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BIBLE  
STUDIES

# NEHEMIAH

*Rebuilt and Rebuilding*

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



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## FOREWORD

Many Christian congregations in the affluent West have had some exposure to the book of Nehemiah—especially those whose ministries required a capital campaign for building expansion! Yes, unlike some other Old Testament books, many of us have knowledge of Nehemiah, the commendable postexilic Jew who served long ago in Persia at the king’s table. We have read of his vocational change to general contractor and of his return to the once proud city of Jerusalem to rebuild its walls.

That said, we should ask, “While we may have read Nehemiah, or heard a series of sermons based on it, have we learned to read it well? Have we heard it on its own terms?” After all, it is one thing to take an Old Testament book into the Christian church; it is quite another to keep it in its original context. Truth be told, Christian studies of a book like Nehemiah often end up bowing to the pressure of using the Bible as a “how-to manual”—a lamentable practice which relegates Nehemiah to a book of mere lessons on leadership, or simply a guidebook for planning successful brick-and-mortar campaigns.

This is where the real strength of Kathleen Nielson’s study guide on Nehemiah is seen. As a student of the Scriptures, she refuses to allow us to run roughshod over Nehemiah’s original setting, purpose, and intention. We are led into the book as we

should be—we are given tools not only to read it, but to read it well.

Christian Bible study guides that make an attempt to bring us into the Hebrew world of divine promises to Abraham and David require great care, and should be written by those who possess an understanding of that world on its own terms. Further, the fruit of their work must demonstrate a mature grasp of biblical theology, so proper connections to Christ and his church can emerge. In Kathleen Nielson, we are blessed to have someone capable of doing both.

I welcome the opportunity to commend her study notes to you. May God remember her, as well as you, for all the good that is done for Christ as a result of time spent reading and listening to this divinely inspired memoir called *Nehemiah*.

David R. Helm

# A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life, in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read*! We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to ten studies in Nehemiah. This Old Testament book tells the dramatic story of God's people led by a godly leader at a crucial point in their history. It was a point of *rebuilding*, after the consequences of sin had devastated the people and their land. The whole biblical story of the Hebrew nation—from the choosing of Abraham, through the Exodus, through the rise and fall of the kingdom—is vital background for the story of Nehemiah. This study, then, begins in Lesson One by putting the story in its biblical context. The unfolding of the book becomes even more beautiful and clear when seen as part of the larger story of God's working to accomplish his covenant promises to his people. Nehemiah is all about a God who preserves his people according to his word—and who calls them to walk in light of that word.

A more specific context for Nehemiah is needed as well. When we look in many Bible versions for introductory notes to Nehemiah, we find simply: "See Ezra." Although the two books were originally separate, many early manuscripts combined them as one story of the Jewish return from exile. Jewish tradition assigns to Ezra the priest the role of compiling and editing the two books, even though the second book is largely made up of Nehemiah's memoirs. Tradition gives Ezra the authorship of Chronicles as well. These books all faithfully chronicle the history

of God's people—listing careful genealogies, giving detailed descriptions of religious festivals, keeping close track of the leaders God raised up, and in general offering a picture of a people chosen and preserved by God through generations, for his good purposes. The continuity of this picture is great between Ezra and Nehemiah especially, with Ezra not only perhaps editing both, but also appearing as one of the lead characters in both. The background from Ezra (Lesson Two) directly paves the way for study of the text of Nehemiah, which begins in Lesson Three.

What is to be gained from a study of Nehemiah? This study approaches the text first of all as the inspired Word of God, authoritative and profitable (2 Tim. 3:16–17). God breathed these words through his Spirit into these leaders of Israel centuries ago for the good of God's people both then and now. As we take in these words of Nehemiah, we will certainly notice that we are taking in a good story, with drama, excitement, and a compelling main character. It is amazing to watch Nehemiah the leader through the process of this book—weeping, praying and praying again, planning with godly deliberation, leading with dynamic strength, facing opposition head-on, charting his course unswervingly according to God's Word. Nehemiah can challenge any leader and any *person* who wants to follow God with strength and passion.

Other levels of the story will emerge, however, as we study this book. We will grasp the flow of Old Testament history and the significance of the post-exilic period in that flow. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther make up the last part of the Old Testament's historical books, which come in our Bible before the poetic literature and the prophets. We are reading in Nehemiah the final glimpse of God's people mercifully reestablished in Jerusalem after their exile under the Babylonians and before that long, dark, intertestamental period of waiting.

