

13 Days in the Book of Nehemiah

Introduction

Nehemiah was in leadership during an extraordinary time in Israel's history. He faced opposition from all sides—both from his own people and from outside forces. A little background will help set the stage for understanding the pressures Nehemiah faced.

From antiquity, Ezra and Nehemiah have been considered almost as one book. The two books cover a period of about one hundred years. In 587 B.C. Judah was removed from the land of Israel and deported to Babylon with only a few left in the land. In 538 B.C. Cyrus sent some of the people back to rebuild the temple. Nehemiah's second return would be around 430 B.C. Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah are all wrapped up in this history. Zerubbabel built the temple, Ezra brought the Law back into Israel's life and Nehemiah rebuilt the wall that made Jerusalem secure. The amazing thing is that Israel had more autonomy and distinctiveness than at any time of their existence as a sovereign state. The Persian Empire allowed the people to practice their religious convictions with seriousness, and this probably accounts for why Israel had such a pristine religious life at this time.

While Zerubbabel and Ezra worked more in the religious realm, Nehemiah was really sent to Judah to be governor of the land, and that gave him considerably more ability to make some lasting changes in the life of the people. The people needed Nehemiah's strong leadership to handle the opposition to their work. There were three primary opposers: Sanballat, Geshem and Tobiah. Sanballat was probably governor of Samaria and was not interested in Judah's becoming an independent nation again. Geshem is thought to have been a leader of a powerful block of Arab communities. Tobiah was probably governor of Ammon and a member of an influential Jewish family. Derek Kidner describes the importance of this period of Israel's history: The two centuries of the Persian empire were among the most formative periods of Jewish history.

Out of the ruins of the little kingdom of Judah there had emerged the small community whose concern to be the people of God by pedigree and practice shaped it into the nation which meets us in the New Testament. Already the future prominence of the Temple and its priests of the law and its scribes, as well as the enmity between Jew and Samaritans, could be seen developing. Throughout this time the Persian regime was given a substantial part to play, both in sending and subsidizing the three expeditions of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and in backing their authority with its own. It was not the first empire, nor the last, to be allotted some such role.

The Israelites living in the land were fairly passive at this point in history. They had to adapt to the culture around them because they were such a small remnant. Their intermarrying and political ties made this considerably worse. Nehemiah's gifts in administration and perseverance enabled him to mold this people back into the "people of God" so they could obey God's commands and have a distinction from the people around them. This is where Nehemiah shines through. It was not enough to build just the wall—he had to build a people that would once again stand on their own as God led them. Putting some "backbone" back into the people was a large part of what Nehemiah had to accomplish—even if it required him to be harsh with them at times.

God has called each of us to important tasks, both as leaders and as followers. Reading Nehemiah will help us to have the courage we need to follow through even in the face of difficulty and persecution. God be with you as you study. Ask God to speak to you and change you as you read and reflect on Nehemiah in the coming days, starting tomorrow.

Day 1: Depending On God

At one time or another, most of us have said, "I am too busy to pray!" If the work of God or the work that we want to do for God depended on our energy and insight, then it might be true. But of course, at least theoretically, we believe that God's work can only be done through his power (Ps 127:1, "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain"). Yet we don't think our biggest job is to pray. If we did, it might make a big difference in what we try to accomplish for the Lord! As we go before the Lord in prayer, we gain his perspective, and we gain confidence. In this study Nehemiah models dependency on the Lord for his strength.

WARMING UP TO GOD

Before you look into the Scriptures, sit quietly for a few moments and breathe deeply, allowing yourself to become relaxed and peaceful. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you discernment as you begin studying Nehemiah.

READ: Nehemiah 1

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * What event is being discussed in verses 1-3?
- * What four things does Nehemiah do when he hears Hanani's report (4)?
- * List the specific concerns that Nehemiah mentions in his prayer (5-11).
- * What evidence is there that Nehemiah believed God heard his prayer and would answer it?
- * What do you learn about Nehemiah's character from his reaction and his prayer?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * Nehemiah got more confident as he prayed and fasted. How does this compare with what you have experienced in prayer?
- * As you think about your ministry, what do you need to speak to God about?
- * What will you do to take a risk and become part of the answer for that prayer?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Thank the Lord for using people just like you to carry out his plans. Ask him to give you courage as you participate in his work.

