

Introduction to Nehemiah

Historical setting

- Judgment and exile in Babylon
- Babylon itself conquered
- handful of people left in the land; general devastation
- Nehemiah about return of people to the land and the restoration of Jerusalem

Ezra- Nehemiah

- unity in ancient times; same story; some overlap
- same author as Chronicles?
- historical challenges... (as always - depends on view of Scripture)

Ezra 1-6: history before Ezra comes

Ezra 7-10: memoir of Ezra when he comes

Neh 1- 7:72: part of Nehemiah's memoir

Neh 8-12:30 continuation of story (Ezra and Neh both in Jerusalem)

Neh 12:31-13:31: memoir of Nehemiah continues

Three returns of the people to the land

1. Edict of Cyrus (cf. Ezra 1): return of first group of Jews under Sheshbazzar, Zerrubabbel, Jeshua c.538 BC - temple starts be built in middle of resistance. Completed in time of Darius (cf. Ezra 4:24-6:22)

2. Then Ezra comes (scribe/teacher of law) (458BC) (cf. Ezra 7)

3. Then Nehemiah (445 BC) - arrived in Jerusalem (from Susa, SW Iran) 13 years after Ezra arrived. He returned for a further visit sometime between 433 and 423 b.c. He may have made several journeys between Persian capitals and Jerusalem in this period of 20 years.

promise of being sand on seashore but smallness of remnant - 50,000 who came back from exile - challenge in this period

Structure

Chapters 1-6: Restoring God's city in difficult circumstances

Chapters 7-13: Reforming God's people under God's law

Remember importance of temple, city and land for Israel's relationship with God. Ezra focuses on the temple, while Nehemiah focuses on the city.

What are the big ideas?

We learn about **God**:

- he's the gracious God of the covenant - he keeps his promises of love to his people despite their sin and rebellion
- he's sovereign over the events of history, rulers and the actions of his people to promote their good, and his purposes and glory
- he's as much at work in day-to-day providence as in the miraculous (there are no miracles or signs of supernatural deliverance in Ezra-Nehemiah)

We learn about **Law, covenant and reform**

- God's people relate to the Lord on the basis of covenant, and their keeping of the covenant through obedience to God's word
- Much of Ezra-Nehemiah are a kind of 'ancient reformation'. God's people must continually be reformed by God's word (here: the Law): in its lifestyle and in the way it does worship (chapters 8-10 about covenant renewal). Though Israel has been 'cut down to the roots' it can now draw spiritual nourishment from the Law and be renewed.
- importance of continuity with the historic people of Israel - God's plan and inheritance continued through this people who've returned to the land

We learn about **holiness**:

- God's people must live pure and separated lives - there's a tremendous danger from the surrounding peoples of spiritual contamination i.e. building of the wall
- corporate worship is at the centre of who they are and the city that they build (i.e. emphasis upon the temple and its regulation)
- a particular danger from the surrounding cultures comes through intermarriage - God's people are to marry only with other believers
- God's people are prone to repeated unfaithfulness (cf. chapter 13). The book has a high view of sin and low view of man's best efforts - even in the middle of reformation

We learn about **prayer**:

- its importance - prayer is spread throughout Nehemiah and is weaved into the narrative; a large part of two chapters (1 and 9) are prayer.
- action and prayer go together

We learn about **spiritual leadership**:

- God uses lay people powerfully
- leaders need courage from God
- leaders are dependent upon God
- leaders are to be people of prayer

We learn about **ministry** and **opposition**:

- ministry involves hard work and involves everyone
- there will always be opposition from enemies, and sometimes from within God's people
- this opposition comes in lots of different forms - and can be subtle or overt

How do we read Nehemiah as new covenant believers?

We should read Nehemiah in its own OT context and quickly ‘jump out of it’ to the NT, but we should also let our reading of it be steered by a new covenant perspective.

Themes in Nehemiah	 New Covenant fulfilment
Jerusalem/Temple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● church now ● onwards to the new Jerusalem in the future
Nehemiah, God’s leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Christ ultimately as the builder of the church and perfect Leader ● spiritual leaders
Building walls	Ministry & service (‘building up the church’ but <i>not</i> ‘building the kingdom’)
Law	Life in and ruled by Christ
Gentiles	the World

Be wary of the reading of Nehemiah as practical leadership principles for today; or any kinds of allegorical reading. As with the whole OT, we’re meant to read it in light of Christ and the church.

Part One: Restoring God’s city in difficult circumstances (chapters 1-6)

Summary: God’s man (Nehemiah) leads the people in re-building the city’s walls in the middle of lots of difficulties and problems.

