

NEHEMIAH

MATERIAL BY NATHAN COMBS

ashib, ³⁷Mattaniah, Mattenai,
of the sons of Binnui: ¹Shimei,
iah, Nathan, Adaiah, ⁴⁰Mach-

10:44 ⁿ [ver. 3]

¹ Septuagint; Hebrew Bani, Binnui ² Or and
them away with their children

NEHEMIAH

Jerusalem
ords of ^aNehemiah the son of
ah.

happened in the month of
n the twentieth year, as I was in
tadel, ²that ^cHanani, one of my
ame with certain men from
I asked them concerning the
scaped, who had survived the
concerning Jerusalem. ³And

1:1 ^a ch. 10:1

^b Zech. 7:1 ^c ch.

2:1 ^d Esth. 1:2, 5;
2:3, 5

1:2 ^e ch. 7:2

1:3 ^f ch. 2:17 ^g ch.

2:13; 2 Kgs. 25:10

^h ch. 2:3, 13, 17

1:4 ⁱ [Ezra 9:3]

^j ch. 2:4

1:5 ^k ch. 9:32;

them, ^sthough your outcasts are i
termost parts of heaven, from th
gather them and bring them ^tto
that I have chosen, to make n
dwell there.' ^{10u}They are your
and your people, whom you
deemed by your great power and
strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, ^llet your
tentive to the prayer of your serva
the prayer of your servants who c

Class Agenda

Subject	Chapter(s) to Study
Introduction to Book	Historical Material/Overview
Journey to Jerusalem	1.1-11
Preparations to Build	2.1-20
Opposition to the Work	3.1-4.14
External and Internal Issues	4.15-5.13
Last Gasp of God's Enemies	5.14-6.14
Finishing the Wall	6.15-7.73
Reading and Restoring Law	8.1-18
Prayer of Recommitment	9.1-38
Sealing the Covenant	10.1-39
Leaders of Jerusalem	11.1-36
Dedication of the Wall	12.1-47
Nehemiah's Final Reforms	13.1-31

Introduction

Do a casual quick reading of the book in one sitting to get a feel of the overall message. Try not dwell too long on any one text since your purpose is to get an overview. As you read, answer the following questions:

- a. Who are the main characters in the book?
- b. How long did it take Nehemiah and the people to complete the wall?
- c. Other than the rebuilding the wall, what other major reforms did Nehemiah make?
- d. How would you characterize the main message of Nehemiah in one sentence?

The Persian Empire

The Persian empire came into existence during the reign of Cyrus II (the Great), who ruled from 559-530 B.C. Cyrus' ancestors were chiefs or "kings" of Anshan, a district in Persia. Cyrus became the chief ruler of both the Medes (a neighboring nation) and the Persians when he captured the Median capital city of Ecbatana in 550 B.C. Over time, with the conquests of Babylon and Lydia, Cyrus created the largest empire the world had yet seen. By 480 B.C., it is estimated that 50 million people lived in this enormous kingdom that stretched from Greece to India, approximately 3,000,000 square miles.

In the scriptures, Cyrus' role in rebuilding Jerusalem and God's temple is specifically foretold in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 44.28, 45.1). In Ezra 1.1-4, Ezra records Cyrus' proclamation in the first year of his reign, giving the Jews permission to return to their homeland and restore their country. This Biblical account of Cyrus' religious tolerance is supported by the Cyrus cylinder (pictured on page 4), a propaganda account of Cyrus' greatness discovered in Babylon in the late 1800's.

The Persians were known for their readiness to embrace the customs of foreign nations. For example, the Persian kings probably borrowed from Babylon and (further developed) a royal messenger system. This system, mentioned in Esther 8.14, became so efficient that it was said of the pace of the messengers, "No mortal thing is quicker." The Persians also adopted the cuneiform writing styles of neighboring countries, such as Elam and Babylon.

The government of Persia was ruled by a monarch with unlimited power. A council of seven princes existed (Esther 1.14), but it had no share in the rule of the king. In marriage, the Persians practiced polygamy, and unions between close family members (e.g. between siblings) were not unusual. As soldiers, the Persians were famous as archers and javelin-throwers; they were also skilled in the use of the sling, and above all in riding. Boys were taken from the women's into the men's part of the house at the age of 5, and were trained in "riding, archery and speaking the truth" until 20 years old.

