

# **Nehemiah Bible Study**

**By Rev Norman Hiley**

**Nehemiah – a Man of Prayer.** Ch.1 vv1-11

No.1

We are going to look at a period in the history of Israel about 400 B.C as the exile in Babylon was coming to an end.

The great theme of Ezra and Nehemiah is the faithfulness of God in restoring Judah and Jerusalem after the fire of the exile had purged the nation, and the remnant was ready for the 2nd chance that God was giving them.

There are 3 characters in the Story of the Return from Exile –  
**Zerubbabel** who was a prince in the House of David – he would be the secular ruler;  
**Ezra** – a scribe well acquainted with the Law of Moses; and  
**Nehemiah** who at the time was cupbearer to the King of Persia.

What we can learn from Nehemiah that will be a help to us today to meet the demands made upon the church by a hostile world?

Nehemiah was a worker – he got things done – like building walls around the devastated City – but before that he was a ‘Man of prayer’.

The return from Babylon took place in 2 phases, separated by some 60 years.  
The first return was under Zerubbabel – c536B.C.  
And the 2nd under Ezra – c 458 B.C  
But there was practical work to be done to make the return complete.

This is where we meet up with this remarkable man – Nehemiah c445B.C.  
His name means – “Jehovah comforts”.  
He was not a priest like Ezra, nor a descendant of David, like Zerubbabel – but his character showed a remarkable degree of nobility and trustworthiness when he was appointed to such an important task as the cup-bearer to the king. It was his job to taste any wine before the king, so as to ensure that it was safe to drink and not poisoned by any of his enemies.

## **Who then was Nehemiah the Man?**

He was born in Babylon of Jewish exile parents. He was rich and influential in the king’s court.

He lived in luxury in Babylon, but his heart was in Jerusalem – the City of the God he loved.

## **What did he do that is so important? –**

He didn’t lead an army – never fought a war – never had any medals for bravery.  
He is known to us simply because he built a wall - and as we study this book we will learn how he did it and why he did it. He did it for the glory of God and with the help of

God.

We too have an urgent work to do for God in rebuilding the Walls, as it were, around our faith, and to do that we will need men and women as dedicated and daring as Nehemiah was.

**He was a Man of Purpose; of Passion; of Prayer; of Planning and Principle.**

A man who persevered until the job was done despite the opposition and the problems.

Very often the Work of God lies in ruins because there are no men like Nehemiah available.

He was simple man – sincere – strong - courageous and determined – and daring enough to make problems into possibilities. The Work of God is ruined by half-heartedness. The Work of God is commenced by those with vision, and the faith to make that vision into a reality.

The work may be started by a few – even just one man –but he knew how to encourage others to share his vision. He not only encouraged the workers, but he enabled them to do things they never thought themselves capable of. Not everyone is enabled and encouraged – and too few are as enthusiastic at the end as they were at the beginning.

Any Work for God must be linked with the Will of God – or we will finish up doing what we want to do, rather than what He wants us to do. To work with dedication and determination at something which is outside the Will of God is both fatal and foolish – and not least - sinful.

But to walk away from a Work of God, which seems to be lying in ruins because His Will has been neglected, and His Word disobeyed, is equally sinful. In every Work of God we need the Holy Spirit to burn in our hearts what is the Will of God for us, and the claims of Christ upon us.

Our Prayer should be –“Lord, what do you want me to do, and how do you want me to do it?”

In order to appreciate the lessons we are to learn from Nehemiah we need to relate his story to history.

Look at this outline of O.T. history and see its’ spiritual implications for us today.

**606 B.C.** – 1st. captives were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar .  
These included a man like Daniel.

After 70 years Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians

**536 B.C.** – the return of the 1st band of exiles to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel.  
With the permission of Cyrus the Persian conqueror of Babylon they started to rebuild the Temple, but this work was stopped by opposition from the authorities in Samaria .cp Ezra ch4.

**520 B.C.** – the return of a 2nd band of exiles -which included men like Haggai and Zechariah.

**516 B.C.** – the smaller Temple was completed.

Then followed at 60 years gap in the record when we have the Book of Esther.

**458 B.C.** -the Return of a 3<sup>rd</sup> band of exiles under Ezra to restore the worship of the Temple.

At this time we have the prophet Malachi who said many things which supported the actions of Nehemiah.

