

Nehemiah

A Suggested Outline of Nehemiah

- I. Repairing the Walls (1–6)
 - A. Preparation (1–2)
 - 1. A concerned leader (1)
 - 2. A cooperating king (2:1–8)
 - 3. A challenged people (2:9–20)
 - B. Cooperation—the people work (3)
 - C. Opposition (4:1–6:19)
 - 1. Ridicule (4:1–6)
 - 2. Force (4:7–9)
 - 3. Discouragement (4:10)
 - 4. Fear (4:11–23)
 - 5. Selfishness (5)
 - 6. Guile (6:1–4)
 - 7. Slander (6:5–9)
 - 8. Threats (6:10–19)
- II. Reviving the People (7–13)
 - A. The citizens registered (7)
 - B. The Word of God proclaimed (8)
 - C. The nation's sins confessed (9)
 - D. The holy covenant ratified (10–12)
 - E. The nation's sins cleansed (13)

Nehemiah 1–3

Whenever God wants to get a work done, He lays hold of willing people. The walls of Jerusalem had been ruined; a small remnant had returned; and there was much work that needed to be done. In 536, Zerubbabel and Joshua had taken about 50,000 Jews back and had (by 516) rebuilt the temple. In 457 there had been a small revival under Ezra, but now it was 445, and God was looking for someone to go to the ruined city and restore safety and order. Nehemiah was to be that person. Notice Nehemiah's activities in these three chapters.

I. Nehemiah Prays for the Work (1)

A. The report (vv. 1–3).

As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah (a Jew) held a high position in the court. He was close to the king and could share his confidence. But Nehemiah was not forgetful of his own people, for he eagerly asked his brother for news about Jerusalem. Read Pss. 122 and 137:5–6. Oh, that saints today had as much interest in their heavenly Jerusalem! The news was distressing: the remnant was suffering shame, the walls were broken down, and the gates were burned. See Ps. 79:1–4. Instead of being a city of praise and glory, it was a city of shame and reproach.

B. The response (v. 4).

Nehemiah was immediately burdened for his city. The fact that he was more than 700 miles away made no difference; nor did it matter that he was enjoying luxury and prestige in the palace of the king. He did not say, "The city's plight is not my fault!" Immediately his heart was touched and he wanted to do something to save his city. For four months (from Dec. to April; see 1:1 and 2:1) he wept and prayed. See Dan. 9 and Ezra 9.

C. The request (vv. 5–11).

This book shows Nehemiah to be a man of prayer (1:4–11; 2:4; 4:4; 4:9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). The book starts and ends with prayer! Verse 6 tells us he prayed day and night, so burdened was he for the city. Note that Nehemiah confesses his sins and the sins of his people. He also reminds the Lord of His gracious promises (vv. 8–9) and then offers himself to be God's servant to do something about Jerusalem's plight. "Here am I, Lord, send me!" In v. 11 we see that he has faith to ask God for servants, other Jews who would help him in the task.

II. Nehemiah Prepares for the Work (2)

Four months passed during which Nehemiah waited for God's time to approach the king. "Whoever believes will not act hastily, says Isa. 28:16 (nkjv). Indeed, faith and patience go together (Heb. 6:12). But Nehemiah had a plan in his mind, given to him by the Lord, and he knew just what to do when the right hour arrived. How like the Lord Jesus Christ (John 6:5–6).

A. Nehemiah and the king (vv. 1–8).

No one was to appear before the king with sadness or bad news (Esther 4:1–2), but the burden on Nehemiah's heart revealed itself on his face. He was a man of sorrows, and the king noticed it. Were it not for the providence of God, this sadness might have caused Nehemiah's death. Before taking his burden to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah quickly went to the throne of grace in prayer; then he told the king all his heart. He knew God

would open the way (Prov. 21:1). So thoroughly had Nehemiah worked out his plan that he was able to give the king a time schedule (v. 6) and a list of the materials he would need to do the task (vv. 7–8). God's strong hand (1:10) and good hand (2:8) did the impossible!

B. Nehemiah and the ruins (vv. 9–16).

It took three months for Nehemiah to arrive at the city, and he arrived as a governor, not a servant. A man of patience, Nehemiah waited three days before taking any steps. The enemies were watching and Nehemiah had to be wise and cautious. Later he would discover that some of the nobles of Judah were allied with Tobiah, the enemy of the Jews (6:17–19). By night he investigated the situation, keeping his counsel to himself. He was awake when others were sleeping and concerned while others were at ease. He saw more of the situation at night than others could see in the light.