NB: an ‘impossible’ situation:

- imperial edict stopping the work on the temple (cf. Ezra 4:18-23)
- city in ruins and demoralised people (1:3, 2:18)
- local opposition
- Nehemiah far away in Susa

cannot be more successful than this? The cycles of sin mentioned in chapter 9 seem to be re-occurring.

1. We should read this clearly in its OT context here. These are people who need the indwelling Spirit and new life of obedience in Christ. The disappointment of the end points us to their need of a better Leader and a better Law written on their hearts. The Messiah hasn’t come yet!

2. But, even as NT believers, we should also learn not to place too much confidence in the hope of a ‘final reformation’ of the church and ‘separation from the world’. We need a realistic view of sin’s remaining power in us and the church - and realistic expectations of all our efforts. We’re not home yet! The ending humbles us in all our ministry efforts and idealism.

- (4-9) *Corruption of temple*: chamber made for Tobiah in the temple by his relative Eliasab who was priest! Tobiah and Eliasab closely connected (by marriage v4?).
- (10-14) *Lack of support for ministry* - levites not being properly supported so having to return to old jobs! Temple being left!
- (15-18) *Sabbath ignored and commercialised*
- (23-31) *Marriages to foreign women*
- x3 Nehemiah at prayer again! Vindication and judgment v.14, 22, 29, 31
- Nehemiah's spiritual leadership: purges impurity (8-9 8-9 NB: his anger in the Temple - remind you of anyone...?!), renews the tithes (Neh. 13:11), enforces the Sabbath (Neh. 13:17-18), disciplines the unfaithful (Neh. 13:25-27)

Application:

- the danger of drift in the 2nd generation (particularly the leaders)!. Reformation is quickly followed by spiritual deadness and disobedience. Resolutions don't necessarily hold you, even if they're good things.
- spiritual leadership here is strong: sometimes it means taking in hand and confronting the sin and corruption of God's people. Part of spiritual leadership is to confront public and private sins. Christ is strong in his leadership of us and he will rebuke us when we need it; let's love the rebukes of Christ because they're for our good!
- Nehemiah's character as a model: prayer, courage, straightforwardness/directness, righteous anger, fearless before elites/leaders because he fears God cf. v.18, 26. Christ fulfils them all. Every leader can learn from these too!

What do we learn from this 'disappointing' ending to Nehemiah?

There's ambiguity here with this ending. People who've committed themselves to purity rapidly return to their sin and former practices. There's a kind of tired need at the end of the book for Nehemiah, once more, to bring wandering sheep back! We might wonder why reform

- context of God's judgment

In the middle of that, Nehemiah is stirred to return and lead the people in restoring the (walls of) broken city. *Behind Nehemiah though, is the God of the covenant.* God's sovereign grace and providential, 'hidden' plan are at work through Nehemiah and the people. By the end of chapter 6, the city is re-built.

6:16 'And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.'

Structure

- (1:1–11)** Nehemiah learns of Jerusalem's dilapidation and prays
- (2:9-20)** Nehemiah gains permission to return, comes back, inspects Jerusalem's walls and encounters opposition
- (3:1–32)** The people begin work and repair the walls
- (4:1–23)** The opposition intensifies, but the people persevere, led by Nehemiah
- (5:1–19)** Nehemiah deals with injustice in the community and provides a role model of generosity
- (6:1–7:4)** Conspiracy against Nehemiah, but the wall is finished

Chapter One: God's man at prayer

- Nehemiah hears of the broken city and discouraged people (1-3)
- God's man mourning, fasting, praying (4) (why mourn over Jerusalem v.3? centrality in God's purposes; echoing Moses - standing in breach)
- prayer to Yahweh: universal 'God of heaven' and also Israel's covenant-keeping God (5-6) "empty-handed but not uninvited" !! (Kidner)
- beginning of corporate confession (6-7) (NB: breaking Yaweh's torah)
- prayer based on promises of restoration (8-9) (cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-10)
- group prayer (more than Nehemiah?) (10-11)

Big point: re-building starts in huge dependence upon God - nothing can happen apart from his work and everything is based upon his covenant/promise

Application:

- do we mourn over kingdom 'disasters'?
- leaders need deep profound repentance and prayer
- no kingdom work can begin or continue apart from God's promises and sovereign intervention
- how to pray: big sovereign God, dependence on covenant in prayer, using God's promises back to God in prayer, directness of the prayer, sustained prayer (implication of 2:1 been praying for four months!)

Chapter 2:1-20 Yahweh rules, OK?