Interestingly, Persian culture placed enormous weight on speaking truth. When the ancient Greek historian Herodotus described the Persians, he wrote: "the most disgraceful thing in the world [the Persians] think, is to tell a lie; the next worst, to owe a debt: because, among other reasons, the debtor is obliged to tell lies." In an inscription found carved into Mount Behistun in Western Iran, King Darius I declared: "I was not a lie-follower, I was not a doer of wrong..." In describing his conquests, Darius said: "I smote them and took prisoner nine kings. One was Gaumata by name, a Magian; *he lied*; thus he said: I am king in Elam... One, Nidintu-Bel by name, a Babylonian; *he lied*; thus he said: I am Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabonidus." In the Avesta (a collection of ancient Persian religious texts), the lie, the "druj," was regarded as a great crime and sometimes punishable by death.

In the book of Daniel, the Persian empire is pictured as the silver middle section of a large statue in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2.32, 39). Later in the book, it's depicted as a beast like a bear that was raised up on one side, with three ribs in its mouth. The beast was told to "Arise," and "devour much flesh," indicating the powerful conquest of the Persians (Daniel 7.5).

King Artaxerxes I

The king who is mentioned in the book of Nehemiah, Artaxerxes I, reigned from 465-424 B.C. The book of Nehemiah takes place in the 20th year of his reign (Neh. 1.1). In Greek sources Artaxerxes is surnamed “Macrocheir” (Latin: “Longimanus”), allegedly because his right hand was longer than his left.

Artaxerxes’ father, Xerxes, was probably the Persian king Ahasuerus who married Esther in the Biblical book that bears her name. Xerxes was a mediocre king who failed in his attempt to conquer Greece when his navy was utterly destroyed at the Battle of Salamis (480 B.C.), but he did manage to crush revolts in Babylon and Egypt. Xerxes died in a palace coup in 465 B.C.

When Artaxerxes took the throne shortly thereafter, he inherited an unstable empire. The peace of Callias in 449 B.C. had temporarily ended the fighting with the Greeks, but Egypt was still a powder keg ready to explode again into rebellion. Perhaps one reason why Artaxerxes was so eager to help Nehemiah rebuild Jerusalem was because the King needed the loyalty of the Jews in that troubled time period. Southern Palestine had great strategic value to him, since it controlled the major routes leading to Egypt and served as a buffer zone.

Susa

The city of Susa (Shushan, meaning “lily”), mentioned in Nehemiah, took its name from the abundance of lilies that grew in its area. Susa is located in the southwestern portion of modern Iran, about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. Its ideal winter climate made it a favorite retreat for the Achaemenid kings. The region was brutally oppressive during the summer months, with temperatures commonly reaching 140 degrees F. The Greek philosopher Strabo notes that snakes and lizards crossing the street at noon in the summer heat were roasted to death.

Position of Cupbearer

“Cupbearer” in Hebrew literally means “one who gives (someone) something to drink.” The word occurs twelve times in the Old Testament in the sense of “cupbearer.” In 1 Kings 10.5 and 2 Chronicles 9.4 it refers to Solomon’s attendants. The function of the cupbearer was described by the Greek historian Xenophon: “Now, it is a well-known fact that the kings’ cupbearers, when they proffer the cup, draw off some of it with the ladle, pour it into their left hand, and swallow it down - so that, if they should put poison in, they may not profit by it.” That a cupbearer could have other responsibilities as well is indicated by Tobit 1.22: “Now Ahikar was chief cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts under King Sennacherib of Assyria; for Esarhaddon reappointed him.”

The Return of the Jewish Exiles

Before the nation of Judah was conquered and taken to Babylon, God prophesied through Jeremiah that their captivity would not be permanent, but would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 29.10). After Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return in 538 B.C., the exiles would return in three stages, just as they were exiled in three stages. Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 contain identical total numbers of the returning exiles. Altogether, 42,360 Jews trickled back to the land with various Jewish leaders, not including the servants and singers who accompanied them.

The first stage occurred in 536 B.C., when “Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah” led the first exiles back to Judea. Sheshbazzar brought with him the vessels of gold and silver that originally came from Solomon’s temple (Ezra 1.7-11) and became the first governor of the province of Judah (Ezra 5.14). Under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jozadak, the Jews began to rebuild God’s temple (Ezra 2.8, 5.16). The construction project met stiff resistance from the regional enemies of the Jews, who gained royal authority to stop the building (Ezra 4). Only after a period of time, and with the goading of prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, did the people finish rebuilding the temple (Ezra 5).

