

The Book of Nehemiah

Listed Scriptures

Nehemiah 1, 4, 13

Lesson Aim

- 1) That the students may understand the historical background of the return of the Israelites in exile
- 2) That the students may understand the importance of the power of God in rebuilding the city
- 3) That the students may understand the importance of repentance and resolve to keep God's teachings

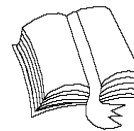
Memory Verse

"For if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear. But certainly God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer." (Ps 66:18, 19)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Nehemiah 1, 4, 13

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D



It is generally accepted that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 445/444 B.C. He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I (465 – 424 B.C.). That was a position of very high office, being someone close to the king. While Zerubbabel led the first group of Israelites back to rebuild the holy temple, we know that Ezra later went to revive the faith of the nation as he led a second group back. As for Nehemiah, his role can be seen as more related to the building of the city walls as well as the revival of a life of true worship towards God.

Please also refer to the Bible Background section for Lesson 10 for additional information.



Over the course of history, we see how God sometimes helped His people by arranging for them to find favor in the sight of people in power. For example, God first arranged for Joseph to become the premier in the land of Egypt, so that when the great seven-year famine came, the sons of Jacob could move their families to Egypt and survive the harsh time. We also see a similar example in the case of Moses. When he was a baby, he was found by the daughter of the Pharaoh, thus escaping the fate of having to be killed.

During the captivity, God used this method to help His chosen people too. Today, we will study the case of an Israelite whose position in court was one that allowed him to stay close to the king of Persia. We will see how he obtained favor and help from the king and returned to the land of Judah to help rebuild the city of Jerusalem.

B I B L E S T U D Y



Nehemiah

The author of the book of Nehemiah was Nehemiah himself. He was the cupbearer of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, who ruled from 465–424 B.C. Nehemiah, following Zerubbabel and Ezra, also returned to the land of Judah. He was governor there for a period of twelve years. It is believed that he went back to the court of the Persian king for a brief time after that. In 433 B.C., he returned to the land of Judah again and carried out the reforms of the religious and social life of the community.

The book of Nehemiah can be divided into four major sections:

- a. Nehemiah returns to the land of Judah (1–2:8)
- b. The city walls are rebuilt (2:9–7)
- c. Revival of faith (8–12:26)
- d. Offerings upon the completion of the city walls (12:27–13)


A. Nehemiah Returns to the Land of Judah (1–2:8)

- a. Grieving for the holy temple (1):
Although Nehemiah was in a foreign land, his heart never left his homeland. He was very concerned about what was going on in the land of Judah. When he heard that the people in the province of Judah were in distress and reproach, and that the city walls were in ruins and the city gates burned, he was exceptionally moved. He wept and cried to God for help. The spirit of Nehemiah is admirable. How many of our present-day believers actually weep and pray for the church, or for the members in church?
- b. The king granted him permission to return (2:1–8):
Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah had a sad countenance, and asked about the cause. After Nehemiah told him about what was bothering him, the king granted Nehemiah permission to return to his homeland. He even granted Nehemiah's request to have timber and other resources for rebuilding the city walls.


B. The City Walls Are Rebuilt (2:9–7)

- a. Upon arriving in Judah (about the year 445 B.C.) (2:9–20), Nehemiah could not wait till the following day but went immediately to examine the city walls. He saw the urgency in rebuilding them, for the ruined walls were a primary reason why enemies were persecuting the Israelites. In today's context, the "walls" of our church are also in ruins. There are many "holes" that needed to be covered up. As children of God, it is our duty to fortify the walls of our church today, whether it is in terms of spiritual nurture, human relationships or in our contact with people who haven't yet received our gospel.
- b. Delegation of tasks in rebuilding the city walls (3):
The whole nation was involved in the rebuilding of the walls. The work was divided into different sections of the city walls, and the people were organized into groups, each handling a section.
- c. Obstruction from enemies and how they circumvented it (4):
Sanballat and Tobiah, together with their group of men, tried to disrupt the work of rebuilding the walls. Nehemiah encouraged the people not to withdraw in fear. Instead, he devised a plan such that half the people would work on the rebuilding while another half would hold weapons and keep watch. They also arranged for people to keep watch at night.

