

# **“The Words of Nehemiah”**

## **Nehemiah 1:1-11**

As with many of the books of the Bible, there are good, godly scholars that question the authorship of the book. Even though the first four words declare the authorship, some believe that it was actually written by someone else from a “diary,” so to speak, that came from Nehemiah. The first seven chapters are written in the first person, clearly demonstrating that Nehemiah is the one doing the writing, while chapters eight through ten are in the third person, seeming to indicate a different author (some believe it was Ezra). This pattern of first to third person authorship is seen frequently in the Old Testament and is not proof positive of either a different author or a change of author – it was simply a way to demonstrate importance and direction of attention in the story.

The book of Nehemiah was called “The Second Book of Ezra” until toward the close of the fourth century (and in some cases, in the Latin versions especially, it didn’t take this name until the 16<sup>th</sup> century). It was originally part of the book of Ezra – both books simply called “The Book of Ezra.” In the Hebrew Bible, it is part of the section known as “the writings.”

According to the historian James Ussher (Church of Ireland Archbishop between 1625 and 1656), the events recorded in Nehemiah cover a period of eleven years.

### **I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK – VS. 1**

#### ***A. “The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah”***

1. Some consider the Hebrew word for "words" (דְּבָרִי) to be that of "his transactions of deeds for דִּבְרֵי "dibre" signifies things done, as well as words spoken" (John Gill), but that is reading far more into it than should be. The simplest translation of a word in any language is to be its most common meaning (in this case, words spoken or written), unless there's reason to look to another, secondary meaning. Since there is no reason, other than to try and show someone other than Nehemiah wrote these words, then it is best to leave it as meaning his words. Even the Septuagint translates the Hebrew here by the word "logos," pointing to words.
2. The name "Nehemiah" was a fairly common one but one with a significant meaning, considering what God used Him to do. The name means "the Lord comforts," "and is a fitting name for the man who was deeply distressed at the perilous and oppressive condition of his holy city Jerusalem and its Jewish inhabitants" (Zodhiates). Although some see this Nehemiah as the one that came back with Ezra (Ezra 2:2), it is not. The timeline simply doesn't match up.
3. He was "the son of Hechaliah" – nothing is known of who his father was. A lot of speculation has been given as to who he was but there is no support for any of it so it's best to just leave it as we don't know.
4. He was a younger contemporary of Ezra and held the position of "the king's

cupbearer” (1:11). “The official who poured drink into the cup and gave it to the king (Gen. 40:9-14, where the Hebrew word is rendered butler). The office was one of the most dignified in an oriental kingdom, and required moral trustworthiness in its occupant lest he be bribed to present poisoned wine to the king. It said much for the character of Nehemiah that he, a stranger and a foreigner, should have been appointed to such an office at the Persian court” (John D. Davis, A Dictionary of the Bible). This could very well have been done because of the testimony of Daniel in the Persian court.

- B. “And it came to pass” – simplified, “and when,” or simply, “and” as some versions have it, but that doesn’t give the full impact to the past tense use of these Hebrew word (a temporal modifier) וַיְהִי.**
- C. “In the month Chisleu” – the end of November to December – some have it as December but since the Hebrew calendar (then) had thirty days per month, the months didn’t always line up precisely with ours. This was their ninth month.**
- D. “In the twentieth year” – that is, the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I (called “Longimanus” (Latin: longus – long; manus – hand) because his right hand was allegedly longer than his left), ruler of the Persian empire from 465-425 B.C. The twentieth year of his reign would have been between 446 and 445 B.C. He**

**was the grandson of Darius I (Daniel 6 and 9), son of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus).**

**E. "As I was in Shushan the palace" – the same Shushan where Daniel received the vision of Daniel chapter eight (the ram and the goat). This was the winter residence of the Persian kings.**

**F. Nehemiah is considered "post-exilic" – that is, it was given after the exile of Judah in Babylon and the people were back in the land of Israel. In particular, they had been back in the land for some 90 years at this point.**

**G. There were three returns of people out of the nation now known as the Persian Empire (Medo-Persian), back to Jerusalem and Israel in general.**

1. The first was led by Zerubbabel – the one who was tasked with rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem – took place approximately 538 B.C. (Neh. 7:5-73; 12:1-47).

[Ezra 1:1-3](#)

<sup>1</sup> Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

<sup>2</sup> Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

<sup>3</sup> Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

#### Ezra 2:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city;

<sup>2</sup> Which came with Zerubbabel...

