

Nehemiah

Who, When, Where

Written by Nehemiah.

The text itself tells us it was the story starting the 20th year of Artaxerxes, (446BC).

But it covers a period of at least 12 years. So it was probably written somewhere around 435BC.

This is about the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem after the 70 year exile in Bablyon.

Summary

Ezra led the people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of Yahweh. God then used Nehemiah to lead them back to rebuild the city wall.

Solomon had also built a temple, and then built his palace.

Is there something in that? What's the point of building a city, if God has nowhere to live there?

70 years before they had been sent into exile for their rebellion and sin against Yahweh. This is the story of how the city was rebuilt, both physically, and also how it came to be restored as a fully functioning city of Jews, who were completely committed to following their god, Yahweh, and living their lives as his people, devoted to doing his will.

Before You Read

How involved are you in building the church?

How would you go about returning to a city and getting the wall rebuilt? What would your action plan be?

How long do you think it would take to restore a wall around the city in those days, with everybody working on it?

What does it take to make you afraid?
What do you do when you are?

Would fear be enough to stop you doing your work for God?

Key Verses

Nehemiah 1:4

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

How do you feel if you hear about problems in the church? About its persecution, (mostly in other countries, but increasingly in the West too).

Does it break your heart? Does it drive you to prayer and fasting?

If it doesn't, does your lack of passion for the church, the body you are part of, drive you to prayer and fasting?

If it doesn't, ... what's it going to take!

Nehemiah 2:1

Now I was cup bearer to the king

Ever wonder if God is making you the answer to your own prayer? If he has put you in the position you're in, with the skills you have ... for just this moment.

Just like queen Esther. Just like Joseph. Just like you?

Nehemiah 2:10

When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly, because a man had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.

They're always there aren't they. People who think they know better and are so sure there is no God that their mission in life is to get in the way of all the people who are doing his will.

They ridicule us, which really just shows their own foolish beliefs. They try to exert political pressure, thinking that kings and political leaders have more power than God himself.

How should we respond?

Nehemiah 3

Each one repaired the piece of the wall near them... and the ones next to them repaired the section near them.

This is body life. Each one using the position and skills they have to do the bit they can do near them.

This is Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 in action.

What's your bit for building the church?

Nehemiah 4:1, 3

When Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.

Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, "What they are building, if a fox climbed up it, he would break down their stone wall."

When they can't make a case against us, they always seem to resort to mocking. So when people mock you for being a Christian... just let it roll off you. It's only because they have no logical argument, and they want to feel better about their own baseless beliefs.

Their mockery even exposes their own fears. If a fox would break down the wall by climbing on it, ... then what are they worried about? Why do they care if you build such a feeble wall. It won't protect you.

They're just trying to take your attention away from the work of God that you are doing. Stay focused.

Nehemiah 4:4-5

"Hear, our God; for we are despised; and turn back their reproach on their own head, give them up for a plunder in a land of captivity; don't cover their iniquity, and don't let their sin be blotted out from before you; for they have insulted the builders."

I think as Christians we would probably pray more like, "forgive them father, because they just don't know what they're doing".

Nehemiah 4:9

But we made our prayer to our god, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.

We're in this together with God. We have a role too.

We can't just pray for protection and then sit back and enjoy the sun. We have to get on with the work, and do practical things too for our own protection.

A farmer can't just pray for a good crop. He has to go out and at least plant the seeds himself.

If we're asking God to provide our finances, we still have to be prepared to take on a job. Paulus made tents. Some missionaries teach in schools.

Just something part time to do our part. And let God bless your work and your mission.

Nehemiah 5:10

I likewise, my brothers and my servants, lend them money and grain. Please let us stop this usury.

Usury, charging interest on a loan, between Jews was expressly forbidden in the Law. Maybe they had been gone too long, (70 years), and had taken on the Babylonian thinking. But excuses aside, it's just wrong.

Even today, if another Christian has a need and you have it... why not just give it to them. If it's too much to just give away, then why not lend it to them without charging interest. Did God give it to you just so you can get richer and richer on the back of your family? Your Christian brothers and sisters, who have a need?

Nehemiah 5:18

... yet for all this I didn't demand the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

Nehemiah had the right, as governor, to extract taxes from the people he governed, to pay for his expenses.

But he never claimed it, because the people were already doing it tough and he wanted to please God by looking after his people.

Paulus in the New Testament was the same. That's why he made tents to pay his own way, even though he had every right to ask the people he was ministering to to pay his expenses.

How about you? Are you a tent maker? Or do you take a wage from the people, so there is no stress on you, but only on the people you are serving?

Nehemiah 6:3

I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work, so that I can't come down. Why should the work cease, while I leave it, and come down to you?"

The enemies were constantly trying to distract Nehemiah and the people from their mission. But he saw it for what it was. And refused to stop his work for Yahweh to go and meet with them.

Who is distracting you? Is it working?