Day 2: The Planning Process

Once Dwight L. Moody was sailing on an ocean vessel and a fire broke out. One of this traveling companions said, "Don't you think we should go and pray, Brother Moody?" Moody replied, "You can go and pray, brother, but I am going to man the water buckets. There is a time to pray and a time to put the fire out!" We tend to build a dichotomy between praying and doing. Usually what trips us up in the Christian life is not finding the balance between dependency on God and action on our part. Surely both must be important in God's eyes! In this chapter Nehemiah shows evidence of careful planning on both fronts.

WARMING UP TO GOD

What fears do you have that keep you from taking risks with your faith? Tell your Father about them — and let him show you how to overcome them with his strength.

READ: Nehemiah 2

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * How did Nehemiah give evidence of having a well-thought-through plan in verses 1-9?

- * What is the difference between the praying Nehemiah does here and what he did in chapter 1?

- * What evidences of thoroughness do you see in verses 11-16?

- * Why do you think Nehemiah appears so confident (17-20)?

- * Why was it reasonable for Nehemiah to be tough with Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem (18-20)?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * When you do a "great work for God," do you expect opposition? Why?

- * Do you feel it is okay to say the "gracious hand of my God is upon me" (v. 18) regarding the work that you are doing? Explain why or why not.

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Consider one risk or act of faith you need to take this week and ask the Lord to guide you through this test of your obedience.

Day 3: Many Hands Make Lighter Work

A gifted leader can motivate others, but a job usually gets done because of prayer and unity among believers. This is so primarily because vision is spiritual and not material. When there is a lot of mundane work, like repairing a badly damaged wall, there must be unity for the job to be done. People need to feel they are part of the decision and the process. To miss this step of getting people “on board” dooms most projects to failure. This chapter shows how much the Israelites desired to work.

WARMING UP TO GOD

Where are you today, figuratively, with the Lord? Take stock of yourself in relationship with him, confessing your sins and acknowledging his grace for you. He is listening and desires to talk with you today.

READ: Nehemiah 3

DISCOVERING THE WORD

* This chapter describes the hard work of building the wall around Jerusalem and repairing the gates. List the groups or individuals in this chapter who give themselves to the work.

* What are some of the occupations of the repairers?

* What was the place of women in this work (12)?

* From the chapter, what seems to be the motivation for people to work on their part of the wall?

* Was Nehemiah privileged to have everyone committed to the work (5)? Explain.

APPLYING THE WORD

* How do you feel when you face an impossible task and people are not committed to work?

* How has cooperation played a significant part in your group’s success in ministry?

* Do you feel you are as motivated to work in your church or fellowship as this group of people is? Explain your response.

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Ask the Lord to give you a helper or partner in your ministry and ask him to teach you both how to work together.

Day 4: Opposition From The Outside

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me!” We usually hear children say this. But when we want to oppose something because it is getting in our way, we adults have a slightly more sophisticated way of doing the same thing. The enemies of Israel started out at the “sticks and stones” level, but they were soon into slander, intimidation and threatening with weapons. Our enemy the devil is always going to oppose the work of God. We need to expect and be able to fight opposition, if we do God’s work.

WARMING UP TO GOD

How have your plans for good and faithful service to the Lord been frustrated lately? Express your feelings to the Lord and give them over to him completely, trusting he will continue to do his will on earth.

READ: Nehemiah 4

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * What is the progression of seriousness as Sanballat and Tobiah threaten them in verses 1-3?

- * How does Nehemiah respond to the opposition (4-6)?

- * Why do you think Nehemiah is so uncharitable in his prayer in verses 4-5?

- * What inside help does Sanballat have as he intimidates the Jews and Nehemiah (10, 12)?

- * How does Nehemiah handle the threats in verses 13-20?

- * What was Nehemiah trusting in to get the work done (9, 14, 20)?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * In what situation have you seen a creative solution keep the work moving forward?

- * Does opposition make you want to quit a job, or does it challenge you to work harder to complete it? Explain.

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Pray verses 4 and 5 to the Lord, boldly asking for sinful oppression to be lifted from Christians today.

Day 5: Opposition From Within

Most organizations and nations fall apart because of opposition and deterioration from within than from without. An idea is conceived, gains adherence and grows to fruition. Then after it has served its purpose for a period of time, the work it took to get to that point is taken for granted and often personal motives corrupts the intended purpose. At the beginning there is sacrifice by the people, but someone usually figures out how to make money from the idea, and it is not long before that which helped people hurts people. That is what happens in this chapter of Nehemiah.

