

Introduction to Nehemiah

Hello and welcome to the KYB study of Nehemiah. I'm Heather Jackson and I'm glad to be bringing you this introduction, written by Sue Gleeson. I can't help but wonder who you are and where you are as you're listening to this CD and I'm imaging many different people in a variety of places and circumstances.

As we'll see from the study of Nehemiah though, the Lord knows exactly where each one of us is, who we are and what's going on in our lives right now. None of it takes him by surprise. He not only knows, but He takes an active interest in each of our lives. He gives us opportunities to work together with Him, in our personal circumstances to bring about his purposes in the bigger picture.

Some of you might be very familiar with Nehemiah's book, for others this might be the first time you've read it. It doesn't matter whether it's the first time or the 101st time. Whenever we prayerfully open God's Word, we can expect to hear from him and that's exciting!

The Bible holds a wealth of good things for us to discover and to digest. Things that help us grow in our knowledge and understanding of God as well as that encourage us and build us up; helping us to make wise life choices as we set ourselves to follow the Lord Jesus. The book of Nehemiah is no exception as we learn about the who, the what and the why of Nehemiah's time. We'll see how we can apply what we learn to the world we live in, both our close to home world and to the wider world around us. So, come prayerfully and expectantly to this study, asking the Lord to open your mind and your heart as you open His word.

You might like to pause the recording at this point and pray, asking the Lord to open your mind and your heart as you come prayerfully and expectantly to this study.

When you have finished praying, resume the recording.

Let's begin with a brief overview of events leading up to the time of Nehemiah.

After being led out of Egypt by Moses, the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. After Joshua's death, the people were ruled by Judges. The judges were leaders who God had appointed. But as time went by, the people decided it would be better to be like the other nations around them and have a king instead. God warned them about the consequences of their choice, but gave them what they asked for.

So, Saul became the first King of Israel. After Saul, came David; then David's son, Solomon; followed by Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Not long into Rehoboam's reign, the Kingdom of Israel was split into two parts. The southern kingdom known as Judah was made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin but remained under Rehoboam's rule with Jerusalem as its capital.

The northern kingdom known as Israel was made up of the remaining 10 Israelite tribes and was ruled by Jeroboam. It was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC. But the southern kingdom of Judah went on to be ruled by a succession of kings, all descendants of David.

Even though there were times of great spiritual renewal, the Israelites often lapsed into rebellion and unfaithfulness towards God. They chose to ignore the repeated warnings he gave them as to what they could expect if they continued in their disobedience.

And so, judgement eventually came with the invasion of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon in 586 BC. Many people were killed. Jerusalem's walls were broken down and burnt. The city was plundered. There was great distress as the people of Judah were taken away captive to Babylon.

Just under 50 years later, the Babylonian empire itself was conquered by the Persians but the circumstances of the Israelites remained largely unchanged. However, Cyrus, the reigning King of Persia at this time, gave permission for any Israelites who were so inclined, to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.

So, it came about that under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a group of Israelites went back to begin this work in 536 BC. However, they were severely hampered by opposition from the surrounding peoples. 20 years were to pass before the temple was finally completed.

A second group of exiles under Ezra's leadership went back to Jerusalem about 80 years later. But this group also come up against strong opposition.

You might like to pause the recording at this point and look up Nehemiah chapter 1 and read verses 1-3 out loud.

When you have finished reading, resume the recording.

At the time Nehemiah begins his story, around 445 BC, more than 90 years had passed since the first group had returned to Jerusalem. Although the temple had been rebuilt, the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins and the people of Judah were still in a state of distress and disgrace.

Nehemiah's book is a combination of his personal memoirs and historical records. There are two main themes running throughout. One is the restoration of the wall

around Jerusalem and the other is the restoration of the people of God to the ways of God.

However, this is much more than the account of a building project or a spiritual revival. Nehemiah does tell how the wall was built and he certainly writes about spiritual revival; all of which makes for interesting and exciting reading.

