

16. Nehemiah

1. Overview: Nehemiah tells the last chapter of the sequential history of the nation of Israel that is revealed in the Old Testament. The roughly 400-year period that follows is referred to as the silent years until John the Baptist starts his ministry teaching in the wilderness of Judea. Almost all the remaining books of the Old Testament will be expanding and filling in details on events between Creation and the events in Nehemiah.
2. Writer: Based on the first-person voice through the book, it seems likely that **Nehemiah** himself is the penman. It is also possible that **Nehemiah** spoke the words, while another man recorded them like the prophet **Jeremiah** did with the Scribe, **Baruch** (Jeremiah 36:4) based on the opening verse: *The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.*
3. Time period: The narrative picks up 13 years after the Book of Ezra ends in the 20th year of the Persian King **Artaxerxes (2nd)**. Most of the events in described in the Book of Nehemiah take place within about ten months between the 9th month of Hebrew Calendar and the 7th month of the following year. However, in the last chapter, the narrative jumps forward twelve more years, to given an account of some events that occurred while **Nehemiah** was away from Jerusalem and how he addressed them upon his return.
4. Key Figures:
 1. **Nehemiah** - The Israelite Cup Bearer to the King of Persia, who travels to Jerusalem to encourages the rapid rebuilding of the city walls. **Nehemiah** is the Governor over the region of Judah for at least 12 years.
 2. **Artaxerxes (2nd)** - King of Persia. He authorizes Nehemiah to travel to Jerusalem and agrees to provide the lumber for the rebuilding of the city gates.
 3. **Eliashub** - The High Priest. He helps with the building of the walls, but he also has an evil alliance with an enemy of the Jew- **Tobiah**.
 4. **Ezra** - the same scribe referenced in the Book of Ezra;
 5. **Sanballat** - from a Moabite City, and an Enemy of the Jews, a leader of Samaritan Army, who daughter marries the grandson of **Eliashub**; and
 6. **Tobiah** - Ammonite Enemy with family ties to various notable Jewish Families, who convinces **Eliashub** to give him use of a treasure chamber within the Temple.

5. Chapter by Chapter:

Chapter 1: **Nehemiah Learns of the Sad Condition of Jerusalem.**

Reign of Artaxerxes (2nd): Year 20.

9th Month of the Hebrew Calendar Year (*Chisleu* - November/December)

Verses 1-3: **Nehemiah** is an Israelite captive working as the Cup Bearer to the King of Persian - **Artaxerxes (2nd)** at the Persian winter capital of Shushan (Shushan is thought to be the city now known as Susa located in Iran and about 250 miles east of Babylon). **Nehemiah** is visited by his brother, **Hanani** who has come from Jerusalem, and he tells **Nehemiah** about the afflictions of the Jews living in Judah and that the walls and gates of Jerusalem still have not been rebuilt. (We don't know exactly how long it has been since **Zerubbabel** returned to Jerusalem to start the rebuilding process of the temple and the city, but many years have now transpired.)

Verses 4-11: Upon hearing this sad news, **Nehemiah** sits and mourns for several days. While fasting, he is praying to God: first, confessing the sins of Israel, and then asking God to cause **Nehemiah** to find favor in the sight of **King Artaxerxes(2nd)**.

Chapter 2: **Nehemiah Petitions Artaxerxes and Travels to Jerusalem**

Reign of Artaxerxes (2nd): Year 20. 1th Month of the Calendar Year

Verses 1-9: Three months later, King **Artaxerxes** notices that **Nehemiah** is distressed and asks him what is troubling him. **Nehemiah** fearfully states that he is upset because Jerusalem, the city of his fathers, is in a ruined condition. When prompted by the King, **Nehemiah** states that his desire is to travel to Jerusalem so he can rebuild it. **Artaxerxes** agrees and sends **Nehemiah** with an armed escort to Jerusalem carrying a letter instructing the keeper of his forests to give timber to Nehemiah to make the city gates.

5th Month of the Calendar Year

Verses 10-20: **Nehemiah** arrives in Jerusalem and after being there three days, he secretly travels around the city by night surveying the damaged condition of the walls and gates. The next day, he encourages the people to rebuild the walls of the city and informs them of how God is already aiding them and how the King **Artaxerxes** had approved the project. The people respond favorably saying- "*Let us rise and build.*"

Now the Jews have enemies in the region, most notably (i) **Sanballat**, who is from a city in Moab and is a leader of the Samaritan Army (See 4:2), and (ii) **Tobiah**, an Ammonite. These enemies are greatly upset that someone was coming from the Persian Capital seeking the welfare of the Jews. When they learn of **Nehemiah's** plan to rebuild the city walls, they openly mock him asking if he intends on rebelling against the King.