The second stage of returning exiles came in 458 B.C. when Ezra, a highly skilled scribe and priest, led a group back to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes’ reign (Ezra 7.7). He went to Israel with the intention of teaching his people about the law (Ezra 7.10). We’re told in Ezra 7.11-26 that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra a letter which outlined in detail what he was authorized to carry with him on the trip and what he was to do upon arriving in Judah. Artaxerxes gave Ezra access to large amounts of silver and gold for buying animals and ingredients for sacrifices. Ezra also was given special authority by the king to appoint judges and magistrates who could administer justice in the province.

Finally, in 445 B.C., the cup-bearer Nehemiah led the third stage of exiles after hearing distressing reports about his ancestral homeland. When he set foot in Jerusalem, Nehemiah encountered an eclectic combination of restoration and ruins. The rebuilt temple was already 70 years old and various homes had already been rebuilt around the city, including some very nice “paneled houses” (Haggai 1.4). The city’s walls, however, were still lying in heaps of rubble. It had been 141 years since Nebuchadnezzar had completely destroyed Jerusalem. The post-exilic Jews who had returned to Jerusalem in the first stage had been living without their chief defense for 91 years! The Jews seemed accustomed to living in their broken-down, dilapidated city. It took a godly and determined leader to lead them out of their demoralized mediocrity.

Hebrew Calendar Compared to Modern Calendar

Month	Hebrew Calendar	Gregorian Calendar	Hebrew Festivals
First Month	Abib* Nisan†	March-April	14th Passover Leviticus 23.5 15th-21st Unleavened Bread Exodus 12.14-20 16th Feast of First Fruits Leviticus 23.9-11
Second Month	Ziv* Iyyar†	April-May	14th Delayed Passover Numbers 9.10-11
Third Month	Sivan	May-June	4th Pentecost (Feast of Weeks) Leviticus 23.15-16
Fourth Month	Tammuz	June-July	
Fifth Month	Ab	July-August	
Sixth Month	Elul	August-September	
Seventh Month	Ethanim* Tishri†	September-October	1st Feast of Trumpets Leviticus 23.24 10th Day of Atonement Leviticus 16.29-34 15th-21st Feast of Booths Leviticus 23.34-40 22nd Solemn Assembly Leviticus 23.36
Eighth Month	Bul* Marchesvan†	October-November	
Ninth Month	Chislev	November-December	25th Feast of Dedication John 10.22
Tenth Month	Tebeth	December-January	
Eleventh Month	Shebat	January-February	
Twelfth Month	Adar	February-March	

*Name of Month Pre-exile

†Name of Month Post-exile

Journey to Jerusalem
Nehemiah 1.1-11

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Why would Nehemiah record the exact month and year of his brother's arrival in Susa?
- B. Break up Nehemiah's prayer into its different sections and identify its structure.

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. List reasons why the exiles would be in "trouble and shame" because of no wall or gates?
- B. Which scriptures does Nehemiah bring into his prayer? What are their contexts?
- C. Nehemiah seems pretty nervous about the prospect of talking to Artaxerxes (1.11, 2.2). From what you've read in the Introduction and in Ezra 4, why might he be scared?
- D. How is this prayer similar to the one in Daniel 9.3-19, which is prayed by another godly Jewish exile in Persia?

III. Application - So what?

- A. Identify specific elements of leadership in Nehemiah's character in chapter 1.
 - 1. How is leadership reflected in asking Hanani about the condition of the exiles? How can we learn from this?
 - 2. In his immediate reaction of anguish and dismay? What can we learn?
 - 3. In his prayer? What can we learn?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study about 1.1-11

**Preparations to Build
Nehemiah 2.1-20**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Make a list of the things Nehemiah asks for in his discussion with Artaxerxes.

- B. List the things that Nehemiah did once he got to Jerusalem to get construction started.

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. How long was the time span between Nehemiah hearing the news about the walls and Nehemiah's conversation with the king? Why are we told this information?

- B. Nehemiah attributes his success to God: "the good hand of my God was upon me" (2.8). When we see that particular phrase in other places in scripture, what kinds of successes did God give (Ezra 7.6, 9, 28; 8.18, 22, 31)?

III. Application - So what?

- A. How can we apply Nehemiah's actions in verse 4?

- B. What principles about preparation do we learn from this chapter?

- C. What kind of planning and preparation does Jesus require of us (Luke 14.25-32)?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study about 2.1-20

**Opposition to the Work
Nehemiah 3.1-4.14**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. What are some interesting things you notice about the different kinds of people who built the wall?
- B. Make a list of the various ways the people of Jerusalem encountered opposition.
- C. What kinds of criticisms were shot at Nehemiah and the workers? Put them into your own words.