**445B.C.** the return of Nehemiah who served as Governor of Judea, during which time he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. After 12 years he reported back to the king in Babylon as he had promised he would. During his absence there was a period of compromise between the returned exiles and the Samaritans who occupied the land.

**425 B.C.** - Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem for a 2nd term as Governor of the province. At this time he had to correct many of the results of the disobedience of the Jews to the Law of God.

Isn't this a parallel in some ways to the church of today?

Are we not called as Nehemiah was to –

- a) Rebuild the Walls
- b) Restore the worship
- c) Re-emphasise the Word
- d) Renew our vows to God.

When the walls lie in ruin in the church, just about anything is allowed to creep in and spoil the work and worship of God. The curse is caused by neglect of the Word of God and the breaking of our vows to serve God.

The people of God were too busy building fabulous houses for themselves and getting as much money as they could to surround themselves with luxury whilst God's house and work lay in ruins. Cp Haggai 1 vv2-6.

How little has changed from their day to ours 2500 years later.

Nehemiah saw a city in ruins and God's name dishonoured.

That is why he saw that the Wall had to be rebuilt so the city could re-populated by those who would live to glorify God in their worship and service.

The time was short. This is the last recorded history of God's people before Christ should come. There was to be period of 400 years of silence from the prophets until John the Baptist arrived announcing the coming of the Messiah. To lose all that the Will of God meant would have left the people unprepared for the eventual blessing that was to

come.

So here we have God's 'Man of Purpose' – prepared and ready – waiting for the Call of God and willing to answer it immediately. A man whose vision refused to be dimmed – whose vigilance anticipated every difficulty, and whose vigour overcame every obstacle. He was a man who created his own crisis, and wasn't prepared to let the Work of God and the Name of God be made a cause for shame.

I have studied the Man and the Book written about the Man – and his response to God – I have read it through and written my thoughts down. – I have prayed it in – and now I am trying to work it out and to pass it on.

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### **Summary of the Book –**

Ch.1-6 - Reconstruction - the Re-building of the Wall

Ch.7-13 - Re-Instruction – the Restoration of the Worship

### **Read ch.1 vv1-3**

#### **1. The Reproach of the Remnant.**

There was bad news from Jerusalem.

The people of Jerusalem were in ' great trouble and disgrace' v3

Does the fact that the Work of God lies in ruin cause you to be concerned?

In our own land – in our town – and maybe even in the church - we have seen things deteriorate slowly. There seem to be broken walls everywhere – and this should cause us concern as the state of Jerusalem did to Nehemiah.

So much has changed in my lifetime as a Believer – and most of it was not for the best. It troubles me to see the Word of God neglected – the place of prayer abandoned – and the preaching of the gospel that saves so rarely heard.

I may have more than a similarity with my name which begins with N as his did – I am deeply concerned to see a reversal of this backward and downward trend and a return to the 'times of refreshing' we once enjoyed in our faith in Jesus. Spiritual things were his first concern.

He had a good job – an influential position in the King's court. He was a wealthy man – and his promotion prospects were very good - BUT – his main concern was for the purpose of God and not his own prosperity. His concern led to prayer – and his prayer involved Confession – and that led to commitment - and a commission from God to put wrong things right again.

God will not call and commission men or women who do not have a concern and compassion. No matter what else they might have in terms of natural ability will put them into a work of God if there in no availability. Like Isaiah of old we need to be close

enough to God to be able to see the problem as he sees it and make the commitment – ‘Here am I, send me’.

He only calls those who make themselves available - those who bleed when others get hurt and who weep with others who suffer.

v1 – In the 20<sup>th</sup> year of king Artaxerxes (c445B.C.) visitors from Jerusalem came to the winter palace of the king in the city of Susa. They came sometime in November – December (the month of Kislev)

The delegation from Jerusalem was probably led by Nehemiah’s brother Hanani. This delegation had probably been sent to seek the help of Nehemiah to petition the king to have a serious situation resolved in Jerusalem. Such a long journey by such a large delegation was obviously important, and Nehemiah wasted no time finding out why they had come.

### **v2b – He began with an urgent enquiry**

Nehemiah lived in comparative luxury to those who had returned to Jerusalem, but he couldn’t forget that he himself was a Jew. and the welfare of his brothers in the faith was important to him.

We could be in the same position as Nehemiah; because as Western Christians we have so much- and our brothers in the faith in other parts of the world have so little.

We should never be envious of those who have more – or less compassionate towards those who have much less.