Nehemiah 6:10

I went to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home; and he said, "Let us meet together in God's house, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple; for they will come to kill you; yes, in the night will they come to kill you."

But read on, Nehemiah discerned that this was not a message from God at all. Even if someone prophesies to you, check it out. Ask God yourself. One leader I knew used have this happen all the time in his church. He learned to ask, "If this is a prophesy about me personally, why didn't God tell me himself? Why did he choose you to speak with, and ask you to bring this message to me?"... usually when he said that, they would walk away.

In this case, Shemaiah was already shut in his own house, already living in fear himself. And he was just passing on that fear to Nehemiah.

Watch out for people who are afraid. It can be contagious.

Be brave. Like Nehemiah. Encourage them too if you can. But if not, just make sure you stand strong yourself and do not give in to their fear. Their faith in God is not like yours, and they may be being used by the enemy to make you do something you shouldn't.

Nehemiah 8:8

They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading.

Ezra and the priests read the book of the law out loud in front of the people ... but then they also explained it.

Do you preach? Do you teach? They're different aren't they. And the same people shouldn't necessarily do both.

Nehemiah 8:14

They found written in the law, how that Yahweh had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month;

They found it in the law... so they went and did it.

But we read in the Bible that church should be a body. That we each should do our part as God has gifted us.

And we ignore it and keep running church the way we would run a business.

If you read God's way in the book. Do it God's way.

Nehemiah 9

This is a fantastic summary of what Yahweh had done for Israel over the years, and how he put up with their worship of idols and their rebellion, but reached a limit when they even killed his prophets, and he handed them over to their enemies to be disciplined. But he didn't wipe them out, (as he could have), and now is restoring them to once again be his people, blessed by him, living in Jerusalem, worshipping in his temple.

So they made an oath, with a curse if they broke it, to serve him and obey the law.

How has God dealt with you? How have you responded?

Grab a pen, (or a computer), and write down your own history with God. Do you need to come crawling back now?

Nehemiah 11:1

The princes of the people lived in Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts in the other cities.

We see a casting lots a lot in the Bible. (Sorry, compulsory Dad joke). But very often they did cast lots to determine who does what in the Bible.

Have you ever tried that? Would you be willing to be bound by the outcome?

Make sure you pray first of course. It's not just throwing a dice and doing it if a 6 comes up. Pray about it. Ask God to control the outcome.

If you are going to try this for your big decision, I would also suggest that you don't just give God a "which one should I choose, A or B", kind of question. Make sure you leave room for "neither" - or you might replace a disciple with someone when God has already chosen someone else whom you never even met yet! (Like they did with Matthias instead of Paulus).

The other thing you can do with casting lots. Even if you're not willing to be bound by the outcome. Is to just cast the lot as if it was real, and then think about how you feel about that outcome. Sometimes this can help you clarify your own thinking on something. Especially if you're really excited, or really disappointed, in the outcome of the lot.

Nehemiah 13:4-5

Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the rooms of the house of our God, being allied to Tobiah, had prepared for him a great room ...

Can you believe that! After all that's happened. After Yahweh has been glorified by all that's happened. A priest is allied with one of Israel's enemies and even gives him a room in the temple!!

But oh doesn't it break your heart. This happens in the church all the time. People who should be our leaders, who should be protecting us. Do deals with non Christians so they can profit from the ministry of the church!

You do not want to be in their shoes when they have to account to God for their actions!

Or yours, if you haven't been doing your part to make sure that those who serve in your church are provided for, so they don't need to do deals with non Christians to pay their bills.

Nehemiah 13:26

Didn't Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations was there no king like him, and he was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless foreign women caused even him to sin.

Nehemiah was contending with them for having foreign wives. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, had hundreds of them. And they led even him into sin.

Choose your wife carefully.

After You Read

What verses really stood out to you?

How would you summarize this book in a sentence or two? What is it about? What is God trying to say to us?

How did you like chapter 3. It's one of my favourites in the whole Bible.

On the surface it looks a bit boring and repetitive, but to me it's such a brilliant picture of how the church should work.

We're a body, and just like these guys building their wall, we should each build the little bit of the church near us. I'll build near me, you build near you, and between us ... we build the church.

It's not built in entertainment style church meetings. It's not built by business organisation style leadership.

It's not built by the select few who "run" the church.

It's built by each of us doing our bit. You use your gift, I use mine. The holy spirit runs it. We each do our bit.

In 6:15 we read that the wall was rebuilt in 52 days. But from 5:14 we see that issues were still arising after 12 years! Would you have persevered?

How about building a church? How long does that take?

Are you prepared for the long haul, or are you just willing to put in ... maybe a year... and if it's not working yet, just move on?

Times are probably coming when those around us will do everything they can to make us afraid, of persecution, of imprisonment, of anything they can think of... to stop our ministry. To close our churches.

How will you respond when that happens?

What did you learn from Nehemiah about how to handle things like that?