

# THE RETURN: NEHEMIAH: PART B

**Suggested Reading:** The Book of Nehemiah

*Corresponds to Workbook pp 119-122*

## Introduction:

Nehemiah, who held the important post of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, led the third return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem in 444 BC. Because Nehemiah was God-confident, God-directed, and God-serving, he was the ideal leader to reconstruct the wall around Jerusalem in spite of serious opposition and hardship, “over a hundred years after King Nebuchadnezzar razed the city. The Temple had been rebuilt and the people, led by Ezra, have begun reforming their lives according to the Torah. Upon his arrival, Nehemiah believes it is his mission to rebuild another crucial dimension of the people’s identity—the city’s walls and gates that have been destroyed and burned by fire. In ancient times, walls protected a city from trespassers and invaders, thus securing peace of mind and stability of life for those who lived within. They also gave definition and identity to the city and its inhabitants. The deteriorated walls and gates mean that, as yet, there was a blur between ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘not Jerusalem’—an ambiguity that carried over into Jewish identity, for whom the Holy City was the center of history, the home of the kings, and the throne of the Great King.”<sup>1</sup>

## Nehemiah 1

What report does Nehemiah receive in Babylon from Jewish friends who have just visited Jerusalem? How does Nehemiah respond? What does this tell you about him? (1:1-4)

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When you receive heartbreaking news, is your first reaction to pray AND fast? \_\_\_\_\_

Of what is Nehemiah quick to repent? (1:7) \_\_\_\_\_

However, to what promise and hope does he cling? (1:9) \_\_\_\_\_

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### *Historical Note:*

To be a cupbearer meant more than just pre-tasting the King’s dinner wine for poison. It essentially amounted to being second in rank to only the King himself and held much prestige. It is interesting to note that exiled Jews throughout the ages seem to have risen to the highest rank in their alien country-- for example, Joseph in Egypt, the cupbearer Ahikar in Assyria (Tobit 1:22), Daniel and friends in Babylon, and now Nehemiah in Persia.

## Nehemiah 2

King Artaxerxes notices that Nehemiah is uncharacteristically sad and distraught and asks what is distressing him. What does Nehemiah do *before* he answers the King? (2:4-5)

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<sup>1</sup> Gray, Tim and Jeff Cavins. *Walking with God: A Journey Through the Bible*. (c) 2010 by Ascension Press, West Chester, PA, pp 212.

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Do you pause and pray before an important conversation that may have great repercussions?

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What did Nehemiah specifically ask for? Why did the King agree? (2:5-8) \_\_\_\_\_

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Note that all three waves of returning exiles were assisted by cooperative Gentile kings.

Nehemiah was convinced that God wanted him to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall. Are you likewise willing to yield your agenda and schedule and go where God wants you to go and do what He directs? Trust God to move and direct you precisely where He needs you.

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### **“Four Great Questions to Ask God Every Day**

1. *What do you want me to do?*

2. *How do you want me to act?*

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to accomplish the goals He sets before you.

3. *When do you want me to act?*

God has a precise timetable for everything that He desires to accomplish.

4. *How can I best represent you today?*

The Holy Spirit desires to influence others not only through what you do and say, but also by your very presence in any group of people.”<sup>2</sup>

Why did Nehemiah assess the damaged walls by night? (2:12-13) What did he propose to Jerusalem’s leaders in 2:17-18? \_\_\_\_\_

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How did the people respond in 2:18? \_\_\_\_\_

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What immediate opposition did Nehemiah face? (2:19) How did Nehemiah calmly and confidently reply? (2:20) \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Nehemiah 3**

Describe the conditions in which the workers repaired the wall (3:33-37). \_\_\_\_\_

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What attitude of the Jews hinted at their future success? (3:38) \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Nehemiah 4**

Tensions escalated. What new threats must the workers face? (4:1-12) \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley, Charles. *Living in the Power of the Holy Spirit*. (c) 2005 by Nelson Books, Nashville, TN, pp 45-47.

