

*A Study of the Book of Nehemiah*

**The Desperate Need for a Godly Man (*Nehemiah 1:1-3*)**

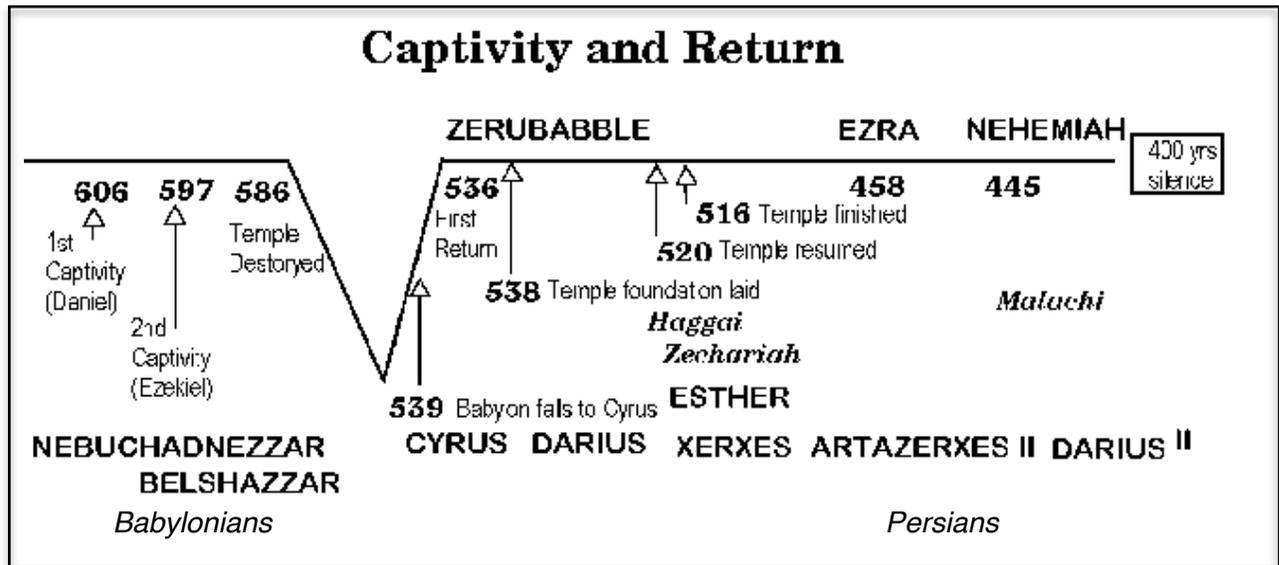
“The most critical need of the church at this moment is men, bold men, free men. The church must seek, in prayer and much humility, the coming again of men made of the stuff of which prophets and martyrs are made.” ~ A. W. Tozer

**I. Overview**

Throughout history, the Lord has used particular men to “stand in the gap”. While we may not be another Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, or a Billy Graham, we are called, as men, to follow Christ and to serve as godly-servant leaders. The book of Nehemiah provides intentional, practical insight on how to walk with God and allow God to work through us for His glory. In our study of one of Israel’s greatest leaders, Nehemiah, we will glean much from a man who modeled a life of great character, discipline, determination, zeal, and grace.

**II. Introduction to Nehemiah (1:1-3)**

A. An Overview



In 586 BC, the nation of Judah was taken into captivity and the Temple destroyed by the Babylonians (see 2 Chron 36:17-20). For approximately 70 years, Israel will remain exiled from their Promised Land. However, in 536 BC, the world power of that time, the Persians, will allow the first group of Jews to return to the land of Israel (see Ezra 1-6). By 516 BC, the Jewish Temple is rebuilt (see Ezra 7-10).

Nehemiah’s story occurs approximately 50 years after the rebuilding of the Temple. Under the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah will serve as governor of the Judaeen territory (Yehud).

In so doing, he will unite the people, bring reform, and most importantly, rebuild the walls of the Holy City. Archaeological evidence reveals that the Persian king had constructed numerous fortresses throughout this region during this timeframe due to the threat of Greek and Egyptian invasions. Thus, this trustworthy cupbearer is the perfect candidate to oversee the fortification of Jerusalem.

Little is known about Nehemiah, apart from the fact that he was a Jewish aristocrat in exile who rose to the status of cupbearer to Artaxerxes I in the Persian royal court at Susa.

