

How'd we get here?

Nehemiah 1:1-11

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



This week, we begin our fall teaching series through the book of Nehemiah. As we walk through it, we will see a story about a wall, a story about perseverance, a story about opposition, and about living in a place that is home but doesn't quite feel like it. More than anything, as we begin today, we will see that everything ahead of Nehemiah is ultimately in the Lord's hands. And Nehemiah can trust the Lord for the future because of God's steady and loyal love.

The events of Nehemiah took place toward the beginning of what's called the Second Temple Period (around 516 BC – AD 70). God's people had been in captivity, first under the Babylonians and then under the Persians. There were several groups that departed from Persia and returned to Jerusalem to re-establish God's people in their own land. One wave was led by Ezra, another by Zerubbabel, and another by Nehemiah. Ezra was a scribe, so he helped with re-educating Israel; Zerubbabel was a priest and re-established the priesthood; and Nehemiah was the governor, who helped with social order. Each had their own place in God's plan.¹ In the opening section, Nehemiah comes face to face with the weight and consequences of his own sin and the sin of generations before him. In this way, he recognizes that sin is both personal and corporate and has immediate and generational ramifications. The reality that we must confront in our lives is the same nature of sin in our context. If we desire to move forward with God, that will never be done by disconnecting from the past. The good news is that we are not called to bear the burden of the past on our own. Nehemiah confronts the past through the steadfast (*hesed*) love of God. **The steady love of God allows us to reckon with the past, repent in the present, and move forward in faith.**

1. Who is Nehemiah?

- a. Context and situation – Life after the Babylonian exile and under the Persians.
 - i. Quick historical overview:²
 - 1. Israel becomes a nation during the Exodus. (1450 - 1400 BC)
 - 2. Period of the Judges where Israel is a nation with no human king. (1350-1050 BC)

¹ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 6). The Good Book Company.

² Note: All dates are approximate.

3. United kingdom period / first Temple period. – Saul, David, & Solomon (1050-930 BC)
4. Divided kingdom – North Israel & South Judah (930-587 BC)
 - a. Israel is first to be carried off into exile under the Assyrians. (745 – 605 BC)
 - b. Judah will be carried off into exile under the Babylonians. (587 – 539 BC)
 - i. The Babylonians usurped the Assyrians historically.
5. The time of exile – Life under Babylonian rule. (587 – 539 BC)
6. Persia comes to power and usurps the Babylonians. (539 – 331 BC)
 - a. **The events of Nehemiah took place toward the beginning of what's called the Second Temple Period (around 516 BC – AD 70).**
 - b. **The word Nehemiah means "Yahweh comforts."**³
 - c. **Providentially, too, the Persian empire gave positive encouragement to its peoples to practice their own religions in full style and with due seriousness.**⁴
 - d. The founder of the Persian empire was Cyrus the Great, formerly king of the small state of Anshan near the Persian gulf. He had displaced his overlord Astyages in 549 BC, thereby inheriting the vast Median empire which overarched, to the north and east, that of Babylon.⁵
 - i. **This very history was recorded not just in the Bible, but also in Cyrus' own words on the *Cyrus Cylinder*.**⁶
 1. This extra-biblical account gives us confidence in the historicity of the Biblical text.
7. Eventually, the Greeks would come and usurp the Persians. (334 – 150 BC)
8. Next, the Romans would usurp the Greeks. (150 BC – 1000 AD)
 - a. It would be then under the Romans that Israel would remain the longest, and Jesus would come as Messiah.
 - b. From the time of Nehemiah to Jesus is somewhere around 500-600 years.
- b. **Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel. → Where do they all fit?**
 - i. There were three waves of return to Jerusalem—led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and then Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe these returns, but they are not attempting to provide a complete detailed history of this 100-year-plus time span. Instead, they focus on only a few highly significant years.⁷
 1. There were several groups that departed from Persia and returned to Jerusalem to re-establish God's people in their own land. One wave was led by Ezra, another by Zerubbabel, and another by Nehemiah.
 2. **Ezra was a scribe, so he helped with re-educating Israel; Zerubbabel was a priest and re-established the priesthood; and Nehemiah was the governor, who helped with social order. Each had their own place in God's plan.**⁸

³ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 11). The Good Book Company.

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 16.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 16–17.

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 21.

⁷ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 11). The Good Book Company.

⁸ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 6). The Good Book Company.

