

An introduction to Nehemiah (*Autumn 2021*)

Historical background to Nehemiah

The events of the book of Nehemiah cover a period of 12 years or so during the 5th century BC, when the people of Israel were struggling to get re-established as God's 'holy nation' (Exodus 19:6) after the end of a period of exile which had begun when they had been unceremoniously thrown out of their land.

This was probably something approaching 700 years after the days of Ruth (whose story we worked our way through as a church during August), and a lot of water had flowed under the bridge in that time:

- God had reluctantly allowed them to have a king (which they wanted in order to be "like all the other nations" - 1 Samuel 8:19).
- Initially that had brought prosperity – both politically and spiritually – under David (Ruth's great-grandson) and his son Solomon, who oversaw the building of a magnificent new Temple.
- However, things soon started to go wrong – the kingdom split into two and a series of (for the most part) bad kings followed.
- The northern kingdom fell to Assyria in 722 BC, and then in 586 BC it was the southern kingdom's turn, with Nebuchadnezzar laying waste to Jerusalem, destroying the Temple, and taking the people into captivity in Babylon.
- Babylon was then itself conquered by the Persians, who had a rather more respectful view of their subjects, and from 539 BC started allowing the Jews to return to their homeland – many, however, decided to stay where they were.
- Although the Persian kings were very supportive of rebuilding (even providing finance), progress was slow and irregular because the Jews became discouraged by opposition from the local people who had come to fill the land during their captivity.
- A new Temple (not as grand as Solomon's...) was nevertheless completed in 516 BC, but Jerusalem largely remained a broken city and its Jewish inhabitants a broken people.

This continuing need for rebuilding and restoration was what brought, first, Ezra (458 BC) and then Nehemiah (445 BC) to Jerusalem.

Who was Nehemiah?

Nehemiah was a Jew who (it is assumed) was born and brought up in Persia before rising to a privileged position of high status as "cupbearer to the king" (Nehemiah 1:11). But the way in which he reacted to hearing of the sad state of affairs in Jerusalem indicates that he remained fully committed to the God of Israel.

He is sometimes first and foremost regarded as a 'political' leader, a great administrator and organiser – a 'layman' when considered alongside Ezra (the priest and teacher of the law). Nevertheless, he is very clearly also a 'spiritual' leader, a man of prayer with an overriding concern for the honour of God.

Who wrote the book of Nehemiah?

It seems almost certain that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written by the same person – the earliest Hebrew manuscripts have them as a single book. The most popular view is that the author of both was Ezra (who appears most prominently in the book of Nehemiah when he reads out the Book of the Law of Moses in Chapter 8).

What is Nehemiah all about?

Most obviously, the story is about a practical building project – restoring the walls of Jerusalem. More fundamentally though, the lesson is one of the building of community, a community that is:

- grounded in prayer to a sovereign God,
- living a distinctive life under the authority of Scripture, and
- committed to working together and serving one another.

And it's also a story which both celebrates the way God empowers us to triumph through troubled times and exposes the temptation to ease away from him when we sense the pressure is off.

Sunday-by-Sunday plan

Sunday	Passage	
5th September	Nehemiah 1:1-2:10	Nehemiah is sent to Jerusalem
12th September	Nehemiah 2:11-3:32	The building of the wall
19th September	Nehemiah 4:1-23 & 6:1-14	Opposition to the rebuilding
26th September	Nehemiah 5:1-19	Looking after the poor
17th October	Nehemiah 6:15-7:73	The wall is completed
24th October	Nehemiah 8:1-18	Ezra reads the Law of Moses
31st October	Nehemiah 9:1-10:39	The Israelites confess their sins
21st November	Nehemiah 11:1-12:47	A new worshipping community
28th November	Nehemiah 13:1-31	But what happens then?

[Several of the above are likely to be too long to be covered in the Sunday service, but it would still be a good idea to read the whole passage at home.]

Brief comment on longer-term Bible-based preaching plan

It isn't practically possible to go through the entire Bible in Sunday morning services – we reckon that would take at least 20 years! But what we can do is try to ensure that as far as possible we cover all the key themes of the Bible and the different ways in which those are brought to us (stories, teaching, prophecies, poetry etc.) over a period of, say, 5 years.

So, in broad terms the current plan is that at St Paul's we will generally aim each year to have one term (usually the Autumn) in the Old Testament, one in the Gospels (usually between Christmas and Easter), and one in the rest of the New Testament. There will need to be flexibility (and the details will sometimes have to change...), but at the moment the idea is to work through the first half of John's Gospel starting this Christmas (and then return for the second half at the beginning of 2023), following that in the Spring/Summer with one or more New Testament epistles.

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September 2021