## B. The Composition and Character of the Book

### 1. Relationship to Ezra

Until the Middle Ages, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were printed together as one book in the Hebrew bible. Consequently, together these two books are seen as a literary unit and outlined accordingly (adapted from Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 185):

- I. The Goal Initiated: The Decree to Rebuild the House of God (Ezra 1:1-4)
- II. Effort to Accomplish that Goal: The Rebuilding of the House of God (Ezra 1:5-Neh 7:72)
- III. The Completion of that Goal: The Celebration of the Rebuilding of the House of God (Neh 7:73-13:31)

Important to note is that rather than adhering to a strict chronological sequence, Ezra and Nehemiah arranged events in their narratives for the overall presentation of restoration in the land of Israel.

### 2. Style & Genre of Nehemiah

The following three matters are important to observe when studying the book of Nehemiah:

- *There is an ongoing shift between first and third person narration.* The first-person speech is personal and subjective; whereas the third-person narration is objective and authoritative (see Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, 129-30).
- *Nehemiah's rhetoric and actions are downplayed by the narrator.* The book seeks to downplay individual leaders in order to elevate the community and display the powerful, gracious hand of God.
- The genre, or literary type, of this book reflects a memoir. Ancient memoirs recorded events that the narrator personally observed or had performed (see Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 42).

### 3. Theology of the Book of Nehemiah

As we study this book, we need to observe carefully the following overarching theological themes:

- *The sovereign hand of God in bringing about the restoration of Israel should not be missed.* Even secular authorities will act in accordance with God's plan for His people (see 7:27).
- *The people of God are called to remain faithful and holy—no matter the political and social climate* (see Neh 8-13).
- *This deliverance from Babylon, however, demonstrates that the full potential of restoration between God and His people has not yet been realized.* As noted by one scholar, "The events that occur under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah are not God's last words . . . but merely a necessary setting of the state for a far greater act of God in which his search for human obedience within the covenant is finally gratified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth" (McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 5).

#### C. Introduction (1:1-3)

v. 1 - Apart from the mention of his father in verse one and his brother in verse 2, we know little about this man named Nehemiah.

v. 2 - The time frame is December, and the "twentieth year" refers to the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign (approximately 445 BC). The location is Susa, the capital of not only Persia, but it is also the capital of the entire ancient world. In verse 11, Nehemiah will inform us that he serves in a very trusted and powerful position within the Persian monarchy.

Because of Nehemiah's position, he has first-hand access to the international news and the opportunity to interact with visiting foreign dignitaries. His political clout allows him to focus his attention on his home capital, Jerusalem.

v. 3 - The news is devastating. The Jewish remnant is being persecuted and harassed by the enemy. To complicate matters, there is no physical protection for these Jewish settlers. The glorious walls and gates built by Solomon and refortified by Hezekiah lay in ruins.

### III. Intersect

In these thirteen chapters, we encounter more than a mere Persian cupbearer or Jewish governor; we will examine a man whose life is marked by the following:

- *Nehemiah is a man who is passionate about glorifying God.* His zeal is not fanaticism or pushy egoism, but rather "a humble, reverent, businesslike, single-minded commitment to the hallowing of God's name and the doing of his will" (Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 33).

- *Nehemiah is a man who understands that he is dependent upon the Lord.* In 6:15-16, Nehemiah is quick to give praise to the Lord for any accomplishment (also, see 4:20). The mighty men of faith, such as Moses, Daniel, and Nehemiah, faced great opposition and obstacles. And yet, they remained faithful and accomplished their God-given tasks because of their view of God—a God who was greater, more powerful, and consistently faithful than any thing this world could offer.
- *Nehemiah is a man of prayer and godliness.* This book begins with prayer (1:5-11) and ends with prayer (13:14, 22, 29-30). Nehemiah clearly models what can occur when a righteous man prays (see Eph 6:18 and 1 Thess 5:17).

### **For further thought . . .**

*Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:*

In our hectic schedules and attempts to “get by” or even “make it big,” we can fail to see a world that is hurting—a world that is laying in shambles. The walls are down. And the gates of human souls are razed. Are you easily distracted by the next text message or looking for that important email that you fail to listen to those around you? Do you focus your attention on the needs of those around you, or are you too busy and distracted? Despite his prestigious political position and his comfortable surroundings, Nehemiah will go and serve God and His people. He valued the Lord and His people over personal gain.

Take some time reading James 1:19-26 this week. Reflect on ways in which you can improve your listening skills, and note ways in which you can reduce the time you speak and the ways you grow angry.

“A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble.” ~ C. H. Spurgeon