

# Old Testament History

Lesson #25

Nehemiah 1:1-13:31

## Outline

### I. ***Nehemiah's Return And Reconstruction Of The Wall (1:1-7:3)***

- A. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem (1:1-2:10).
  - 1. The report from Judah and Nehemiah's prayer (1:1-11).
  - 2. Nehemiah authorized by the king to go to Jerusalem (1:12-2:10).
- B. Reconstruction of the wall around Jerusalem (2:11-7:3).
  - 1. Nehemiah's inspection and proposal to rebuild (2:11-20).
  - 2. Reconstruction begun (3:1-32).
  - 3. External opposition to the reconstruction (4:1-23).
  - 4. Internal strife threatens to undermine reconstruction (5:1-19).
  - 5. Reconstruction completed despite increasing opposition (6:1-7:3).

### II. ***Reformation Of The Remnant (7:4-13:31)***

- A. List of the returning exiles (7:4-73).
- B. Renewal of the covenant (8:1-10:39).
  - 1. Ezra reads the law (8:1-18).
  - 2. The people confess their sins (9:1-38).
  - 3. The sealing of the covenant (10:1-39).
- C. Dedication of the wall (11:1-12:47).
  - 1. Residents of Jerusalem and the surrounding towns (11:1-35).
  - 2. List of priests and Levites (12:1-26).
  - 3. The dedication ceremony (12:27-43).
  - 4. The ministry of the priests and Levites (12:44-47).
- D. Reform of the people (13:1-31).
  - 1. Separation from foreigners (13:1-3).
  - 2. Temple reforms (13:4-14).
  - 3. Observance of the Sabbath (13:15-22).
  - 4. The sin of intermarriage (13:23-29).
  - 5. Closing summary of Nehemiah's reforms (13:30-31).

## Notes

### ***Nehemiah 1:1-2:10***

- "Susa," a major city of Elam in southwestern Iran, was located in a fertile plain 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. At this time it served as a winter palace for the kings, but the area became intolerably hot during the summer months. Daniel saw himself in a vision at Susa (Daniel 8:2). It was also the site of the story of Esther. Ezra 4:9-10 refers to the men of Susa who were deported to Samaria.

- The lack of a city wall meant that the people were defenseless against their enemies. The walls and gates of Jerusalem had lain in ruins since their destruction by Nebuchadnezzar some 140 years before, despite attempts to rebuild them. The leaders and people had evidently become reconciled to this sad state of affairs. It took an outsider to assess the situation and rally the people to renewed efforts. The Jews had attempted to rebuild the walls earlier, in the reign of Artaxerxes I. But after the protest of Rehum and Shimshai, the king ordered the Jews to stop.
- Although Nehemiah was over 700 miles from home, he had not forget his own people (Psalm 122:1-9; 137:5-6). He was enjoying the luxury and prestige in the palace of the king, but he wanted to help rebuild Jerusalem. Instead of being a city of praise and glory, it was a city of shame and reproach (Psalm 79:1-4).
- On a Nisan calendar "the twentieth year" was April 13, 445, to April 1, 444. For four months (from December to April) he wept and prayed. This book shows Nehemiah to be a man of prayer (1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). In fact, the book starts and ends with prayer. He prayed day and night because he was so burdened for the city.
- During the exile fasting became a common practice, including solemn fasts to commemorate the taking of Jerusalem and the murder of Gedaliah (Esther 4:16; Daniel 9:3; 10:3; Zechariah 7:3-7).
- Regardless of one's personal problems, the king's servants were expected to keep their feelings hidden and to display a cheerful countenance before him. Were it not for the providence of God, Nehemiah's sadness might have caused his death. Before taking his burden to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah quickly went to God in prayer. Despite his trepidation, he knew that he stood not only in the presence of an earthly monarch, but before the King of the heavens.

### ***Nehemiah 2:11-7:4***

- The trip took three months, and Nehemiah was accompanied by an armed escort, though not because his faith was weaker than Ezra's. Rather, because of his position as official governor of Judah, it was in accordance with custom that he should have an escort assigned him. He arrived as a governor, not a servant. Nehemiah waited three days before taking any steps. The enemies were watching and Nehemiah had to be wise and cautious. By night he investigated the situation, keeping his counsel to himself.
- He challenged the leaders of the remnant to work with him (not for him) in repairing the walls. Nehemiah showed them the need, outlined the task, and assured them of God's blessing. He showed great leadership

in endearing himself to the people, motivating them, and solving their problems.