Chapter 3: **Accounting of the Leaders and their Worksites.**

5th Month of the Calendar Year

Around the third day of the 5th month, the high priest **Eliashib** arose up and started building the "Sheep Gate", which is thought to be located on the northeast corner of the city. An accounting is given of the individuals and families that were responsible for rebuilding the specified portions of wall and gates, starting from the Sheep Gate and moving and moving counter-clockwise around the walls of city. Notably, some individuals were working with great zeal, tackling more than one section of wall, while others are called out for their only half-hearted efforts. (We determine the start day by using the Walls Completion Date on the 25th day of the 6th month and subtract the 52 days of construction)

Chapter 4: **The Jews Enemies Mock and Conspire.**

When the Jews Enemies, **Sanballat** and **Tobiah**, hear that the Jews have started rebuilding the walls, they continue to scoff and mock their efforts saying that if a fox were to step on their feeble walls they would crumble down. **Nehemiah** prays for the Lord would return their reproaches back upon their own heads and they continue building.

When the walls are about halfway completed, the Jew Enemies stop laughing and begin to take this construction project as a serious threat. (They likely don't want to see Jerusalem restored to a position of power in the region.) **Sanballat** and **Tobiah** conspire with the Arabians, Ammonites, and the Ashdodites (formerly a city of the Philistines) to unite and fight against Jerusalem in a sneak attack. **Nehemiah**, who received advanced warning of the plan, positions all the people in defensive positions on the wall- ready to receive the attack. But the attack does not come once the Jews' Enemies realize they had already lost the element of surprise.

From that time onward, **Nehemiah** split his servants (likely referring to his personal servants in his role as Governor) into two groups: Builders and Sentries to guard the city. All the Builders were armed and ready to defend themselves at a moment's notice. It was a grueling period, laboring from sun up until the stars appeared, and with such an intense focus that they only took their work clothes off to wash them.

Chapter 5: **Nehemiah Rebukes the Rich Jews.**

Verses 1-13 There is terrible famine in the land of Judah at this time, and during the construction process, **Nehemiah** discovers that many of the people had been forced to mortgage all their lands just to be able to buy food and pay the taxes owed to the Persian King. With no other option, now these same people were being forced to sell their children as bond-slaves to pay their debts owed to the wealthy Jews. (Under the law, it is forbidden for one Jew to charge another Jew interest on a loan (also called usury). See Deuteronomy 23:19) **Nehemiah** sharply rebukes the wealthy nobles and rules, who had been charging interest of their loans to other Jews. **Nehemiah** orders the following:

- (i) all the lands that had been mortgaged must be returned immediately to the debtor, and
- (ii) 1% of the money or goods (corn, wine, oil) that the nobles collected on the loans had to be returned to the debtor.

The Nobles all swear an oath that they would do so and that they would also completely forgive the balances owed on the loans.

Verses 14-18- **Nehemiah** briefly breaks off from the narrative to clarify that during the twelve years that he was Governor he did not abuse his position by taking additional taxes from the people, even though previous Governors had done so and that by right he could have lawfully done so.

Chapter 6: **Sanballat's Traps and the Walls Completed.**

Verses 1-9 Once the walls were completed, but before the Gates had been built and installed, **Sanballat** sends multiple messages to **Nehemiah** asking for a meeting in a neutral site attempting to lure him out of the protection of the city. **Nehemiah** smells the trap and refuses to meet with him. Next, **Sanballat** sends a message saying that it is being commonly reported that **Nehemiah** is attempting to rebel and set himself up as king and it is going to be told to the King **Artaxerxes** so they should get together to sort this whole misunderstanding out. **Nehemiah** bluntly responds that all those allegations are just lies that come from **Sanballat's** own head.

Verses 10-14 Next, **Sanballat** hires an Israelite prophet named **Shemaiah** to try to scare **Nehemiah** into fleeing into the temple saying that they would come that night to kill **Nehemiah**, but **Nehemiah** doesn't take the bait and avoiding the evil.

25th day of the 6th Month of the Calendar Year

Verses 15-19: After 52 days of furious labor, the walls and gates are all completed on the 25th day of the 6th month of the Hebrew year (*Elul* – August/September), which caused their enemies to have “down cast eyes” (discouraged, disappointed) as they saw that the Lord had caused the work to be completed. After this time **Nehemiah** had to deal with the subversive efforts of **Tobiah** within Judah, who had a network of Jewish Nobles acting as both informants and lobbyists on **Tobiah's** behalf. These nobles were loyal to **Tobiah** because he had some (unlawful) family connections to Jewish rulers.

