

Survey of the Bible part 62 **Nehemiah 1 - 4**

We now start a new book of the O.T. Scriptures called Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra. You'll remember that Ezra was a priest and scribe and teacher of the law. He was sent to Jerusalem by King Artaxerxes in the year 457-58 BC.

Ezra 7:7-8 ⁷ Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸ He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

We know from history that Artaxerxes came to power in 464 BC and so this is the reason Ezra, according to Ezra 7:7, would have come to Jerusalem around 457-58 BC.

In fact, we're told the very month in which Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. It was the 5th month. He set out for Jerusalem in the 7th month and so it took him 2 months to get to Jerusalem.

In the Jewish calendar the fifth month would have been the month designated Av, which in our calendar would include parts of July and August and so it was a hot journey in those days.

But Nehemiah wouldn't go to Jerusalem for another 13 years. As Ezra went up to Jerusalem in the 7th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah went up in the 20th year of Artaxerxes.

Nehemiah 1:1 ^{NAU} The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,

By the way, Chislev which is often pronounced Kislev includes parts of November and December when he would get word about those who had gone before him a few years before.

Nehemiah is regarded as a prophet and yet what we are told about him is that he was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes which was no small thing.

Does anyone know what part of the duties of a cupbearer were?

To test by tasting the drinks and foods that were presented before the king.

And why do you suppose that was an important task?

If anyone was going to try and poison the king one of the closest people to him would have been the cupbearer. And so, the very last

person who would touch drink or food, before the king, would be this man.

It would be hard to bribe a cupbearer, but you could fool him into serving poison to the king. It would become clear relatively soon as to whether or not the food and drink was safe to consume.

But Nehemiah hears that those who had left a few years earlier to go to Jerusalem, who were given the task to rebuild the temple, were having troubles by the locals and it distresses him.

Nehemiah 1:1-4 ^{NAU} The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³ They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." ⁴ When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

And so, Nehemiah prays to God that He might have mercy on those in Judah. But evidently, even though the temple is rebuilt, because of all of the trouble the locals are causing the Jews in Jerusalem, one thing that didn't get done was rebuilding the wall around the city. And it's when Nehemiah hears this that he wept, mourned and prayed to God.

In chapter 2 of Nehemiah he begins to explain how the Lord began to answer that prayer.

Nehemiah 2:1-6 ^{NAU} And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine *was* before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. ² So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" ⁴ Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." ⁶ Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

Notice how Nehemiah begins chapter 2. In what month and in what year does this particular event take place?

It is still the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, just as we saw in chapter 1, but instead of the month Chislev it is now the month Nissan, which included parts of both March and April.

And so, from November/December to March/April we're looking at about 4 months. Winter is about over and Spring is in the air.

And everyone knows that when spring is in the air everyone begins to perk up and liven up from the long months of winter. But notice what we see in our passage.

Nehemiah 2:1-2 ^{NAU} And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine *was* before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. ² So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.

What does the king notice about Nehemiah's countenance?

But notice what Nehemiah says in verse 1. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

Does this mean that he had not been sad outside of the king's presence?

No. In fact, for 4 months he undoubtedly was sad as he had not heard from God concerning his first request of the Lord and undoubtedly he continued to pray.

But what happens after a time when you don't seem to hear from God?

It begins to affect your attitude and you can only hide that for so long. And even though he hid it from the king for a while it now began to affect his work, in this case his service to the king and the king notices.

In fact, the king notices that it's not the kind of sadness that results from being physically sick but a sadness that comes from the heart.

Well, when Nehemiah is confronted with this he panics thinking that his employer is going to reprimand him or worse. No one likes to have someone who is always depressed around them especially when that someone is your right hand man as was the case with Nehemiah.

But the king was genuinely concerned for Nehemiah as we'll see in a moment. But Nehemiah answers the king.

Nehemiah 2:3 ³ I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

This really bugged Nehemiah and he could no longer contain it. But I'm sure he didn't think that God would answer his prayer in this way. If he had he would simply have gone to the king earlier and asked to go back to help his brethren.

But notice the king's response.

Nehemiah 2:4 ⁴ Then the king said to me, "What would you request?"

Now that's a loaded question because you may not be sure how to answer. If I ask for too much will he think I'm out of line? But notice how Nehemiah reacts.

Nehemiah 2:4 So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Notice what is going on here in the span of about 30 seconds, from the time the king asks Nehemiah about his sadness to the time the king asks him what do you want me to do about it?

But in even a shorter time, the time from the last question of the king to the time Nehemiah answers, what is Nehemiah able to do?

To pray to the God of heaven.

How long do you think that prayer was?

However long it was, probably long enough for the words, God give me wisdom, Nehemiah was given an answer and was able to answer the king.

Now, it is also possible that Nehemiah always knew what he would say to the king if given an opportunity, (he had 4 months to think about it), and so the king asking him the question what would you request, may have been an opportunity for Nehemiah to pray to the God of heaven and simply say, praise God, thank you Lord, may the king's heart be open. And so, he goes for it.