2. The second (recorded) was led by Ezra – approximately 458 B.C.

#### Ezra 7:1

<sup>1</sup> Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

#### Ezra 7:7

<sup>7</sup> And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

3. The third (recorded) was led by Nehemiah – approximately 444 B.C.

## **II. THE CHARACTER OF THE MAN – VS. 2, 4-11**

### ***A. He was a man of concern – vs. 2***

1. When his brother Hanani, and other Jewish men, came to see him, Nehemiah asked

how things were in Jerusalem.

- a) He apparently hadn't been there himself to this point but showed great concern for the welfare of the people that had gone back to Jerusalem (referred to here as "escaped" – those that escaped death while in captivity), as well as being concerned for the physical city of Jerusalem itself.
  - b) "One of my brethren" – this could mean either a sibling by birth or a fellow Israelite, but considering he calls him "my brother" in 7:2, it seems clear that Hanani was a literal brother of Nehemiah.
2. "And I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity" – he showed concern for his fellowman – his fellow Israelites. By application, we can learn from Nehemiah's concern that we are to be concerned for our fellow believers, fellow citizens of heaven, if you would. We are to be concerned with all men, especially their spiritual well-being, but there is to be a special concern for other believers.

Galatians 6:2

<sup>2</sup> Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

John 13:34–35

<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

<sup>35</sup> By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

John 15:12

**12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.**

3. "And concerning Jerusalem" – he was concerned with the state of their lives. He was concerned with their physical safety and security, as much as Ezra was with their spiritual safety and security. We need to be concerned for others – both spiritually and physically. This wasn't just true of Nehemiah, and the Old Testament Israelites, this is as much true for the New Testament church today as it was for them then.

**James 2:14–17**

**14** What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

**15** If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

**16** And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

**17** Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

**Matthew 25:42–45**

**42** For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

**43** I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

**44** Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or

athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

**45** Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

1 John 3:16–18

**16** Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

**17** But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

**18** My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

### ***B. He was a man of compassion – vs. 4***

1. What is our reaction to the plight of others, especially those of like-precious faith? What is our reaction to the spiritual welfare of people in America? We seemed more concerned about their political views than we do their spiritual condition – and that is seen today than at any other time in modern history.
2. He did four things when he heard the words (as given in verse three):
  - a) He “sat down and wept” – his first reaction was one of grief and sorrow for the physical plight of his people. As seen in his prayer in the next few verses, he recognized their physical plight was tied to their spiritual decline and sins as a people, and he realized that in order for him to be successful in helping with their physical

plight they had to get their spiritual "house" in order first.

The same is true today. If we want God to bless our home and our family and our lives, and if we want Him to bless our nation, then we are going to get our spiritual "house" in order – both literally, in our own individual homes, and metaphorically, as a nation.

- b) He "mourned certain days" – he didn't just get briefly emotional, he mourned for their plight for a number of days. The word "certain" is inserted by the translators to help with the understanding. The Hebrew word for "days" (דַּיִם) is the plural for "day." It would literally read "mourned for days."

The significance is that he was more than just a little concerned – more than a little grieved. He saw what sin can do to a people and it overwhelmed him. Something similar happened to Ezekiel during the captivity in Babylon.

#### Ezekiel 3:14–15

**14** So the spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me.

**15** Then I came to them of the captivity at Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days.

He sat "astonished" – the word means he was devastated and in horror by what he saw. He was appalled by the condition in

which they were living, and for seven days he did nothing but sit there with them in their plight.

- c) He “fasted” – this was not a called fast, or a fast that was part of the Israelite worship; this was one that was done simply because of the severity of the plight they were in. It would be good for us to consider fasting when things look bleak – as Nehemiah did.

I intend to come back to the issue of fasting in the near future but for now just remember that the point of fasting is to set life aside, if you would, to refrain from those things that please us, and devote ourselves to getting closer to the Lord for the purpose of receiving from Him an answer for a specific, urgent, serious need.

**Psalm 69:10**

**10** When I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach.

**Psalm 109:24**

**24** My knees are weak through fasting; and my flesh faileth of fatness.

**Matthew 17:21**

**21** Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

**1 Corinthians 7:5**

**5** Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.

- d) He “prayed” – the weeping and mourning and fasting culminated in the need to pray.

The praying took place with the fasting – the two are almost always connected in Scripture when fasting is mentioned. There can be prayer without fasting but there shouldn't be fasting without prayer.

3. What have we done for the plight and condition of those around us?

### **C. He was a man of confession – vs. 5-11**

1. He confessed the sins which all the people committed to God – vs. 5-10
  - a) In verse five, Nehemiah declares truths about the God of heaven (the same term Daniel used so often) that should have been familiar to the Israelites, but were used in a way as to remind them Who it was they had offended and to bring to the forefront of their minds the plight they were in was able to be changed if they remembered Who it was they were to serve.