C. Nehemiah and the Jews (vv. 17–20).

Nehemiah did not believe in a one-man ministry; he challenged the leaders of the remnant to work with him (not for him) in repairing the walls. The motive? "That we may no longer be a reproach." He was concerned with the glory of God as well as the good of the nation. Nehemiah showed them the need, outlined the task, and assured them of God's blessing. Immediately the opposition was aroused (as it always is), but Nehemiah knew that God's hand was upon him and his work.

III. Nehemiah Prospers in the Work (3)

A. The pattern.

The work was organized and directed, with the spiritual leaders taking the lead (v. 1) and the people cooperating. God noted each worker and put their names in the book. Each one had a specified area of responsibility. No one can do everything, but every person can do something. Of course, you will never have 100 percent cooperation; in v. 5 we find some of the nobles refusing to get involved. There were forty-two groups of workers.

B. The people.

What a variety of workers—priests (v. 1), rulers (vv. 12–19), women (v. 12), craftsmen (vv. 8, 32), and even Jews from other cities (vv. 2, 5, 7). Note that some were willing to do extra work (vv. 11, 19, 21, 24, 27, 30). Some did their work at home (vv. 10, 23, 28–30), and this is where Christian service ought to begin. Some workers were the only ones from their families (v. 30), and some workers were more zealous than others (v. 20). Compare v. 11 with Ezra 10:31 and you will see that even some former backsliders joined in the work.

C. The places.

There is a definite spiritual lesson in each of these gates. *The sheep gate* (v. 1) reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (John 10). This was the first gate repaired, for without the sacrifice, there is no salvation. Note that the sheep gate had no locks or bars, for the door of salvation is ever open to the sinner. This is the only gate that was sanctified, setting it apart as a special gate. *The fish gate* (v. 3) reminds us of soul-winning, being “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). *The old gate* (v. 6) speaks of the old paths and the old truths of the Word of God (Jer. 6:16 and 18:15). The people of the world are forever looking for “some new thing” (Acts 17:21), and they refuse to go back to the basic truths that really work.

The valley *gate* (v. 13) reminds us of humility before the Lord. In Phil. 2 we see Christ descending from the glories of heaven into the valley of human limitation and even death. We do not enjoy the valley, but often God must take us there to bring a blessing to our lives.

Verse 14 introduces *the dung gate*. Apparently this is the gate through which the waste and refuse of the city were taken. Imagine how difficult it would be to repair a gate in such a place! Certainly this speaks to us of the cleansing of our lives (2 Cor. 7:1; Isa. 1:16–17). Later some of the Jews were to complain about the rubbish; see 4:10. *The gate of the fountain* (v. 15) illustrates the ministry of the Holy Spirit; see John 7:37–39. It is interesting to note the order of these gates: first, there is humility (the valley gate), then cleansing (the dung gate), and then the filling of the Spirit (the fountain gate). *The water gate* (v. 26) speaks of the Word of God, which cleanses the believer (Eph. 5:26; Ps. 119:9). Note that this is the seventh gate mentioned, and seven is the Bible number for perfection—the perfect Word of God. Note too that this gate needed no repairs! “Forever, O Lord, Your Word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89, nkjv).

The horse gate (v. 28) introduces the idea of warfare. Certainly there are battles in the Christian life, and we must be ready to fight. See 2 Tim. 2:1–4. *The east gate* (v. 29) makes us think of the second coming of Jesus Christ (Matt. 24:27). In Ezek. 10:16–22, the prophet saw God’s glory depart from the temple by the east gate; see also 11:22–25. But later (43:1–5) he saw God’s glory return “from the way of the east.” *The gate Miphkad* (v. 31) speaks of God’s judgment. The Hebrew word *miphkad* means “appointment, account, census, mustering.” It carries the idea of troops showing up for review. Certainly God is going to call all souls up for judgment one day.

As you review these gates and their order, you can see the suggestion of the full picture of the Christian life, from the sheep gate (salvation) to the final judgment. Praise God the Christian shall never face judgment because of his sins! See John 5:24, Rom. 8:1–2.

Nehemiah 4–7

Whenever the people of God start doing the work of God, there will be opposition. A worker of weak faith and purpose will quit, but a person of resolution and confidence will overcome the opposition and finish the task. Nehemiah was such a person. Notice in these chapters the opposition that he faced (from both within and without the city) and the victories that he won.