### **v3 – A Distressing Account -**

The survivors of the exile were in great trouble and disgrace. -And we are told why. The walls of the city were still broken down and this meant there was no security and the Temple could not be used as it was intended to be as a place of the free worship of God.

v3b

It is one thing to hear about such a tragic situation – and it is another to do something about it.

Nehemiah sensed that things were not right in Jerusalem. He could glean that news from messages that filtered back to Babylon from time to time. Things had not gone well since the rebuilding of the Temple 60-70 years before and the time of Haggai and Zerubbabel. The high hopes when the Temple was completed – albeit much less grand than that of Solomon, which had been destroyed – had been overtaken by events as the people of God compromised their faith and became friends with the worldliness and idol worship around them. Too much of the world had infiltrated into the Temple – just as today too much of the world has infiltrated the church.

The prophet Malachi was preaching at the time of Nehemiah and had to plead with both the disappointed leaders and the discontented people. Villages lay in ruins – there was migration to the towns and cities. There was exploitation of the poor by the rich; Famine hit a depleted population hard; there was a falling in living standards.

These natural things were in addition – or maybe because of – a desecration of the Lord’s

Day, and disobedience to the Lord's Word. Temple worship became slovenly and was a discredit to the holiness of God.

The whole religious life of a desperate, discontented and despairing community lay as much in ruin as the walls of the city. The story of failure was not the Will, or purpose, of God for His people. Their ruin was not God's intention and we have to be as honest as Nehemiah was when He became aware of the situation.

There is nothing to be gained by shutting your eyes and hoping that the problem will solve itself. We have to be prepared to see the church as it is and ourselves as we really are.

There is too much crying of 'Peace -when there is no peace' – of pretending that all is well when we have closed our eyes and ears to seeing and hearing the cause of our trouble and disgrace.

We have to 'see it as it is' - and then we shall be able perhaps to see what needs to be done.

What the delegation told Nehemiah changed his whole outlook as he shared the reproach and the shame.

## **2. His Re-action to the Need - read vv4-8**

v4 – It broke his heart and he wept for several days. He was driven to his knees in prayer. He was not the only one to weep over Jerusalem. The day would come when Jesus did the same. The ruined lives of those who should have loved and lived for God caused his tears to flow – and in the case of Jesus led to him giving up his life for those he came to save.

For Nehemiah his compassion – i.e. his willingness to suffer with the people of God - led him to doing something he had never expected.

I am convinced that no-one will ever find their life's work for God until they have found the one thing in His Will that will cause them to become desperate enough to weep and mourn, fast and pray over things as they really are.

The load has to be accepted and the pressure applied before there can be a Christ-like re-action to the need.

Weeping is considered to be unmanly – indeed for some women it is also becoming unwomanly. I don't mean the tears that say 'I am sorry for myself' –but those that express my concern for others.

For Nehemiah it was the honour of God and the sin of Jerusalem that caused his concern. For us it is the same – except that we would add to the list the Son of God – His Spirit – His Cross – and his church. These are things that should concern us.

Anything that takes glory away from God ought to move us to action- whether it be personal or collective as a church. God was dishonoured by the failure of his own people. Their disobedience gave outsiders the opportunity to disregard God and His salvation. When believers behave no better than unbelievers then God's reputation is at stake as well as theirs.

Before we can be effective in prayer we have to be prepared to weep over the ruins of our own self-will and pride. I will never be the man I should be if I am not prepared to see the cause of my failures as God sees them – or the effect my failure has on the faith of others.

God cannot use us to rebuild the ruins if we are not prepared to weep over the broken stones in the Wall. Nehemiah wept and fasted as he prayed. We don't do much of the weeping and fasting – and this I believe effects also our praying.

Fasting doesn't mean only doing without food for a time – it means being so concerned about the ruined state of a Work of God that food is the last thing we think about and we are prepared to pray through until an answer comes.

Our prayer for our church should be intense and be seen in tears of repentance, which when God answers will turn to tears of joy. There will be no winning without warfare – no victory without vigilance.

Nehemiah was called to build a wall – but first he had to weep over the ruins and accept his part in the nation's sin. We have to be able to weep over the ruins of an un-Christ-like life - And unfaithfulness in our witness and unfruitfulness in our ministry. We have to shed tears for an almost non-existent prayer life which ends up with unbelieving disobedience – and makes us more of the world, than we make of it being for God.

