

Before starting this lesson, read the book of **Nehemiah**. Feel free to skip over long lists of names. You may find it helpful to read the book, go thru the lesson and then read the book once again. Since it is short, it will not be difficult to do.

Nehemiah the book

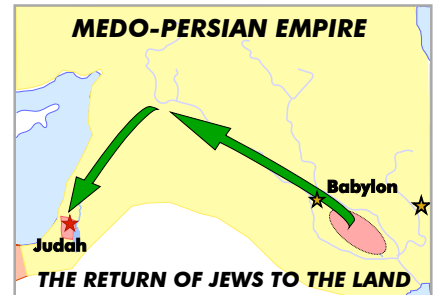
It is Jewish history covering a period of 20 years, from 445 to 425 BC.

It describes a 3rd group of Jewish exiles in Babylon,

returning to their land of Israel and rebuilding.

With Jewish content and written by Jewish people, it uses the Jewish writing style.

The information is not in chronological order. It is arranged by topic



Outline

Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls	chapters 1-6
Rebuilding spiritual lives	chapters 7-13

Nehemiah the person

He was governor of Judah for 12 years - from 445-433 BC. and then again c. 428 BC.

He kept historical journals, writing about current events and how he responded to them.

Some 25 years later, Ezra, guided by the Holy Spirit, took parts of these journals and formed them into the book we know as Nehemiah.

The historical background

The **BABYLONIAN EMPIRE** conquers the Jews, starting in 606 BC and sends them into exile in the valley just south of Babylon.

Sixty seven years go by. And then the Babylonian empire is conquered.

The **MEDO-PERSIAN EMPIRE** begins in 539 BC.

Cyrus, the first king – in 536 BC – tells Jewish exiles

they can return to their homeland in Jerusalem.

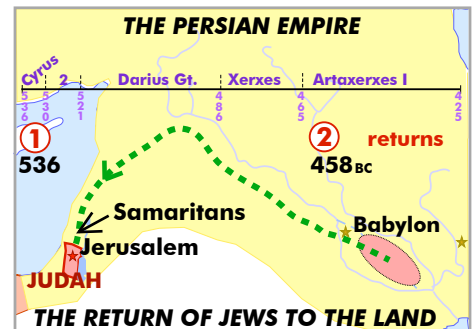
50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of...

their first governor, Zerubbabel and the high priest, Joshua.

Artaxerxes, the 6th Persian king – in 458 BC –

makes the same offer 78 years later.

3-5,000 Jews returned with Ezra, a Jewish priest and scribe.



Twelve more years go by. It is now **446 BC**.

The Jews have been in their homeland for 90 years.

Gradually the name of the land is changing from Judah to its original name - the land of Israel.

The Jerusalem Temple, their towns and family farms have been rebuilt.

But the **wall** around Jerusalem is still broken down.

This means the Temple, the graves of the former Jewish kings and all the homes within the city are unprotected. So the Jews finally start to repair and rebuild the wall.

This brings opposition from their enemies - the Samaritans and Arabs.

Their grandparents had tried to stop the building of the **Temple** 75 years earlier.

Now it is the grandchildren who want to stop the building of the **wall**.

They send a letter to Artaxerxes, who is still king of Persia.

Ezra puts a copy of this letter in his book

This is a copy of the letter they sent him. To Artaxerxes, from your servants, the men of Trans-Euphrates. The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you, have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations of the walls. Ezra 4:11.

Verse 15 ...we are sending this message ...so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records, you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place of rebellion from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed.

Twelve years earlier, Artaxerxes, this same king, had sent **Ezra** to Jerusalem. He sent him...

To deliver money for the maintenance of the Temple
To develop civil leadership with Jewish laws.

The king had never thought about their city wall or the possibility of Jewish revolt. Everything he knew about the Jews was positive. But following the letter's suggestion, Artaxerxes checks the historical records. He discovers that in the past, during the Babylonian empire, Jews in Jerusalem had rebelled 3 times against Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar did destroy the city because of the rebellion. He decides the writers of the letter have a point. So he writes them back.