- ii. Nehemiah is tasked to rebuild the city walls. → This is much more than patching a few holes.
 - 1. Archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon notes: **“The effect on Jerusalem was much more disastrous and far-reaching than merely to render the city defenseless ... The whole system of terraces down the (eastern) slope, dependent on retaining walls buttressed in turn by the fill of the next lower terrace, was ultimately dependent on the town wall at the base, forming the lowest and most substantial of the retaining walls.”**⁹
 - 2. **The news of v.3 was a shattering and devastating blow.** → Not just a historical note.
 - a. Its most likely background is the sequence in Ezra 4:7–23, in which a bid to rebuild the walls had been reported to king Artaxerxes and promptly crushed ‘by force and power’. It was an ominous development, for the ring of hostile neighbors around Jerusalem could now claim royal backing.¹⁰
- c. What themes are we to pay attention to in Nehemiah?
 - i. But if we walk away from this book with just a rebuilt wall, we miss many greater things that it’s possible to see in the pages of this rich book. **It has an obvious relevance to any type of rebuilding we might do for God—from our homes and families to our local churches, communities, cities, and government.** It teaches us about gospel mission.¹¹
 - 1. There is a risk to fail to see the greater themes of redemption and the providence of God.
 - 2. In Nehemiah, we also see that God is ultimately the initiator of his kingdom being built, and we are his divine stewards and representatives. When we are in the midst of great need, opposition, rebellion, encumbrances, and sins, God still works through us and motivates us to complete his work.¹²

2. We face the past supported by God’s loyal love. (v.5)

- a. Every aspect of Nehemiah’s prayer (that he offers in response to the news) is founded on the conviction that God is inclined towards him and his people with a loyal love. (*hesed*)
 - i. **The nature of his prayer.**
 - 1. It deliberately postpones the cry for help, which could otherwise be faithless and self-pitying.
 - 2. It mounts immediately to *heaven* (as the Lord’s prayer does), where the perspective will be right, and it reflects on the character of God”¹³
 - 3. **He follows the ACTS prayer method:**
 - a. Adoration – “The great and almighty God...”
 - b. Confession – “confessing the sins...”
 - c. Thanksgiving – “Remember the word you spoke...”
 - i. Supplication – “Give success to your servant...”

⁹ Kathleen Kenyon, (Digging up Jerusalem, p 170)

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 85.

¹¹ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God* (God's Word For You) (p. 5). The Good Book Company.

¹² Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God* (God's Word For You) (p. 6). The Good Book Company.

¹³ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 172.

- ii. This immediately begs the question for us: Do we share the same perspective as Nehemiah?
 - 1. **Remember:** The news about Jerusalem is not that it needs a new coat of paint, a few holes in the drywall patched, and some laminate flooring. → It has been totally ruined and done so by royal decree.
 - 2. **When we face unimaginable challenges, setbacks, and opposition, are we a praying people who appeal to the Lord knowing that he is for us?**
 - 3. Or, are we a people that question God's love, faithfulness, and ability?
 - a. Nehemiah comes out of a period of exile and great pain.
 - b. This is not a call to spiritual perfection. → I.e., Never doubting, never questioning, never wrestling.
 - c. **It is a call to approach those things and moments with the reminder of God's faithful love and to keep showing up to be in relationship with him.**
- b. The significance of *hesed*. (v.5)
 - i. Example: *hesed* in the life of Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:8-9)
 - 1. **⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.**
 - ii. **The key word is *hesed***, often rendered 'loving-kindness'. It is a word which on occasion means something very like loyalty, and on occasion something very like love. ¹⁴
 - iii. **Naomi is asking for Yahweh to show the same loving-kindness and loyalty that they have shown to her and her sons.**
 - 1. To the original audience this would have spoken about "covenant"... an odd ring to it?
 - 2. It also includes elements of: mercy, steadfastness, love, faithfulness, and loyalty.
 - 3. This is the kind of commitment a mother / father makes to their child.
 - a. I.e., There is both a tenderness to this love and ferocious fortitude.
- c. **We can reckon with the past.**
 - i. Sin causes shame → Shame causes us to hide → Hiding magnifies our pain.
 - 1. We see this clearly in the garden with Adam and Eve.
 - a. They sin → They are filled with shame and hide from God and from each other.
 - b. Their pain has been magnified, so they begin to deflect blame.
 - i. Adam → It was her fault.
 - ii. Eve → It was the serpent's fault.
- ii. **What is sin?**
 - 1. **The fundamental unbelief, distrust, and rejection of God and human displacement of God as the center of reality.** ¹⁵
 - a. **Sin has deeper roots of distrust and displacement of God that are expressed through my behavior.**
 - i. I.e., Sin is not just the wrong actions I willfully do or the right actions I willfully ignore.

¹⁴ Cundall, A. E., & Morris, L. (1968). [*Judges and Ruth: an introduction and commentary*](#) (Vol. 7, p. 245). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁵ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, [*Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 107.