WARMING UP TO GOD

The Lord is excited to hear from you today and wants to listen to all you have to say. Tell him about your day and your feelings for a few minutes before you begin reading the Word.

READ: Nehemiah 5

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * What three forms of internal opposition in verses 1-5 develop against the building the wall?

- * Who seem to be responsible for this inequity? Why do you think they would do this?

- * How did the practices of the leaders compare to those of Nehemiah (14-18)?

- * What kind of leadership did Nehemiah exercises to deal with the internal opposition to the wall?

- * How did Nehemiah do all he could to not be part of the internal opposition?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * In what ways are leaders today likely to assume privileges as these nobles and officials did?

- * How do you determine what is culturally acceptable and what God's kingdom values are?

- * What kind of internal opposition could divert your ministry from your real objectives?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Ask the Lord to "remember you" as you strive to serve him and carry out his will.

Day 6: Facing Intimidation

Using power to create pressure is a very effective way to get at people, especially if they are not sure of themselves or what they should be doing. However, if the objects of intimidation are quite confident in what they are doing, they may not be at all bothered by this approach. Nehemiah had wrestled with God so thoroughly about what he was doing in building the wall that he was not sidetracked by attempts to call him away from the work. When someone reacts like Nehemiah, then the intimidator must become more and more threatening. It eventually boils down to who can intimidate the most or who is the most confident in what God's will is for the occasion. Notice in this chapter that Nehemiah doesn't give in to the intimidation.

WARMING UP TO GOD

Think of a time when you had to be aggressive to fight for something you thought was right. How did you feel and act? Write down your ideas and compare them to the actions of Nehemiah.

READ: Nehemiah 6

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * List all the efforts at intimidation in this chapter.

- * What kind of divided loyalties do you find in the people building the wall?

- * From this chapter, what guiding principles does Nehemiah give about how to cooperate with other religious groups?

- * How do circumstances (17-19) make it difficult for Nehemiah to keep his objectives clear?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * How is the work God has called you to do a "great work" and worthy of your full attention?

- * How could your vision be great and clear enough so that you will not be sidetracked (3,8,11)?

- * What do you expect by way of opposition in the job you are doing for the Lord?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Ask God to give you single-mindedness and determination as you work to proclaim his truth to those around you.

Day 7: FAMILY HISTORY

In this chapter of Nehemiah, we find that if people could not trace their lineage back to a pre-exilic Jewish relative, they were not considered true descendants and could not be counted. I wonder if some of them didn't wish they had listened more to their relatives when they were talking about great-grandpa and great-grandma.

WARMING UP TO GOD

Recall a fond family memory that you have from a holiday or your childhood. Thank the Lord for giving you your past as a remembrance and guide for the future.

READ: Nehemiah 7

DISCOVERING THE WORD

* Who was to guard the city and what do we learn about where they were told to guard (1-3)?

* We met Hanani in 1:2. From the qualifications given in verse 2, why could Nehemiah trust him?

* Nehemiah decides that the families who have returned should be registered. How would the registration deal with Israel's sin of mixing themselves with the people of the nations around Jerusalem (vv. 64-65)?

* Why couldn't some of the people make connections with relatives?

* What is significant about Nehemiah giving the priests 530 garments and the rest of the people only giving 67 garments?

APPLYING THE WORD

* In what ways are you concerned about your family history and protecting it?

* How does the thought that you will be in someone's Christian family tree affect you?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Think of one person you would like to invite into the family of God and ask the Lord to assist you as you witness to this person.

Day 8: Celebration And Revival

A look at church history seems to indicate that mature Christians have a pretty wide variety of emotions. That is, they know how to laugh, and they know how to weep. When we deny the variety of religious emotions that we find in the Bible, we are robbing ourselves. In this chapter of Nehemiah we see real repentance, contrition and weeping as well as great celebration and joy in doing what God wants. Without the exhilaration of celebration our tears of repentance would lead us into morbid introspection - something that would do us no good, because only God can handle our sins and shortcomings. But without true repentance and contrition we really do not find joy of the kind this chapter demonstrates.