But in amongst it all he describes such things as God's faithfulness to his covenant promises; and how God's people faced danger and difficulties. He tells what went right and what went wrong as the Israelites worked together and fought together. He writes about the enemies who opposed both God's work and God's people; about their tactics and how their targets were affected.

As the study progresses, we'll come across some lists that might seem tedious to us.

You might like to pause the recording at this point and look up Nehemiah chapter 7.

What do you notice about this chapter? In what way does it look different to other chapters in Nehemiah?

When you have finished commenting on the chapter, resume the recording.

Nehemiah considered these lists to be as important in the overall record as any other part. And let's not forget that since all Scripture is inspired by God, he also considers such lists to be important.

So, approach them, along with the rest of the book, with an attitude of anticipation.

Nehemiah has deliberately included all kinds of interesting details and undercurrents in what he's written. There's skulduggery and treachery, there are victories and failures, danger, defeat, joy and sorrow. There are spiritual highs and lows - very much like our own lives today.

And while it could be thought of as a galloping good read, Nehemiah's book is more than a tale of intrigue and adventure. This is a detailed historical record, much of it from Nehemiah's own accounts. It really happened. This is a record of God at work.

Although we'll be reading quite a lot about what Nehemiah thought and did, his aim is never to draw attention to himself. Nehemiah is recording God's dealings with His people at a particular time in history. He wants his readers to know God and to take Him seriously; to bring their lives into accord with God's word so that they might enjoy the blessings that obedience brings.

The information Nehemiah does give about himself is in the context of other events that are happening around him at the time. For instance, in the first chapter of his book, he reveals that he is cupbearer to the Persian King. This was a very important and influential position. It would have had great responsibilities attached to it, as well

as plenty of privileges and lifestyle advantages. Why does Nehemiah mention it? What relevance does it have to his story?

Well, knowing that Nehemiah was the King's cupbearer, tells us how close he was to the Persian King. Not as in being best friends or a personal relationship, but in proximity. It sets the scene for the conversations between himself and the King that followed. Conversations that in themselves are an interesting part of the unfolding story, as we'll see.

It also gives us an insight into what Nehemiah was willing to let go of in order to follow where the Lord was leading him. He writes frankly about events and about his reactions to them. Even when we think that he might have prettied things up a little at times, he doesn't. He gives us a 'warts and all' account.

Nehemiah had a deep concern for the Israelites in Judah and for the city of Jerusalem, even though he'd never been there. It's clear from the very beginning of his book that this wasn't just a passing interest. He was eager to hear the latest news from some men who had recently returned from Judah. When they told him that the survivors of the exiles who'd gone back to Judah were in great trouble and disgrace; and that Jerusalem's walls were broken down; its gates destroyed by fire, Nehemiah was deeply disturbed and distressed. What could he do about it? What did he do about it?

Nehemiah's great anguish of heart and soul turned him firstly to God in prayer. How did he pray? How should we pray? What place does prayer have in a believer's life?

Almost every day we hear news that has the potential to cause us concern or distress. It's not uncommon for situations to crop up that we're not sure how to pray about. Sometimes our heart can be so full of whatever's troubling us that we can't think straight to pray anyway.

We can feel helpless and weak. When what we want to be is hope filled and strong. We want to conquer but find ourselves crumbling instead. And there are times when we might not be particularly upset but we do need to know the mind of God. We need His wisdom to know how to respond to certain situations day by day; knowing what to do, what to say in the routine things of life, as well as in the more pressing issues.

You might like to pause the recording at this point, look up Nehemiah chapter 9 and read verses 32-37 out loud.

These words occur at the end of a long prayer of confession led by the Levites after the people had listened to the reading of God's Word for 7 days!

When you have finished reading verses 32-37 of Chapter 9, resume the recording.

One of the things we have to look forward to in this study is seeing the place, the purpose and the power of prayer in Nehemiah's life. We'll see what he based his approach to God on and why. We'll hear some in depth praying and get glimpses of "on the hoof" praying. Perhaps a few of his prayers will surprise us.

