



Summary of Nehemiah

Introduction

Some 1,000 years after the time of Moses and some 400 years before the birth of Jesus, the nation of Israel and the Jewish people were in a desperate state. Their nations were destroyed: first the northern kingdom of Israel was captured by the Assyrians and the people were dispersed among the surrounding nations; then the southern kingdom of Judah was taken into exile by the Babylonians. The city of Jerusalem was completely conquered and the once glorious temple of Solomon was destroyed.

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they deported almost everyone from the city and the region. For some 70 years, Jerusalem was a ghost town, with the potential to end up like many ancient cities - completely forgotten except to history.

When the Jews were deported to Babylon, they began to make homes for themselves there. They settled down, and many still followed the God of their ancestors, but they did it from Babylon, with no desire to return to the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some of these faithful Jews were raised up to places of prominence in the governments they were deported to. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego became leaders in Babylon; Esther was made queen in the courts of a Persian king.

However, after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, they were given the opportunity to return to their homeland, the Promised Land. Out of the some two or three million Jews deported from the land, only 50,000 decided to return to the Promised Land. That is only something like 2 percent! However, they did return, they rebuilt the temple and, in the days of Ezra, they laid a spiritual foundation for Israel once more.

The Book of Nehemiah begins 15 years after the Book of Ezra ends; almost 100 years after the first captives returned to the Promised Land; and some 150

years after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. After this long time, the walls of the city of Jerusalem were still rubble. Before this, citizens of Jerusalem had tried to rebuild the walls but had failed. In Ezra 4:6-23, it is recorded that some 75 years before they had tried to rebuild the walls, but were stopped by their enemies. No one thought this obstacle could be overcome, so the walls lay in ruin and the people remained in peril from foreign invasion.

Chapter One

Nehemiah was working as the cupbearer to the King of Persia in the city of Susa when he received news of the poor condition of the city of Jerusalem with its broken walls. This saddened him greatly and so he prayed to the Lord, acknowledging that it was Israel's guilt that had brought about this situation.

Chapter Two

When Nehemiah was serving Artaxerxes, the king was perceptive to Nehemiah's depressed mood and asked him to explain. Emboldened by prayer, Nehemiah told him it was because of the state of Jerusalem, so the king asked him what he needed. Nehemiah requested letters for free passage and the timber necessary to rebuild the gates of Jerusalem, which the king granted; only Nehemiah had to agree a date for his return to serve the king.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he conducted a covert inspection of the city walls and gates at night with just a few trusted men for he had told no one of his mission.

Following his inspection Nehemiah told the leaders of his plans and they agreed to help rebuild the walls and gates. However, there were three foreign officials probably from Samaria who mocked him and accused him of sedition against the king. Nehemiah answered that the Lord was the king he served in this matter.

Chapter Three

The building work is described, and the workers are named, section by section. The point of this account is to show that the people as a whole responded to Nehemiah's challenge and believed that God would give them success. The description of the work demonstrates the concerted effort of the people.

Chapter Four

While the building continues, Sanballat and his allies resort to direct action in order to stop it, but their plot is foiled.

Chapter Five

There was an outcry to Nehemiah by all the Jews for they were struggling under the burden of both taxation to the king of Persia and also to their fellow Jews for the nobility were loaning them money at interest. Therefore, the poorer people were struggling to feed their families and having to sell their land to the nobles. Nehemiah instructed the nobility and the priesthood to honour God and treat their countrymen fairly, which they then did.

Nehemiah set the example in this for he did not take the food allowance or the tax that was due to him from the people in his position as governor. In addition, he invited many people to his own table each day to feed them from his own provision.

Chapter Six

Nehemiah's enemies try to scare him into ceasing the work, but he is not deterred and the wall is finished.

Chapter Seven

Now that the walls and gates are securely in place, Nehemiah appoints the Levites to their duties including the gatekeepers. A curfew is set to ensure that no one enters Jerusalem at night. Nehemiah then gathers all the nobles and the officials of the city. The book of all the original returnees who came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua is brought out and presumably read to the gathering.

Chapter Eight

Ezra appears in the Book of Nehemiah for the first time as the people are gathered together and the Book of the Law, probably Deuteronomy, is read out in their hearing. The people then go on to celebrate the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, celebrating the way the Lord protected them during the exodus.

Chapter Nine

The next phase in the great act of covenant renewal is a prayer of praise, confession and petition.

Chapter Ten

Many of the people agree to the new covenant that has been drawn up by Nehemiah and signed by the leadership. It commits them to walking the ways of God and following his written laws. In addition, they agree to keep themselves segregated from the Gentile nations and they accept the responsibility of funding the temple's activities, both through an annual tax supplemented by regular offerings.

Chapter Eleven

This chapter addresses the need to maintain a proportion of the population in Jerusalem and records the names of leaders who lived there. Populated villages of Judæa are also named.

Chapter Twelve

The chapter commences by naming the priests and Levites who had returned from exile starting with those in the original group under Zerubbabel and Jeshua through to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Nehemiah then goes on to describe the dedication of the walls following the successful task of rebuilding them. This was a joyful celebration that could be heard for miles outside of the city itself.

Chapter Thirteen

Because of what was written in the book of the law about Ammonites and Moabites, the people separated themselves from anyone of foreign descent.

Nehemiah had returned to see the king of Persia as he had promised to do. While he was away, Eliashib had made provision for Tobiah to have a room in the courts of the temple contrary to the law. On his return, Nehemiah forcibly removed Tobiah and all his belongings. Nehemiah also learned that the correct provision for the Levites had not been made and so he remonstrated with the officials over their neglect of this important act in the house of God.

The people were working and carrying on acts of commerce on the Sabbath so Nehemiah remonstrated with the nobles over this profanity. In addition, foreign traders were coming into the city on the Sabbath to sell their goods. Nehemiah ordered that all commerce should cease on the Sabbath and that the gates of the city should be locked before sunset as the Sabbath commenced. Some traders camped outside the city walls on the eve of the Sabbath but were warned to stay away, removing the temptation to the Jews to trade with them.

There also remained the problem of marriage to foreigners to the point where the children could not even speak the language of Judah. Nehemiah warned the people that this was contrary to God's law and used the example of Solomon's unwise marriages to foreign women that led him to apostasy. All such marriages were then forbidden. A son of Eliashib, who was the son of the high priest Jehoiada, refused to give up his foreign wife and was excluded from the community.