

ERIC MASON NEHEMIAH FOR YOU

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Nehemiah For You

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Published by:
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Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates.

ISBN: 9781784986780

Cover design by Ben Woodcraft | Printed in India

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Nehemiah For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translation used:

ESV: English Standard Version (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)

NLT: New Living Translation

NIV: New International Version

INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah is one of those books that can easily end up being hidden from the sight of the believer. It is one of the smaller historical books—like Ezra or Esther—and it tells the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the people’s return from exile. This was a key moment in the history of God’s people.

But if we walk away from this book with just a rebuilt wall, we miss many greater things that it’s possible to see in the pages of this rich book. It has an obvious relevance to any type of rebuilding we might do for God—from our homes and families to our local churches, communities, cities, and government. It teaches us about **gospel*** mission. We have to be careful not to get locked into the details and fail to see the greater themes of **redemption** and the **providence** of God.

God had a key role for his people, Israel, and that was for them to be **priests** to the nations (Exodus 19:6). That was what Jerusalem was all about: a city on a hill, a light to the world, representing the rule of God. Often, Israel forgot this and fell into selfishness, idolatry, and all-around failure to live up to their **covenant** with God. Sound familiar? We can be this way as well. Nehemiah shows us the work it takes to rebuild representation of the glory of God to the nations.

In Nehemiah we also see that God is ultimately the initiator of his kingdom being built, and we are his divine **stewards** and representatives. When we are in the midst of great need, opposition, rebellion, encumbrances, and sins, God still works through us and motivates us to complete his work.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve used the book of Nehemiah for leadership development, church-planter training, pastor development, entrepreneurial advice, and personal devotion and encouragement. We can see ourselves and our lives in it. But most of all we can see God’s intentions, his glory, and his Son.

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 163).

Overview of Nehemiah

The events of Nehemiah took place toward the beginning of what's called the Second Temple Period (around 516 BC – AD 70). God's people had been in captivity, first under the Babylonians and then under the Persians. There were several groups that departed from Persia and returned to Jerusalem to re-establish God's people in their own land. One wave was led by Ezra, another by Zerubbabel, and another by Nehemiah. Ezra was a **scribe**, so he helped with re-educating Israel; Zerubbabel was a priest and re-established the priesthood; and Nehemiah was the governor, who helped with social order. Each had their own place in God's plan.

At the start of the book, Nehemiah finds out about the broken-down condition of Jerusalem and is moved to action. He gains support from the Persian king to get involved in God's plan to re-establish Israel in their own land.

Throughout, we see the enormous courage, zeal, and spiritual resilience of Nehemiah as he seeks to turn this broken city into a light for the nations again. At the center of his activity is the reconstruction and repair of the walls of Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the walls would be a sign that Jerusalem was a city again.

But the deepest things that needed to be addressed weren't the structure or aesthetics of the city but the heart of the city. It was the people of God that gave the city its reputation and character. Therefore, Nehemiah began to

focus on the social and spiritual character of the people. He dealt with issues of justice, resisted the distractions of enemies, and reinstated the word of God in its place at the center of the life of the city. The focus in chapters 1 to 7 is more on external, physical issues and social renewal. Chapters 8 to 13 focus more on inward, spiritual issues and covenant renewal.

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Whether they knew it or not, Nehemiah and the rest were only a few generations from the Savior's coming. Jesus would live, die, and rise again, and would guide the people of God beyond the walls of Jerusalem in mission, to establish his reign over the nations. It's a mission we're still part of today.

1. REBUILT TO BUILD

As we look at the first few verses of Nehemiah, I want to explain how the story connects to the grand theme of what God has been doing, has done, and will do.

Redeemed to Represent

Nehemiah is nestled at the beginning of what's called the Second Temple Period, when the **temple** was being rebuilt in Jerusalem and the people of God were returning from exile.

Long before that, God had chosen the Israelites to be his own people, to show off who he was to the world. Deuteronomy 7:6-7 explains this:

“The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all people.”

God likes to choose people that have nothing—that are unimpressive. They are “the fewest of all peoples.” Paul says a similar thing about the Christian church in 1 Corinthians 1:26: “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” God hasn’t chosen just the cool people. Some of us are geeks. Some of us are awkward. Some of us are weird. All of us are sinful. But God is going to use these weaknesses, because people know we’re like that, and so, as God transforms us and makes us look more like himself, people will realize that there’s something about us that is beyond us.