WARMING UP TO GOD

What has God's forgiveness meant for you? Recall a specific instance when God's tangible grace intersected your life. Dwell upon it for a few moments and let the remembrance of God's overflowing goodness refresh your soul.

READ: Nehemiah 8

DISCOVERING THE WORD

* The seventh month was one of great importance to the Jews. It was to include several feasts as well as the great Day of Atonement. What prompted the people to meet together?

* What were the qualifications of those who attended (2-3)?

* What statements show the seriousness of the people as they receive the Word of God (3-12)?

* Who assembles the second day (13)? Why do you think this is?

* Verse 17 says that all the people had great joy. What was the reason for this?

APPLYING THE WORD

* How much is celebration a part of your regular Christian life?

* How do Christians you know show the great joy they have from obeying God's Word?

* Many Christians do not have much joy because they don't take obedience to God's Word seriously or make it a priority in their lives. How will you guard against that in your life?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer and celebrate all the many ways the Lord has provided for you and forgiven your sins.

Day 9: Getting Back To Your Roots

For many of us it is difficult to think about corporately confessing our sins in the sight and hearing of many people. Yet revival and renewal are always preceded by contrition and remorse for our sins. Israel is at the end of itself, and the Lord is the only one who can deliver them, so they are returning to him. We too must be humbled, broken and serious to be recipients of God's renewal.

WARMING UP TO GOD

How do we get beyond the sin that keeps us from true fellowship with Christ and find true healing? Ask God to show you as you read Nehemiah 9.

READ: Nehemiah 9

DISCOVERING THE WORD

* Note that the time frame is about three weeks after the first reading of the Law. Why do you think they were wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads?

* A quarter of a day is probably two to three hours. Does it seem feasible to you that they could confess sins for that long? Explain.

* Why do you think they spent so much time confessing the sins of their ancestors?

* What are the evidences from this passage that Ezra did not lose hope, even though the sins of Israel were many?

APPLYING THE WORD

* How freely in your Christian life can you move between repentance for your sins and experiencing the celebration of God's forgiveness?

* It may be surprising that the Israelites could go back so far and remember so many sins. Do you have any sense of history regarding your family sins or shortcomings? Explain your answer.

* Now picture a time of corporate confession for your church or fellowship group. What kinds of sins should you be repenting of as a group?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Think of one act of reconciliation you need to make with members of your family, friends and the Lord himself. Pray and ask for forgiveness and commit to following through on your commitment this week.

Day 10: A COVENANT WITH GOD

Much of the world thinks that Christianity is a rip-off. Because Christians see God as the Creator, and therefore the owner of everything there is, we give a tithe, and even more, to the Lord as an appropriate response. Part of the confusion is that the non-Christian sees the church or Christian leaders as getting that money. While serious Christians see all they have as belonging to God, non-Christians basically see all they have as a result of their hard work! Christians must be very honest and responsible with the money they control. Otherwise they open the body of Christ to ridicule and suspicion by the non-Christian world. There is no way the body of Christ can function well unless all God's people support those who have forgone a secular job to do the full-time work of the Lord and the body. This chapter of Nehemiah is about making such a covenant of support.

WARMING UP TO GOD

What promises have you made or do you need to make with the Lord? Discuss them with him and ask for renewed energy for renewed faithfulness.

READ: Nehemiah 10

DISCOVERING THE WORD

* The result of hearing the Law read (chapter 8) and the result of obeying the Law (chapter 9) now produce a written agreement in chapter 10 to obey God and his commandments. Who were the groups of people mentioned in this chapter?

* What evidence is there that everyone was included in the covenant agreement (28-29)?

* Make a list of the things that the people covenant to do before the Lord (30-39).

* Why would it be very important in their situation not to intermarry?

* Who collected the tithe, and to whom did these people tithe?

APPLYING THE WORD

* What effect would the actions the people commit to have on their life and worship?

* Do you feel you take material things and the tithing of them as seriously as they did in this passage? Why or why not?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Reflect upon your commitments to the Lord with family, at work or school, or in your times of fellowship with him alone. Rededicate yourself in specific ways to these commitments—and promise the Lord to have renewed effort and obedience.

Day 11: Choosing Where To Live And Work

When a Christian is deciding where to live and work, he bases the decision on where he feels God wants him to develop a ministry and be of help in the building up of the body of Christ. People with the world's values do not choose a place to live and work on that basis. But as a Christian, not just my money belongs to the Lord, but my profession and my gifts belong to him so they can be used in the body of Christ. God would surely know better than I where I should live and work so that I would fit his plans for the building of his kingdom!