The enemies of Israel also play a prominent role in Nehemiah's account of events. They are powerful and dangerous men, not to be dismissed lightly. Their determined attempts to stop the work going ahead on Jerusalem's wall were cleverly designed to do maximum damage. Their threats and political interference put great pressure on Nehemiah and the people in Jerusalem. Their enemies worked to undermine everything Nehemiah did. Do Israel's enemies succeed? Have God's people learnt from their exile in Babylon? *This time*, will God's people remain faithful and persevere under the pressure? We'll find out.

The strategies used by Israel's enemies are not confined to Nehemiah's time. The same kind of tactics are experienced by Christians today. Today, we also face all kinds of pressures. For example, many of us will know what it's like to have a sense of being right where God wants us to be; doing what he wants us to be doing. Although it might be a challenging situation you are in, it's a challenge we're glad to take up. Then, much to our distress, people who are opposed to what's happening, push hard against it. Troubles begin even amongst the people we're working with. Things are said and done that undermine confidence; that raise doubts; that threaten to bring the whole thing undone. It might even threaten to bring us undone. Where is God when this kind of thing happens? What's a person to do? We'll have opportunity to find out as this study progresses.

Nehemiah's position in the Persian court undoubtedly had many advantages. Yet as he thought about the situation in Judah, he was also very aware of the restrictions he was under. He was not a free agent. He was very much under the authority of the Persian King.

Nevertheless, God had put Nehemiah in exactly the place he wanted Nehemiah to be. We are all God's people in place, wherever that place may be. We might view our circumstances as being full of restrictions and insurmountable problems. How could we ever be of use to God? How can we make a difference in anybody's life? What good can we possibly do?

It could seem to us that Nehemiah had all sorts of advantages and opportunities that we haven't got. On a scale of 1 to 10 we might rate our usefulness, our abilities, our possibilities as being very low. But that's our assessment, not God's.

Our usefulness to God isn't based on such things as where we live, or how wealthy or healthy we are. It's not determined by our marital status or our level of education;

and nor is it dependant on whether or not the people we live with share our Christian beliefs.

What counts is our availability and willingness to follow God. Wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, the Lord asks us simply to trust Him and obey Him. God's purposes for us can become clearer as we faithfully follow where he leads us and look for opportunities to serve him, and others around us, right where God has placed us. And we commit our work and the results to God.

The most important place Nehemiah was in and the most important place we can be in, was full submission to the Lordship and sovereignty of God. Nehemiah bowed before the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the covenant keeping God of Israel; his God; his redeemer. We come to the same God through His son, Jesus Christ, repenting of our sin and accepting Jesus as our Saviour and Lord; and growing in a personal relationship with Him. This is the most important part of our lives — everything else follows on from there.

An important aspect of Nehemiah's book is his attitude towards God's word. From beginning to end his words and actions are based on the word of God, which he knows well and deeply. He consistently keeps it before the people, urging them to know it, to believe it and to live in accord with it. Not only did this give the people knowledge of God's will and of his commands to them, but it exposed them to the blessings available to them as the people of God.

You might like to pause the recording at this part, look up Nehemiah chapter 8 and read verses 9-12 out loud.

When you have finished reading these verses, resume the recording.

God's Word does set boundaries for his people, but it also opens our eyes to the benefits and joys of obedience. Let's keep that in mind as we read and study it.

Nehemiah knew it would take more than the restoring of a wall to bring the Israelites back into right relationship with God. God had exiled his people because of their rebellion, but he had also put a set time on this judgement. God had promised to restore them when they repented. The wall would give a sense of security and future. Jerusalem would no longer be a heap of rubble, despised by the surrounding nations. The restored wall would certainly send a strong message to the surrounding peoples. But the wall was more than this: it was also proof that God is powerful and he keeps his promises to his people.

However, simply building the city and its wall from the rubble wasn't enough. The Israelites themselves needed more. They needed to deal with the brokenness and rubble in their lives that had come between themselves and God. They needed to know what to do about it. They needed to know why they could have complete confidence in God, and know what to do when they faced opposition. They needed to know how to live as the people of God they were called to be. And we need to

know the same things. The answer, the information, the promises are all there in God's Word.