I. Ridicule (4:1–6)

God's people always have enemies. In this case, they were Sanballat, a government official in Samaria; Tobiah, the Ammonite; and Geshem, an Arabian, who is also called Gashmu (6:1, 6). These three wicked men were outside the nation of Israel; in fact, the Ammonites were definite enemies of the Jews (Deut. 23:3–4). Their first weapon was ridicule; they mocked the "feeble Jews" openly before the leaders of Samaria. Satan is a mocker (Luke 22:63; 23:35–37). Ridicule is a device used by ignorant people who are filled with jealousy. They mocked the people ("feeble Jews"), the plan ("will they finish in a day?"), and the materials ("stones and rubbish"). How did Nehemiah answer them? He prayed to his God! His concern was only for the glory of God and the testimony of the nation, so do not read personal revenge into his prayer (see Ps. 139:19–24). Note that the people still worked as they prayed, for prayer is no substitute for work. Satan would have loved to see Nehemiah leave the wall and get involved in a dispute with Sanballat, but Nehemiah did not fall into Satan's trap. Never allow ridicule to stop your ministry; "take it to the Lord in prayer" and keep on working.

II. Force (4:7–9)

What Satan cannot accomplish by deceit he attempts to do by force. What a confederation of people we have in v. 7! And all of them conspired against the Jews. It is amazing how the devil seems to have no manpower shortage. We have two enemies in 2:10, three in 2:19, and a whole multitude in 4:7. But "if God be for us, who can be against us?" How did Nehemiah face this new attack? He prayed and set a watch. "Watch and pray!" is a repeated admonition in the NT; see Mark 13:33 (the world), Mark 14:38 (the flesh), and Eph. 6:18 (the devil). Note that Nehemiah did not depend on prayer alone; he also set a watch.

III. Discouragement (4:10)

The battle moves now from outside the city to inside. Satan followed this same tactic in Acts 5–6 when he used Ananias and Sapphira and the complaining widows inside the fellowship of the church. He also used Judas inside the ranks of the apostles. How discouraged the workers were, with all that rubbish on the inside of the city and the danger lurking on the outside. Why did the tribe of Judah complain? Perhaps it was because they were secretly in league with Sanballat (6:17). Note in 13:15 Judah's disobedience to the Law of God. When they said, "We are not able!" (v. 10), they were actually agreeing with the enemy (4:2). Discouragement and complaining spread rapidly and hinder God's work. We do not read that Nehemiah paid much attention to their complaint; he kept on building, watching, and praying.

IV. Fear (4:11–23)

Fear and faith can never abide in the same heart. In v. 11, we have a rumor the enemy started that their armies would suddenly invade Jerusalem. The Jews living outside the city heard this report and carried it to Nehemiah ten times. How persistent Satan's workers can be. Finally, Nehemiah set the guard on the walls and encouraged the people not to fear. Note that the work stopped from v. 13 to v. 15—exactly what the enemy wanted. Nehemiah saw the folly of this plan, so he put the workers back on the job, a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other. He also set a special watch with trumpets (vv. 19–20), but he did not allow the work to stop. These Jews are wonderful examples of what a Christian worker ought to be: they 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).

V. Selfishness (5)

This is a sad chapter, for in it we see the Jews selfishly preying upon one another. No building is recorded in this chapter. There were great economic burdens upon the Jews, not only because of the famine (Hag. 1:7–11), but also because of the taxes and tributes. The Jews were being robbed by their own people through mortgages and servitude. How did Nehemiah act in this crisis? First, he was angry (v. 6) because his people were so spiritually backslidden as to rob one another. He saw it not as an economic problem, but as a spiritual problem. He consulted with his own heart (v. 7) and certainly prayed to God for wisdom. Then he rebuked the people (vv. 7–11), reminding them of God's goodness to their nation. "We have been set free by the Lord," he argued; "will you now put one another in bondage again?" He appealed to the OT Law as he commanded them to restore their ill-gotten profits (Ex. 22:25). How the enemy enjoyed seeing the Jews rob one another (v. 9)! Note that Nehemiah also appealed to his own good example as a leader (v. 10). The people vowed to obey the Word—and they did!

