

# THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH



## A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

---

*“And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work.” –Nehemiah 2:18*

---

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament before the 400 silent years. It tells of the return of Nehemiah to Jerusalem, about 12 years after Ezra returned, to exhort the people to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a great man of God, filled with the Spirit and with tremendous faith, courage and passion. He embodied some of the greatest leadership principles found anywhere in Scripture as he led a struggling nation to overcome opposition in the rebuilding of their city and the great wall around it, their culture and, most importantly, their relationship with Yahweh.

Aside from showcasing the character of Nehemiah, the story reveals the faithfulness of God toward His people. In spite of their sins and repeated straying from His covenant, He graciously forgave them and allowed them to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. And after they rebuilt and continued to stray from God, He was faithful to give them chance after chance to return to Him.

The story reminds us of the close connection between Israel's national life and their spiritual life. They truly were called to be "one nation under God." They could only maintain a healthy civil life as they walked in fellowship with Yahweh, following His moral and spiritual laws. Thus, Nehemiah helped Israel rebuild their wall; but more importantly, he helped them rebuild their walk with God – the true key to their security and success as a nation.

The book has two parts: **The rebuilding of the wall (1:1–7:3)** and **the rebuilding of the spiritual life of the people (7:4–13:31)**.

## THE REBUILDING OF THE WALL (*Chapter 1:1-7:3*)

### **Principle #1—A leader feels deeply for people and asks God to move: (1)**

*The book opens with Nehemiah serving King Artaxerxes as his personal cup-bearer, an important position. Yet when his brother Hanani returned from Jerusalem he initiated a concerned inquiry as to how the Jews were doing and the state of the city. He was told about the desperate conditions back in Jerusalem; the walls and gates were broken down and the people were in great trouble. Nehemiah's reaction was to sit down and weep. He immediately fasted for several days before uttering any prayers! Nehemiah modeled for us that it only takes ONE faithful person who truly cares and wants to make a difference. A short summary of his prayers was recorded. After confessing the sins of the nation who continued to desert their God, he recalled God's precious unconditional promises to His people, and asked Him to remember them at this crucial time.*

*He asked God to hear his prayer and grant him favor with the king. Nehemiah prayed his way through every leadership decision he made in this story!*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Nehemiah modeled 2 principles of prayer: 1) Silence and fasting followed by humility and confession (**Read 1 John 1:9**).*

*2) Citing the promises of God back to God. When we affirm God's own words, and stand on them in faith, we are "praying according to His will" (**Read 1 John 5:3,14,15**).*

*A healthy prayer life is always preceded by a healthy knowledge of the Word of God. The more that you know about the character, the ways, and the promises of God, the more effective you will be in talking to God about the issues of life. (**Read John 15:7**).*

***What are you praying for/about right now? Find some verses in the Bible where you can literally pray them back to God.***

*When we pray scripture, then our heart becomes attuned to God's own heart and desires. Then God is pleased to answer!*

## **Principle #2—A leader moves in faith based on deep convictions: (2:1-10)**

*As cupbearer to the king, it was improper for Nehemiah to be sad in the king's presence. He was caught by surprise when Artaxerxes reprimanded him for his unhappy demeanor. Nehemiah uttered a quick prayer to God and then made a huge ask of the king:*

*"If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it" (2:5).*

*He also asked for: 1) Letters to the governors ensuring his safe conduct to Jerusalem and 2) authority to be given timber necessary to reconstruct the city gates. Not only did the king grant all his requests, he also sent army troops to protect Nehemiah on the way.*

*He gave God the glory for answering his many days of prayer and fasting! Yet, this did not mean the task would be easy. Two people made life incredibly difficult for Nehemiah: Sanballat and Tobiah, foreigners who were "officials" in the regions around Jerusalem.*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Just because God is "answering our prayers," this does not mean that there will be no challenges or difficulties in the journey ahead. In fact, trials are always part of God's ways to grow our faith, sharpen our character, increase our hope and experience more of God's love **(Read Romans 5:3-5)**.*

*More significantly, we can display God's character to those around us who don't know Him personally. If you have been pursuing God's agenda, and you are encountering difficulties, do not assume you have made a mistake and turn back. It often means that you are pushing back on evil, so opponents will push back on you. Present your needs to God and allow Him to help you move forward.*