How do the Jews respond? What is in each hand? (4:11-12) \_\_\_\_\_

How is this an allegorical picture of spiritual warfare? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you hold in your hand? A rosary? An open Bible? \_\_\_\_\_

Intensified opposition calls for intensified prayer and common-sense, Spirit-led action!  
“When has your plan to do something good for God met with resistance? What happened next?  
What project or enterprise would you ask God to bless right now?”<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

### **Nehemiah 5**

There is no rest for the weary, and Nehemiah “confronts an additional crisis when he discovers that the people are falling back into the sins that got them sent into exile to begin with. There has been a famine, and some of the Jewish officials are charging heavy interest to their fellow Jews for food and supplies. The burden has become so great on them that many have been forced to sell themselves or their children into slavery to pay off their debt. Nehemiah is outraged that they would leave bondage in Babylon only to become slaves in their own country. He reproaches the officials—who agree to return land and interest.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Nehemiah 6**

What plot is hatched against Nehemiah? (6:1-7) Why is this a particularly precarious time in the construction process? \_\_\_\_\_

Once again, you have to admire Nehemiah! What is his response in 6:9? \_\_\_\_\_

When you are completing your own ‘God assignment’ and meet stiff resistance or opposition, what lesson should be gleaned from 6:9? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Nehemiah 7**

How many people take up residence in Jerusalem? (7:66) \_\_\_\_\_

### **Nehemiah 8**

Ezra did what two important functions for the Jews in 8:8? \_\_\_\_\_

Note that it was necessary for Ezra to interpret the Scriptures for the people because they could no longer speak or “understand classical Hebrew after living in Babylon for so long.

<sup>3</sup> Ponessa, Father Joseph, SSD. *Exile and Return: Come and See Bible Study*. (c) 213 by Emmaus Road Publishing, Steubenville, OH, pp 136-137.

<sup>4</sup> Cavins, Jeff and Tim Gray. *Workbook: The Bible Timeline: The Story of Salvation*. (c) 2019 by Ascension Press, West Chester, PA, pp 241.

Rather, they had adopted Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew that served as the international tongue of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires successively.”<sup>5</sup>

How did the people respond to this intensive, seven-day Scripture training? (7:9-10; 18) \_\_\_\_\_

Do you react in a similar way during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass? \_\_\_\_\_

What is to be the source of our strength? (8:10) \_\_\_\_\_

How much time a day do you spending in just singing or praising God, listening to Christian music, or delighting in Adoration? \_\_\_\_\_

If your time spent ‘rejoicing in the Lord’ is not much, could there be a correlation to your sense of malaise, discouragement, or sloth? \_\_\_\_\_

During this marathon session which would have lasted about 54 hours over 8 days, the “people of Jerusalem had listened as Ezra read the Scriptures. They absorbed the facts, but they still lacked true insight. **Several factors will always be necessary to gain spiritual understanding.** *First, it takes time.* The people had to process what they learned before they came back to build upon that foundation. *Second, it takes the right people.* The people specifically sought out Ezra the scribe to teach them the Scriptures. The Bible repeatedly affirms the importance of godly people imparting life’s wisdom to those willing to learn it. That’s the *third factor: it takes a teachable attitude.* The older leaders were members of Ezra’s peer group, and yet they said, ‘Teach us.’ They demonstrated a genuine desire to learn.”<sup>6</sup>

### Nehemiah 9

This prayer is the longest found in all of Scripture and is noted for its honest expression of pain and humility. Ezra begins by praying an extensive act of contrition. How does he contrast the Jews’ behavior to God’s character? (9:16-17, 33) \_\_\_\_\_

Why have the people found themselves in such a predicament, according to Ezra, who echoes the Minor and Major Prophets? (9:26-31) \_\_\_\_\_

### Nehemiah 10

The people pledge to “not neglect the house of the Lord” (10:40) along with what other promises? (10:30-32) \_\_\_\_\_

This amounts to a significant covenant renewal on the part of the people.

### Nehemiah 12

<sup>5</sup> Bergsma, John and Brant Pitre. *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament.* (c) 2018 by Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA, pp 452.

<sup>6</sup> Swindoll, Charles. *Joshua-Esther: Insight’s Bible Application Guide.* (c) 2013 by Insight for Living, Plano, TX, pp 180-181.

At last the day for the dedication of the wall arrived. Ezra led the procession of purified priests and Levites, choirs, and rejoicing Jews. According to the description of the joyful event in 12:43, what could be “heard from afar off”? (12:43) \_\_\_\_\_

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Not since the days of Joshua had the Feast of Booths been celebrated with such rampant joy!

