

Nehemiah

The name *Nehemiah* means “Jehovah has comforted.” This man of God was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the Persian king who ruled from Babylon. When Nehemiah inquired about the Jews’ success in rebuilding the city, he learned that they were being reproached (hindered); the walls and gates had not been repaired. Nehemiah came under a spiritual burden for his people and the holy city, Jerusalem, and in the twentieth year of the king’s rule (approximately twenty-two years after the Jews began returning to Jerusalem from Babylon), requested release from his cupbearing responsibilities so he could return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah returned around 445 BC. The angel of the Lord had previously informed Daniel that the streets and walls of Jerusalem would be rebuilt during troublesome times (**see Dan. 9:25**).

1:5-11 King Solomon had predicted Israel’s captivity, saying if the people would pray facing Jerusalem and repent of their sins, God would hear and bring them back to the land (**see 2 Chron. 6:36-39**). Nehemiah, Ezra, and the prophet Daniel all earnestly sought the Lord with prayers and fasting on behalf of Jerusalem and the Jews in captivity (**see Ezra 8:21-23; 9:3-15; Dan. 9:3-23**). Nehemiah was the king’s cupbearer (**v.11**); Ezra was a priest and a scribe (**see Ezra 7:11**); and Daniel was a descendant of the royal kings of Judah (**see Dan. 1:3**). All three men offered detailed prayers of repentance for the sins of their fathers who had breached God’s commandments in the Law of Moses, the Torah. God will hear the prayers of ministers as well as ordinary believers when they pray in humility and faith.

2:7-8 Nehemiah asked the king for letters to signify his favor toward the rebuilding of Jerusalem and requested wood from the king’s forest for the gates, the house, and parts of the wall (**v. 8**). These letters would become significant in blocking the harassment of Sanballat and Tobiah, who attempted to hinder the work of the Jews on the wall of Jerusalem (**see Neh. 4:7-8**).

2:18 Again we read that the hand of the Lord was upon a person, directing his actions and granting him favor.

2:19 These three men- Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem- became a “thorn in the flesh” to the Jews who were working feverishly to rebuild the city (**see Neh. 6:1-2**).

3:1 The name of the high priest Eliashib means “God restores.” Each time the Jews spoke his name they were saying “God restores...God restores.” The Sheep Gate was restored first, as this was the gate through which sheep would eventually be led as offerings at the temple. It was called “sheep market” in Christ’s day (**see John 5:2**).

3:3-12 These verses list the many gates that were restored under Nehemiah’s direction and inspiration.

The Twelve Gates of Jerusalem (3:1-8)

At the time in Jerusalem’s history, there were twelve gates in the city walls. These gates symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel (the twelve sons of Jacob) and are all listed in the book of Nehemiah.

1. The Valley Gate (2:13; 3:13)
2. The Fountain Gate (2:14; 3:15; 12:37)
3. The Sheep Gate (3:1; 12:39)
4. The Fish Gate (3:3; 12:39)

5. The Old Gate (3:6; 12:39)
6. The Refuse (Dung) Gate (2:13; 3:14; 12:31)
7. The Water Gate (3:26)
8. The Horse Gate (3:28)
9. The East Gate (3:29)
10. The Miphkad Gate (3:31)
11. The Gate of Ephraim (8:16; 12:39)
12. The Prison Gate (12:39)

Today there are eight main gates in the wall of Jerusalem. They are:

1. Herod's Gate
2. The Damascus Gate
3. The New Gate
4. The Jaffe Gate
5. The Dung Gate
6. The Eastern (Golden) Gate
7. The Zion Gate
8. The Lion's Gate

These gates are open to the public; they do not include the sealed Double Gate and the Triple Gate located on the southern wall. In addition, passageway through the famed Eastern Gate (the Golden Gate) has been blocked by large stones. Muslims may have sealed this gate in AD 1541; it remains sealed to this day. In 1970, an archway from an earlier gate was discovered, concealed directly beneath the present Eastern Gate.