The Walls lay in ruins – just a heap of rubble. This could be the same for any believer or church in our day.

Nehemiah's weeping led him to praying – as any such compassion should do for us.

### **3. Realising the Remedy -** Read vv5-7

He began to pray. His prayer was humble and reverent v 5  
Persistent and prevailing v6  
Urgent and answerable.

- a) His prayer began with Praise – v5 notice how he addressed God.  
'Lord of heaven; Great and awesome;  
Keeping his part of the covenant with those who love him and obey him.'

We should praise God for WHO He is.

Reverence and respect for him are as important as faith and love.

We can trust God to keep His Word when we recognise that He is the Lord God in heaven.

Nehemiah's spirit went out in praise before he dared say what was on his heart.

b) Confession of sin. vv6-7

God isn't interested in fine phrases, but he is concerned with listening to contrite hearts. Isaiah knew that - cp Isaiah 57 vv 15 "I live in the high and holy place, but also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit; to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."

When we pray it isn't for the benefit of others who might hear us – but to God who hears and answers the cry of the heart. If God is to be expected to put everything into hearing and answering our prayers then surely we must be equally willing to put everything into offering prayer.

v6 – God is asked to be attentive and alert. To look with eyes open -and ears inclined to hear our whispered prayer.

For this to be so Nehemiah had to be persistent in order to prevail.

He didn't just pray once and that was it – he says that he prayed 'night and day'.

Not now and again - but 'without ceasing'.

### **Who did he pray for?**

For the people of Israel, because they had sinned against God – and for himself as he identified himself with them. He prays "WE" – including myself – have sinned against you." He made himself to be no different from them.

The sin of Israel made them hard of heart and deceitful – but the same sin when confessed made Nehemiah confident before a forgiving and redeeming God v10

c) **Trust – vv8-9** He remembered what God had promised to Moses.

What had God promised? - 1. Unfaithfulness would result in calamity

2. Faithfulness would result in blessing.

We have the means of answering our own prayers.

v9 God says, 'Return to me and keep my commandments'

Ruined lives can be rebuilt as well as ruined walls but it is essential that we return to God and keep his commandments.

When we are prepared to do that then I believe God will not delay in doing his part

It began with Nehemiah, but God has his reputation at stake as well.

He had given His word and we can rely on Him to keep it.

It is a good thing that God is more faithful to His promises to us than we are in ours to Him.

If He treated us as we sometimes treat him we would have no hope at all.

**d) Ask v11** ‘Please help me.’

Going to Jerusalem to rebuild walls wasn’t quite a cup-bearer’s assignment.

Nehemiah was going to require all the help he could get.

Being a church Pastor was never my idea of a life- assignment. I was an engineer – an administrator – but not a wall-builder.

Nehemiah couldn’t do what he had to do without the help of God and others.

His wasn’t the only one to pray – v11 ‘Be attentive to the prayer of me – your servant... and to the prayer of your servants (plural) who delight in revering your Name.’”

He needed the prayers of others as well as his own to guarantee that God would hear and answer by opening what appeared to be closed doors.

The King was the one who had signed the decree to stop the wall being rebuilt and he had to be persuaded to fit in with the Will of God for his people in Jerusalem.

God is a specialist in ‘things thought impossible’. But often the instruments he uses are very ordinary people who are prepared to be used to do things beyond their ability. God will always give us tasks that are too big for us. If you only do things that are within your capacity or capability then you will not need God to help you do them.

God does BIG things with inadequate people. – But He won’t do them until He sees that they are as concerned as He is – especially about ruined walls. He wants people like Nehemiah who are prepared to put everything into second place to doing His Will – which always should be our 1st priority.

Nehemiah was a ‘Man of Purpose’ - and behind that purpose was a ‘Man of Prayer’.

A man who was willing to – a) Bear the Reproach of the Remnant.

b) Recognise the Need and respond to it

c) Realise the only remedy was return to God before it was too late.

He had the vision - but he needed others to share it with him in seeing the Walls rebuilt.

This is something the Church of today needs to realise – and we want men and women like Nehemiah who are prepared to weep in prayer over the ruins of our own efforts, until God hears and answers our prayers that there might be success in the work we do for God.

God has done great things for and through others – and He can do the same for and through us.

He waits for the Nehemiahs of our day to pay the price that the Nehemiah of the 4th

century B.C did. We will learn much more of what this kind of commitment means as we see this man's service and sacrifice.

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