- Nehemiah is the king's cupbearer! (comes after the prayer) - God been at work providentially long before his praying!
- conversation is in the context of Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1
- Nehemiah's boldness - (2) taking life in hands by asking for such bold thing but notice the balance between Nehemiah's dependence on God and boldness before the king: "So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king..." (4b-5a)
- Nehemiah = submitted to most powerful king in world, his servant (5) but is also servant to God of heaven (v.4) - there's a King over the king.
- Lord's hand upon kings for sake of his people. v.8 ' And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.'
- v.9 God always abundantly supplies his servants and answers prayer!
- Dale Ralph Davis 'Remember Ezra's rejection of an armed escort as a matter of faith in Ezra 8:21-23. Yet here we have Nehemiah's acceptance of an escort as a matter of wisdom! It would add authority and support to his position and work.'

Chapter 12:27-13:3 God's work is celebrated!

- big celebration as wall is dedicated
- this is to be a new holy city dedicated to God cf. v.30 priests, people and even gates/walls are purified. Now a place dedicated to God.
- praise and thanks to the Lord - this isn't Nehemiah's doing
- lots of corporate singing and choirs!
- v43 lots of joy x5. Everyone rejoicing!
- 44-47 temple worship is organised and ministry is supported. All the people involved in giving (44b and 47)
- hint of a new davidic restoration ('as long ago in days of David' v46)
- 13:1-2 reference back to OT law: Deut 23:3-5 Ammonites/Moabites not to enter 'assembly of the Lord' - purity of the people

Application:

- the church must purify itself as a new, holy city!
- let's be a people of joy!
- don't despise corporate singing!
- generous giving to support ministry is a sign of reformed hearts
- just think of the day when the new Jerusalem comes down: the singing, choirs of angels, the joy!
- what does 'separation from unbelievers' look like in your life?

Chapter 13:3-31 Disappointing falling away

NB: how we read verse 4 is important. Seems to imply 13:6-3 happened *before* 12:27-13:3. *But* the problem with that reading is that Nehemiah was present during that time (whereas 13:6f implies Nehemiah not around).

Dale Ralph Davis suggests another translation: rather than 'now before this' better to have 'in face of this'. So: 'So in the face of this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge....'

Nehemiah has to deal with sin amongst people. All abuses of earlier chapters rear heads again here. Very important here: they're breaking all covenant stipulations of chapter 10!

Application:

- specific commitments and resolutions are made in relation to particular issues - holiness is particular and always faces 'issues'.
- commitment to give and fund the church and its worship; worship is prioritised. Christ is to be first and centre of all of life. Everything is devoted to him.
- true reformation always produces change in lifestyle and distinctive living amongst Christ's people

Chapter 11:1-12:26 Filling the city (and the land) and re-ordering worship

- the city needs filling! (1-2 cf. 8:4). It's not quite the nations coming into the great city yet (Micah 4:2)
- lot casting; 1 out of 10 people relocate to Jerusalem to fill it
- people who settle 3-24; again, everyone gets remembered! Everyone who moves for the sake of the kingdom is recognised!
- (25-36) Land itself filled with people NB: bigger area of resettlement than just what had before the exile! Villages are also remembered...!
- 12:1-26 worship is organised and re-ordered; overview here of leaders over *generations* The restoration of Israel is being completed - temple, city and worship.

Application:

- God's people should be ready to move for the sake of the kingdom, not simply for their own comfort i.e. world mission, church planting
- you won't lose out what you give up for Jesus's kingdom - your name is written down!
- don't despise the day of small things - God is filling the earth with his salvation. Difference from here is that the city will be filled with all the nations. NB: we apply the separationism in Nehemiah in terms of holiness and not in reluctance to reach the nations!
- true worship of God continues down through generations; bygone eras are still important; need to put myself in the context of many people down through time

- God's man's practical wisdom and planning (v.12); circumspect surveys the wall, makes plans! doesn't tell everyone what he's doing! politically savvy!
- But all in context of God's sovereign control v8, 12, 18, 20 - everything is in the Lord's hands - providence.
- vv17-18 motivates the people in the context of God's sovereignty. v18 'And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.' NB re-building of wall brings an emphasis on separatism - phys protection and spiritual quarantine of the people
- Opposition and ridicule v 10, 19-20 - already seed of serpent raises its head; Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem = enemies. Are pol leaders in the area/region. Nehemiah's response to opposition: 'God will give us success. We, his servants, will build. You have no part with us.' (v20)

Application:

- we need to think hard about how action, practical wisdom, prayer and God's sovereignty relate - all of these are found here! DRD 'When human enmity runs into divine providence, the latter smashes the former.'
- expect opposition and ridicule
- recognise that the Lord controls ruling governmental powers for the sake of his people; how pagans can *both* be enemies *and* helpers of God's people (cf. Ezra)

Chapter 3:1-32 Everyone works!