4:1-5 The jealous Samaritan governor, Sanballet, and his cohorts were angry and mocked the Jews, diminishing their success, Nehemiah again prayed to God to send judgement upon these mockers and resisters as they again conspired to hinder the very will of God.

4:10-12 Ten times the enemies of the Jews came to Jerusalem, harassed the construction crews, and made threats against them.

4:13-23 Nehemiah divided his workers into two divisions: one-half of them would rebuild the walls while the other half held weapons and guarded the walls with shields, spears, and bows (**v. 16**). Note that the workers also carried swords at all times (**v. 17-18**). Men worked from sunrise until late at night and were required to remain in the city in the event of sudden attack by the Samaritans (**v. 21-23**). Nehemiah kept a man with a shofar (trumpet) with him continually; if the shofar sounded, the people were to gather for battle (**v. 18-20**).

Parallels Between Nehemiah's People and The People of Today (Chapter 5)

The common Jews were in a dire situation. More than forty thousand had returned to more than thirty-two cities in Judea and the area of Benjamin. Many returned to dwellings that had not been lived in for seventy years. Homes needed repairs; vines had not been pruned; weeds had overtaken the yards; and many people were in distress. Ordinary citizens mortgaged their land, vineyards, and houses to purchase food (**v. 3-4**), then later resorted to borrowing money from wealthier Jews to maintain their farms, rebuild their homes, and pay the king's tribute (**5:7**).

The Jewish rulers charged interest on the loans (**v. 7**); a practice forbidden in the Law of Moses (**see Lev. 25:36-37; Deut. 23:19**). Because of their excessive debts, average citizens were placing their children “unto bondage,” meaning the children were becoming slaves, and the parents understood this (**v. 5**). Nehemiah rebuked the elders, demanding that they restore the lands and homes to those in debt and stop charging interest to their own brethren; the wealthier Jews obeyed Nehemiah’s demand (**v. 8-13**).

Modern conservative-Christian economists note that the manipulation of money and interest rates has caused entire families to lack finances and file for bankruptcy, as they cannot afford increasing interest rates on their mortgages. We see today where the “king’s tribute” (government tax money) is used to bail out banks and businesses; in the United States, money is printed by the Treasury and borrowed with an interest charge. The debts of nations and people’s inability to repay the “king’s tribute” will always lead to economic woes and eventually to the devaluation of a nation’s currency. As money becomes worthless, the resulting chaos can lead to an eventual one-world currency. (*see coming Revelation notes on The Five Views Of The Book Of Revelation, How John’s Vision Is Linked To Other Old Testament Prophecies and Visions, The Use Of Prophetic Symbolism, The Revelation Of Jesus Christ, Blessings For The Overcomer, Seven Scrolls And Seven Churches In Revelation, The Five Types Of Crowns Given As Rewards, The Symbolism In The Greco-Roman Culture, The Symbolism In Revelation, Matthew 24 Reveals The Imagery Found In Revelation, Early Church Theories Concerning The Antichrist, Where Will The Antichrist Rule?, The Mysterious Mark Of The Beast, Why Limited Buying And Selling?, The City On Seven Hills, and more.*)

Shaking The Lap (5:11-13)

The phrase “I shook my lap” (**v. 13**) describes an ancient custom. The lap was a large pocket sewn on a person’s outer garment used to hold and carry items. To “shake the lap” was a public sign of disgust and indicate a curse; in some instances, it was a declaration of war. For example, in the time of the Roman Empire, the Roman ambassadors gave the choice between peace and war to the Carthaginians. As a group, the Roman Senate shook their togas and announced, “We bring you war.” Here, Nehemiah shook his outer garment before the elders and commanded that the houses of the elders charging interest to the people be shaken and emptied if these leaders did not perform their oaths. These Jewish leaders discerned that Ezra and Nehemiah meant business and were walking closely with God. They performed their wishes and released the Jews from the interest charges and returned their lands, vineyards, and homes to them (**see v. 11**).

