

NEHEMIAH

THE HOLY CITY

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**31 UNDATED DEVOTIONS
THROUGH THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH**





INTRODUCTION

The meaning of Nehemiah's name – 'The LORD has comforted' – is very appropriate. This is a book about 'the great and awesome' God (1:5; 4:14; 9:32) who comforts his people with his faithfulness. The God who is unchanging, unshakable and gracious far beyond anything that we deserve. The God of the Bible.

Here are three big questions to ask as we read Nehemiah:

1. Where are we in salvation history? That's always vital when we read any part of the Bible: where have we reached in the unfolding of God's plans and purposes? How are the promises of God to the people of God – the promises to and through Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets – progressing? What has been fulfilled? What is still lacking?
2. How does the book model faith to us (that is, living rightly as God's people by taking God at his word)? Nehemiah himself is a truly remarkable man of God, as we will see! We have much to learn from him. We also find the Jews acting together in faith as a people, and there is plenty to apply to ourselves corporately as the church of Christ.
3. Most importantly, how does the book point us to the Lord Jesus? As Nehemiah seeks to build a 'new Jerusalem', he foreshadows the words and work of a far greater man of God. The purpose of all God-breathed Scripture is to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and to equip us for godly lives in his service (2 Tim. 3:15–17). We've got the book wrong if we don't learn from it to love, trust, follow and obey Christ! And ultimately it should leave us crying, 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22:20).

As we read Nehemiah, let's pray with Paul: 'Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.' (2 Thes. 2:16–17, ESV)

For those who are interested, more material on the background of the book of Nehemiah can be found at the end of these notes.



Nehemiah Part 1: Restoring the Place

Much of what we call the book of Nehemiah is the writings of the man himself. First-person historical narrative is quite rare in the Old Testament, so the book has a very intense, personal feel. All that we know for sure about Nehemiah we learn from this book; he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. But we will get to know this ‘formidable, practical man’¹ quite well!

We start in a city called Susa, in what is now Iran. Susa was the winter capital of the Persian Empire. The date is autumn 446 BC, during the twentieth year of Emperor Artaxerxes I (we are reminded of the king’s name in 2:1). This is the last history book of the Old Testament (Malachi, the latest Old Testament book of all, is set perhaps a decade after the end of Nehemiah).

What has become of God’s people, Israel – the Jews, as they are now called? When Emperor Cyrus announced that the Jews could leave exile in Babylon and return to their homeland (Ezra 1) a good number went up to the land of Judah, first under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua (Ezra 2). Later, another smattering came with Ezra (Ezra 8). But not all the Jews returned

to the promised land. Many stayed in the places of exile (we read the story of some of them in the book of Esther, also set in Susa). Clearly Nehemiah’s family is one of those that has remained.

And they have flourished in exile! Nehemiah is a significant person at court: cupbearer to the Persian emperor (v. 11b). Cupbearers were more than simply wine-tasters. They could often be trusted advisors, even friends, of the king. Nehemiah has done very well for himself.

The stage is set!

REFLECTION

None of what happens in Nehemiah happens by accident. We will see much more of this, but why not start by praising God that he ordains the movements of all nations, the destiny of his people, and the life of each individual (including yours!). Thank him that we have ‘Nehemiah’ in our Bibles!

Hanani is probably a blood relation of Nehemiah (he appears again in 7:2). He arrives in Susa with a deputation from Judah. And Nehemiah is very keen to find out how things are going for the remnant who had returned to Jerusalem (v. 2).

That is remarkable in itself! Here is our first glimpse into the heart of Nehemiah the man. Jerusalem is 800 miles from Susa. Several generations have passed since the first Jews returned from exile. Nehemiah and his family have done well where they are. Jerusalem and the people there could so easily be out of sight, out of mind for Nehemiah. Why would he be bothered about them?

But Nehemiah is a man who loves the Lord and his people, and who knows his Scriptures. Of course he is bothered! He will go to great lengths for the good of these people.

There is a challenge for us there. But perhaps we also get just a little pre-echo of another one who held the highest possible position of privilege – and yet was concerned for a people very far off in every sense! Paul tells us about him in Philippians 2:5–11.

The news from Jerusalem is all bad, though. Long gone are the glorious days of David and Solomon. Even the hopes of a great renewal after the exile, as promised by the prophets, seem dashed. The people of God are a pitiful few, living in a tribute territory to a pagan king, their city in ruins. And there are plenty of other problems, as we will see. ‘Great trouble and disgrace’ (v. 3) is the painful reality.

REFLECTION

*‘... remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering’ (Heb. 13:3).
How bothered are we about God’s church across the world? Whether it is desperately compromised? Or desperately persecuted? How does Nehemiah challenge us – and point us to Jesus?*