- d. Nehemiah rebuked the nobles for usury of their fellow Jews (5):
Nehemiah was furious when he found out that the nobles were demanding tributes from their fellow Jews. He ordered them to return all the money that they had received through such means.
- e. Completion of the city walls (6):
The enemies of the Israelites threatened Nehemiah with false accusative letters but Nehemiah was not daunted. He prayed that God would sustain him with courage. After enduring various forms of difficulties, Nehemiah and the Jews finally completed the rebuilding of the city walls, in fifty-two days.
- f. Nehemiah arranged for people to take charge of Jerusalem (7):
Nehemiah appointed his brother Hanani to take charge of the city and Hananiah to be in charge of the citadel, for he was a faithful and God-fearing man.
- g. A census was taken (7:4–73):
There were not very many Jews who returned to the land of Judah during the first journey. God moved Nehemiah to take a census of the families who were living in the land so as to calculate the number of people who had actually returned.

C. Revival of Faith (8–12:26)

- a. The Book of the Law was read (8):
On the seventh month, Nehemiah gathered all the people by the Water Gate, and Ezra the scribe was asked to read the Book of the Law (of Moses). The Levites were there to help the people understand the readings. The people of God were so touched by the words of God that they wept, but they were told not to grieve but to rejoice, for they had understood the law of God. They also began to build booths to observe the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles), for it had not been observed since the days of Joshua, the son of Nun. This was a sign that the people of God had neglected the laws of God for a long period of time.
- b. The people of God repented of their sins (9–10:31):
On the twenty-fourth day of the seven month, the people gathered together to fast and pray and confess their sins. The Levites also prayed to God on their behalf. The people repented of their past sins and even drafted a covenant to obey the words of God. Nehemiah and all the priests put their seals on the covenant.

- c. Resolutions were made (10:32–39):
Among the resolutions made, one was that they would offer a portion of their yearly gains toward the livelihood of the priests and other Levites, so the workers of God could concentrate on serving in the Lord's temple.
- d. Jerusalem (11–12:26):
As for the rest of the people, a tenth of them were chosen by casting lots to move into Jerusalem to populate the city. A list of all the priests and Levites was also finalized.

D. Offerings Upon the Completion of the City Walls (12:27–13)

- a. Offering the sacrifices (12:27–13:3):
To mark the completion of the city walls, the people circled the city and made offerings to God. The offerings were kept in storehouses, and the Levites assumed their roles in the various services in the temple of God, just like in the days of David. The people also made a resolution to be separate from the other nations.
- b. The final clean-up (13:4–31):
After Nehemiah's term as governor was over, he returned to the king of Persia. During his absence, the faith of the people began to wane. By the time Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem a second time, he had to reorganize the lives of the people once again. First, he cleansed the temple, and reinstated the Levites in the services within the temple. He strongly rebuked the Israelites who had married gentiles. He reiterated to them also the need to observe the holy Sabbath. It was not only an outwardly clean-up, done on the temple, but also inwardly, in the spirituality of the people.
- c. Nehemiah's zeal in rebuilding the walls of the city never dwindled no matter what difficulties arose before him. He saw the need to fortify the city of God against enemies. He also cared about the spirituality of the people. He cleansed the temple and reinstated religious services. More importantly, he stirred the people of God into repentance and obedience to the laws of God.

Today, we need more "Nehemiahs" in our church. We need people with a zeal for God's house, to guard against all forms of enemies, and also to strengthen the church internally. That way, every believer can be strong and keep the words of God. Are we ready to be "Nehemiahs" for God?

C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



1 Who was Nehemiah? How would you describe his role in the history of the Israelites in the post-exilic era?

2 What were some of the sins the people of God had committed, and what were some of the things that they had neglected to do for many generations?