All Christians are God's people now, but initially God chose the people of Israel to display who he was to the other nations (Isaiah 49:8-9; 60:1-3). And this was to happen in a particular place: the **promised land**, and specifically in the city of Jerusalem. Deuteronomy 12:5 says, "You shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there." Jerusalem was the place where God's presence dwelt. It was the center of the whole nation, the center of their worship, the center of their representation of him. This was why being sent away into exile, away from Jerusalem, was such a terrible thing.

Exile was initiated because of the people's disobedience. God had given his people this mission, and they had failed him by becoming idolaters. (Idolatry is worshiping anyone or anything instead of God.) Whenever anything gets in the place where God should be in the life of his people, he first calls them to repentance. He did that in this case through his prophets—Isaiah and others. But if they don't repent, he pulls out a cosmic belt. God disciplines his children because he loves them. The Babylonians, under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, besieged Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoiachin—around 597 BC. They took the people of **Judah** into captivity. Later, the Persians came in and took over; they took Babylon itself into captivity, together with all the nations that the Babylonians had taken into captivity.

For the Israelites, exile did not just involve the pain of moving and being uncertain about the future; there was also the pain of being taken away from the place where God was and where they were supposed to be representing him.

Even in the midst of this discipline, however, God's people were still to represent his name. He told them through the prophet Jeremiah, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7). That's one thing that's beautiful about the God of heaven: whenever he gets after someone, he gets after them with purpose.

He tells us this in the New Testament as well. Ephesians 2:8 says, “By **grace** you have been saved through faith.” Then verse 10 goes on, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

In other words, God’s people are redeemed to represent. “Redeemed” means “bought back.” He saves us, and then he **anoints** us to represent him. That’s a broad Bible principle; the mission of God through his people is rooted in our identity in him. We are redeemed to represent. God’s people of all times have always been called to represent his reign on earth.

Back to Jerusalem

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God had told his people, “I know the plans I have for you ... plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Even in the middle of the discipline he was giving them, he offered them comfort and purpose.

God intervened so that the king of Persia (Cyrus the Great and then his successors) allowed the people to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city. There were three waves of return to Jerusalem—led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and then Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe these returns, but they are not attempting to provide a complete detailed history of this 100-year-plus time span. Instead they focus on only a few highly significant years (see Gregory Goswell, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, ed. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, p 371). That’s why there are chronological gaps between Ezra 6 and 7, between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1, and between Nehemiah 13:3 and 13:4.

The word Nehemiah means “**Yahweh** comforts.” Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t that something? Who else gives you a whipping, and then comforts you? Through Nehemiah, through Ezra, and through the prophets God sent at this time—Malachi, Haggai, Zephaniah and Zechariah—God was encouraging his people and giving them hope. He was saying, *It’s all right now. It hurt, didn’t it? But I just did it*

because I love you. That's the way God is; he comforts his people after he disciplines them. This is important because when the people of Judah get back to Jerusalem and see the state of the city, they are going to need comfort.

Among those who have already returned to Jerusalem is Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah. He and all of the returned exiles are feeling broken about the circumstances and condition of the city to which God has sent them. Hanani goes back to Susa, which was the capital of Persia, and he comes to see Nehemiah (Nehemiah **1:2***).

Nehemiah asks him questions about the Jews who are in Jerusalem, and about the state of the city itself. This is Hanani's response: "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

There is only a remnant of the people still left in the city. That means a small group of people that God has drafted to continue to represent him.

But this remnant is "in great trouble and shame" (**v 3**), and the wall of Jerusalem has been broken down. The city walls had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and despite some attempts to rebuild them, they remained in ruins for almost a century and a half. Such a lamentable situation obviously made Jerusalem vulnerable to numerous enemies. Yet because of a mixture of apathy and fear, the Jews had failed to rectify this glaring deficiency. Archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon notes:

"The effect on Jerusalem was much more disastrous and far-reaching than merely to render the city defenseless ... The whole system of terraces down the (eastern) slope, dependent on retaining walls buttressed in turn by the fill of the next lower terrace, was ultimately dependent on the town wall at the base, forming the lowest and most substantial of the retaining walls." (*Digging up Jerusalem*, p 170)

* All Nehemiah verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

In other words, the whole integrity of the city was threatened by the broken-down state of the walls. It's no surprise that the people felt wrecked and without help.