As the story unfolds, we witness a time of revival as day after day the Word of God was read and explained to the Israelites. These are exciting chapters to read. We'll see the power of God's Word at work in the hearts of people who are hungry to know what it means; who are listening, ready and willing to respond. We'll see them worshipping; we'll see people convicted of their sin repenting before the Lord and the result of restored relationship with Him. People understanding perhaps for the very first time, what it means that the joy of the Lord is their strength. Aren't these things that we all want to see in our own lives?

You might not be in the process of building a wall right now – bricks and mortar might be the furthest things from your mind. If Nehemiah has written down his list of priorities on a scroll, it would almost certainly look entirely different to the to-do list you might have on your fridge. And yet, maybe not so different after all.

Don't we all feel deeply about the suffering of people we care for? Don't we want to put right the things that are wrong in our homes? In our churches? Our communities? In our own relationship with the Lord? Don't we have needs on a daily basis to be taken to the Lord in prayer? Don't we experience opposition when we set out to obey God's commands? And don't we too want to know God's way through life, every aspect of it and follow Him wholeheartedly?

The broken walls in our lives might be made up of different stuff but our situations and our needs are very similar to the ones Nehemiah writes about.

He also writes about promises. God's promises to His people and their promises to God. God's promises are always kept. As we'll see, his people's promises weren't; even though they were made with good intentions. The Israelites wanted to do the right thing, they wanted to build up their city, their nation, their spiritual strength. They responded well to Nehemiah's strong leadership and agreed with what he and the other leaders said about the need to do things God's way.

But more than once, they failed to follow through – some surprising lapses are discovered towards the end of the book. However, because we too are fallible, let's not anticipate tut-tutting about their failures. We can instead marvel at the mercy of God who never abandoned them. Yes, he disciplined them; and yes, he knew they'd fail again, and again; and yes, he continued to love them and stand by his promises; and yes, he does the same for those who belong to him today.

Nehemiah was a man of determination and confidence in his relationship with God. He wasn't half hearted in his attempts to do what he believed God expected of him. He followed God boldly, no matter what; and his heart was to have his fellow Israelites do the same. He had his share of difficulties and disappointments. Things didn't always go smoothly. People didn't always cooperate. Sometimes they actively

worked against him. In spite of all such things, Nehemiah did his best for God in dependence on God. His driving force at all times was to please his Lord, whom he knew to be faithful, powerful, loving, reliable and sovereign.

As they worked together rebuilding Jerusalem's wall, the Israelites had much to learn. Not only about bricks and mortar, but about themselves, their enemies and their God. They had to deal with strong opposition from the outside, as well as some divisive and corruptive action amongst themselves. They needed to find out how to apply God's Word to everyday life. Sometimes they succeeded – these were mountain top times when they rejoiced in the Lord and enjoyed fellowship with one another; when their enemies weren't able to defeat them.

At other times they failed miserably. Often, they needed to take long, hard looks at themselves in the mirror of God's Word and adjust their lives accordingly.

We can be thankful that Nehemiah wrote about the joys and difficulties he and the Israelites experienced, because their stories could be our stories. We'll find people with aspirations and hopes just like ours and be able to recognise familiar strengths and weaknesses. But the best news - it's the same God who is lovingly, mercifully, consistently at work drawing His people back into right relationship with Himself; demonstrating His covenant love and commitment. He did it then and He's still doing it now.

Let's pray together as we finish.

Lord God, thank you for the powerful inspiration of your Spirit that brought Nehemiah's book into being so many years ago and yet always relevant because your Word is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, cutting right to the heart of everything. Father we want to know you more and more. We want to know what you have to say to us so that we can live our lives as you want us to. We want to recognise your presence in every aspect of our lives and to rejoice in knowing that you are working out your purposes through every situation. We come to this study expectantly, hopefully, ready to listen and to learn. Please enable us to understand and receive your truth. Fill us Lord with all joy and peace in believing. We ask this in the precious name of our Lord Jesus. Amen