(1) *"I beseech thee"* – אָנָּא – *an interjection meaning to beg – shows his attitude in prayer and the need that he was presenting.*

(2) *"O LORD God of heaven"* – יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְהוּדָה – *again, a recognition of the God to whom he was praying and his understanding of God's ability to hear and answer. "Alludes to God's almighty government of the world, and the further predicates of God, to His covenant faithfulness" (K&D).*

(3) *"The great and terrible God"* – *"great"*

*in that He is able to do mighty things;  
"terrible" (יְהוֹרָא) – root word is יָרָא, a  
verb meaning to fear, and shows that  
the God we serve, the God Nehemiah  
served, was to be feared for who He is,  
and what He both has done, is doing,  
and will (or can) do.*

*Some translations have this as  
"awesome," but that doesn't give the  
true sense of the word as it was meant  
at the time.*

*(4) "That keepeth covenant and mercy for  
them that love him and observe his  
commandments" – this is important to  
Nehemiah as he works with the  
Israelites, for it is this that he uses to  
remind them of what God promised if  
they would get right, and what  
happened when they turned against the  
Lord. This would have taken them back  
to what Moses taught them in the Law  
and shown that God was still the same.*

#### **Exodus 20:6**

**6** And shewing mercy unto thousands  
of them that love me, and keep my  
commandments.

#### **Deuteronomy 7:9**

**9** Know therefore that the LORD thy  
God, he is God, the faithful God,  
which keepeth covenant and mercy  
with them that love him and keep his  
commandments to a thousand  
generations;

#### **Romans 8:28**

**28** And we know that all things work  
together for good to them that love  
God, to them who are the called

according to his purpose.

- b) Verses 6-10 finds Nehemiah, in this tremendous prayer, confessing both his sins as well as the sins of the people of Israel that were back in the land. He declares the sins as "very corrupt" in that they had not kept the commandments, statutes, nor judgments that were commanded in the Law. He reiterates the warning that they would be scattered if they rejected that Law, and he reminds them that, as the God of mercy, He would draw them back to Himself, and to the land, if they would just obey His word.
- c) Verse 10 shows Nehemiah understood his place, and shows that he understood that God, as their Redeemer, would help in this time of extreme need. He "reminds" God that the people of Israel were His people, not Nehemiah's, and as such, they were His to lead – Nehemiah was just a servant to do His bidding and lead where needed.

Very similarly, the church today is not the pastor's – it is the Lord's. Their His sheep, not the pastor's and as such He is the One that will need to be followed – we're just here to point people to Him.

- 2. Verse 11 – He confessed His God before others, in particular, in this case, Artaxerxes the king.

### **III. THE REASON FOR THE MISSION – VS. 3**

#### ***A. To repair the people***

- 1. The people were in "great affliction and reproach."

- a) "Great affliction" - בְּרָעָה גְּדוֹלָה - simply, a very bad condition, a very great distress – describes many people today.
  - b) "And reproach" - וּבְתוֹרֵפֶה (תּוֹרָפֶה) - they were taunted by their enemies. Their condition was so bad they were the laughing stock of those in better condition than them.
2. Nehemiah recognized the plight of the people before he recognized the plight of the city. Both were important to him and he knew the two were connected.
  3. For us today, it is necessary we recognize the spiritual condition, as well as the physical condition, of those around us – both in our own household as well as in our neighborhood (and country, for that matter). We need to see them in the condition they're in if we are going to be able to help them.

### ***B. To repair the wall***

1. The wall was broken-down (still) – מִפְּרִצָתָּהּ (Pual stem, emphasizing intensity) – the walls weren't completely destroyed, only portions were, it seems, but the parts that were destroyed were completely destroyed and had to be completely rebuilt, not just repaired.
2. To apply this spiritually, we should help rebuild others' hearts that are broken down because of sin.

### ***C. To repair the gates***

1. The gates were still a pile of ashes. This would appear to be the same condition they were in after war with Nebuchadnezzar. The people had been in the land for 90 years and still hadn't rebuilt anything but their homes. They weren't concerned about others.

Haggai 1:4-9

<sup>4</sup> Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?

<sup>5</sup> Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways.

<sup>6</sup> Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.

<sup>7</sup> Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways.

<sup>8</sup> Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

2. Applied spiritually, the gates to our heart need to be maintained to keep the enemy out.

Ephesians 6:16

<sup>16</sup> Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

Conclusion: How are we at recognizing the plight of those around us? Are we people of concern, of compassion, of confession? Do we see the reason for which God has left us on this earth after He saved us? If not, then we need to be like Nehemiah and spend some time in fasting and prayer to get a hold of the throne of God and beg Him to change us so we do.