

### NEHEMIAH

#### Lesson 2, Chapter 1

We began our study of Nehemiah last week by means of a brief introduction to the book and reading Chapter 1. The introduction focused on explaining the regional political realities at the time of Nehemiah because only with this information and context can we understand why the Persian King was so accommodating of Nehemiah in order for him to journey 1000 miles from the Persian capital of Shushan to rebuild the broken down walls of Jerusalem.

In summary we can say that when King Artaxerxes agreed to send his cupbearer Nehemiah to Jerusalem with his blessing, it was because it was to his and his empire's benefit. The Persian Empire was now so vast that some of the larger nations that made up the empire had become very difficult to control. Egypt, for instance, had a heritage of being a superpower in its own right and had always held dreams of creating its own empire. Being subjugated to a Persian King whose capital was a thousand miles away, and whose culture was so vastly different from Egypt's, was intolerable. So Egypt was in a nearly constant state of rebellion and they possessed the means and ambition to be quite a problem for Artaxerxes.

But in addition to Egypt other nations in and around Judah (especially immediately across the Jordan River to the east) took Egypt's cue and were in a rebellious mood and they too constantly challenged Persian authority. However the Jews of Judah were generally friendly towards the Persians, and King Artaxerxes badly needed to maintain and even strengthen the loyalty they showed towards him. After all, the Jews had been rescued and released from their captivity in Babylon by the Persians. The Persian monarchs tended to be more enlightened and tolerant of their subjects than the Babylonians, and so generally gave most of the kingdoms and nations in their empire enough latitude to continue speaking their own language, continue worshipping their own gods, and as long as Persian law was obeyed they could even institute their own cultural traditions and customs. A few years earlier Artaxerxes had sent Ezra to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and re-establish the Levitical Priesthood (mostly funded by the Persian treasury), and so this show of generosity and kindness to the Jews created good relations.

As has been the case for more than 3 Millennia, the fortress city of Jerusalem was established in a strategically valuable location, and that is why it has always suffered attacks and been at the center of the ambitions of foreign potentates. From Jerusalem a strong military presence could deal with Egypt, the nations of the Trans-Jordan, Arabia, and even the territories of the

former northern tribal regions of Israel. At the same time, an enemy that gained control of the city of Jerusalem could create major problems and routing them out would be difficult and costly in terms of lives and resources.

Even today, although on the one hand the battle over Jerusalem is about religion, on the other hand its strategic location remains politically important because even though the names of the nations surrounding it have changed since the Bible times, the dynamics of desire for power and regional dominance by those nations has remained the same. Due to the advancement of military mobility and rapid deployment using modern technology, Jerusalem can control a huge area from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jezreel Valley, to the east beyond the Sea of Galilee, and to the south to North Africa and Egypt. So the importance of who controls Jerusalem is at least as significant now as it was in Nehemiah's day.

These thoughts had to have already been in Artaxerxes' mind well before Nehemiah's request to go to Judah; it's only that Nehemiah (a trusted and capable member of the king's inner circle) desiring to go to Jerusalem to direct the rebuilding of the defensive walls suddenly presented Artaxerxes with the opening he was looking for. Wisely, he leapt at the chance and offered Nehemiah every means of support.

Chapter 1 is short, so let's re-read it.

### **RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 1 all**

The name Nehemiah (***Nechemyah*** in Hebrew) means "the Lord comforts". It was not an uncommon name and we'll find a number of Nehemiah's in the Bible including two more in the Ezra-Nehemiah Scriptures. The only way to sort them out is by family ties (if stated) and by the era in which they lived. The opening words of this chapter make it clear that the primary writer of this book is Nehemiah himself, even though it is indisputable that at least one editor has been involved in creating this book in the final form that we have it today that probably was not completed until around the time of Alexander the Great (about 330 B.C.)

The year our story begins is 446 or 447 B.C, and it is the 20<sup>th</sup> year of King Artaxerxes' reign over the Persian Empire. Once we reach the 13<sup>th</sup> and final chapter of Nehemiah the time could be as late as around 410 B.C. Thus as we discussed last time, in Protestant Bibles since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Nehemiah represents the end of the Old Testament timeline and there is a glaring gap of information on the progress of the Jews and the happenings in the Holy Lands from then until the opening of the New Testament. As I explained in our first lesson on Nehemiah, this 4 century gap or so-called Silent Period was artificially created when the British and American Bible Society leadership decided to remove the 15 books of the Apocrypha (which dealt with the time between Nehemiah and the birth of Christ) from Protestant Bibles.

