

# ***Introducing Nehemiah***

## **1. History**

Nehemiah is found half way through the Old Testament. However, the events recorded here represent the last events of Old Testament history. Nehemiah 13 took place around the year 430 BC. After this there were over four hundred years of history unrecorded in the Bible. During this time God is silent, sending no prophets to his people (the last prophet was Malachi who ministered at the time of Nehemiah in 445 BC). Then the silence is broken with the birth of Jesus and the preaching of John the Baptist – a voice crying in the wilderness.

To understand the context of Nehemiah we need to bear in mind several historical events

**587 BC** – Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jerusalem, burns the temple, breaks down the walls and carries the cream of the nation into Exile in Babylon. This includes Daniel and his friends. It was the result of years of disobedience against God, but it was an horrific experience, like a return to Egypt – “By the rivers of Babylon we laid down and wept when we remembered Zion...” (Psalm 137:1).

**539 BC** – The Babylonian empire fell to the Persian empire. King Cyrus of Persia passed a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and re-build the Temple. 50,000 Jews returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel. These events are recorded in Ezra 1-6.

**515 BC** – After many conflicts and set backs they finally completed the building of the Temple. This was supported by the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah. However, the walls of the city were not re-built. This left the city vulnerable and defenceless against its enemies.

**458 BC** – After a depressing period during which the people back in Jerusalem were treated with contempt, Ezra the scribe returned to the city with a small band of exiles. His ministry is recorded in Ezra 7-10. He taught God’s word to the people and began to re-build the walls. However, the Samaritans, who were the enemies of the Jews, sent letters to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. They reported that the city had a history of rebellion and that the walls would only lead to future rebellion. The king sent orders for the work to stop (Ezra 4:19-23).

**445 BC** – Nehemiah hears that the rebuilding of the walls had ceased, and he began to pray. How could he reverse the policy of Artaxerxes?

**444 BC** – Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and remains as governor for twelve years (444-432 BC). This is recorded in Nehemiah 1-12. After this he reported back to Susa.

**430 BC** – Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem a second time – discovering that the people have forgotten God and turned their back on Him (Nehemiah 13). These are the last recorded events of the Old Testament.

## **2. Background**

The book is based on the personal memoirs of Nehemiah (1:1-7:73; 12:31-13:31) and it is written from a first-person perspective. He was cup bearer in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes. It is a sequel to the book of Ezra.

The book of Nehemiah opens in the Persian city of Susa in the year 445 BC. In 444 BC Nehemiah travelled to Israel leading a few exiles. Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament. Although the book of Esther appears after Nehemiah in the Bible, the events in Esther occurred in the time period between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.

Nehemiah was a layman, not a priest like Ezra or a prophet like Malachi. He served the Persian king in a secular position before leading a group of Jews to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city walls. Under his leadership, the Jews withstood opposition and joined together to accomplish their goal. Nehemiah led by example, giving up a respected position in the palace for a challenging task in a politically insignificant district. He partnered with Ezra restore the people and challenge them to obey God's commands.

### 3. Importance

The book of Nehemiah records the re-construction of the walls of Jerusalem. A city without walls was vulnerable to its enemies. Walls were always destroyed by invaders in order to destroy a city's ability to resist its enemies – so much so that it became proverbial (Proverbs 25:28). The enemies of Israel looked at the city with contempt since after a hundred years they had failed to re-build the walls. This explains Nehemiah's response (1:3-4). God's glory is being dragged through the dirt, since this was no normal city.

- It was the city of the great king and the joy of the whole earth (Psalm 48:2) - the city where God had chosen for his name to dwell (Nehemiah 1:9). God's glory and reputation was associated with Jerusalem.
- God's purposes focused on this city. He planned to build a people in Jerusalem through whom he would reach the whole earth. His people were to be a light to the Gentiles – showing the nations the uniqueness and glory of their God, the one true God.
- God's purposes focused on the coming of the Messiah. It was in Jerusalem that he would reveal himself and accomplish his ministry there.

This explains the words of Nehemiah:

*Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.'* (2:17)

God's people need a leader to unite them and to enable them to fulfil God's great purpose of proclaiming his name to the ends of the earth. Nehemiah is the leader that they need. We can learn many lessons in godly leadership from Nehemiah. However, the purpose of these stories is to point forward to the perfect leader, of whom Nehemiah is merely a shadow. If we want an example to inspire us it is better to look beyond Nehemiah and focus on the life and ministry of Jesus. He is the true leader that we all need.

### 4. Structure

<b><i>Nehemiah 1-7</i></b>	<b><i>Restoration – Building the walls</i></b>
<b><i>Nehemiah 8-12</i></b>	<b><i>Revival – Instructing the people</i></b>
<b><i>Nehemiah 13</i></b>	<b><i>Reformation – Challenging disobedience</i></b>