### **Benefits of Praise**

1. “Praise acts as a spiritual weapon when we are in a spiritual battle.
2. Praise tears down the strongholds in our lives.
3. Praise makes us more sensitive to what the Lord is saying to us.
4. Praise brings forth a spirit of humility.
5. Praise changes the atmosphere.
6. Praise brings us into the realm of God’s glory.
7. Praise softens our hearts to the multiple outpourings of the Holy Spirit.
8. Praise scatters the enemies of God.
9. Praise defeats the design of the enemy.
10. Praise helps us to host the presence of God.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Significance of the Restored Wall**

“The walls of a holy city exist not to keep people out, but to define a sacred space to which people are invited to come. The holy wall is therefore significant mainly for its gates (Psalm 24:7-9). Jesus never calls himself a wall, but he does call himself the point of entry in John 10:7,9: “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep... I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”

Currently bricked up is the very ancient eastern-facing double portal, which Herod called the Susa Gate, but which has mostly been called Golden or Beautiful Gate. Outside this gate Saint Peter performed an act of healing (Acts 3:2). In Jewish tradition, when the Messiah came he would enter the city through that gate. Islamic authorities took the Jewish tradition seriously and bricked the gate up to keep the Messiah out.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Nehemiah 13**

Nehemiah returned to Babylon for twelve years before returning to Jerusalem once again. What three transgressions by the people prove that they are far from true reformation?

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Note that throughout the ages God has called His people to new life and new beginnings. “Jesus spoke to St Francis in the Church of San Damiano and said: ‘Francis, go and rebuild my Church, which, as you see, is falling into ruin all around you.’ In that moment, Francis was praying in a church that was quite literally falling into ruins. The obvious thing was to begin rebuilding it right then and there, stone by stone. But, as Francis came to see, the work of rebuilding

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<sup>7</sup> Oney, Deacon Larry. *Divine Mission: Discovering Your Hope and Purpose*. (c) 2017 by Hope & Purpose. pp 36.

<sup>8</sup> Ponessa, Father Joseph. *Exile and Return*. pp 150.

involved so much more than moving stones. More fundamentally, it involved moving hearts. And hearts are much more difficult to move.

Life in Christ is constant rebuilding. It is turning away from sin and back to Christ again and again, in the midst of joy and suffering, doubt and fear, hope and anxiety. It's being honest about the cracks in our own foundation—our weaknesses and struggles—and allowing Christ's grace to heal those cracks. It's answering his call and allowing him to transform us into the living stones we were made to be."<sup>9</sup>

What 'cracks in your foundation' need addressing? Isaiah 1:16-20 \_\_\_\_\_

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"Have you ever had an experience where you strayed from the Lord, repented, and returned to Him? This may be in a relationship or attitude. What rebuilding did you need to do?"<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

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True conversion of heart takes time, and it more often resembles one step forward and two back. What relationship frustrates you most at the moment? What lesson might Nehemiah have for you? \_\_\_\_\_

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#### *Cultural Context:*

The modern reader often flinches when reading of Nehemiah's treatment of the men who had intermarried with pagan women. However, this was a matter of survival of Jewish identity and culture. Intermarriage with the Gentiles was of serious concern. It is obvious that the "people of God need isolation from the nations to preserve their own covenant relationship with God, rather than being empowered for an offensive advance in mission to the Gentiles."<sup>11</sup>

#### **Historical and Personal Context:**

"Those who return from a far country, a place of sin and separation from God, can find peace and joy again. Reflecting on the commandments of God, examining one's conscience, repenting of sin, and making a firm purpose of amendment can bring great joy today, just as it did in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Just as the exiles returned to Jerusalem with Nehemiah in 444 BC, another group of Jews would return to their homeland 1900 years later. In 1948, following the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust that destroyed the lives and hopes of so many of the Jews, many survivors returned to Israel to rebuild a nation. Similarly, those who are exiled from God by sin and rebellion, can return home to Him, through reflection, repentance, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation."<sup>12</sup>

**(c) Glenda Canfield, March 2022.**

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<sup>9</sup> Franciscan University of Steubenville Fundraising Letter, received March 15, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Cavins, Jeff and Tim Gray. *Workbook: The Bible Timeline: The Story of Salvation*. (c) 2019 by Ascension Press, West Chester, PA, pp 120.

<sup>11</sup> Bergsma. *Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*. pp 456.

<sup>12</sup> Ponessa, Father Joseph. *Exile and Return*. pp 142.