I want to make it clear however that I can find no evidence that at anytime in history has any group, Judaism or Christianity, regarded the Apocrypha as Holy Scripture nor as highly inspired as the canon that we find in our Protestant Bibles today (and I enthusiastically agree with that assessment). That said, Jews and Christians did regard it as somewhat inspired (something more than mere literature), as truthful and accurate, and supremely relevant to the progress of the Jewish people and to the history of the Holy Land. It is the relevance to the Jewish people and the insufficient relevance to the gentile Church, as well as the position of the Catholics that the Apocrypha continued to hold a firm place in the Catholic Bible, which seems to have led to its demise in the Protestant branch of the Church. But make no mistake: it's not only the Catholics who have retained it. Most of the many Eastern Orthodox branches of the Church have kept some or all of the books of the Apocrypha in their Bibles. Although originally the books of the Apocrypha were scattered about in the Bible, later the solution was usually to gather those 15 books together and make it a separate section of the Bible so that it is understand that it is not on the same spiritual level as the Old and New Testaments.

My position is that the Apocrypha is important, relevant and ought to be read by Believers in Christ. It goes a long way towards explaining the rise of Hellenism and the enormous Greek cultural influence over the Holy Land in Messiah's era. It explains how Judaism came to adopt many paganized traditions, and from that we can deduce how some of those traditions eventually found their way into Christendom. This Greek cultural influence has also invaded the Western Church and greatly colors the way we read the Bible. So we need to be aware of it. That said there are some Jewish superstitions included in the Apocrypha, and some twists on earlier Biblical history that has to be taken with a grain of salt. But never should it be taken as infallible or as Holy. I recommend the English translation of all 15 books of the Apocrypha written by Edgar J. Goodspeed as an accurate and readable text.

We immediately run into a challenge in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of Nehemiah as we are told it was in the month of Kislev in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes' reign that Nehemiah learned of the distress of the Jews in Jerusalem. And the issue is that in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the next chapter, we are told that AFTER Nehemiah heard the bad news from his brother Hanani, he went to the king but that this occurred in the month of Nisan in that same 20<sup>th</sup> year. For those who know the Biblical Jewish calendar, Nisan is the 1<sup>st</sup> month and Kislev is the 9<sup>th</sup> month. So we have Nehemiah going to the king in the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the year knowing about the distress of the Jews and asking to be sent to Jerusalem, which is 8 months BEFORE his brother told him about it in the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the same year. Needless to say, some of the Higher Critical Bible scholars have used this to say that the book of Nehemiah is flawed or unreliable.

It seems we need some instruction in the use of calendars if we're to understand this. And while this gets a bit complicated I hope you'll pay attention because understanding the calendar as used at different points in the Bible is so critical to understanding the sequence and timing of events. The Hebrews have several different calendar years, each used for different purposes. There is the Religious event calendar year, the Civil calendar year, the

Tithing calendar year, and a couple of others. Don't let this throw you; we have the same thing with modern calendars. We have the Civil Calendar year (January through December), we have the school calendar year (which varies depending on where you live), we have the Fiscal calendar year (that is generally used only for business accounting and can start in any month a business chooses as long as it remains consistent year to year), the agricultural calendar year and a few others. In the Bible we also have years based on the reigns of kings, and there are at least 5 different ways that the kings' regnal years are counted. So what we are dealing with in the opening two chapters of Nehemiah is two things: King Artaxerxes regnal calendar (indicating how many years he's been ruling as king), and also the Hebrew calendar that tells us what month of the year we are dealing with.

As time went on, thankfully, the ways kings counted their time in office generally reduced to what is called the Tishri calendar. And that is because the Tishri calendar year method was created by the Babylonians and not the Hebrews. The Babylonians controlled a vast empire (eventually taken over by the Persians), but the Hebrews only controlled little Israel and then only Judah, and so the Tishri Calendar became much more widely adopted than the Hebrew calendar. The Tishri Calendar simply means that the month of Tishri was designated as the first month of the year (while on the Hebrew calendar Tishri was originally designated in the Bible as the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the year). In time the Jews acknowledged the near universal use of this Babylonian Tishri calendar by creating the manmade traditional Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah (aka Jewish New Year). Rosh Hashanah is the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishri. But Biblically speaking the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishri already had a God-ordained appointed time (one of the 7 Biblical Feasts) assigned to it: Yom Teruah, the Day of Trumpets. So now we have the confusion that on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the month of Tishri, it is Rosh Hashanah (the start of a new year), yet the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishri is also the Feast of Trumpets, which is supposed to take place on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the year.