**Are convictions different from beliefs? Explain.**

### **Principle #3—A leader assesses the situation and forms a strategy: (2:11-20)**

*When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he first quietly surveyed the damage. He did this alone, at night, without telling any of his fellow Jews what God had put on his heart. Once he had privately assessed the state of Jerusalem, he presented the problems, and challenged the people to trust his lead.*

*“You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, “Let us arise and build!” So they began this good work (2:17,18).*

*The opponents Sanballat and Tobiah appeared again, mocking their plans and belittling their power to accomplish them. Nehemiah responded wisely and firmly:*

*“The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it” (2:20).*

#### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Nehemiah exercised wisdom in knowing WHEN and HOW to cast vision to his fellow Jews. He knew it would have been premature to simply walk back into town and announce grandiose plans to people who had been struggling for decades.*

*After he had privately gathered information about the conditions and assessed the task ahead, he was prepared to have a vision-casting conversation with key leaders. He also brought God’s sovereign hand into the foreground, making it clear that God had already begun to move on behalf of this vision. No wonder the leaders responded with faith: “Let us arise and build!”*

**Why is a proper assessment of a situation crucial?**

**Why is a strategy important?**

## **Principle #4–A leader unleashes the power of teamwork: (3)**

*Nehemiah took the time to acknowledge everyone who joined in the work. A few details stand out in the list of workers:*

- *Everyone from priests, to perfume-makers, to goldsmiths helped.*
- *Some noblemen refused to help (3:5).*
- *Shallum built with the help of his daughters (3:12).*
- *Some groups repaired bigger sections of the wall (3:13).*
- *Baruch worked with exceptional zeal (3:20).*
- *Many built right near where their houses were located.*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*A great task requires a great army of workers. But workers need to be placed in the most effective positions so that they will remain highly motivated. Workers need to be appreciated for their efforts so that they feel valued. It is also significant that Nehemiah knew people by name. He did not “objectify” people as means to an end.*

*He saw them as real people with real lives. I am sure that as he walked by them every day, they felt loved and inspired by their leader.*

***Who do you have charge over?***

***What can you learn from the example of Nehemiah?***

***What role are you playing in building the kingdom of God through Saguaro Canyon Church?***

***What part of “the wall” are you building in this season of your life?***

## **Principle #5–A leader doesn't let opposition distract from the goal: (4)**

*Once Sanballat and Tobiah saw that the Jews were moving into action, they increased their attacks. They used ridicule and belittling to discourage Nehemiah and company. In turn, Nehemiah resorted to prayer:*

*“Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads . . . for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders” (4:4,5).*

*Soon, the wall reached half its height (4:6). Next, the opponents became angry and plotted to physically disrupt the workers (4:7,8).*

*“But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (4:9).*

*Then, the opponents made death-threats (Read 4:11,12). Nehemiah increased security measures and gave an encouraging word to the project managers: (Read 4:14).*

*Nehemiah both inspired and equipped his work force. They were prepared to fight with the sword in one hand and to lay another brick with the other hand, depending on the need of the moment.*

*“Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked” (4:17,18).*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Nehemiah combined “doing God’s work” with the practical necessities of “being prepared to fight.” We so often make the mistake of creating a divide between secular and sacred activities. But every “work” is sacred, when it is carried out under the watchful eye of God, in obedience to His commands.*

***What might it look like today for you to hold ‘a sword’ in one hand (practical, common-sense measures) and ‘a brick’ in the other hand (building God’s kingdom)?***

***Can you think of modern day parallels?***

## **Principle #6—A leader cares for all people under his/her authority: (5)**

*Nehemiah was more than a wall-builder; he was a social activist. When he learned that the poor were being taken advantage of by the rich in the returned community, he immediately took action. He was angered by the fact that Jews who had been released from bondage in Persia were now being placed in financial bondage by their own fellow Jews! He demanded that high-interest debts be forgiven and confiscated land returned immediately. (Read 5:12-13)*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Through all of his actions, Nehemiah showed a true heart for the welfare of people. He was not just into projects; it was the people and their well-being that mattered. He was hard on those who abused people for selfish gain.*

***In what ways might God use you to fight for the needs and rights of the disadvantaged? Is there some cause He is placing before you, where you can make a difference in this world?***