5:14 Nehemiah had worked as governor of Judea for twelve years and, in this role, directed the rebuilding of the walls and gates.

5:19 Nehemiah wanted God’s favor on his life for his obedience. God’s favor accomplishes more than man’s favor.

How To Say, “OH NO!” (6:1-3)

The Samaritans organized conspiracies and strategies and hurled verbal assaults against the Jewish leaders and workers to prevent their progress. Now these same adversaries requested a meeting with Nehemiah in one of the villages in the plain of “Ono” (**v. 2**), an odd name mentioned five times in the Bible three times in Nehemiah (**6:2; 7:37; 11:35**). Nehemiah understood that Sanballat’s ulterior motive was to remove him from the wall, to delay the work, or possibly to slay him.

Likewise, the adversary wants to hinder your assignment and stop your destiny by distracting you “in the plains of Ono.” Symbolically, “Ono” is a place where, once you get there, you say to yourself, “Oh no... what have I done...Oh no, why did I do this...” The plain of Ono is also a place of regret because it pulls you out of God’s will and into the enemy’s trap. When Nehemiah was invited to Ono, he essentially told Sanballat, “Oh no! I am not leaving the wall to meet with you” (**see v. 3**). Four times, people sent a message for Nehemiah to come down, and all four times he told these distracters to forget it. He was staying in God’s favor and not compromising with an adversary. We should say “Oh no” to temptation, to fear, to the tendency to be bitter and unforgiving. We need to say “no” to all the snares the adversary sets for us.

6:5-9 A fifth letter arrived, again accusing the Jews of attempting to establish their own king and dishonor the king of the Medes and Persians in Babylon. Note that previously the king gave Nehemiah letters indicating his approval to conduct the work in Jerusalem (**see 2:7-10**). Sanballat’s motive was attempting to frighten the people (**v. 9**).

6:10-14 The Holy Spirit revealed to Nehemiah the false prophets’ strategy: they were being paid secretly to put the fear of assassination in Nehemiah’s heart. But he refused to be intimidated. Despite the “stress” that was upon this man of God, he walked in God’s favor continually, looking to God for His strength and help.

7:1-4 The city and gates were complete, but watchmen were required to guard the gates from unsuspected enemies who might try to sneak into the city. The houses within the walls of Jerusalem were not repaired and few men were living inside the city. More men were needed in the city to rebuild the living areas and to defend the city against future attacks.

8:2-6 This reading of the Torah took place during the Feast of Trumpets (**see Lev. 23:24**). Ezra stood on a raised platform and, when he opened the Tora, the people stood; then they raised their hands, bowed their heads, and eventually fell on their faces in worship. This may be the origin of some Christian communities’ custom of standing at the reading of the Bible as a minister reads his “text.”

8:8 The people did not add to nor take away from the Word of God; they received it as it was written and intended.

8:10 After many years of captivity, distress, and rebuilding, the time came for the nation to stop weeping and begin rejoicing! “The joy of the Lord is your strength” was the theme of God’s promise and a reminder to all the people. The joy of the Lord is still the source of our strength today.

Four Branches Representing Four Types of Life Issues (8:14-18)

The feast described here was the Feast of Tabernacles, which Moses called “the Feast of Ingathering” (**see Exod. 23:16**). Jewish rabbis assert that four types of tree branches were used to build booths in which the people were to live during the seven days of this yearly feast. First each branch is a picture of our spiritual walk with God. These four branches are identified by rabbis interpreting the Hebrew words used in **Exodus 23:16** and based upon Jewish tradition.

The first branches came from the willows of the brook; the willow represents weeping and sorrow. In Babylon, the Jews sat down by the rivers of Babylon, hanging their harps upon the willows, weeping, refusing to sing the song of Zion (**see PS. 137:1-3**).

The second branches came from the palm or date tree, a tree associated with victory and rejoicing. Multitudes of people waved palm branches when Christ rode the donkey into Jerusalem (**see John 12:13**) prior to his crucifixion (**see John 12:13**).

