

What Should I know about the Book of Nehemiah?

Nehemiah is a book about new beginnings. The people of Israel had lost their home in the Promised Land due to their constant pursuit of idol worship. The people simply would not worship God the way that He desired. Even before they entered the Promised Land, God had warned them to be obedient to his command or they would lose their place and be sent into exile (Deuteronomy 28:64). And, to ensure that the people would have his blessings for obedience and cursing for disobedience indelibly imprinted on their community conscience, God had them march in a valley between two mountains and half the priests stood on the one and the other half stood on the other — the ones on Mount Ebal speaking the curses of God and the ones on Mount Gerizim speaking the blessings of God upon the nation. You can read more of this in Deuteronomy 26:16-29:1.

Sadly, generations tend to do a poor job of teaching their children about what is right and what is wrong. Too often, parents take the mindset that says, “I want my children to decide what they will believe for themselves!” To borrow the words of Charles Spurgeon, “If you will not bias your children to what is right, the Devil will gladly bias them toward that which is wrong.” Moreover, not teaching our children the things of faith is a sin. Repeatedly in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, God commands people to pass on what they know about God to their children. And not doing so has drastic consequences.

For Israel, the consequence is that they would lose their inheritance in the land. That took place in two steps, first the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. God permitted the Assyrian armies to attack the southern kingdom of Judah, too, but because King Hezekiah repented, God was patient and the Angel of Yahweh (the pre-incarnate Christ) came by night with sword drawn and slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, causing the Assyrian army to flee. You can read more on this in Isaiah 36:1- Isaiah 37:38. An interesting piece of trivia is that the Assyrian king who led these armies was a man by the name of Sennacherib, and in his own annals he records that he had Jerusalem ensnared like a bird in a cage, but then inexplicably retreated home to his capital.

God’s patience did not last forever and in 608 BC, a little over 100 years later, God sent the Babylonian army in to conquer Judah and sack Jerusalem. When Jerusalem was sacked, they also looted and then destroyed the Temple which Solomon had built. Unlike the Assyrian conquerors, who dispersed the people of the kingdom of Israel to the corners of the Assyrian empire, the Babylonians took the people of Judah to Babylon and its surrounding regions, leaving a small remnant of intact believers.

I want you to notice something, though. God brought the people into the Promised Land in 1452 BC. Thus, from Israel’s entrance into the land to the final exile was a period of more than 800 years! Eight-hundred years of God being patient with his people. Eight-hundred years of God’s people worshiping as pagans! God offered them rebukes, but patiently allowed them to remain in the land, sending prophets and others to call the people to repent. Sometimes we miss that as we read through the Old Testament. Think about it; eight-hundred years ago, the United States didn’t even exist. In fact, the only westerners who had ever been to America at that time were likely some wayward bands of vikings. Think about how the world has changed since the medieval period and there you have a taste of the patience of God with an idolatrous Israel. As

idolatrous as the Christian church is today, I wonder sometimes, how much longer God will wait until he finally declares it to be what it is and tears it down.

The people spent seventy years in exile. This, of course, was no surprise to anyone who listened to the prophets as Isaiah (Isaiah 23:17) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10) both prophesied that the exile would take place for seventy years before the exile began and Daniel (Daniel 9:2) reminded the people of the seventy years as they came to an end. At the end of seventy years, consistent with the prophesy of Isaiah (Isaiah 45:1), God raised up a king in Persia named Cyrus, who overthrew the Babylonians and would permit the people to return to their homelands. Do not think that this was a favor that Cyrus did uniquely for the Jewish people, but instead he committed immense amounts of wealth helping former exiles to rebuild their homelands and their places of worship.

There were three returns from Babylon that the Bible records. The first two are spoken of in the book of Ezra and the third is recorded in Nehemiah. That did not mean that there were not others who found their way back, but since travel was oftentimes fraught with danger, people tended to move in large caravans. The first group was led by Zerubbabel and Joshua and was tasked to rebuild the Temple. They did not do a very good job, so God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them along (Ezra 5:1). The second group would be led by Ezra himself. Nehemiah led the final group with the task of rebuilding the walls of the city.

To appreciate the challenge of this return trip, you need to understand a little of the geography of the region. Note the map below:



Note the red line and the distance it covers. That works out to a trip of 1,678 miles. That is almost as far a drive as it would be from Zelienople, PA to Yellowstone National Park or, if you wanted to drive to Key West and then back up to Orlando. That is a long way in a car, but can you imagine how long a trip it would be if you were on foot or riding a pack animal? In ancient

times, a caravan would typically cover about 15 miles per day. That is in essence a 4 month journey. This was not an easy trip...yet again, many elderly people chose to make the voyage knowing they might not survive the journey.