- Whenever the people of God start doing His work, there will be opposition. Various documents indicate that Arabs became dominant in the Transjordan area from the Assyrian to the Persian periods. They enjoyed a favored status under the Persians.
- A worker of weak faith and purpose will quit, but a person of resolution and confidence will overcome the opposition and finish the task. Every person had a specified area of responsibility. No one can do everything, but every person can do something. In all, there were 42 groups of workers.
- The first weapon used to try to stop the work was ridicule. Ridicule is a device used by ignorant people who are filled with jealousy. The second weapon was force. What Satan cannot accomplish by deceit he attempts to do by force. There were two enemies in 2:10, three in 2:19, and a whole multitude in 4:7. There was a great balance between prayer and posting a guard as Nehemiah's answer to this threat. The third weapon was discouragement. Discouragement and complaining spread rapidly and hindered God's work. We do not read that Nehemiah paid much attention to their complaining; he kept on building, watching, and praying. The fourth weapon was fear. The Jews living outside the city heard that the armies would suddenly invade Jerusalem and took this report to Nehemiah ten times. He did not allow the work to stop. The people had a mind to work (4:6), a heart to pray (4:9), an eye to watch (4:9), and an ear to hear (4:20).
- An unexpected problem was selfishness. The people were being robbed by their own people through mortgages and servitude. In times of economic distress, families would borrow funds, using members of the family as collateral. If a man could not repay the loan and its interest, his daughters, sons, wife, or even the man himself could be sold into bondage. Nehemiah rebuked the people, reminding them of God's goodness to their nation. He also appealed to his own good example as a leader.
- "Ono" was located seven miles southeast of Joppa near Lod. It was in the westernmost area settled by the returning Jews. It may have been proposed as a kind of neutral territory, but Nehemiah recognized the invitation as a trap.
- Since he had access to the temple, Shemaiah was probably a priest, possibly one of those who were particularly friendly with Tobiah. He likely had shut himself up in the temple as a symbolic action to indicate that his own life was in danger and to suggest that both must flee to the temple. Most likely Shemaiah's words were a ruse in which he pretended to be in personal danger and tried to get Nehemiah to take

refuge in the temple. Even if his life was genuinely threatened, Nehemiah was not a coward who would run into hiding. Nor would he transgress the law to save his life.

- On October 27, 445 B.C., the walls of Jerusalem were completed. Remarkably, though neglected for nearly a century and a half, they were rebuilt in less than two months under Nehemiah's leadership. The rapid completion of the wall despite such overwhelming odds could only have been accomplished with God's help.

### ***Nehemiah 7:5-73***

- Normally the gates were opened at dawn, but this was to be delayed until the sun was high in the sky. The Old Testament distinguishes the sun from the stars, not by its great light, but by its heat (Exodus 16:21; 1 Samuel 11:9; Psalm 121:6; Isaiah 49:10). Inhabitants of the Near East are conscious of the sun's heat, especially during the summer (Psalm 32:4). The gates were to be shut and bolted before the guards went off duty.
- The list of names is essentially the same as that found in Ezra 2:1-70, with a few minor variant spellings and numerical differences.
- The small number of Levites who returned is striking. As Ezra was about to leave Mesopotamia, he found not one Levite in the company; so he delayed his departure until he could enlist some Levites (Ezra 8:15-20).
- "Drams" or "drachmas" were Greek coins weighing about 3/10 of an ounce; "1,000 drachmas" would weigh about 19 pounds. As a drachma was ordinarily a silver coin, the Hebrew word may designate the Persian daric. The weight of "20,000 drachmas" would be about 375 pounds; "2,200 minas," about 2,550 pounds; and "2,000 minas," about 2,500 pounds.
- Many returning exiles were not from Jerusalem, whose population no doubt suffered the greatest casualties in the Babylonian attacks. These naturally returned to their own hometowns, leaving Jerusalem underpopulated (cf. 11:1-24).

### ***Nehemiah 8:1-10:39***

- "The first day of the seventh month" was the New Year's Day of the civil calendar (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1-6), celebrated also as the Feast of Trumpets with a solemn assembly and cessation from labor. Women did not participate in ordinary meetings but were brought together with children on such solemn occasions. The people evidently stood for about five hours attentively listening to the exposition of the scriptures. This was 14 years after Ezra did it upon his return in 458 B.C.