Thus when Passover rolls around in the month of Nisan, and the Bible says that Nisan is supposed to be the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the year and Passover is to occur on the 14<sup>th</sup>, on the Tishri calendar Nisan becomes the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the year. So the Hebrews are said to have a Religious calendar year that begins with the month of Nisan as the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the year, and also a separate Civil calendar year that begins with Tishri as the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the year. But it gets even worse because according to the Bible, the year advances by one (say from 2014 to 2015) on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Nisan, but the Jewish Civil Calendar year changes years on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishri. And most Hebrew calendars that are sold today show the Hebrew year changing on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishri. Thus while in the Bible Passover is described in the Torah as the FIRST feast of a new year and Sukkot is the final feast of the year, with the new Jewish Civil Calendar Yom Teruah is the 1<sup>st</sup> feast of the year and Shavuot (Pentecost) is the final Biblical feast of the year. Awful, isn't it, when we mess with God's timing? It makes discerning years and sequence of events in the Bible all the more difficult.

Bottom line as concerns the matter of timing in Nehemiah: obviously the calendar being referred to is a Tishri calendar year. Therefore in chapter one verse one since Tishri is the 1<sup>st</sup>

month of the year, then Kislev is the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes' reign; and in chapter two verse one that makes Nisan the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes' reign. That solves our dilemma, and it tells us that it was about 4 months from the time that Nehemiah's brother told him of Jerusalem's dilapidated state until Nehemiah brought wine to the king and informed him of his desire to go to Jerusalem and repair the city's walls (we could probably all use a glass of wine about now!)

We are told in Nehemiah 1:3 that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins and the gates were burned up. And then in verse 4 that this news brought Nehemiah to tears and he mourned for several days. One of the issues that scholars point out (and have various opinions about) is whether the walls of Jerusalem were newly destroyed, or whether this is referring to the damage that Nebuchadnezzar had inflicted 150 years earlier and had never been repaired. I'll not deal with all the arguments on both sides except to say this: the book of Ezra confirms that while Ezra tried to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, he essentially only succeeded in rebuilding the Temple. The main argument put forth that the damage that Nehemiah heard about was new, and that Ezra DID rebuild some or all the walls but they were again in ruin is that Nehemiah reacted so strongly to the news that it HAD to have been new damage. That's it. There is no Biblical or historical record of the walls of Jerusalem being rebuilt before the time of Nehemiah, and there is no Biblical or historical record of the walls being rebuilt and then brought to ruin yet again after the Babylonian exile. It is purely the conjecture of modern Bible scholars. Therefore there is no reason to doubt that since the King of Babylon destroyed the walls of Jerusalem circa 600 B.C. that they had NOT been rebuilt (or at least anything but partially); but Nehemiah was about to make it happen. The lack of protective walls also explains the poor economy of what should have been a prosperous city, and it also explains why so few people lived in Jerusalem that Nehemiah had to nearly compel some country folk to move there.

Verse 5 begins a prayer of supplication and confession by Nehemiah and we see that this powerful man in the Persian government who had been born and assimilated into the Persian culture (or he would not have remained living in Persia but rather would have migrated to Judah), was not only religious, but the prayer shows that he was quite familiar with the Torah. I suspect this was probably due to Ezra's teaching and influence; after all, Ezra was also in some type of service to King Artaxerxes and Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries. Even more, we see Nehemiah speak of the Lord in both Hebrew terms and in Persian terms. Where in our CJB the first words of verse 5 are translated as: "I said, Please Adonai, God of Heaven", what it actually says is, "Please YHWH, Elohe ha-Shamayim". That is, Nehemiah first calls God by His formal Hebrew name (Yehoveh) but then continues with the standard Persian term for the highest god of their pantheon of gods, God of Heaven. Nothing wrong with this; it only indicates that Nehemiah was as much Persian as Hebrew in his ways and thoughts.