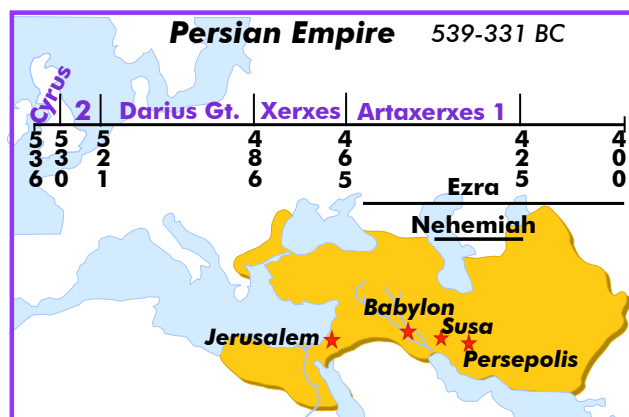
*Greetings. The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence. I issued an order and a search was made and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition. Ezra 4:18-19 Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt **until I so order**. Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests? 4:21-22*

Artaxerxes tells the Samaritans and Arabs, *stop the Jews from building the walls of Jerusalem*. The Samaritans are delighted to follow the king's order. According to Ezra 4:23, the Samaritans go to Jerusalem and force the Jews to stop rebuilding the city walls. Altho the letter did not say to destroy what the Jews had already repaired, the enemy takes advantage of the situation. They burn the wooden gates that had just been set into the wall. They knock down the repaired sections. This happens in **446 BC**, some 12 years after Ezra came to Jerusalem.

Six months to a year go by. It is now 445 BC. Back in Persia, life is going on as usual. The king divides his time between the palaces in Babylon, Susa and Persepolis. In each place he has people to serve him. In Susa there is a Jewish man. His name is **Nehemiah**. He is the king's cup bearer.

To us, that means butler. But in the Persian court, he is responsible to taste the king's wine in case it might contain poison. In other words, he is the king's protector - a position of importance and trust. Since he is around the king when he is relaxing, it is only natural for the king to discuss things with him. So he is also the king's confidant.

Ordinarily one would not expect a Jewish person to have this position. But Esther and Mordecai had been queen and secretary of state in the days of his father. He had seen all the thing they had done for the empire. In addition, his father, Xerxes, had been assassinated in his own bedroom by **Persians** working in the palace. Artaxerxes decides he will be safer with Jewish men around him. This is why he had **Ezra** in Babylon and **Nehemiah** as protector and confidant in Susa.



With this background we can begin our study of Nehemiah. Chapter 1:1 gives us the date - the month of Kislev in the king's 20th year, which would be November 445 BC. Ninety-one years have gone by since the Jews first went back to their land. Nehemiah is in the palace in Susa.



According to verse 2, Hanani, his brother, and other Jewish men have just come from Jerusalem to give Nehemiah the latest news. They tell him the people and city are disgraced. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and the gates are burned.

Nehemiah is shocked. He assumed that in the last 91 years, surely the wall had been rebuilt and the houses within the city had been repaired. In all cultures of that day, the capital city was built to reflect the glory of their gods. Jerusalem had been known by everyone as the *city of God*, the God of Israel. But a broken-down wall and burned gates certainly does not

reflect His glory. In fact, it gives the impression He is powerless - He cannot protect His city. What a disgrace to God's name and reputation.

Nehemiah is even more grieved when he learns that the Jews **had** been building the wall. But the king he works for had given a stop work order. He had not known about it because he works in Susa. The command was given when the king was in Persepolis.

In his sorrow, Nehemiah turns to God, weeping, fasting and praying. Only God can change the king's heart. But God cannot work when there is disobedience in the lives of His people.

So in his prayer, Nehemiah first of all confesses the **unfaithfulness** of the Jewish people, including himself. He is not guilty of idolatry or rebellion against God. But he knows he has not obeyed perfectly in every way. So he includes himself in the confession.

Nehemiah then appeals to the faithfulness of God and His promises.

*Remember the instruction You, God, gave your servant Moses, saying, If you, Jews, are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to Me and obey My commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a **dwelling for My Name**. 1:8-9*

God said He chose Jerusalem as His city; His name was to always be connected with it.