- Even today, the day after Sukkoth (Feast of Tabernacles), the Jews celebrate a festival called Simhat Torah ("rejoicing over the Torah"), in which they parade in a circle inside the synagogue seven or more rounds with a different person holding the scrolls each time. Children carry flags with inscriptions extolling the word of God.
- The statement "from the days of Joshua son of Nun" does not mean that no celebration of the Feast of Booths had taken place since then, as such celebrations are mentioned after the dedication of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:65; 2 Chronicles 7:9) and after the return of the exiles (Ezra 3:4). It must mean that the feast had not been celebrated before with such exceptional joyfulness or strictness of observance. The great joy compares to that experienced at the renewal of the Passover under Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:26) and at the revival under Josiah (2 Kings 23:22; 2 Chronicles 35:18).
- There was a three-week interval between Ezra 10:17 and Nehemiah 9:1. The congregation spent about three hours in the study of scriptures and three hours in the worship of the Lord. Nehemiah presented a long recitation of the history of Israel. In everything that happened God had been justified, but the people still did not listen to God's judgments.
- In 10:28-29, the people applied the word of God to their lives. It is one thing to pray and agree to a covenant; it is another to separate from evil and do everything that God wants.

### ***Nehemiah 11:1-12:47***

- Nehemiah returns now to the story of the walls, which he had interrupted to tell about the spiritual work under Ezra. It was necessary to get the Jews to live in the city, for both the good of the city and the glory of God. This, of course, demanded faith.
- "The holy city" is a rare use of the phrase in a historical narrative that is usually found in prophetic books. The practice of redistributing populations often involved the forcible transfer from rural settlements to urban areas, but only part of the people were chosen by lot; the rest moved willingly.
- The limits of the Judean settlement after the return from Babylon have been confirmed by archaeological evidence; none of the coins minted for Judah have been found outside the area demarcated by 11:25-30.
- The "book of the annals" (cf. Nehemiah 7:5) may have been the official temple chronicle containing various lists and records. Compare the annals of the Persian kings (Ezra 4:15; Esther 2:23; 6:1; 10:2); "the book of the annals of the kings of Israel," mentioned 18 times in 1 and 2 Kings; and "the book of the annals of the kings of Judah," mentioned 15 times in 1 and 2 Kings.

- The dedication of the walls was led by Ezra and Nehemiah. They divided the people into two great companies, which Ezra leading one group along the east side of the city, then north to the temple area, while Nehemiah led the other group north and then east, meeting the other group at the temple area.

### ***Nehemiah 13:1-31***

- After 12 years of serving as governor, he is recalled to Susa, leaving his brother in charge, but he later returns to Jerusalem. The 32nd year of Artaxerxes I ran from April 1, 433, to April 19, 432 B.C. We do not know the exact length of his second term, but it must have ended before 407 B.C., when other sources inform us that Bigvai was governor of Judah.
- When he returns, he sees the situation has regressed. Tobiah has occupied the temple courts. Nehemiah was a man of a strong temperament who expressed his anger by taking quick action (cf. Ezra 9:3). Though only a single chamber used by Tobiah has been mentioned before (vss. 5, 7-8), the plural "rooms" shows that other chambers were involved.
- The tithe has also been neglected. Because of this, the priests and Levites have to "moonlight." This has probably been a long-standing abuse. Nehemiah's rebuke of the officials here recalls his earlier rebuke of the selfish wealthy who exploited the less fortunate in granting them usurious loans.
- The Sabbath has been neglected. When the gates were shut on the Sabbath eve, the persistent merchants carried on their activities outside the gates for two weeks until Nehemiah noticed them. Nehemiah was not a man of idle words. He meant what he said and was not averse to backing up his words by force. Nehemiah closed the city gates before the Sabbath so they can observe it properly. Additionally, they were to celebrate the Sabbath with joyous gatherings. Fasting and mourning were forbidden.
- Mixed marriages have reemerged. Ezra had dealt with the same problem of intermarriage some 30 years before. Plucking the hair from another's beard was an action designed to show anger, to express an insult, and to mark someone to scorn (2 Samuel 10:4; Isaiah 50:6). Nehemiah's action was designed to prevent future intermarriages, whereas Ezra dissolved the existing unions. One of the priests had even married the daughter of Sanballat, thereby desecrating the priesthood.
- The book closes with three prayers (vss. 22, 29, 31). Nehemiah has done this work, but only God can bless it and keep it going. Nehemiah would one day die, and the people would forget him, but God would never forget him!