- initially, an uninteresting list!
- main verb = "make repairs" (lit. "make strong"); ministry/service of repairing/strengthening/building up; about recovery of something
- leadership by example v1; priests lead the way
- amazing recognition of each individual - names are mentioned and every person's contribution is recognised/remembered. Details are held up. Some of them incredibly small!

- non-professionals = normal people who build! lay ministry!
- v5 Arrogance! Nobles of Tekoites not stoop to serve the Lord - too proud! but v9 for Rephaiah (ruler of half of Jerusalem) - not too proud. Willing to stoop though a leader!

Application

- a lot of ministry involves repairing that which has been broken down; seasons of decline and then re-building will always be necessary until the kingdom fully comes
- Lord will remember what each one of us has done! None of us are forgotten in the kingdom! a roll of honour of Yahweh's workers, recorded for lasting remembrance.
- work of the kingdom is done by many, not just by one. We're all involved and it needs the work of many, not just of one. What stands out is a long list of many names, not just one name!
- Am I willing to humble myself to serve? or am I arrogant like the nobles of Tekoa? Don't I follow a Messiah who made himself a servant-slave for me?

Chapter 4:1-23 Opposition and how to deal with it

Opposition rises up 1-12

- Ridicule 1-6
- Intimidation 7-23
- People fed up v10
- Physical threat v11
- Gossip/propaganda v12

Summary: danger and discouragement for the workers!

Response: organised perseverance 'get ready to fight!' 13-23

- fight for your people and remember the Lord 4:14
- organise, watch, be ready to fight and keep working 13, 23
- sword strapped on side 4:13, 16,17, 18
- God's sovereign rule 4:20 - he will fight for us

Chapter 9: Confessing sin

- notice the response to being instructed by God's word: repentance!
- their corporate gathering (1-3): fasting/mourning (NB: fasting and repentance), separation from the Gentiles ('the world'), worship, hearing from the word
- importance of faithful leaders to lead in repentance (4-5)
- awesome prayer: 'The barely habitable city, the encircling heathen, and the poverty and seeming insignificance of the Jews are all transcended by the glorious reality of God' (Kidner)
- (6) who God is
- (9-15) recounts God's amazing covenant grace
- (16-31) Israelite history: 'where sin increased, grace increased even more'
- (32-37) Confession and crying out for help now

Application:

- God's amazing grace and the horror of sin - how do we live in light of the cross? What more can we say of God's grace to us in our history!
- a culture of repentance is the right response to God's word
- we must separate ourselves from the world
- we need to learn to pray big, biblical prayers!

Chapter 10: Renewing the Covenant

- (starts in 9:38) repentance shows itself in a renewed covenant; structured, public, binding commitment (NB: not a 'new covenant' biblically but a re-affirmation of the old Mosaic covenant)
- specific names mention in 1-27 - including the leaders; consecration is made public
- details of the covenant: (28) separation from the peoples (implicitly their idols) with attending curse (!); (30) marriage, (31) sabbath, (32-33) resources to fund worship, (34) firewood offerings, (35-39) offerings in worship
- the major issue comes out in 39b: "We will not neglect the house of our God." Worship is central!

- importance of proving true Israelite ancestry (61) - this is all about re-establishing the people as they've become intermixed with the pagan society around them.
- everyone gets noticed - even the camels and donkeys (69)!
- they generously contribute their resources to the work (70-72)

Application:

- purity and definition of the church matters - we are called out from the culture around us
- everything is about the kingdom and its extension and progress
- we are saved for worship

Chapter 8: Reading the Law

- a new beginning (or a *return* to the covenant) for the whole people (5) as gathered to sit under God's 'instruction'. 'Torah' occurs 9 times in this chapter. Law is read by Ezra (1-6) and explained/preached by the levites (7-8). A festival of the word (18 - a whole week!)
- people's patience, attention, reverence, worship before the instruction
- people's mourning *and* joy at the word (9-12)
- Feast of tabernacles re-discovered (13-18) - their obedience: hear the word (14) and did it (16). Feast was a reminder of their dependence on the lord.