Artaxerxes had said the wall of Jerusalem could not be rebuilt until **he** changed the decree. So Nehemiah closes his prayer in verse 11 with a personal request.

Lord, give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.

To put it more simply, he is praying,

*Lord, show me how to influence the king so he **will** change the decree.*

Nehemiah knows it will not be easy. Altho he talks with the king every day, he cannot bring up the subject and say, *The Jews need their wall in Jerusalem. You need to change the command.*

Nehemiah has to wait until the king brings up the subject. I appreciate Nehemiah's patience. He does not rush ahead of God and try to get the job done himself. He prays and then does the hardest - he waits. He believes God will work in ordinary ways.

Four months go by. One day as he is serving the king, Artaxerxes asks,

Why are you so sad when you are not ill? You must be sad of heart.

At the end of 2:2 Nehemiah writes, *then I was very much afraid.*

Nehemiah has not *purposely* looked sad to get the king's attention. Under Persian law there was a death penalty for anyone showing sadness while serving the king. By mentioning Nehemiah's sadness, the king is saying he has broken that law.

No wonder Nehemiah is afraid. In response, Nehemiah gives both a tactful and truthful answer. All cultures of that time placed importance on the protection of the graves of their ancestors. So he starts with something that he and the king have in common. He explains the graves of **his** ancestors have no protection. The city gates have been burned and the houses in the city lie in ruins. The king asks, *what do you want?*

At last, here is the chance Nehemiah has been waiting for. Notice his immediate reaction in 2:4, *then I prayed*.

During the 4 months of waiting Nehemiah has used the time to plan **what** to ask for and **how** to ask for it. So his prayer is not, *what should I say?*, but rather, *I know what to say. Now Lord, help me say it effectively and tactfully.*

We can see that Nehemiah has carefully thought about it by the 3 things he asks for.

In verse 5, he asks for permission to rebuild the wall.

In verse 7 he asks for letters that prove the king changed the decree.

He also asks for a line of credit to get provisions and timber from the king's forest.

Artaxerxes agrees. He changes his decree, appoints Nehemiah as governor of Judah and commands the city and wall to be rebuilt. The date is 445 BC.

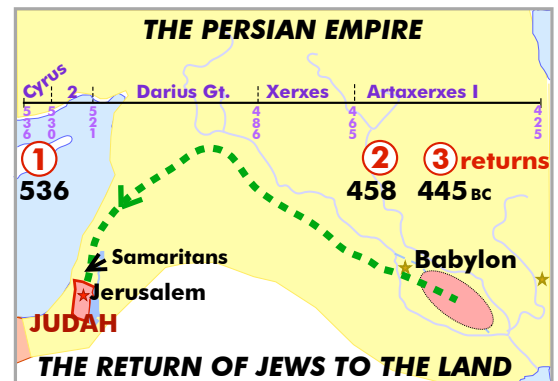
This is now the 3rd return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. The number of Jews who return with Nehemiah is unknown. It is evidently a much smaller group, because altho the trip from Susa to Jerusalem is 800 miles, it takes them only about 2 months. (See note at end of lesson)

When Nehemiah was working in the palace, he showed he was a man of **prayer, patience** and **wisdom**.

Now that he is in Jerusalem, he will show even more wonderful qualities.

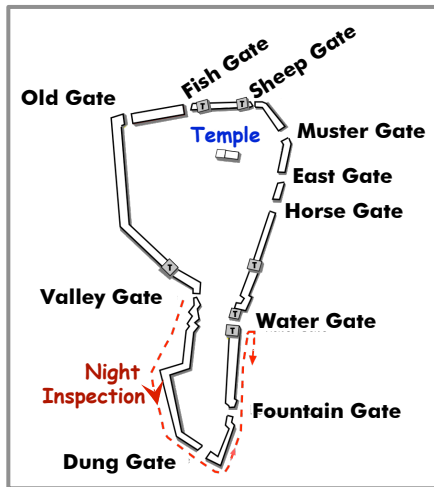
Humility

He does not make a big announcement about who he is and what he is going to do.



Practicality.