The third branches were from citrus trees; they had somewhat acidic fruit, which represents the seasons of bitterness we encounter.

The fourth branches were from the myrtle tree, which symbolizes warfare. (Note that **Zech. 1:8-11** recounts Zechariah's prophet's vision in which he saw four horses of different colors and a man standing among the myrtle trees).

These four branches represent and sum up four prominent issues of life: times of sorrow, victory, bitterness, and warfare. For the first since the days of Joshua, the children of Israel were now celebrating Tabernacles (**v. 17-18**), a feast representing the seasons of joy.

9:4-38 The five books of Moses have been read; and now the Levites offer a prayer to God to renew their covenant with Him. The covenant was written, and seals were placed upon the scroll (**v. 38**). Much of this chapter is a review, beginning with the calling of Abram out of Ur of Chaldees (**v. 7**), to the division of Israel and the Assyrian captivity of the ten tribes (**v. 32**).

10:1-39 These verses give sixteen parts of the covenant that the priests and Levites covenanted to keep and teach the people. Each part is found in the five books of Moses and is a command for Israel's moral, ethical, judicial, and spiritual laws. After the seventy years of captivity and years of distress in rebuilding the city, these elders and spiritual ministers understood that the reason for all their past difficulties was the combined generational sins of the kings, priests, elders, and people. They knew that if the leaders and people obeyed the laws of God, they would again prosper as a nation. As written in the Torah, "Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do" (**Deut. 29:9**).

11:1-2 In order to repopulate Jerusalem, lots were cast to determine who would be chosen to live there. One out of every ten people living in the surrounding towns and cities was selected to move to Jerusalem, meaning a tenth of the Jewish population would live in Jerusalem. The Hebrew word for *tithe* is *ma'aser*, meaning "the tenth part," and I believe this "tenth" of the population moving to Jerusalem represented a "tithe" to God's city in Jerusalem. Note that those willing to move to Jerusalem also received a special blessing from the people (**see v. 2**).

12:44-47 Nehemiah not only restored the divine order of the priesthood (along with Ezra), the temple rituals, the seven feasts, and the Sabbaths, he also restored the worship David and Solomon had instituted in their days (**see v. 45**). The temple was not intended to be a place of form and routine but was a house in which to worship the Most High with singing and instruments of praise. The same is true today.

13:1-31 One final phase remained in Nehemiah's complete restoration of Jerusalem: a cleansing at the temple and a restoring of the divine order of tithes for the Levites (**v. 12-12**). Nehemiah separated the priests who had married non-Jewish wives, or the "mixed multitude" (see v. 3). He then stopped the men from profaning the Sabbath by selling food and goods at the gates of Jerusalem (**v. 15-22**). Finally, he separated the men who had married wives from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab (**v. 23-30**). Note that a relative of the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat, the enemy of the Jews. Nehemiah

expelled this man from the temple (**v. 28**). History indicates that Sanballat's son-in-law went to Samaria and there the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim.

PLEASE REMEMBER ME, OH GOD! (Chapter 13)

In the closing chapter of Nehemiah, the man of God performed a final "house cleaning" to ensure that the divine order and spiritual purity were established in the house of God. He removed a priest, Eliashib, who for twelve years had secretly been allied with Tobiah the Ammonite (**v. 4-9**). Nehemiah restored financial support to the Levites and priests (**v. 10-14**). He demanded that selling of all goods be stopped on the Sabbath in Jerusalem and at the gates (**v. 15-22**), and he required all Jews who had married strangers to separate from their foreign wives or to "get out of town," which some did (**v. 23-28**). Notice the number of times when Nehemiah dealt with these complicated issues, he requested that God "remember" him for the good he did (**v. 14, 22, 31**).