Application:

- the importance of the corporate gathering of God's people to hear instruction from the word; this is the basis of reformation! Church gatherings are vital
- we don't need anything new, but just need to continually return to what has been given to us: God's word (especially the gospel). Let's keep returning to the 'old things' and letting them shape who we are and how we live
- let's imitate the royal reception and reverence given to word of God by the people
- the word of God, and obedience to it, forge the identity of God's people
- importance of letting mourning for sin lead to joy in our salvation

Application

- kingdom work is warfare; dangerous, difficult and opposed; a war-time mentality. Get yourself ready for action: don't take off your clothes (v.23) and sleep in Jerusalem (22)!
- keep going and persevering - 'strap a sword on your side' v14 'fight for your brothers'
- prayer/dependence *and* action *again* vv4-5; v9 'And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.' v14 *and* v20
- strong leadership; need strengthening with truth and God-centred living ; v.10-12 weakness of the people, but determination of Nehemiah v14. Christ, our commander, leads us to be vigorous for him.

Chapter 5:1-19 Spiritual danger - Injustice amongst God's people!

- different kind of threat here: not outward here - but inward! internal spir problems all about absence of social justice
- israelites being exploited by own people
- v6 Nehemiah very angry at injustice here: confrontation and denunciation (7); redemption-centred explanation (8); you need fear the Lord (9); other brothers living differently (10); command (11)
- Oath enforced God will bring you into judgment for injustice (13)
- 14-18 Nehemiah's contrasting lifestyle: generosity and hospitality
- NB: prayer for vindication 5:19

Application

- how we treat each other and living out justice is vital!
- leader's role to stand up for justice and exemplify hospitality within the community and to model generosity and caring for needs cf. Nehemiah's natural self-limiting is key; not take what 'deserve', 'have right to' cos of fear of the lord (v.15)
- promotion not used for myself but for the good of others and the Lord(16)
- if you don't care about justice, you don't fear the Lord

Chapter 6:1-7:4 Strategies against God's leader

Opposition and lies from God's enemies: Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem (and others)

- plot to harm him v.2
- lies/disinformation: accusing Neh of rebellion and wanting to make himself king (6-7 cf. 2:19)
- trying to make him afraid v.9,13
- trying to ruin reputation v.13
- false prophets against him as well as well (14) been paid off
- treachery of own leaders (17-19); powerfully connected and influencing the leaders around Nehemiah - bound by oaths to him; spreading propaganda about the deeds of Tobiah! 5th column within the city trying to wear down Nehemiah

Nehemiah's response:

- seems perceptive and wise (2, 12) - not naive; discerning of other peoples' motives; avoids the traps
- tenacious (4)
- clear-headed and speaks truth (8)
- prayer as weapon (9, 14) - how he deals with these enemies!

But: the wall is nonetheless completed! (15-19) God's work continues in midst of plots and opposition. His help of his people to re-build the city and its walls produces fear of God amongst the surrounding peoples.

Application:

- be ready, wise, practical and realistic about spiritual opposition and its discouraging power; let's be realistic about the tremendous spiritual enemies we face (Eph 6:10ff)
- prayer is your weapon in the face of every kind of opposition
- remember that God's work goes forward right in the middle of lots of opposition - the cross is the supreme place where God's Leader is opposed and this is where God's work goes forward!

Part Two: Reforming God's people under God's law (chapters 7-13)

Summary: The people, now 'safe' behind the city's physical and spiritual walls, are led into a reformation of their lives based on God's Law.

Nehemiah's own voice disappears in chapters 8-12, and then reappears in 12:31. Ezra 'turns up' in chapter 8 and teaches the people. The emphasis in these chapters is on God's people as a transformed society, repenting of their earlier lifestyles and now being regulated by God's word. This is a picture of ancient reformation as people re-discover the word of God.

However, the ending of chapter 13 is 'disappointing'. The book finishes on a sobering note as we see the problems of cycles of sin and reforming God's people in this world.

Structure

- A. **(7:1-73)** Ordering of worship and genealogy of the returnees
- B. **(7:73b-8:18)** The people gather and hear the Law
- C. **(9:1-37)** The people corporately confess their sin and repent
- D. **(9:38-10:43)** The people's covenant with God is renewed
- E. **(11:1-12:26)** The city is repopulated and worship is organised
- F. **(12:27-13:3)** The wall is dedicated
- G. **(13:4-31)** Nehemiah intervenes when the people fall away

Chapter 7: The basis of reformation

- the practicalities of running the city (1-5): the walls of the city are guarded. Important spiritual and physical barrier.
- genealogical record (5-73) re-produces and parallels records of Ezra 2; come right before foundation of the Temple is laid in Ezra 3. So: Nehemiah 7 also leading us to another kind of consummation in chapters 8-10 with the covenant renewal. Ezra 3 stresses the people and Temple (restoration of worship), while Nehemiah 8 stresses the people and the law (word restoration of the word).
- people "come up" out of Babylon (6) - a new exodus!
- emphasis on priests, Levites, temple servants - centrality of Temple service and worship.