## **Principle #7—A leader knows that personal integrity is essential: (6:1-14)**

*Sanballat and Tobiah saw that they could not keep the wall from going up; so they tried to bring Nehemiah down. They tried to meet with him to ambush him; but he would not go. They tried to accuse him of mounting a campaign to make himself king of Israel; but he told them they were spreading fake news. Then, they hired one of Nehemiah's trusted friends to lure him to sleep in the temple so that he would escape a murder-plot; but Nehemiah discerned they were trying to snare him into sin so that his name and character would be discredited (only priests could live inside the temple). Nehemiah, as always, brought his enemies and his problems to God in prayer: (Read 6:14)*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

***How do you respond to false accusations against you? Why is it paramount for leaders to speak the truth?***



## **Principle #8—A leader perseveres until the job is completed: (6:15–7:3)**

*(Read 6:15) Fifty-two days! That’s all it took for the people to rebuild the entire wall around Jerusalem. What a display of God’s powerful help and people’s faithful, dedicated work. A lot can happen in a short amount of time when God and people decide to move together. Meanwhile, the opposition was losing strength.*

*“When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (6:16).*

*Once the wall was completed, Nehemiah made sure it worked efficiently. He gave great attention to detail, appointing gatekeepers, musicians, priests, district officers and city leaders to make sure the security of the city was efficient. Most importantly, he appointed men of integrity who revered the Lord to key positions: **(Read 7:2)**.*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Nehemiah’s attention to detail makes it clear that he was doing his work for the glory of God. The apostle Paul wrote about this. **(Read Colossians 3:23-24)**.*

*Nehemiah led a building project and governed the people.*

***How does Nehemiah’s example inspire you concerning the work God has given you to do?***

## THE REBUILDING OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE PEOPLE *(Chapter 7:4-13)*

*The wall completed, now the story turns to how Nehemiah worked to insure the healthy functioning of the spiritual/moral life of the returned community. It is one thing to have a city built. It is another thing to have a city full of people who are walking in God's ways.*

### **Principle #9—A leader puts the right people in the right place: (7:4-73)**

*God put it on Nehemiah's heart to search out the genealogical records of the original group of returnees under Zerubbabel. (The list in Nehemiah 7 corresponds with the list in Ezra 2.)*

*His reason was to make sure that the city was populated with legitimate Jews who could prove their birthright. He also had a longer-term goal of bringing balance to the urban-rural distribution. His goal was that 1 out of every 10 families would settle inside the city of Jerusalem **(Read 11:1-2)**.*

*As Matthew Henry said: "It is one thing to properly build a city. It is another thing to properly people a city."*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

***Why is it important to recognize the right people for a project or position?***

***Have you ever experienced a time when the wrong people were in the wrong position, and things went sideways? Explain the situation.***

## **Principle #10—A leader teaches people the truth, yet with grace: (8)**

*Here is the story of an amazing national convocation, declared by Nehemiah and led by Ezra. The purpose was to bring the people back under the hearing of God's Word and obedience to it. (Read 8:3-4)*

*Due to the long captivity in Babylon/Persia, many Jews had lost their aptitude in the Hebrew language. Thus, teachers and interpreters had to help them properly understand God's Word. (Read 8:7-8)*

*Once they understood the meaning, people began to weep over what they were hearing (likely the original covenant with Yahweh, including the blessings and curses associated with it). The leaders encouraged the people, in spite of the heaviness of the message: (Read 8:10-11)*

*On the following day, Ezra had a special reading time with the leaders of Israel. They found the original command concerning the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:33-40); a clear indicator that they were reading the books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy). They immediately obeyed by calling for a nation-wide Feast of Booths celebration. Ezra publicly read God's Word each day. (Read 8:16-17)*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Ezra had a personal commitment to be a man of God's Word (Read Ezra 7:10). Now we see him calling the entire nation to hear and heed God's Word.*

*People did not own personal copies of the Bible in that day, so the way they heard the word of God read, was in public settings, such as this one.*

*Paul wrote to the young pastor, Timothy, "Give attention to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13).*

***In what settings are you able to read the Word of God aloud in a group?*** *If you've never done this before, give it a try. After you've read the Word of God, discuss as a group what it means and how it personally impacts you.*

## **Principle #11–A leader admits past sins and asks for God’s mercy: (9)**

*All of chapter 9 is a prayer – the longest prayer recorded in the Bible – and it has only one focus: recounting the nation’s sins and confessing them. The nation gathered 24 days after Ezra began reading the Scriptures to them. Led by the Levitical priests, they poured out their hearts to God. (Read 9:3).*