Malachi, also a prophet of the exile, revealed that a "book of remembrance" was written in heaven for those who fear the Lord and think on His name (**see Mal. 3:16**). Numerous types of books are used in heaven to record information and events, including the book of the tears of the saints (**see Ps. 56:8**), the names of believers in the book of life (**see Phil. 4:3**), and the book of deeds and works, from which our earthly lives will be judged (**see Rev. 20:12**). The book of remembrance, only mentioned in **Malachi 3:16**, is believed to be a heavenly book with names of individuals who fear God, testify of His name, and give of tithes and offerings, as alluded to in the context of **Malachi 3**, since Malachi was dealing with the people bringing their tithe and offerings to the temple.

Malachi's writing predates Nehemiah's, and it is quite possible that Nehemiah understood the significance of this mysterious book revealed to Malachi and was requesting God's attention to remember him for all his good deeds. Malachi wrote that those in the book of remembrance would be spared as a father spares his sons (**see Mal. 3:17**), indicating that a person whose name was in the book of remembrance would receive protection in the day of adversity. Nehemiah had many personal and political adversaries and needed supernatural protection from the Lord. God certainly remembered Nehemiah and granted him success.

WHEN GOD REMEMBERS YOU

After Samson broke his Nazarite vow and lost the anointing on his life, he eventually cried out, "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee and strengthen me..." (**Judg. 16:28**). Hannah desired a son and in prayer said, remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaiden a man child, then I will give him back unto the Lord all the days of his life..." (**1 Sam. 1:11**). The psalmist besought God, "God remember me, O Lord, with favor..." (**Ps 106:4**). In each of these examples, the Hebrew word for *remember* is *zakar*, which has the connotation of marking something or recognition to remember it.

We read that after the flood Noah, "God remembered Noah" (**Gen. 8:1**). God also remembered Abraham and spared his nephew from the destruction of Sodom (**see Gen. 19:29**). When the time came for the barren womb of Rachel to conceive a son, the miracle occurred because "God remembered Rachel ... and opened her womb" (**Gen. 30:22**). As the children of Israel cried out to the Lord during their bondage in Egypt, "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (**Exod. 2:24**). God also informed Israel that if they went to war and sounded the

trumpet, they would be “remembered before the Lord your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies” (**Num. 10:9**).

If we say God “remembers” or “remembered” someone, does it mean He ever forgot that person? Certainly, it does not. David explained this concept of God’s remembering when he wrote, “He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (**Ps. 98:3**). He continued his explanation when he wrote, “He hath remembered his covenant forever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations. Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac...” (**Ps 105:8-9**). Remembrance is recalling what God already knows, and not recalling something forgotten. Isaiah, under God’s inspiration, wrote, “Put me in remembrance: let us plead together: declare thou, that thou mayest be justified” (**Isa. 43:26**). God desires that we know His promises that are established in His Word, sealed through the blood covenant. We “put God in remembrance” by speaking the Word of God with our mouths and confessing the written promises of the Scripture. God has not forgotten what He has written; He desires, however, for *you to know that He has spoken and is moved toward you when you put Him in remembrance of His Word and make a declaration.*

In prayer, I often say, “Lord, I remind You that You said in Your Word...” This is the same type of approach Moses used in intercession when he appealed to God to spare Israel from destruction. In **Exodus 32:13**, God has determined to slay the nation and raise up a new nation through Moses. At the point of crisis, Moses reminded God of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it forever.” Observe the reaction of the Lord after this type of prayer: “And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people” (**Exod. 32:14**). The word *repented* in this context does not mean to *repent of sin*, as God cannot sin, but in Hebrew it means to be sorry (here in a favorable sense), and in this instance to change one’s opinion toward something. God changed His intention to destroy Israel when reminded of His covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, concerning the greatness of the nation of Israel. This is the same type of “remembrance” for which Nehemiah was asking God in his life. He had many enemies from Samaria and was living under threats and pressure. He wanted God never to forget how he restored the city and was obedient to follow His Law (**13:14; 22, 29, 31**).

It is good to know in times of crisis, we can *call to remembrance the covenant* we have in Christ and make a steadfast profession (confession) of our faith, as it is written, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; for he is faithful that promised” (**Heb. 10:23**).