It is interesting that Nehemiah's appeal to God was based on the promises of God's covenants to the Hebrew people. And also it was based on the inherent grace contained in

those covenants that is extended to all those who love the Lord AND obey His commandments. Which commandments? The Law of Moses, of course, as there existed no other divine commandments for the Hebrews. It is fascinating to me that essentially Nehemiah is appealing to God on the basis of his Hebrew roots, and He is defining who God is based on God's attributes and actions, which are based on God's covenants with the Hebrews. Nehemiah was born in the Persian Empire well after the Jews had been freed from the Babylonians. He lived far away from the Temple, far away from the Priesthood, and therefore away from Torah teachers, and instead he lived in a gentile world where the Diaspora Jews (such as himself) embraced a form of early Judaism that had replaced certain elements of Biblical worship and observances with new traditions that served to pacify the Persians while appealing to the Jews as "good enough" if not downright pious. And yet as this sudden awakening to the plight of God's holy city of Jerusalem and its Jewish residents swept over him like a Tsunami of living water, he immediately knew to turn to God. And he also realized that turning to God meant coming to Him on His terms, and within the context of God's commandments and instructions.

I hope this last statement pricked your ears, for so much of the modern Church has become deaf to God's Word and instead has assimilated into a type of Christianity that is based on traditions, syncretism with pagan observances, and wed to tired old manmade doctrines. We have been oh so comfortable and satisfied with these strange ways for a long time; but suddenly a whole crop of new Nehemiah's are popping up all around the world, awakened by a concern for Israel, for God's Jewish people, and a burning desire to recover His holy Word in our lives. Just as Nehemiah turned to the Torah and to his Hebrew roots in preparation to serve the Lord in an exciting new way, so must Believers in the modern era. Just as did Nehemiah we must let go of the weak and questionable definitions and attributes of God ascribed to Him by human religious leaders, and discover Him anew within the pages of the Hebrew Bible and especially the Torah. Our concern must be turned toward what He says is most important to Him at this time in history: the restoration of the people and nation of Israel. And then from this our understanding of the NT will change and grow, our faith will be deepened and made purer, and our relationship with Christ will mature and ripen, making us useful in service to Him now and ready to be harvested at the last trump.

Note that in verse 6 Nehemiah (similar to Ezra) completely identifies himself with his people, and with their sin. He confesses first that the source of the troubles for Israel is with the people being disobedient to God's commandments; Nehemiah's prayer is intensely personal as he admits that both he and his direct ancestors bear blame. And leaving no doubt that what he and the Jews are violating aren't Judaistic customs and traditions, he refers directly to the laws and rulings given by Moses. Then in verses 8 and 9, after confessing the sins of he and his people and that doing so was to break the covenant they had made with God, Nehemiah draws attention to the consequences. It is that even though they remain redeemed, Israel was scattered throughout the nations and left to wallow in the curses that come from breaking God's commandments. However this sad reality is balanced with the other side of the divine coin: forgiveness. IF after being exiled for breaking faith the chosen people will return to God and begin to recover and observe His laws and commandments, THEN the Lord will go and



gather His people from wherever they have been flung on this planet and bring them home. Or as the verse says, "I will collect them from there and bring them to the place where I have chosen for bearing my name". And that place is Jerusalem. There is so much to examine here.

First, it is that the people who transgressed against God and refused to obey His laws and commandments weren't pagans, they were His redeemed people. They knew who God was, and they believed in Him. And God knew them because He was their redeemer. But that redemption didn't amount to a Get-out-of-jail-free card or immunity from prosecution. That is, the Hebrew people didn't obey their way to redemption any more than do folks today who count on Yeshua for redemption. Yet, when the redeemed disobey God's commandments to a great enough degree the discipline from the Lord can be extremely severe. With Israel and Judah the severity amounted to expulsion from their land inheritance into subjugation and oppression by gentile nations who didn't fear the Lord. Paul issues a similar warning to those redeemed by Christ's blood:

**Romans 11:22 CJB <sup>22</sup> So take a good look at God's kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God's kindness toward you- provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off!**

Second we find that Nehemiah understood that a covenant has two sides to it: blessings and curses. If one violated the stipulations of the agreement, then the curses kicked in to operation. If one kept the terms of the agreement, then *shalom* would be the result. For God's redeemed, the curse was usually not complete or permanent rejection by the Lord or loss of redemption; rather it was to have one's status with God severely reduced and for blessing to be curtailed. Christ put that dynamic in another way in a most familiar passage to Seed of Abraham and Torah Class followers:

**Matthew 5:17-19 CJB**

**<sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.**

**<sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.**

**<sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

So the formula (OT and NT) is that those who have been redeemed are obligated to follow the Torah commandments. For those who obey those commandments and teach others to obey the commandments, their status in God's Kingdom will be elevated. For those who disobey those commandments and teach others to disregard them, their status in God's Kingdom will be severely reduced to the lowest level. The exiles of Judah didn't lose their redeemed status as members of God's Kingdom for disobedience; and as Believers we don't typically lose our redeemed status as members of God's Kingdom for disobedience. In fact, if either group disobeys but comes to their senses, acknowledges that the trouble is disobedience to God's commandments (not to some religious doctrines or personal sense of right and wrong), and changes their ways, and turns back to obedience to the Lord then He will return them to their normal status in relationship with Him. Nevertheless there are both earthly and eternal consequences for disobedience, especially when coupled with teaching others that God's commandments are irrelevant.

Thus Nehemiah understood that the only hope for himself and for his fellow Jews was a return to obedience to God's Torah; nothing else would substitute. It is obvious that almost all of what Nehemiah claimed in his prayer were paraphrases (and some were close to verbatim) of passages from the book of Deuteronomy.

Listen to Deuteronomy 30:1 – 4.

### READ DEUTERONOMY 30:1 – 4

<sup>CJB</sup> **Deuteronomy 30:1** *"When the time arrives that all these things have come upon you, both the blessing and the curse which I have presented to you; and you are there among the nations to which ADONAI your God has driven you; then, at last, you will start thinking about what has happened to you;*

<sup>2</sup> *and you will return to ADONAI your God and pay attention to what he has said, which will be exactly what I am ordering you to do today- you and your children, with all your heart and all your being.*

<sup>3</sup> *At that point, ADONAI your God will reverse your exile and show you mercy; he will return and gather you from all the peoples to which ADONAI your God scattered you.*

<sup>4</sup> *If one of yours was scattered to the far end of the sky, ADONAI your God will gather you even from there; he will go there and get you.*

Third, only **after** acknowledging his and his people's sin, and the covenant relationship that is the basis of their personal relationship with God, and that God keeps His promises whether



those promises are negative or positive, Nehemiah then petitions Yehoveh for his own success as he prepares for an audience with King Artaxerxes.

Verse 11 says, “.....Now please be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who take joy in fearing your name...” So the implication is that Nehemiah had some prayer partners. He didn't go at this alone. My only comment on this passage is this: it honestly shocks me sometimes that the prayer request list may at times have only a few requests on it. I don't know why that is; pride, fear of embarrassment, being a very private person perhaps. Could it be that most folks have nothing of importance in their lives to bring before the Lord? That hardly seems likely. I know of the troubles that some who are listening to me are having, and of the troubles of some of your children or grandchildren, even parents and friends. I know that you pray to the Lord for His intervention and help. So why are you going it alone? Why aren't you asking for the hundreds of prayer partners available to you to join with you? Are the prayers of many more effective than the prayer of one? Yes! Over and over we see that principle in the Bible and here in Nehemiah it is also brought to light. Enough said.

This chapter ends with the comment that “I was the king's personal attendant.” It was quite a personal achievement for Nehemiah to have reached such a lofty position. And it shows (as with Daniel, Esther, Mordecai and others) that the Jews of the Babylonian exile were not usually treated with prejudice, rather it is that several Jews had been elevated to surprisingly influential positions in the empire's government, with some belonging to the King's royal court. So it brings us right back to the question I asked last week: what would ever possess a man of Nehemiah's education, wealth and status to throw in his lot with his fellow Jews in a remote place where he'd never visited? The narrative seems to indicate that it was an “accident” that Nehemiah heard about the decrepit condition of Jerusalem and the distress this caused for the Jews of that area. But quite illogically the news so overwhelms Nehemiah that he can't bear it. He determines that something must be done and that it can only be the God of the Jews who has caused this improbable set of circumstances to come about such that he must be the one to step forward.

He is fully aware that this is going to mean great changes in his life. He is going to leave the luxurious, prestigious, and secure confines of the King's palace for a place far away that he knows little about, except that the people living there can barely make it due to the ghetto-like conditions and precariously unprotected population that is currently Jerusalem. But he recognizes that this is God calling him into service; service that he had never imagined for himself but that he had been, unsuspectingly, prepared for it over the last many years. Now Nehemiah had a simple choice to make in response to the Lord calling him to a radically new vocation and lifestyle. The choice was either yes or no. And that is the choice that every Believer already has been, or eventually will be, faced with. What is your answer?