Chapter 7: **Nehemiah Orders Genealogy Accounting of all the People.**

Verses 1-5: With the walls and gates all completed and the appointment of the Porters, Singers, Levites to their respective services, **Nehemiah** sets two men to be the rulers over the city of Jerusalem (One is **Hanani**, **Nehemiah's** brother from Chapter 1). **Nehemiah** orders the city rulers not open the gates of the city until the sun is hot and to set a watch at night.

God puts it on **Nehemiah's** heart to gather all the people, including rulers and nobles, so that they may all be checked against the Genealogy records. **Nehemiah** finds a registry of the genealogies of the Jews that first came to Jerusalem with **Zerubbabel**.

Verses 6-73: **Nehemiah** copies out the entire registry from **Zerubbabel's** return. (While not word for word, these verses are extremely close to all the verses in Ezra Chapter 2.)

Chapter 8: **The Law is Read and the Feast of Tabernacles is observed.**

1st day of the 7th Month of the Calendar Year. (*Ethanim-September/October*)

Verses 1-12: Starting six days after the walls are finished, all the people gather in an assembly in Jerusalem. **Ezra**, the scribe, standing upon a wooden pulpit reads the law to all the people for about three hours each morning until the whole law is read. Verse 8: *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.* (This is sound guidance for every preacher). Initially, the people start crying and weeping when they hear the law (likely knowing they had not been keeping the law and hearing all the curses in it for disobedience, which is a terrifying combination). However, **Nehemiah** and **Ezra** encourage them not to cry for this day is a “holy day unto the Lord”. So, instead of weeping, there is great joy among the people because they have understood the word of the Lord.

2nd day of the 7th Month of the Calendar Year.

Verses 13-18: The next day during the reading, they discover that they are supposed to keep the Feast of Tabernacles in the 7th Month of each year by building tents (aka huts, booths) out of tree branches. All the people obey and build themselves tents to camp out in for the week of the feast. The last time the Feast of Tabernacles had been kept in such a manner with everyone participating in the tent dwelling was around 1,000 years earlier, during the time when **Joshua** still leading Israel, while they were still conquering the land of Canaan.

Chapter 9: **A Solemn Assembly**

24th day of the 7th Month of the Calendar Year.

Verse 1-4: The people gathered together again on the 24th day of the same month, this time fasting and wearing sackcloth upon their bodies and ashes upon their head. (These outward gestures manifest that they were mourning their sins and repenting from them.) The Children of Israel separate themselves from all the “strangers” (persons of any other nation) and began to confess their sins and the sins of their fathers. For a quarter of that day, the Law is read to the assembly (this would be the second time it was read through in a month) and the next quarter is spent confessing their sins and worshipping the LORD their God.

Verses 5-35: Eight Levites arise and order the people to stand up and bless their God. Then the Levites give a lengthy recap of how God, in his goodness and mercy, has blessed Israel starting from creation and going through many key events in Israel’s history:

Verses 7-8 The Covenant with Abraham;

Verses 9-11 The Exodus from Egypt;

Verses 12-15 The giving the Law in the Wilderness;

Verses 16-21 Israel’s rebellion in refusing to enter Canaan and the 40 years of Wandering;

Verses 22-25 The conquering of Canaan by God’s hand;

Verses 26-35 The pattern of rebellion by Israel and God’s corrections in the times of Judges and Kings;

Verses 36-38: The Levites state that they though are all servants of the LORD, they now they serve in the land that had given to their fathers by God, but only as mere servants and subjects of the King of Persia and that they remain in great distress. For all the foregoing reasons, they make a formal covenant to be the Servants of the LORD.

Chapter 10: **The New Covenant is Sealed**

Verses 1-28: An accounting of each person who sealed (signed) the covenant.

Verses 1-8: The names of the Priests;

Verses 9-13: The names of the Levites;

Verses 14-27: The names of the Chief Leaders of the people; and

Verse 28: Everyone else who had separated themselves from the strangers and who had knowledge and understanding of the law.

Verses 29-39: The people entered into an oath and a curse to do the following:

- (i) Keep, observe and do the law of God;
- (ii) Remain separated from strangers;
- (iii) Not to buy goods on the Sabbath days;
- (iv) Allow the fields to lay fallow every seventh year;
- (v) To give 1/3 shekel (money) from each person to the House of God each year to perform all the daily, weekly, and annual sacrifices (these had formerly been supplied by the King);
- (vi) Allocate the wood gathering responsibilities to supply for the House of God (formerly done by servants of Israel like the Gibeonites);
- (vii) Bring in the first fruit offerings and tithes (1/10 of increase) of the people, which was the portion for the Levites and Priests; and
- (viii) To Not forsake the house of God.