VI. Guile (6:1–4)

The people went back to work, and so did the enemy. This time Sanballat and his men aimed their attacks on Nehemiah the leader. Many of God's people will never realize here on earth the special temptations and testings God's servants face day after day. Spiritual leadership is a costly thing. Sanballat invited Nehemiah to a friendly meeting on the Plain of Ono, and Nehemiah refused. God's separated servants dare not walk "in the counsel of the ungodly" (Ps. 1:1). Beware of the smiles of the enemy, for Satan is more dangerous when he appears to be your friend than at any other time. Four invitations came (v. 4) and Nehemiah refused them all. "I am doing a great work and cannot come down!" Stay on the job when Satan invites you to quit, and God will bless you.

VII. Slander (6:5–9)

The fifth time the messenger came, he brought an “open letter” filled with slanderous accusations against Nehemiah and his people. “It is reported” is one of the devil’s chief weapons. “They say” or “I have heard” are phrases that usually introduce gossip and lies. Who are “they”? Nehemiah detected the scheme and immediately exposed the lies in the so-called “open letter.” His life and character refuted every lie in the letter. In vv. 1–4, the enemy offered to work with the Jews; here in vv. 5–9, the enemy wanted to defame Nehemiah’s name. Note how Nehemiah again prayed for God to overrule (v. 9). Servants of God cannot help what people say about them, but they can help what kind of character and testimony they have. If Nehemiah had stopped the work to defend his reputation, the walls would never have been built.

VIII. Threats (6:10–14)

Shemaiah had shut himself up in his house, apparently afraid of the enemy, but in reality he was working with the enemy. Why was he not helping the Jews build the wall? It pays to be cautious around so-called Christians who always have advice but never seem to get any work done for Christ themselves. Paul warned about false brethren (2 Cor. 11:26). Shemaiah lied to Nehemiah and tried to frighten him into going out to the enemy for safety. But Nehemiah saw through the scheme and openly refuted Shemaiah’s lies. Again, he prayed for God’s help and then went right back to work.

The walls were completed in fifty-two days. And the people worked during the hottest part of the year. God was glorified, the enemy was embarrassed (v. 16), but the compromising Jews were still at work trying to get Nehemiah to accept Tobiah. What a burden these nobles of Judah must have been to godly, courageous Nehemiah. The work had been completed. To God be the glory!

Nehemiah 8–13

The walls were completed on the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month (6:15). This second half of the book begins on the first day of the seventh month (8:2), and the emphasis is on the people of the city and their dedication to God. The material building was now over. It was time to begin to build the people spiritually.

I. Proclamation of the Word (8–10)

Ezra returned to Jerusalem to assist Nehemiah in the dedication of the walls and the sanctifying of the people. Do not confuse this scene with that in Ezra 3. It is significant that they gathered at the water gate, since this gate symbolizes the Word of God (3:26). The people had an appetite for the Word, for they asked Ezra to bring the Book and preach it. The first day of the seventh month marked the Feast of Trumpets; the tenth day would be the Day of Atonement; and the fifteenth to twenty-second days, the Feast of Tabernacles (see Lev. 23:23–44). Ezra read the Word and explained it for many hours, assisted by the Levites. Verse 8 describes a perfect church gathering: the people

all assembled to listen; the Word was exalted; the preacher read and explained the Word so that people could understand it. The people wept at hearing the Word, overcome, no doubt, with grief for their sins. But this was to be a day of rejoicing. They would weep on the Day of Atonement! Ezra commanded them to feast and rejoice; see Ecc. 3:4.

The next day, the leaders met with Ezra and discovered the law concerning the Feast of Tabernacles. They proclaimed this law throughout the land, and as the people obeyed, there was "very great gladness" (v. 17). There is joy in hearing the Word, but greater joy at obeying it. The result of this "Bible conference" (which was held daily for a week, v. 18) was a great convocation of convicted people on the twenty-fourth day of the month. Ezra and the Levites taught the Word for three hours, then led the people in confession and prayer for three hours, and so on throughout the day. The prayer in chapter 9 is a spiritual summary of the OT history of the Jews: the Creation (v. 6); the call of Abraham (vv. 7–8); the Exodus (vv. 9–14); the nation's wilderness experiences (vv. 15–23); the conquering of the land (vv. 24–25); the period of Judges (vv. 26–29); the period of prophets up to the captivity (vv. 30–31). "Now therefore ..." (v. 32) brings us up to Ezra's day and the need of the nation to repent and confess sin. Note in v. 36 that the Jews admit that the "deliverance prophecies" in Isaiah and Jeremiah did not apply to their return from captivity. They will apply at a future date when God gathers Israel again to Palestine. To say that these OT promises were fulfilled when Israel returned from exile, and are now being fulfilled "in the church," is to twist Scripture.