WARMING UP TO GOD

What rests heavy on your heart today? Draw near to Jesus, who is waiting to put his arms around you as you tell him of your concerns. Let him listen to all your anxieties and allow them to become his worries for you.

READ: Nehemiah 11

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * How did the Jews in chapter 11 decide who would live in Jerusalem?

- * Why do you think the people did not want to live in Jerusalem (2)?

- * What reasons can you think of for these five groups of people to live in Jerusalem (3)?

- * How (from chapter 10) would all of these people be taken care of materially?

- * How was Nehemiah making the city ready for the people?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * What factors do you consider in determining where you should live? (Consider occupation, salary, school, church, ministry, family and so on.)

- * Since our barter system is money, in what ways does our lifestyle free us up to be more involved in kingdom building?

- * As you read this passage, what personal decisions (past or future) about where you live and how that impacts your service to God come to mind?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Ask the Lord to help you live in obedience - your hardest daily decision no matter where God leads you.

Day 12: Important Work

"If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well!" I would like to have a dollar for every time I heard growing up. I don't think that I understood the saying nearly as well as I do after years of working on it. Integrity and respect come to those who do a good job. We recognize excellence when we see it, and we are offended by a job half-done. We would be of much better use to God, others and ourselves if we didn't volunteer for everything that came along, but rather did a better job on the things we can realistically complete. If I do my part faithfully, God will do the rest in building his kingdom.

WARMING UP TO GOD

How is your kingdom workload? Are you feeling overwhelmed by commitments to your church or fellowship? Or are you ready for a new challenge? Reflect on your commitments of service to God before you begin.

READ: Nehemiah 12

DISCOVERING THE WORD

- * Why do you think the author mentions so many people in this chapter?

- * How would you feel if you were Meshullam (25) who had to guard the storerooms?

- * Consider verses 8 and 24. Do you think most people would have wanted these jobs? Why or why not?

- * From the book of Nehemiah so far, what is the reason for their great rejoicing (43)?

- * How important do you think the collection of these goods was to the effective running of Jerusalem and providing the worship and celebration that Jerusalem represented (44-47)?

APPLYING THE WORD

- * What are some of the supporting roles you think of in the church?

- * How could you give (financially and with your encouragement) to sustain the supporting people (that is, pastors, missionaries, youth workers, denominational headquarters) in your church or fellowship?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Thank the Lord for giving you a job in his kingdom, and recommit yourself to be faithful in your tasks.

Day 13: Spiritual Decay

“I know they are sinning against the Lord, but I love them too much to reprimand them.”

Sometimes we emphasize loving people and not endangering our relationships with them over challenging them to get right with the Lord. When we think like this, we have accepted the world's values and not kingdom values! If relationship with God is the most important thing in the world, then to help people get back into right relationship with God is the best thing we can do for them. When we don't do this, what we are really saying is that we are more concerned about what that person thinks than what God thinks. We must be freed from this kind of bondage, or we are not of much use to God, others or ourselves. When we are biblically directed, we will be respected and others will hear God's Word through us.

WARMING UP TO GOD

Do you need forgiveness from the Lord today? Stop now and tell him about your pride or selfishness today — and let the solid truth of 1 John 1:9 that you are forgiven and cleansed cause you to rejoice and be refreshed.

READ: Nehemiah 13

DISCOVERING THE WORD

* Nehemiah spent twelve years in Jerusalem before going back to Artaxerxes and then a few years before he went back to check up on things. How had the Israelites backslidden from the Lord?

* How could the people have gone this far astray after they made the covenant in chapter 10?

* How did Nehemiah feel when he came back and saw how bad things were spiritually?

* Does the text give clues as to why Israel has backslidden? Compare 10:30 and 13:23-28.

* How does Nehemiah's dramatic and physical response (25) guide us in dealing with sin today?

APPLYING THE WORD

* Why is it so much harder to confront leaders who are sinning, as in this chapter?

* In what ways do you need to be more direct with others about their sin?

* How can you get others to help you to deal with your own sin?

RESPONDING IN PRAYER

Ask the Lord to make you more like Nehemiah, who pursued righteousness and called others to holy living. Pray as he did: “Remember me with favor, O my God.”