But we will understand not only the human history; we will grasp the divine history as well—for Nehemiah is telling not just

the story of the Jewish people. He is telling, above all, the story of *God* at work among his people, accomplishing his sovereign plan to preserve them and bless the nations through them, as he promised Abraham. God's people at this point in history are poor and weak as they reassemble and rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. However, God had promised great things to them and through them, and so they persevere, under godly leaders. As those leaders turn the people's attention to God's Word, it becomes clear (especially to us) that God's promises point to more than an earthly kingdom. The Jews will never again be a magnificent kingdom as in their former days of glory, under David and Solomon. Yet from the Jews will come a promised and glorious king, through whom God will call out a people from all the nations of the earth. This book is about the God who sent his Son—the seed of Abraham—to save his people from their sins. It is about the roots of our salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our method of study, after establishing the context in the first two lessons, will be careful, verse-by-verse, passage-by-passage examination of the text. Historical background and cross-references are provided when they help clarify the text. Several charts will help you read with understanding. Applications will be suggested as they grow out of the story. Our main task will be to look carefully at the words of Nehemiah, to ask questions about those words, to understand them in their immediate and larger contexts, and to learn from them as the people of God. Before each day's work on the lesson, we will do well to pray, asking God for understanding through the power and teaching of his Holy Spirit. We will do well to read and reread the text for that day first, thoughtfully and carefully. The words of the text are beautiful and powerful. May we come away from them, like the people in chapter 8, celebrating with great joy because we have understood the words that were declared to us.



# Lesson 1

## REBUILDING THE WALLS . . . AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE WHOLE STORY

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The book of Nehemiah will amaze us with its dramatic story of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. We will enjoy this story even more if we understand its background. Where did these people come from, and who are these families who are struggling to rebuild a broken-down city? These are *God's people*, who show us both *the consequences of disobeying God's law* and *the blessing of receiving God's mercy*.

(Please refer throughout this lesson to the General Timeline and the Detailed Timeline in the back of the book.)

### DAY ONE—THESE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE

1. The people rebuilding the walls in Nehemiah are God's people. They have God's word on it. What scriptural

LESSON 1

promises to their ancestors apply to these people as a nation?

a. To Abraham: Genesis 12:1–3 and 13:14–17

b. To Moses: Exodus 19:3–6

c. To David: 2 Samuel 7:16

d. Through the prophet Isaiah: Isaiah 9:6–7





of human unfaithfulness do you observe? Second, what do you observe about God's dealing with unfaithfulness?

a. 2 Kings 17:5–15

b. 2 Chronicles 36:11–20

The northern kingdom was dissolved forever, but many Jews from the southern kingdom stayed together, grew, and even prospered in exile—figures such as Daniel and Esther (and Ezra and Nehemiah). A number did remain faithful to their God, and God in his mercy preserved them.

### DAY THREE—THE BLESSING OF RECEIVING GOD'S MERCY

These people of God show not only the consequences of disobeying God's law, but also *the blessing of receiving God's mercy*. The very first deportations of Jews from Jerusalem to exile in Babylon had begun as early as 605 B.C. Just short of seventy years



c. 2 Chronicles 36:20–23

2. We marvel now, looking back. The prophet Daniel, who had been among the first exiles taken to Babylonia, marveled as he watched it come to pass. What did he do when he read the prophecies from Jeremiah and understood that the end of the exile was near? In Daniel 9:1–19, what can you observe and learn? (“Darius” of v. 1 is probably a temporary ruler appointed over Babylon at the beginning of Cyrus’s reign—not the later Persian King Darius.)

DAY FOUR—SO WHAT?: PART ONE

So, we have the background story straight. But what does it have to do with us? Are we simply to benefit from taking in all this fascinating history, or can we begin as well to connect personally with this story? The answer to that last question is a resounding *yes*.

First, *this is our story*, if we have become part of God's people. Most of us probably do not share the privilege of being Jewish, or part of Abraham's physical seed. We could not list our names in the genealogies that continue down through the generations. How can we be part of God's chosen people? What is the only way, ever, for anyone to belong to God?

1. Read Galatians chapter 3. It's a difficult chapter, so we might not understand every part of it—and that is fine. But this chapter answers the question we are asking. The apostle Paul is writing to the Galatians and telling them how to become God's people—and it's not by having Abraham's genes *or* by perfectly obeying the law. So how is it? Write down key phrases from this chapter that point to how we do indeed become God's people, Abraham's true seed.



DAY FIVE—SO WHAT?: PART TWO

Not only is this our story, but, second, *this is our God*. The God of the Bible is one God, from beginning to end, working in all of human history to redeem a people for himself through his Son Jesus Christ. The God to whom we as believers pray when we wake up in the morning is the God to whom Nehemiah prayed when he wanted to go back to Jerusalem. For this final day, look back through the passages we have read during this week of background study. As you reread, jot down key phrases you find that tell you about God—what he is like and how he deals with his people. Spend some time meditating on and worshiping the Lord God.

# Notes for Lesson 1