He takes 3 days to get a good rest. He understands that to make wise decisions, his mind and body need to be rested. Then he quietly collects the facts without a lot of emotion or people around him. He goes out at night and with the light of the full moon, he assess the damage to the walls and what needs to be done. It is only after he has gathered all the facts and taken time to evaluate them, that he calls the people together and presents his plan.



Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem, meaning the wall, 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 upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding'. So they began this good work. 2:17

When the enemy hears of their plan, they question Nehemiah. According to chapter 2:19 representatives of the enemy include Sanballat the Horonite - a part of the Samaritans, as well as a man of Ammonite heritage and an Arab. Nehemiah tells them in verse 20,

The God of heaven will give us success. We His servants will start rebuilding. But as for you - Samaritans, Ammonites and Arabs, you have no share in Jerusalem, or any claim or historic right to it.

Nehemiah knows how to organize and get people working as a team. Because of the enemy, the wall cannot be built just one section at a time. It needs to go up all at once.

So he gets thousands of Jews involved from thruout the entire area. They come to Jerusalem and he divides them into 42 groups. Each group is to work on a section of the wall that is nearest to where they are staying.

Chapter 3 is a summary of who did what. From the list we can see the co-operation - the high priest, other priests, Levites, mayors with the adult daughters from the outlying towns, people from all the towns, merchants, pharmacists and goldsmiths.

Some haul away rubble while others take usable stones and build. As they begin, no one says this work is too hard; they have never built a wall or this manual labor is beneath them.



To get an accurate picture, the complete wall will be about 2 miles in circumference, 9 - 15 feet thick and 10-15 ft. high. Some parts are standing and need only a little repair. Parts that are broken down, have a lot of the used rock within a short distance. But even with this, re-building the wall is not easy. Their enemies do everything possible to harass and make things difficult.

Chapter 4 describes their tactics. It is here we see Nehemiah's practical godliness in the ways he responds.

The enemies start with **ridicule** and scorn. 2 of the enemies say,

Look at the wall the Jews are building. It is so weak that if a fox jumps on it, it will fall over.

Nehemiah and the people do not reply. He asks God to deal with the insults and they continue building.

Nehemiah also has the practical idea to build the wall all the way around at just half of the final height. That way they can have everything enclosed and have greater security in a shorter amount of time. 4:6

The enemy soon discover that ridicule is not going stop the wall from getting built. So they decide to **physically attack** the Jews either while they are building, or when they are going to and from their homes to work. Nehemiah prays first and then sets up a guard thruout the day as well as the night. Notice the balance between the spiritual and the practical. He prays, but then does the logical to protect himself and the people.

Opposition from the **enemy** is bad enough. But then Nehemiah has to deal with the **Jews** themselves.

Some are getting **discouraged** after just a week or two. The work is hard and there is so much rubble to clear away.

Nehemiah tells them to be courageous and then he does the logical.

He divides up the work load. For part of the day, some haul away the rubble, some build and others stand guard.

Later in the day, the ones standing guard do heavy labor and the ones who did heavy labor stand guard.

Other Jews are **fearful** for the lives of their families in the outlying villages.

Nehemiah tells them to believe God will protect them and again does the logical.

He brings the families from the outlying villages into town. Not only will they be protected, but they also can help in the work and watch for the enemy.

When the enemy cannot stop the **people** from working, they try to hinder **Nehemiah**.

First, they suggest he talk it over with them so they can reach a compromise. He can decide where to meet but it should be at least 20 miles north of Jerusalem. Their goal is two-fold - to **stall** the work thru discussion and to get Nehemiah out of town so they can **kill him**. But Nehemiah sees thru their plan and replies

I am carrying on a great project and do not have time to go. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you? 6:3

When that does not work, the enemy tries to **destroy his reputation**. They circulate a letter saying Nehemiah is leading a rebellion against the Persians. As soon as the wall is finished, he plans to set himself up as king. They assume Nehemiah will now get together with them to defend himself.

Nehemiah does defend himself, but not at a meeting. He sends them a written denial and then asks the Lord to keep **him** from getting discouraged. Notice he is aware that even as a spiritual leader he also is capable of getting discouraged.