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. Most translations mention “the army of Samaria” in 4.2. Why would this have been intimidating? (See Ezra 4.23).
- B. Some of the names of the workers are very interesting. See if you can find the meanings of “Hollohesh” (3.12) and “Col-Hozeh” (3.15).

III. Application - So what?

- A. What can we learn from how Nehemiah responded to the criticism the Jews received?
- B. Is it appropriate for us to pray the kind of prayer we see in 4.4-5? Why or why not?
- C. The enemies believed that the wall work was being done by “feeble Jews” (4.2). Nehemiah, by contrast, viewed the work as a work of God (2.20, etc.). Explain why this difference is so significant.

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study about 3.1-4.14

**External and Internal Issues
Nehemiah 4.15-5.13**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Describe Nehemiah's plans for dealing with the danger from their enemies.
- B. How and why is God highlighted in this text?
- C. Make a list of the various things that were causing division amongst the Jews.

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. What were the laws concerning Jewish slavery in the law of Moses?
- B. What were the laws concerning charging interest on loans made to fellow Jews?

III. Application - So what?

- A. What were Nehemiah's strategies for fighting group discouragement? What are some principles we can draw out for ourselves?
- B. What lessons about money do we learn from this section of scripture?
- C. What lessons do we learn about how to handle a job promotion from Nehemiah's example?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study about 4.15-5.13

Last Gasp of God's Enemies
Nehemiah 5.14-6.14

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Nehemiah's generosity is described in detail in 5.14-19. Look closely for indications of his unselfishness and record them. Also, explain the significance of what this particular text is doing *here* in the story of Nehemiah.

- B. What kind of tactics do the enemies of God use as they become increasingly desperate to stop the work on the wall?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. Nehemiah records a short prayer in 5.19, asking God to "remember" him for good. That kind of prayer occurs several more times in the book - in 13.14, 22, and 31 (the last verse of the book). Elaborate on what Nehemiah repeatedly asks God to do.

- B. Where is "Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono?"

III. Application - So what?

- A. What are some characteristics of rumors that we see from this text?

- B. What do we learn about how leaders should respond to gossiping, rumors, and pot shots?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 5.14-6.14

Finishing the Wall
Nehemiah 6.15-7.73

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Do you have any thoughts on why the Levites and singers (i.e. worship officials) had some kind of connection with guarding the walls?
- B. Do you see a correlation between the tactics of the enemies and their subsequent reaction to the finished wall?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. If the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul, how long had it been since Nehemiah had spoken with the Persian king in Susa?
- B. The genealogy of Nehemiah 7 is virtually identical to the one in Ezra 2. Why would Nehemiah include this list of names in his narrative?
- C. “Barzillai the Gileadite” is mentioned in the records. Who was this man?

III. Application - So what?

- A. What does 7.5 mean when Nehemiah says that “my God put it into my heart...”? Are we supposed to draw applications from this? If so, how?
- B. What do we learn from the exclusion of several priests from the priesthood (7.63-65)?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 6.15-7.73

**Reading and Restoring Law
Nehemiah 8.1-18**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. When we look at the actions of Ezra and the Levites in this chapter, what are the characteristics of authentic Bible exposition? What did the process look like?
- B. This chapter makes it clear that the short-term project of building the wall was a means to an end. What was the end?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. Where was the water gate in Jerusalem?
- B. What was the law concerning the feast of booths (tabernacles) in the law of Moses?

III. Application - So what?

- A. What leadership principles can we draw from the fact that Nehemiah delegated the revival to Ezra?
- B. In what ways can we show extreme respect for God's scriptures like the Jews did?
- C. What can we learn about how our guilty consciences/weeping/mourning/sadness can be turned into rejoicing? How does that process occur?
- D. How does 8.13-15 help leaders discover how to develop "insight"?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 8.1-18

Prayer of Recommitment
Nehemiah 9.1-38

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Nehemiah 9 contains the longest recorded prayer in all of Scripture. It is worthy of our careful analyzation. Please identify the distinct divisions of the prayer and what each section is generally about.
- B. What patterns do you see in what the Levites confessed? In other words, what kind of sins keep showing up in the prayer?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. Are there any similarities between this prayer in Nehemiah and Jesus' teachings on how to pray to God? (Luke 11.1-4)?
- B. The Hebrew word for "covenant" in 9.38 is not the usual word for covenant. What does it mean?