*The major portion of the prayer (9:5-31) is a recounting of God’s dealings with rebellious Israel from the day they came out of Egypt until the present (roughly 1,000 years). God was faithful and merciful, though His people repeatedly refused to walk in His ways. The last section (9:32-37) was a plea for God to take notice of their current needs and to mercifully watch over them as they sought to rebuild.*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Why so much confession of sin? Because sin hinders our fellowship with God, and blocks His power flowing in our lives.*

*Confession re-opens the connection between humans and God. The Bible teaches that the sins of our forefathers pass down and impact up to four generations. Recognizing, naming, admitting and repenting of the sins that still show up in us and our children and grandchildren is Biblical.*

*Take time to seriously do this, on a small scale of family sins (like deceit, affairs, addictions, anger, stubbornness, lethargy, pride etc). He is ready to break generational patterns so that the future generations can live in freedom. Once you have confessed, you can thank God for His forgiveness, which He bestows immediately upon those who confess (Read Psalm 32 and 1 John 1:8-9).*

## **Principle #12–A leader solemnizes his/her commitments: (9:38–10:39)**

*The leaders signed a document outlining their commitment to walk in obedience to the covenant with Yahweh. (Read 10:29)*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Although words on paper do not determine behavior, it is good to inscribe our commitments for all to see. This not only solemnizes our personal decision to walk with God, it also holds us accountable in the sight of others who witness our “vows.”*

*Is there some significant commitment that you need to make to God that could be put into writing, with witnesses looking on?*

## **Principle #13–A leader has a long-term view of success: (11:1–12:26)**

*As noted earlier (chapter 7), Nehemiah wanted to ensure the city of Jerusalem was populated with true Jews who were committed to walking in obedience to the covenant with Yahweh. The lists in chapters 11 and 12 were intended to make a public record of those who were chosen to live within the newly restored city walls.*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Why are lists important?*

*Why do organizations have Org Charts (organizational structure)? Why is it important to know who is responsible for what?*

*How can this be applied to the home or daily life?*

## **Principle #14–A leader celebrates the wins with the team: (12:27-47)**

*Two large choirs sang as they walked in the opposite direction around the top of the new wall. They then met in the temple and continued praising God for all that had been accomplished. (Read 12:42-43)*

### **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*Why is celebration an important part of a family, team, or church?*

*What is the greatest celebration you remember?*

## **Principle #15–A leader keeps pointing people to God’s agenda: (13)**

*After staying 12 years in Jerusalem (compare 2:1 with 13:6) Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes in Persia. After a short time there, he was granted permanent leave to return to continue as the governor of Jerusalem. When he arrived back in Jerusalem, he was shocked to find that Eliashib the High Priest had given Tobiah the Ammonite (the former great enemy of Nehemiah and the wall building effort) a large room to reside in inside of the temple – the very room that was supposed to be used to store the supplies given by the people to support the priests who served in the temple! As a result, the priests had quit working in the temple and returned to their own private homes and fields to survive!! (Read 13:8-11)*

*The Jews had strayed in many ways during Nehemiah’s brief absence. They were doing business on the Sabbath day instead of resting. Their city was turned into a market-place for trading on God’s holy day!*

*Just as Jesus would overturn the tables of the money-changers in the temple, Nehemiah quickly put a stop to all the merchandising in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. He stationed guards to keep people from entering the city with merchandise on the Sabbath.*

*He also found the practice of intermarriage flourishing again. The men were marrying Philistine, Ammonite and Moabite women. The children of these unions could not even speak the Hebrew language! Even the High Priest’s son had married the daughter of Sanballat, Nehemiah’s lifelong enemy! Suffice it to say that Nehemiah the reformer went to his grave trying to reform post exilic Israel and keep them from repeating the same old sins.*

## **THOUGHTS TO PONDER**

*How can traditions be helpful? How can they be harmful?*

*How can we avoid going back to our sinful ways? (Read Proverbs 26:11)*

---

## **CONCLUSION**

*The Book of Nehemiah provides a great illustration of how prayer and hard work can accomplish seemingly impossible things when a person determines to trust and obey God. As a leader, Nehemiah was a man of responsibility, vision, prayer, action, cooperation, and compassion who triumphed over opposition with proper motivation.*

*How has this book inspired you to become a better leader?*

*What are some practical examples you have implemented in your life as a result of reading and studying Nehemiah?*

---

## **REFERENCES**

1. Message 14 – The Building of the Wall Nehemiah (*Oakpointe Church–Bob Shirock*) [www.oakpointe.org](http://www.oakpointe.org)
2. Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 200-201.