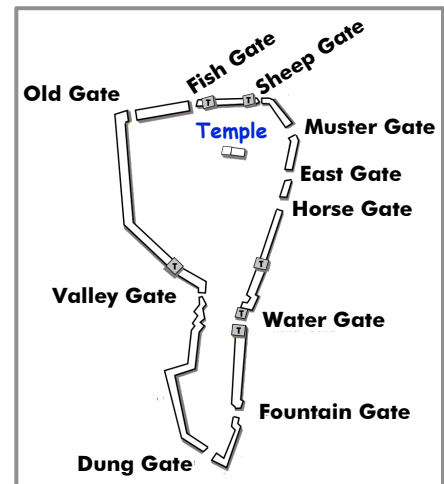
The enemy's final plan is the most subtle - **to use the spiritual** against a spiritual man. They bribe one of the Jewish prophets to give a false message from God. The prophet tells Nehemiah that he will be killed unless he hides inside the Temple. It is in this opposition we see the depth of Nehemiah's godliness.

Nehemiah knows God's commands. Only those from the tribe of Levi are allowed inside the Jewish Temple. He is **not** a Levite, which means he would be disobeying God if he went inside. Because the message contradicts what God has said, he knows this message is not from God. This is why he refuses and says it would be a sin for him to do it.

Nehemiah and the Jews face tremendous obstacles. But there are thousands of Jews involved in the building project. Because they not only pray, but also work long hours, in shifts and God's blessing is on them, according to 6:15, they are able to finish the wall in just 52 days. This is a miracle.

With the wall completed, Nehemiah appoints guards to open the gates every morning and close them every evening. The city is now protected.

The people stay in the area because in 5 days is the Jewish feast of Trumpets. This was a one-day celebration of offerings and the blowing of the ram's horn. It was a reminder of their covenant relationship and a calling them back to God. But they are not sure what God expects of them. So they ask Ezra the priest, to read God's laws to them from the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra reads a portion in Hebrew and then other priests take turns translating it into the Aramaic language and explaining what it means. Aramaic is the language the Jews have been speaking for the last 100 years.



The people stand listening for 6 hours - from daybreak until noon. As they listen, they begin to weep and are discouraged. Ezra and the leaders say they should use this day, not to look at themselves and their failures, but at God and His greatness. They should rejoice in what has been accomplished and how God has helped them because they are His people. It should be a day of joy and praise.

The next day the people return to their homes because it is time for the last of their harvests - the fruit harvest. Three weeks later they come back to Jerusalem for the week-long Feast of Tabernacles or Succóth. Once again these days are for joy and thanksgiving. This time they are thanking God for the blessings and harvests of the past year. During the 7 days they celebrate and also listen to Ezra as he continues to read from the book of Deuteronomy - a summary of God's laws.

As the people hear God's Word, the Holy Spirit is working in their lives. We know this because 2 days after the feast ends, the people again gather in Jerusalem in an attitude of repentance. In 9:3, we are told...

they stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God.

For 3 hours they listen and for 3 hours they confess their sin. **Then** they worship. Only when they deal with their **unholiness** can they truly worship God in *His* holiness.

According to chapter 10, Ezra and the leaders prepare an agreement of obedience for everyone to sign.

They agree not to marry anyone who worships pagan gods. They also agree to keep Sabbath laws. This was for the Jews in the Old Testament because the Sabbath was a sign between God and the Jewish people. They also agreed to bring the first of their harvests and money to the Levites. This provides food and income for the spiritual leaders and for the poor in the nation.

While everyone is in Jerusalem, Nehemiah says more people need to move into the capital city to develop and protect it. Some volunteer and some are assigned.

Everything to this point happened in the 1st year of Nehemiah's leadership.

It includes chapters 1-4 and 6-11.

Nehemiah continues for another 11 years as a godly and effective governor from 445 – 433 BC.

Chapter 5 gives examples of his godly leadership during these years.

Wealthy Jews are taking advantage of other Jews who have land but not enough working cash. When these “cash-poor” Jews have to borrow money from their neighbors, they are being charged 12% interest or required to use their land and children as collateral. If they do not repay the loan on time, the wealthy neighbors are taking title to their land and taking their children as servants either for themselves or to sell to others. There is so much injustice, they finally ask Nehemiah for help.