III. Application - So what?

- A. The people made various preparations before they came before God, worshipped, and prayed. What preparations can/should we make before we pray?
- B. In this prayer, what do the Levites say that sin leads to?
- C. Are there any applications for us in the fact that the people made their covenant *in writing*? Do you gain more clarity and purpose by putting your priorities to paper? If so, how?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 9.1-38

**Sealing the Covenant
Nehemiah 10.1-39**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. How many times does the phrase “house of the Lord” or “house of God” occur in chapter 10? Why is this emphasis here?
- B. Altogether there were 84 people who signed the document. Which groups of Jews signed the covenant and how many were there in each group?
- C. When you examine the specific promises that the Jews make in chapter 10, what things do they have in common with each other?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. What problems with intermarriage had the Jews faced shortly before this covenant was enacted (See Ezra 9-10)?
- B. Why was it so important to bring contributions to the temple (Deuteronomy 12.17-19)?

III. Application - So what?

- A. We learn from this chapter that serious thought precedes any significant change. Think about what hinders our thinking and how we can improve our self-reflection process. Record your observations.
- B. As chapter 10 makes clear, distinction and conformity pull us in opposite directions. When we examine our lives, our work, our homes, how can we become more distinct from the world?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 10.1-39

**Leaders of Jerusalem
Nehemiah 11.1-36**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Chapter 11 records the names of Jews living in Nehemiah's time who were vital to the restoration movement. Yet, they are virtually unknown to us. In this chapter, identify the distinct groups of people who are mentioned and what they did for God's cause.

- B. How many warriors did Judah provide for the defense of Jerusalem? How many from Benjamin? Are there any conclusions we can draw from those numbers?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. What does it mean that Mattaniah was "the leader of the praise" (ESV) in vs. 17?

- B. The Jewish historian, Josephus, makes a few interesting extra-Biblical comments about Nehemiah's drive to recruit people to live in Jerusalem. If possible, look up his comments in the book "Antiquities" in section 11.181. What did Nehemiah do?

III. Application - So what?

- A. We learn from this chapter that your gifts make you valuable, although not necessarily famous. Describe some gifts and roles that are indispensable for a local church or for a family, but aren't limelight positions.

- B. When we feel that we're not getting the recognition or affirmation we deserve, how can this chapter help us with our attitude? Also consider Hebrews 6.10.

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 11.1-36

**Dedication of the Wall
Nehemiah 12.1-47**

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. On the map of Jerusalem, note where the two choirs went inside the city. Record your observations.

- B. Besides singing, what else was involved with the dedication ceremony?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. What does the singing and praising of God over the completion of the wall foreshadow in the new covenant? See Ephesians 5.19-20, Hebrews 13.15, and Revelation 19.1-8.

- B. In 12.24, we're told that the Levites praised God "according to the commandment of David the man of God." What was David's commandment to the Levites? Consult 1 Chronicles 25.1-2, 2 Chronicles 8.14-15.

- C. How does this story compare to the reaction of the people to the rebuilt temple (Ezra 3.10-13)?

III. Application - So what?

- A. We see from the actions of the priests that holiness precedes happiness. Describe some situations in your life where this would be true.

- B. As the Jews rejoice in the midst of a city of rubble, we see from this text that happiness is not dependent on outward circumstance but upon inward choice. Ponder some scenarios where this would be relevant to your life. Record your observations.

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 12.1-47

Nehemiah's Final Reforms
Nehemiah 13.1-31

I. Observation - Taking in the details of the text

- A. Describe the four major categories of problems that Nehemiah ran into upon his return to Jerusalem from Persia.

- B. Take careful note of what Nehemiah did in his rage against the disobedient Jews. What extreme actions did he take? Why was such aggressive, undiplomatic behavior justified?

II. Interpretation - Connecting the historical and literary dots together

- A. According to the law, why couldn't a Moabite or Ammonite enter the assembly of God? See Deuteronomy 23.2-6.

- B. What was the specific law about intermarriage with foreigners? Why did God make that law? See Deuteronomy 7.1-5.

III. Application - So what?

- A. Passivity is the enemy of leadership. Nehemiah faced these problems head-on, not waiting or delaying after he had diagnosed the issues. Describe situations in your family, your church, or your workplace where you should not delay in strongly confronting sin.

- B. Although there is no explicit commandment against marrying unbelievers under the new covenant, what principles can we extract from Nehemiah's violent condemnation of intermarriage with foreigners?

- C. How did Nehemiah avoid becoming bitter and cynical after he returned to a sinful city? How, then, can we avoid negative, pessimistic attitudes despite working with, living with, and worshipping with sinful people?

IV. Participation - Please record any other results of your personal study of 13.1-31