3 How did the enemies try to obstruct the work of rebuilding the city walls?

L I F E A P P L I C A T I O N



Making and Sticking to Resolutions

The Israelites often resolved to obey God's teachings but usually could not follow through. When the Book of the Law of Moses was read to them, the people were full of remorse; they wept and resolved to depart from their old ways and to follow the teachings in the Book of the Law. But when Nehemiah went back to the palace of the Persian king, we see that the people lapsed into their old ways again. They began to neglect observing the Sabbath, and even married pagan women and followed in their ways.

This demonstrates one very important fact: Resolution alone does not ensure the carrying out of deeds. In our life of faith, are we not like the Israelites at times? We resolve to do certain things that we know are good for our spiritual growth and are pleasing in the eyes of God. But, how often do we find ourselves distracted by the things that pull us away from what we have resolved to do?

There is a story that goes like this:

A religious man felt that he was lacking in patience and gentleness. He decided that spending half a year up in the mountains reading holy scripture, meditating and enjoying nature's tranquility would help him improve on this aspect of his spirituality. So, indeed, this religious man spent half a year doing just what he had planned. At the end of the period of spiritual cultivation, he found himself a calmer,

happier and even gentler person. He knew it was time for him to go back to the world.

Half-way down the mountain, he met with a group of children who were so engrossed with their game that they did not realize they were blocking the path of the religious man. "Hey, little children, do stop your game and let me pass" so said the religious man. But, the children were laughing so hard they did not even hear him. "Hey, I said, stop your game and let me pass!" The religious man started to feel his blood rush to his face . . . After a failed third attempt to catch the attention of the children, he picked one of them up and shouted at the poor child in his face. Right away, the religious man caught himself, but it was too late. All his efforts at spiritual cultivation in the past half year did not seem to have helped him at all.

Food for thought:

1. *What does this story tell you about spiritual nurture?*
2. *Are there instances in your own life when you feel you are just like this religious man? In what areas of your life do you feel this way?*
3. *Did you try to help yourself? How?*

There are many resolutions that we make to improve our lives – our relationships with people, our own character, our service to God, etc. Often we end up being like the Israelites, finding it hard to keep up with the resolutions. In the section below are some common resolutions that we make. Write down some of the things that distract you from holding fast to your resolution. Then, write down what you can do or what type of support you need from people around you so that you can keep your resolutions. (Some suggestions have been added as a guide for you.)

1. I often resolve to . . .

—Spend more time reading the Bible

But this is what I end up doing . . .

—Watching TV

—Surfing the Internet

—Chatting on the phone or online with friends

Here's how I can help myself . . .

—Asking for help from family members to turn off the TV past a certain hour

—Limiting the number of hours a week I spend on the computer doing non-work-related activities

2. I often resolve to . . .

—Attend church or family services more often

But this is what I end up doing . . .

—Lounging around in the house in the evenings

—Going out for dinner with friends

—Other

Here's how I can help myself . . .

—Making arrangements with church friends to meet for dinner before service and then going to service together after that

—Other

3. I often resolve to . . .

—Participate in church work

But this is what I end up doing . . .

—Being too shy to approach the person in charge

—Not knowing who to turn to to get started

—Other

Here's how I can help myself . . .

—Discussing my wishes with church friends or family members so they can refer me to the relevant person in charge

—Other

4. I often resolve to . . .

—Preach to friends at school/work

But this is what I end up doing . . .

—Friends do not even know that I am a Christian

—Other

Here's how I can help myself . . .

—Student's input

5. I often resolve to . . .

—Student's input

But this is what I end up doing . . .

—Student's input

Here's how I can help myself . . .

—Student's input



Hymn 396 (I Would Be True) and Hymn 409 (Make Me a Blessing) are two very beautiful hymns, almost like hymns of resolution. As we sing them, let's reflect upon our own lives and see how we can strive to be better people for Christ. Let's also remember that we need to live out the word of God every day, instead of simply making resolutions without actually carrying them out. May God help us.