

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

JULY 24TH-25TH, 2021 // BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH WHO WROTE NEHEMIAH

The book is taken primarily from Nehemiah's memoirs, but both Jewish & Christian traditions recognize Ezra as the author.

- The books of Ezra & Nehemiah were originally one book that told the story of three Jews living in exile (Zerubbabel, Ezra, & Nehemiah) in the Persian Empire who were called by God to return to Jerusalem to help rebuild it.

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL SETTING OF NEHEMIAH.

In 587 B.C., Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Jews were forcibly taken away from their homeland into captivity in Babylon.

- God used Babylon as an agent of judgment against Israel for their sins of idolatry and rebellion against Him.
- But God told His people through the prophet Jeremiah that after 70 years of exile, they'd be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild (Jer. 25, 29).
- Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6) was the first to return to Jerusalem.

The Persian King Cyrus is moved by God to send Zerubbabel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

- The Jews who returned to complete this task faced intense opposition, but finally, the task was finished.
- But the story ends with strange anti-climax-the elders of Israel who remembered the glory of the 1st temple were disappointed and wept (Ezra 3), and Z. turned away others who weren't part of the group and just wanted to help (Ezra 4).

Then we hear of Ezra some 80 years later, who returns to Jerusalem after God moves the heart of the Persian king Artaxerxes.

- Ezra goes to make spiritual and religious reform amongst the Jewish community in Jerusalem.
- He, too, faces opposition from the Jewish people and must work very hard to create reform.

The story of Ezra also has a strange anti-climax-upon seeing that the Jews were intermarried with other foreign nations; Ezra tells them to divorce and sends their Gentile wives and children away (Ezra 10:10-11).

- Scholars are divided as to whether or not Ezra's decree was faithful to God's law (Deut. 7:3-4) or a violation of God's heart (Malachi 2:16).

WHAT IS NEHEMIAH ABOUT?

Then we're introduced to Nehemiah- God moves the heart of the King of Persia to allow Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its city walls (Neh. 1-7).

- Nehemiah encounters intense opposition as he leads a group of Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city.

Then Ezra and Nehemiah team up to lead the people of Jerusalem in spiritual renewal (Neh. 8-12) through confession of sin, covenant renewal, and a great celebration.

- **But then** - there's the anti-climax...
- The book ends with Nehemiah noticing the temple neglected, the sabbath dishonored, and the walls compromised (Neh. 13).

The prophetic hopes of Israel after the exile were for a future Messianic King, God's presence in a restored temple, God's Kingdom over the nations, and God's promise to Abraham.

- Each account in Ezra-Nehemiah begins with that hope but ends with disappointment.
- This book points out that true renewal is only accomplished through God giving His people a new heart (Jer. 31, Ezek. 36).

WHY STUDY NEHEMIAH?

Nehemiah tells us that in every generation, God will place His burden for revival on the hearts of His people.

- Those revivals happen as a result of prayer, bold leadership, and hard work.
- But even the truest revivals, renewals, and restorations God brings about on this side of eternity are incomplete at best.

Social, political, and even moral or spiritual reforms in every generation come up short.

- It's only when Messiah returns in the glory that Jerusalem will be fully restored, and true revival will be accomplished as a result of His work.
- But in the meantime, we labor in this broken world to see revivals take place as a result of God working through His people.

God will find a praying man or woman and place on their heart a burden...and with that burden often comes anguish and profound angst.

- With that burden comes the responsibility to seek God's direction through prayer and to **do something about it**.
- Almost always, opposition comes - but if God is behind the work, revival will come.

A REPORT (NEHEMIAH 1:1-3)

Nehemiah means, "the Lord has comforted," and he was a "cupbearer to the king" (vs. 11) Artaxerxes who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 B.C.

- He's identified as the son of Hachaliah to distinguish him from other Jews of the same name.
- The month of Chislev corresponds to what we call November/December, and the 20th year of Artaxerxes reign was 445 B.C.

Nehemiah was in Susa, which was the king of Persia's winter residence when he hears a report from his brother Hanani about the situation in Judah (vs. 2).

- For nearly a century, a group of Jews had been living in Judah rebuilding the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.
- Hanani and other men had just come from the region (were they residents or just visitors?)

How were things in Jerusalem? Not good.

