

## **REBUILD AND RENEW**

### **An Overview of Nehemiah**

**THE PURPOSE:** To demonstrate God’s faithfulness through the physical rebuilding and dedication of the wall (cf. Zephaniah 3:19–20; Haggai 2:1–9). Nehemiah was written to show the hand of God (2:18) in the establishment of the Jewish people in their homeland following their exile. God revives His people so that they have the clarity, conviction, and courage to pray and act as the people of God for the glory God.

**THE THEME:** Rebuilding the broken wall and renewing the broken covenant.

**THE AUTHOR:** The likely author is Nehemiah who introduces himself and his times in 1:1–3. The use of the first-person is rather unusual in historical narrative. In fact, Nehemiah is the only historical book written *primarily* in the first-person (1:1–7:5; 12:27–13:31). Some believe the third-person sections (7:6–12:26; 12:44–13:2) were written by Ezra since Nehemiah was in Babylon during these events (13:6). Others believe that Ezra wrote both Nehemiah and Ezra because in the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are not two books but one. It is possible that Ezra compiled Nehemiah’s original accounts with other material to create the book of Nehemiah or that an editor reworked the final form.

**DATE AND SETTING:** The historical setting is the last half of the ancient Hebrew book of Ezra-Nehemiah written about 445 B.C. to 425 B.C. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries (8:2, 9) who served God in different capacities: Ezra as priest; Nehemiah as governor (5:14). The book begins in the capital of Persia, Susa, which is now southwest Iran. The book of Nehemiah continues the history of the Jewish people who returned from exile.

**KEY VERSES:** Nehemiah 6:15–16: “So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And it came about when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.”

Nehemiah 8:8: “They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (cf. 8:3, 18; 9:13; 13:1).

**KEY PHRASE:** “Your [God’s] strong hand” (1:10); “the good hand of my God” (2:8); “the hand of my God” (2:18).

**KEY WORDS:** The key word is “remember” (1:8; 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 9:17; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Also important are the words “wall(s)” used thirty-three times and “build/building/rebuilding” found more than twenty times.

#### **SIGNIFICANT OBSERVATIONS:**

1. Nehemiah is the only Old Testament (OT) book written mostly in the first person. No other OT book, except perhaps Jonah, so reveals the character of the human author. Unlike Jonah, what is exposed about Nehemiah is quite positive.
2. Nehemiah is never mentioned in the New Testament (NT) even though he is recognized by many Bible students to be one of the greatest leaders in all Scripture for rebuilding an entire city in fifty-two days (after 141 years of prior failed efforts).<sup>1</sup>
3. Nehemiah is the only book to provide the names of Jerusalem’s gates (3:1–32).

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer says Nehemiah “takes his place, by right as it seems to me, with the greatest leaders of God’s people in the Bible story—with Moses and David and Paul. Nehemiah was a truly marvelous man.” J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995), 36.

4. One out of every eleven verses in Nehemiah is a reference to prayer.<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah prays twelve times in thirteen chapters (1:4, 5–11; 2:4; 4:4–5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).
5. The book of Nehemiah is the last historical book in the OT. Nehemiah and Ezra fill in the historical blanks for the prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Nehemiah and Malachi represent the final two books of OT revelation before God spoke again at the time of John the Baptist after 400 years of silence.
6. Nehemiah may provide the best depiction of the balance between prayer and planning in Scripture.

**CHRIST IN NEHEMIAH:** First, Nehemiah weeps over Jerusalem and its people (1:4), much like Christ weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44). Both men ultimately take extremely bold actions to deliver Jerusalem and God’s people. Second, Nehemiah prays passionately for his people (1:4–11), much like Christ prays fervently for His people in His high-priestly prayer (John 17). Third, the decree of King Artaxerxes marks the beginning point of Daniel’s prophecy of seventy weeks of years that begins the countdown for the Messiah’s return (Daniel 9:25–27).

**NUTSHELL OUTLINE:**

1. The Rebuilding of the Walls (1:1–7:73)
  - A. Preparation for Rebuilding (1:1–2:20)
  - B. Rebuilding (3:1–7:73)
2. The Restoration of the People (8:1–13:31)
  - A. The Renewal of the Covenant (8:1–10:39)
  - B. The Obedience of the People to the Covenant (11:1–13:31)

**CHAPTER TITLES:**<sup>3</sup>

1. Nehemiah Prays
2. God Answers; Nehemiah Inspects
3. Remnant Rebuilds
4. Enemies Object; Guard Forms
5. Remnant Cries Out; Nehemiah Provides
6. Enemies Plot; Wall Completed
7. Hanani Appointed; Census Read
8. Law Read; Remnant Responds
9. Yahweh Praised; Covenant Renewed
10. Covenant Ratified; Remnant Vowed
11. Jerusalem Inhabited; Villages Settled
12. Levites Listed; Wall Dedicated
13. Remnant Rebuked; Reforms Reinstated

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<sup>2</sup> Of the 406 verses in the book of Nehemiah, prayer fills 46 verses (11%). See Robert D. Bell, “The Theology of Nehemiah,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 20:2 (Nov 1986): 56.

<sup>3</sup> These chapters titles were created by Lori M. Krell.