Chapter 11: **Jerusalem's Small Population is Increased**

Verses 1-2

Nehemiah 7:4 Now the city [Jerusalem] was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded. During the rebuilding of the wall, all the people had dwelled in the city, but once the construction is completed and the covenant is sealed, everyone desired to travel back to their respective cities around Judah. Knowing that it was important for Jerusalem to have somewhat of a significant population, it was decided that 1 out every 10 men should stay and live in Jerusalem, plus anyone who wanted to voluntarily live there along with all the rulers. (This is a pretty significant sacrifice because these people would all have lands in their respective cities to which they would not be able to conveniently attend.)

Verses 3-19 An accounting of the notable persons who are living in Jerusalem.

Verse 20-36 Everyone else disperses to their respective cities in Judah.

Chapter 12: **Succession of Priests and Dedication of the Wall**

Verses 1-9: An Accounting of the Priests and Levites who travelled with **Zerubbabel** and **Jeshua** the high priest.

Verses 10-11 Line of succession of 7 high priests:

- (i) Jeshua; (**High Priest in Zerubbabel's Time**)
- (ii) Joiakim;
- (iii) Eliashib; (**High Priest in Nehemiah's Time**)
- (iv) Joiada;
- (v) Jonathan aka Joha'n'an;
- (vi) Jaddua aka Jaddua;

Verses 12-26 Chief Persons (Levites) in the Days of **Joiakim**.

(Noteworthy: Verses 22 & 23 seem to break up the pattern and deal with events significantly during the days of the next three high priests and a reference to a new Persian King Darius (2nd).

Verses 27-47 The Dedication of the Wall. A celebration is held to celebrate the dedication of the completed wall with the princes standing upon the wall with **Nehemiah**, while the Priests blew trumpets, and the singers sang loud and played instruments, and all the men, women, and children rejoiced with great joy. The noise of their joy was so loud that it could be heard from far off.

Officers were appointed to be over the chambers of the treasuries to manage all the offerings that were being joyfully given to support the Priests and Levites, who were now waiting (serving) on the Lord.

Chapter 13: **Nehemiah Travels to Persian Palace, But Must Reform Israel Again.**

Reign of Artaxerxes (2nd): Year 20.

Verses 1-3 **Nehemiah** notes that back when the Law was read the second time, the Israelites had separated themselves from those people of mixed heritage. (See Chapter 9) (This was possible because **Nehemiah** had already required the genealogy background check for each person. See Chapter 7.)

Before this separation had occurred, the high priest **Eliashib** had already made an alliance with the **Tobiah**, who, though an Ammonite, had married the daughter of a prominent Jew and had also obtained a Jewish wife for his son.

Reign of Artaxerxes (2nd): Year 32.

Verses 4-9: Twelve years later, **Nehemiah** travels to visit the King of Persia and while he is gone, **Eliashib** converts one of the treasure chambers of the House of God into the personal chambers of **Tobiah**. Upon **Nehemiah's** return and discovery of the evil that **Eliashib** did for **Tobiah**, he promptly tosses out all of **Tobiah's** stuff and causes the room to be cleaned and set back into its proper use.

Verses 10-14: **Nehemiah** soon discovers that the Levites are not serving at the Temple, because they had not been given their portion of the tithe. They all had to return to their own fields to work them so they could eat. **Nehemiah** strongly reproves the Rulers for forsaking the house of God (in violation of their covenant). **Nehemiah** causes all of Judah to bring in the required tithes of corn, wine, and oil and sets faithful men over the distribution of these goods to ensure that they received by the Levites and Priests.

Verses 15-22: **Nehemiah** reproves the people for not keeping the Sabbath Day by their laboring and trading on the Sabbath. **Nehemiah** causes the gates of the city shut before it was dark the day before the Sabbath and would not open them until after the Sabbath to prevent gentile traders from the port city of Tyre from entering the city to sell their goods.

Verses 23-31: **Nehemiah** discovers that not only are the people marrying strangers again, but their children haven't even been taught the Hebrew Language. **Nehemiah** ferociously contends with them: cursing them (not using foul language but a promise of God's judgment upon them); hitting some; yanking out the hair of others; and making them all to swear to God that they would not give their sons and daughters to be the spouses of people of other nations. He notes that even the wisest King Solomon, who was loved by God, he fell into great sin because of his desire for outlandish women.

Nehemiah discovers that even the grandson of the high priest **Eliashib** (and son of the next high priest, **Joiada**) has married the daughter of **Sanballat**, the Jew's Great Enemy. **Nehemiah** kicks that grandson out of the priesthood and literally chases him away.

Verses 29-31 Having cleansed the priesthood and the people from the strangers, **Nehemiah** sets the wards (courses) of Levites and Priests back in order so there is an appropriate division of labor.