- God's people were in great trouble and shame because the wall of Jerusalem was broken down, and the gates had been destroyed by fire (vs. 3).
- Instead of a land inhabited by a great nation, only a small remnant were there struggling even to survive.
- The magnificent city of God was in shambles.

HOW ARE THINGS AMIDST GOD'S PEOPLE RIGHT NOW?

Since 1990, the percentage of Americans who identify as "Christian" has shrunk by 20%.

- For the first time in 80 years, less than half (47%) of Americans said they attend any house of worship at all (50% in 2018, 70% in 1999).
- Of the young adult generations (Millennials & Gen Z), only 36% attend worship at all.
- Religious "nones" are one of the fastest-growing spiritual groups in the country.

70% of churches in America are either plateauing or declining, and the majority of Protestant churches have seen less than 10 salvations in a year.

- 90-95% of churchgoers don't give financially, and 75-80% never serve in the church.
- 40% of regular church attendees read their Bible once or twice a month, if at all; 15% of them say they **never** read the Bible.

68% of Christian men regularly view pornography.

- Adultery, substance abuse, theft, and domestic violence are practiced by many self-professed Christians.
- God's people in our nation and our spiritual Jerusalem (the Church) are in "great trouble and shame"! But does that concern you?
- Does that move you in the least bit? What do you think God's heart is towards this situation?

ANGUISH (NEHEMIAH 1:4-11)

After hearing the report of Jerusalem's ruin, Nehemiah sat down and wept (vs. 4).

- His heart was genuinely moved with grief and anguish over the ruin and shame that had come upon the city and people of God.
- When God puts His burden on our hearts, sometimes we try to escape and avoid it.
- But there is a time to weep & mourn (Eccl. 3:4) for what is broken and lost.

The sorrow, anguish, and overwhelm drove Nehemiah to his knees as he "fasted and prayed" before the God of heaven.

- When we feel God's burden over what's broken and torn down, often we feel helpless.
- That helplessness is intended to drive us to our knees in prayer, not to places of calloused indifference!

Through Nehemiah prayed for more than 4 months, what we see in verses 5-11 is a recorded prayer representative of all he offered before the throne of God during that time.

- Nehemiah began his prayer with adoration as he professed the goodness and faithfulness of God (vs. 5). The problem wasn't that God was unfaithful towards His people, but that His people were unfaithful towards Him!

Nehemiah confesses the sins of the people of Israel (vs. 6-7), but he also takes ownership for his part and his family's part.

- It's so easy for us to become angry, self-righteous, blame-shifting finger pointers.
- True revival only happens when God's people are grieved by their sin - not preoccupied by the sins of the unbelieving world.
- **1 Cor. 5:12-13**

Then Nehemiah prays according to God's word given to Moses in Deut. 30 (vs. 8-9).

- God had warned Israel of consequences for their unfaithfulness, but rewards of protection and blessing for obedience.
- We so often seek God's blessing on our lives, families, churches, and businesses without remembering that true blessing and protection come about through obedience.

Nehemiah appealed to God to act on His people's behalf - "they are your servants and your people" (vs. 10) and pleads with God to hear his prayer, grant him success, and give him favor with the king (vs. 11).

- Unless God gets into the equation - restoration, redemption, and revival aren't possible.
- Before Nehemiah puts together a plan, he prays, fasts, and seeks the Lord.

A CALL TO OPEN OUR EYES AND HEARTS

- If we refuse to wake up and see the reality of the "great trouble and shame" that has come upon the people of God in our nation, what does that mean for our children, grandchildren, and the generations after us?
- If we refuse the acknowledge the statistical realities of Christianity's decline in favor of our own comfort, what does that say about us?

A CALL TO CONFESS OUR SINS AND SEEK THE LORD

- Has God placed a burden on your heart for someone or something? Are you trying to escape, avoid, or ignore it?
- We can respond to the brokenness and chaos of the world around us with angry, self-righteous, blame-shifting, finger-pointing... or we can take ownership for our own failures - both in what we've done and left undone.
- If our hearts are prideful, arrogant, disobedient, and indifferent towards God, we will be "scattered" both personally and societally.
- But if we humble ourselves, feel God's burden and conviction, and let that helplessness drive us to our knees in seeking the Lord... he will not only restore us, He will use us to be a part of restoring others.