

A Broken Heart for Broken Walls

Nehemiah 1:1-4

Nehemiah 1:1-4 - *“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, ² that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, “The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.” ⁴ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”*

Background Notes

As we begin our studies in the book of Nehemiah, it's important to know the historical setting of the events recorded in this book of God's Word. When we know the background, we can better appreciate the spiritual lessons and principles that God wants us to learn from this book.

The events in the book of Nehemiah occurred late in Old Testament history - near the close of the Old Testament period. The book covers about fifteen years, from 445BC to about 430BC. Over 1600 years before Nehemiah's time, the nation of Israel was united under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, who built the beautiful Temple in Jerusalem. After Solomon's reign, the nation split into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, which was still called Israel, and the southern kingdom, which was called Judah.

Because both kingdoms forsook the Law of the Lord and idolatry became rampant, God permitted both kingdoms to fall to foreign powers. Israel, the northern kingdom, fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722BC. Judah, the southern kingdom, lasted about 150 years longer, but it fell in 586BC, when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies completely conquered Judah. They broke down the city walls, destroyed the beautiful Temple, and took the people away as captives to Babylon. Their exile lasted for 70 years.

Then, when the Persians conquered Babylon, the Persian emperor Cyrus issued a decree in 539BC - the famous "Edict of Cyrus," that permitted the Jewish people to return to their homeland. In 538BC, led by Zerubbabel, about 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem. They reestablished Judah as a province under the Persian government. (Read all about this in the book of Ezra.)

The people of Jerusalem finally finished rebuilding the Temple in about 516BC. It took the motivating ministries of two prophets, Zechariah and Haggai, to stir up the people and urge them to complete rebuilding the house of the Lord. Some years later, in 458BC, Ezra returned from Babylon with about 2000 more Jewish people. Ezra was a great spiritual leader, and he was able to draw many of the people closer to the Lord.

However, since 586BC, Jerusalem had been a defenseless city. The walls that were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar lay in ruins. Some attempts at rebuilding had been made (Ezra 4), but the Persian authorities stopped these attempts. A total of almost 100 years went by from the time the Jews first returned from Babylon, until Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls in 445BC. All this time the walls were in a state of complete disrepair.

Nehemiah was the Jewish cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I. A cupbearer was quite an important position. If you ever wanted to assassinate a king, what better way than through his food or drink? So a cupbearer for the king was quite a prestigious and important position.

While Nehemiah was serving King Artaxerxes in Susa, the Persian capital, he heard news of the dire conditions back in Jerusalem (v2-3). Some men came from Judah and told him how the city walls were lying in ruins, the gates were burned, the city was defenseless, and the people were in great distress.

Nehemiah's first reaction was to sit down to weep and mourn, and to fast and pray. God was about to raise up this man, Nehemiah, to return to Jerusalem. He was going to lead the people in rebuilding the walls. But his first reaction was to sit down with real concern - to mourn, to fast, and to pray about the dire condition of Jerusalem.

Doctrinal Point

1. God desires to see strong spiritual walls.

Romans 15:4 says, *"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."* So all the information in the Old Testament, including the book of Nehemiah, was meant to teach us lessons. What spiritual lessons and principles is God teaching us from the book of Nehemiah? What can we learn from this book?

As a believer, Nehemiah saw a job that needed to be done - and he stepped out and did it. So there are bound to be some **principles about Christian service** here. Nehemiah stepped out and led the people in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, so there will be **principles for Christian leadership**, because Nehemiah was leading in work for the Lord. Furthermore, the physical wall building in Nehemiah pictures **principles for spiritual wall building** that needs to be done in every Christian's life.

God wanted Jerusalem to be a city with walls – a strong and stable city, because Jerusalem was the city of God’s Temple. In the same way, God wants His people today to be involved in spiritual wall building. He wants us to be strong and stable believers, who are clearly defined as Christians.

What do we mean by “spiritual wall building”?

- Walls speak of **strength**. A city with a wall was a strong city. It was a city that could be defended. **God wants us to be strong Christians** who are able to defend the faith. 1 Peter 3:15 teaches us that that we’re to be able to give answers about our faith to anyone who asks: *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”* Jude 3 says that we’re to *“contend earnestly for the faith.”* God wants us to be strong Christians that have walls in the sense of being able to defend the faith. ‘

- Walls speak of **stability**. A city with a wall was a stable city. It didn’t just happen overnight. It wasn’t just a blur on the horizon. It was known and recognized. **God wants us to be stable Christians** - not Christians who are knocked down whenever they have to deal with difficult events - job loss, illness or death. God wants stable Christians, who can stand firm in difficulties, and are able to help others. Have you ever noticed that some Christians always need help? They never help anyone else. They’re unstable - always needing help. Why? They don’t have strong spiritual walls.

It’s so great to be able to see Christians that are stable year in year out. In a few weeks I’ll be teaching at a conference where I taught about ten years ago. It’s going to be great to see some of those people who are still going on strong for the Lord. It’s good to see Christians who have strong spiritual walls. They are stable.

- Walls speak of **separation**. When there’s a wall, you’re either in the city or out of the city. A city with a wall was a separated city - you were either in, or you were not in. There was a clear line of demarcation. **God wants us to be clearly defined as Christians**. Walls speak of separation, in the sense of not being worldly Christians. We’re to be different. Our lives are not to be governed by worldly attitudes and values. Do you have strong spiritual walls? Do people know that you’re a Christian? You’ve heard the expression: if you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Spiritual wall building can be applied to individuals, or families, or churches. Remember, as an individual, every Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Furthermore, Christians together as a church are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). Just as God wanted to see a strong wall around the city of His Temple in Nehemiah’s day, God wants to see strong spiritual walls today - in our individual lives, in the lives of our families, and in the lives of our churches.

So, I think you can see that there are a lot of doctrinal points and practical applications to be found in the book of Nehemiah!

Practical Application

Our first step in spiritual wall building must be concern.

When Nehemiah heard about the broken-down condition of Jerusalem's walls, he wept - he mourned - he fasted - and he prayed (v4). He was more than concerned – he was very distressed. Before the wall could be rebuilt, there had to be real concern.

And before spiritual wall building can take place in our lives, there must be real concern. Nehemiah wept and mourned - have we? Have we wept about the broken-down spiritual condition in our lives? Have we wept about the haphazard way in which we keep our own devotions, or our family's devotions? Have we wept about the sad condition of our church - or have we just gossiped and complained?

Notice that that he wept and mourned for **many days**. *"I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days..."* Nehemiah's concern not just a little stirring of the emotions during a Sunday sermon. He mourned and prayed for many days!

And notice that he fasted. He sacrificed. We could talk about the benefits of fasting from food, but let's think about the principle of fasting here. Some of us need a little more fasting from TV sports and movies and videogames so we'll have more time to read and study God's Word. Are you concerned enough about your spiritual walls to make changes- to sacrifice to that extent?

Furthermore, Nehemiah prayed. Notice - he wasn't praying about his health, or business prosperity, or for good weather, or for a good time at his weekend activities. No. He was weeping and praying about the broken down condition of the walls in Jerusalem!

No wonder God answered Nehemiah's prayer! He was really concerned. Have we prayed as Nehemiah prayed? Are we really concerned about building up the spiritual walls in our lives? Or are we content to live in the midst of the rubble of weak and broken spiritual walls?

Our first step in spiritual wall building must be concern.