Nehemiah 2:5 ⁵ I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

This is the moment of truth. You've been praying about this for 4 months and now finally God seems to be answering your prayer. But just how much of your prayer is going to be answered and in what way?

And without much of an apparent hesitation the king gives permission to Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem with the task of rebuilding the walls.

By the way, do you think there is any significance to the fact that Ezra goes a number of years before Nehemiah and builds the temple of the Lord, and then someone is sent to rebuild the walls?

Yes, they were to go back to rebuild the place of worship, and until God was ready, maybe teaching the Jews to trust God, then He allows Nehemiah to rebuild the walls.

The remainder of chapter 2 is Nehemiah making arrangements to go to Jerusalem and arriving in Jerusalem he surveys the area to see where he needed to start.

But the very first thing he runs into is resistance from the local magistrates around the area of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 2:9-10 ⁹ Then I came to the governors *of the provinces* beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard *about it*, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

But because this was official business of the king, Sanballat and Tobiah would just have to wait and see how they might exploit the situation in the near future.

So Nehemiah takes an evening to look at the walls in the dark, partly so that no one would slow him down and partly to be stealthy in this task. The next morning he has a report ready.

Nehemiah 2:15-20 ¹⁵ So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work. ¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." ¹⁸ I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good *work*. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard *it*, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰ So I answered them and said to them, "The God of

heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

So, the work will go forward but now without someone coming against them trying to discourage them. Again, this is not unlike the enemy who if he can't stop the work of Christ will try everything to slow it down or to simply mock the God of heaven in the process.

In the final analysis, Nehemiah simply ignores the taunts and declares that God is sovereign and will accomplish His will in His strength and might.

Chapter 3 of Nehemiah is where the work takes place and the walls go up and the workers are encouraged as each family takes a part. Everyone was playing a part in accomplishing God's desire to lay the final touches to the walls and the gates and the towers that surrounded the city.

By the way, what picture do we have here where the walls are going up for the people of God?

It's a picture of God's protecting hand. But it is also a picture of the walls that surround the temple where God meets with His people.

What is that a picture of?

Immanuel, God with us. And we know the ultimate manifestation of that.

Revelation 21:1-5 ^{NAU} Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." ⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

This last week I had an opportunity to share at our Wednesday Evening gathering and what I did was to give everyone an opportunity to find a passage or passages that deal directly or

indirectly with exposing Jesus Christ in the O.T. and I used the passage from Luke to demonstrate this.

Luke 24:25-27 ²⁵ And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

In what we see in Nehemiah, Jesus Christ Himself is seen in this event as He surrounds His people and delivers them from the evil one, in this case Sanballat and Tobiah. We have similar pictures in other O.T. places.

Psalms 5:11-12 ¹¹ But let all who take refuge in You be glad, Let them ever sing for joy; And may You shelter them, That those who love Your name may exult in You. ¹² For it is You who blesses the righteous man, O LORD, You surround him with favor as with a shield.

Psalms 125:2-5 ² As the mountains surround Jerusalem, So the LORD surrounds His people From this time forth and forever. ³ For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon the land of the righteous, So that the righteous will not put forth their hands to do wrong. ⁴ Do good, O LORD, to those who are good And to those who are upright in their hearts. ⁵ But as for those who turn aside to their crooked ways, The LORD will lead them away with the doers of iniquity. Peace be upon Israel.

Though the final picture of peace with God is found in our passage in Revelation 21, in our present world we still have to contend with the enemy even though we are surrounded by our God, and He not only protects us from the evil one but delivers us from his dominion even if he were to kill us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God found in Christ.

But the struggle in this present world continues even as it did in those days.

Nehemiah 4:1-3 ^{NAU} Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. ² He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can

they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?" ³ Now Tobiah the Ammonite *was* near him and he said, "Even what they are building-- if a fox should jump on *it*, he would break their stone wall down!"

If you think you can find encouragement from the world you need to get that notion out of your head. There's only One in whom we find comfort and encouragement and that's our Redeemer.

But even in the midst of doing the work of God in the power of the Spirit the attacks go on and we need to be faithful to do the work.

Nehemiah 4:7-9 ⁷ Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, *and* that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸ All of them conspired together to come *and* fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. ⁹ But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

In this particular case there was a physical guard to ward off a physical enemy, but we as believers are also called to set up a guard day and night. Unfortunately, that guarding often means guarding against the enemy within our camp.

Acts 20:28-32 ²⁸ "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. ³² "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

2 Timothy 1:12-14 ¹² For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. ¹³ Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith

and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to *you*.

The Lord is always there for us, but we are to guard the truth and to expose error in love so that we don't stray and become weakened in our ability to do God's will in this world.

And like Nehemiah and the people in Jerusalem we should never let our guards down thinking the enemy will leave us alone.

Nehemiah 4:22-23 ²² At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day." ²³ So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each *took* his weapon *even to* the water.

Our weapons are not of this world, but they are weapons given to us by God to be applied in serving Him.

2 Corinthians 10:3-4 ³ For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.