Chapter 10 gives the names of the brave and godly people who entered into the covenant with God that day. Little did they realize that their names would be recorded eternally in the Word! In vv. 28–39, we see the people applying the Word to their everyday lives. It is one thing to pray and sign a covenant; it is another thing to separate from evil, straighten out our homes (vv. 28–30), honor the commandments (v. 31), contribute to the house of God (vv. 32–33), and serve God with tithes and offerings (vv. 34–39). Too many "Bible conferences" end with the people stirred and blessed, but not obeying what they have heard.

II. Dedication of the Walls (11–12)

Nehemiah returns now to the story of the walls, which he had interrupted to tell about the spiritual work under Ezra. Everything from 7:5 to 10:39 has been parenthetical. The events in Nehemiah are not given in their exact order. 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 leaders were dwelling in the city, but now they wanted the citizens to join them, so they cast lots and moved one out of ten into the city. Verse 2 indicates that there were also some volunteers. The numbers in vv. 3–19 total 3,044. If this represented 10 percent of the male population, we can see how small the remnant was in the land. Note the mention of singers (vv. 22–23). The Jews had no song during their years of exile (Ps. 137), but now they had the joy of the Lord as their strength.

The actual dedication of the walls is described in 12:27–47. Ezra and Nehemiah divided the people into two great companies, with Ezra leading one and Nehemiah following the other (see vv. 31, 36, 38). They started probably at the valley gate. Ezra led his company along the east side of the city, then north to the temple area. Nehemiah

and his company went straight north and then east, meeting the other company at the temple area. It was a reminder, perhaps, of when Israel marched around Jericho and won a great victory. It was also an opportunity to publicly thank the Lord as they witnessed the work accomplished. Verse 43 indicates that the joy of the city was heard miles away. What a day of dedication that was! When dedicated people unite joyfully to dedicate God's work, they will always experience God's blessing.

III. Condemnation of the Wicked (13)

From 13:6 and 7:2 we learn that Nehemiah returned to Babylon for a time, leaving the governing of the city in the hands of his brother. When he returned, he discovered that the people had fallen back into their old ways. Verses 1–3 speak of a cleansing that took place the very day of the dedication, when they separated the heathen wives in the families; see Deut. 23:1–5. Years before, Ezra had faced this problem (Ezra 10). Sin has a way of repeating itself. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found that the Jewish men had repeated this sin (vv. 23–31). In fact, even the priests had sinned in this way. It was necessary for this courageous leader to face sin honestly and judge it.

He started at the house of God, where he discovered (v. 4) that the high priest was allied with the Jews' enemy, Tobiah. ("Allied" perhaps means "related to"; see 6:18 and 13:28.) It is a sad thing when the servants of God compromise with the enemies of God. The priest even gave Tobiah a chamber in the temple and provisions from the temple store, provisions that really belonged to the priests and Levites. Nehemiah lost no time in throwing out Tobiah and his goods, and having the temple chamber sanctified for its proper use.

Another sin was the failure of the people to support their spiritual servants, the priests and Levites. Malachi had something to say about this; read Mal. 3. Nehemiah reproached the people and set up a dependable system for the priests to follow. Note how he asks for God's help in all his ministry (v. 14).

Sabbath disobedience was another problem. The workers were employed on the Sabbath (v. 15), and the merchants were selling on the Sabbath (v. 16). While we do not believe that the Lord's Day today is the same as the Jewish Sabbath, we do feel that God's people ought to set apart the Lord's Day and use it to glorify Him. Our economic system requires that some people must work on Sunday, but it is far better for workers and the nation if they are allowed to honor the Lord's Day. Certainly no Christian should use Sunday as a day for shopping or for doing work that can wait. Nehemiah reproofed the Jews for dishonoring the Sabbath, and he closed the gates of the city against the Sabbath salesmen. See Jer. 17:21–27 with reference to v. 18.

But note that even the Levites were guilty of desecrating the Sabbath (v. 22). Read Mal. 1–2 and you will see that the priesthood had fallen into shameful sins. Unless the leaders of God's people set the example, the people will not easily obey God. Of course, it may be that the failure of the people to support the temple (vv. 10–13) forced the Levites into working on the Sabbath to keep themselves alive.

The book closes with three prayers (vv. 22, 29, 31). Nehemiah has done his 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!