My older sister was right outside the Pentagon on 9/11 when the plane crashed into it. She told me about the look on people's faces walking around that day. It was as if you could see the rubble and the dust in their eyes. There was desperation and there was brokenness because of what they had seen. It wasn't just the US defense headquarters that had been broken down. People's own defenses had been, too. That's the same kind of brokenness that Nehemiah saw on his brother's face.

But this remnant of God's people in Jerusalem was not only distraught because of the physical destruction. As we know, Jerusalem was always about something bigger than just being a beautiful city or a well-defended one. It was the dwelling place of God. The reason why there was such pain among those who had returned from exile was that the representation of God by his people had waned.

The book of Nehemiah is the story of how it was built back up again.

The City in the City

This all applies to us as followers of Jesus Christ because we are God's people now—the ones who represent him to the world. In fact, Jesus compares us to a city in Matthew 5:14.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

A city isn't merely the geography; a city is a people. We are a city set on a hill, like Jerusalem. That's why Revelation 21:2-3 talks about a new Jerusalem. “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with him, and they will be

his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” This is what we as the church are going to be like one day: a new city, a new Jerusalem, where God dwells.

We’re like
movie trailers
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community
is supposed
to look like.

This eternal Jerusalem is going to have no mourning, no crying, no dying, and no pain (v 4). No deprivation or injustice or crime. It is going to be the cleanest city ever! That is what cities look like when God runs them. The new Jerusalem is the archetypal city: the community that every community is ultimately supposed to look like. And God wants us to be like movie trailers for that city. God has redeemed us, and that means that he wants us to

be his representatives in the places that he has sent us into.

Missiologist Lois Barrett helpfully explains what that means:

“Key images of God’s alternative community, the missional church, are found in the Gospels’ descriptions of the people of God as ‘the salt of the earth,’ a ‘light of the world,’ and a ‘city set on a hill.’ These images suggest that mission is not just what the church does; it is what the church is. Saltiness is not an action; it is the very character of salt. Similarly, light or a city on a hill need not do anything in order to be seen. So too it is with God’s ‘people sent.’ The visible, taste-able nature of their community is their missional purpose: by encountering that ‘holy nation,’ others ‘may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven’ (Matthew 5:16).”

(in Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church*, p 128)

What God is helping us to think through in Nehemiah is this: what does it look like to see the power of the gospel transform and rebuild us into a reflection of the eternal Jerusalem? And how is that going to change the world? God calls us to proclaim his gospel in

the world so that people's lives can be changed holistically. We want to see a reflection of the beauty of the new Jerusalem. We long to see no more mourning or crying or pain in the lives of the people we live among. We're trying to see comprehensive gospel change. That is what Nehemiah is about.

On Mission

It is time to rebuild. It is time to join God on mission—to join what he has been doing since the **fall**. The world is in trouble, and he has sent us in as his special ops team. We need all hands on deck because this is a war. In Jesus' name, it is time to get out there. That's what it means to be on mission.

Too many Christians are just consumers. We say, "I need a word about this... I need God to help me with that... I need..." No! God wants us to do something for his glory in our neighborhoods. We've got to roll up our sleeves. No more consumerism.

Of course, you and I do need things. We need the word of God. We need to worship together. We need good **theology**. But when Acts 2:42 says, "They devoted themselves to the **apostles'** teaching," it means not just hearing it but executing it. If church becomes about what we can get, we're doing it wrong. We have been redeemed in order to represent God together to the people around us.

Here's how Nehemiah responds to his brother's news. "I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued **fasting** and praying before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah **1:4**).

A verse like that prompts us to ask questions of ourselves. Have I wept? Have I mourned for the state of God's people? Have I mourned for the state of the world? Have I felt the brokenness Nehemiah felt? Remember, the people in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's time were "in great trouble and shame." That word "trouble" means "brokenness"—being smashed, being injured, being absolutely shattered by circumstances.

That is what God has called us into. He has not called us into a pretty ministry. He wants us to care so much about his kingdom that we are broken when we don't see his rule represented as it should be.

He wants us to get on our faces and cry out to him. We should be expectant, believing in Jesus' name that God is going to work in our communities. But he is not going to do it apart from us, the people he has redeemed to represent him.

Questions for reflection

- 1.** How do you respond to the idea that we are redeemed to represent God in the world?
- 2.** What brokenness do you see in the church and in the world around you? What could you do to represent God in those situations?
- 3.** Where have you seen consumerist attitudes in church? How can you guard against this kind of attitude?