- ii. **If I am the center of my reality, how can I love someone else selflessly?**
- 2. Rich Villodas – **“Sin is a principle of captivity to a power that permeates and contaminates our human reality. *Sin* is the word Christians use to name not simply our failed acts but also our inner and outer captivity.”**¹⁶
 - a. As an inherent part of the human condition, sin is universal, and it is both corporate and individual.¹⁷
- iii. **Here we see something important about the nature of sin. → It is personal, corporate, and historical.**
 - 1. **Personal** – There are sins / expressions of my brokenness that I directly participate in and perpetuate.
 - a. Example: I lie to someone in my family.
 - 2. **Corporate** – There are sins / expressions of my brokenness that we directly participate in and perpetuate.
 - a. Example: I know that something is wrong, but it is part of my larger culture so I go along with it.
 - i. I.e., **Competition**: **“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight”** (James 4:1–2).¹⁸
 - 3. **Historical** – Sin has implications and impacts on future generations.
 - a. **“We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.**
 - 4. **In his prayer Nehemiah confesses his sin and the corporate and historical sin of his people without shame, hiding, or deflection. → Why? Because of God’s loyal love.**
 - a. **He knows that he is safe to confess, address, and confront those things because of who God is and how God has responded in the past.**
 - b. This allows us to confront the past honestly.

3. When we face the past, we must do it honestly. (vv. 6-7)

- a. **If we want to be a person who is faithful in the future, we must be willing to face the past with honesty and in the security of the Father’s love.**
 - i. **Habitual sin often exists within patterns in our lives.**
 - 1. Personally: I know that I am far more likely to give into sin when I am tired, overwhelmed, or hungry.
 - 2. I’ve been able to identify these patterns in my life through practices of confession, reflection, and mentoring.
 - a. **Repentance** is not just uttering and “I’m sorry” to God.

¹⁶ Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Waterbrook, 2020) 99.

¹⁷ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 107.

¹⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 564.

- b. It is a commitment to say I know that my sin is not healthy or for my good, and so I want to get rid of it. → We do that ridding work under the power of the Holy Spirit and by identifying patterns.
 - c. ¹³ **No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.** – 1 Cor. 10:13
 - b. **The past contains ups and downs.**
 - i. **My father's house... covenant language.**
 - 1. In this, Nehemiah recognizes God's faithfulness not just to him, but to the generations past.
 - a. **Reflect: What has God done in your life and in the lives of the saints that have gone before?**
 - b. Nehemiah is certainly thinking of the high moments of Abraham, Moses, the judges, the kings, and the prophets. → God has never abandoned them.
 - ii. Sin – personal and corporate.
 - 1. We often either glamorize or demonize the past. → I.e., It was either the best of times or the worst of times.
 - 2. In Nehemiah, we see that we can and need to embrace both.
 - 3. In recognizing God's faithfulness, Nehemiah also holds space for the sin of the past. → Again, this two-fold process keeps us in the security of God's faithful and loyal love.
 - a. Nehemiah is certainly thinking of the low moments of Abraham, Moses, the judges, the kings, and the prophets. → God has never abandoned them.
 - iii. **We can repent in the present.**
 - 1. Because of God's loyal and faithful love we are able to repent in the present and not be crushed by the weight of our personal or corporate sin.
 - a. Again, consider Nehemiah's situation:
 - i. Jerusalem is in ruins.
 - ii. The people of God are scattered.
 - iii. There is great opposition ahead.
 - iv. They are in exile because of their sin, and the future is bleak.
 - b. He has every reason to feel crushed by the past, yet he is hopeful for the future.
 - c. **Nehemiah moves forward in faith. → The closing of his prayer.**
 - i. "Give success, grant mercy... cupbearer to the king."
 - 1. The *cupbearer* (the same word as the 'butler' of the Joseph story, Gen. 40:2ff.) was a high official in the royal household, whose basic duty of choosing and tasting the wine to demonstrate that it was not poisoned, and of presenting it to the king, gave him frequent access to the king's presence and made him potentially a man of influence. Myers draws attention to a statement of Herodotus on the honour in which the Persians held this office, and to the

portrayal in Tobit 1:22 of Ahikar as not only the cupbearer but the chief minister of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon.¹⁹

ii. The future is not in Nehemiah's control, it is in God's.

1. Nehemiah was no doubt aware that if he was to have any success, Artaxerxes would need to overturn his previous decree (Ezra 4:21); to make such a request could be highly dangerous, even for a royal favorite (cf. Esth 4:11–16). He, therefore wisely refrains from determining his approach in advance, but leaves God to open the way in an appropriate manner.²⁰
2. **Personally** – You are facing challenges that you cannot see a way through yet.
 - a. The future is not in your hands, but in God's.
3. **Corporately** – As a church, we are facing challenges that hurt and that we see and say, “too big, too much, too strong... let's turn around.”
 - a. Nehemiah's example to us says, keep showing up with the Lord. The future is in hands, and our responsibility is to be faithful.
 - b. **Faithful people are marked by three things:**
 - i. **Remember what God has done.**
 - ii. **Have a right perspective on the past.**
 - iii. **Do the next right Godly thing.**

¹⁹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 86.

²⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 173.