Why, do you ask, did those who might not survive still try and make the journey? Ultimately that is a question we cannot answer for every individual, but I think that it is safe to say that their interest in going back to Israel, no matter how hard the journey may be, was seen to be a promise of reconciliation with God. Truly, like it was for righteous Lot (2 Peter 2:7), how their souls must have been distressed as they lived in a land of great idolatry. How they must have yearned for the pure worship of the Temple. Does this not also speak to you, dear Christian? In a world where we are so surrounded by the idolatry of the nations — even idolatry that has snuck its way into the church, do you not yearn for worship that is faithful and true as well? Do you not yearn for worship that is governed by and immersed in the Word of God and not by the preferences of men?

The Place of Nehemiah in the Biblical Canon

Ezra and Nehemiah originally formed one book. In fact, in some old references, you will find comments about “first Ezra” and “second Ezra.” This is present even as recently as the original forms of the Belgic Confession to which we subscribe as a church (though our edition has been adjusted appropriately).

In the Jewish order of the Canon, these two books fall within the third group of texts known as “the Writings.” Thus, Ezra and Nehemiah are understood to be more practical books than prophetic books in nature. What is interesting is that in the Writings, 1&2 Chronicles falls after the books of Ezra and Nehemiah even though Ezra and Nehemiah take place chronologically later than does Chronicles. That is a great conversation for TOPIX, but in short, that is because Chronicles is seen to be the summary of the whole Old Testament which leads finally to the call for the Messiah in the final statement of Chronicles: “Let him go up.”

The Place of Nehemiah in History

Nehemiah takes place around 445 BC. At this point, the Israelites had rebuilt the Temple, yet the Temple remained defenseless — as were the people who served in it and lived around it. King Artaxerxes would permit Nehemiah to see the wall built and provisioned him to do just that. That makes Nehemiah a contemporary of both Esther and Daniel.

In the Greek-speaking world, just to the north and west of Israel, philosophy was beginning to flourish. Democritus was the last of the great Pre-Socratic philosophers and the school founded by Pythagoras was still in its prime. The grand debate that was taking place was over how many “kinds of stuff” made up the world around us. Democritus would be the foremost leader amongst those called “Atomists” who argued that you could break all things down into a single, indivisible molecule. The pythagoreans held that there were both physical and spiritual kinds of “stuff” and one ought not confuse them. Within the lifetime of Nehemiah another Greek philosopher would be born, a man by the name of Socrates, who would influence the world with his thought, largely through his student, Plato.

In politics, the Greeks were inventing democracy and the city-states of Athens and Sparta were rising to preeminence. And in Medicine, Hippocrates was developing both early medical techniques as well as the basis of the Hippocratic Oath still taken by physicians today. Rome, while figuring prominently in the New Testament writings, was still a regional power. Within the lifetime of Nehemiah, though, Rome would establish the first paid army, revolutionizing the development of military powers and setting the foundation for their empire that would follow.

In the East, little of note is taking place. China is ruled by Emperors, yet they have largely kept to themselves, apart from the west and in India, the city of Delhi is founded during Nehemiah's lifetime. The Mongolians controlled the plains between China in the east, India in the south, and Persia in the west, creating a kind of limit to the expansion of each of these three empires.

Why Study Nehemiah?

Nehemiah is a book about new beginnings. We too, at Light of Resurrection Reformed (LORR) are starting anew. While most people tend to approach Nehemiah as a book of leadership techniques, Nehemiah is really a book about a man committed to the right worship of his God and an insistence that the people do just that. That is very much what we are about and it will be good for us at LORR to see Nehemiah as a kind of starting point as we begin anew to the glory of God.

Outline of Sermons

- 1:1-3 — An Introduction to Nehemiah
- 1:4-11 — Nehemiah's Prayer
- 2:1-6 — Nehemiah's Request to go to Jerusalem
- 2:7-8 — Nehemiah's Request of the King
- 2:9-10 — Opposition to the Welfare of God's People
- 2:11-16 — Inspecting the Walls
- 2:17-20 — Meeting with Jewish Leadership
- 3:1-32 — Rebuilding Wall and Gates
- 4:1-6 — Facing Jeers of the Enemy
- 4:7-14 — Opposition to Building
- 4:15-23 — Arming the Workmen
- 5:1-13 — The Sin of Charging Interest on Loans to Believers
- 5:14-19 — Nehemiah as Governor
- 6:1-14 — A Plot to Kill Nehemiah
- 6:15-7:4 — Completion of the Wall
- 7:5-73 — The Census/Church Rolls
- 8:1-8 — Ezra's Preaching
- 8:9-12 — The Sabbath Celebrated
- 8:13-18 — The Feast of Booths Celebrated
- 9:1-5 — Confessing Sins for a Quarter of a Day
- 9:6-38 — A Prayer of Confession

10:1-27 — The Covenant Sealed
10:28-39 — Covenant Obligations
11:1-36 — Levites Living Among the People
12:1-26 — Priests
12:27-43 — Dedicating the Wall
12:44-47 — Temple Services
13:1-9 — Defiling the Temple Corrected
13:10-14 — The Tithe not given to the Priests Corrected
13:15-22 — Doing Business on the Sabbath Corrected
13:23-29 — Marrying Outside of the Faith and Raising Children Outside of the Faith Corrected
13:30-31 — Cleansing the People from Things Foreign to God's Word