His 1st reaction is anger because this is so wrong. Nehemiah says,

I pondered them (these charges) in my mind and THEN accused the nobles and officials. 5:7

He knows it is wrong, but before he takes action, he takes time to think things thru. According to verse 9 he then tells the officials, *What you are doing is not right.*

He commands them to stop charging interest and give the land back to the people. To put this in context, Nehemiah is **not** saying it is wrong to charge interest in business. He is saying it is wrong to charge interest when people need money to sustain life and the money they had in the past, they had used responsibly. In other words, the problem was not due to reckless living and reckless choices.

After 12 years, Nehemiah returns to Susa, to again work for the king, in 433 BC. 5:12.

Some commentators suggest that he returns the following year in 432. While there are no specific numbers, I would like to suggest it is several years before he returns.

First, because in 13:6, Nehemiah says, *after some time I asked leave of the king and came (back) to Jerusalem...*

The phrase “after some time” can mean “at the end of the year”, but it can also mean “after a few years”.

The context of chapter 13 also supports the need for more than a year.

The people had been living up the agreement of obedience when Nehemiah left. But the conditions he finds when he returns require more than just to the end of that year

The high priest had allowed one enemy, Tobiah, to store his grain in a storage room on the Temple grounds. These rooms were only for the priests to use – it was “sacred” ground.

The grandson of the high priest has married the daughter of Sanballat, another of the pagan enemies 13:28

The business people are now doing business on the day God said they should rest.

Jewish men have married pagan women who still worship idols and are raising the children in **their** culture.

I suggest Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem c. 5 years later, in 428 BC.

When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem the 1st time, the *walls* were in ruins.

When he comes the 2nd time, their *spiritual lives* are in ruins.

Typical of Jewish writing, the chapters are not in chronological order. They are based on topic.

Chapter 12 has lists of Levite and priestly families and then gives an example of a special event involving the Levites.

Chapter 13 is the problem and reasons for the correction of the Jews' spiritual lives.

Knowing God's principle that obedience must come before worship, the events of chapter 13 happen before chapter 12.

When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, he immediately deals with each area of disobedience.

He removes the enemy from the Temple grounds

He removes the high priest's grandson from the priesthood.

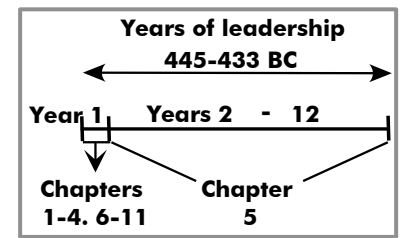
If this had not been done, the grandson would eventually have become head priest and led the people into pagan practices.

He stops business from being done on the Sabbath and restores the support of the Levite spiritual leaders.

It is **after this** that he leads the Jewish people and their nation Judah/Israel in the dedication of Jerusalem's wall.

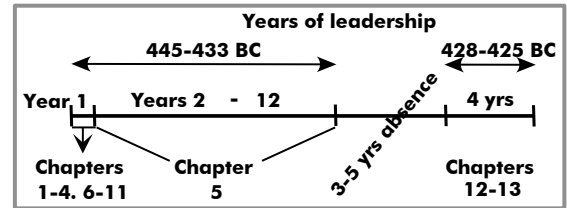
This means the dedication is some 15 years after they finished building it. In our day, that would not be logical or believable.

But this is 2400 years ago, when cultures were very different.



Nehemiah had been sent by the Persian king to oversee the rebuilding of the wall and then be governor of the nation. If he had led a national celebration and dedication of the wall, it would appear he was making a declaration of national independence. Before any dedication, the Persian king would need to understand Nehemiah's purpose as well as give his permission.

So after building the wall, there was no dedication, but Nehemiah remained as governor for 11 more years. He then returned to the king in Susa, to resume working for him. Naturally the king would expect him to stay for awhile. Then after several years, Artaxerxes sends him back to be governor once again.



After first dealing with the disobedience, it is now time, some 15 years since building the wall, that Nehemiah can lead the Jews in a dedication of their capital Jerusalem with the security of the finished wall.

The book of Nehemiah gives us 20 years of Jewish history after the exile, from 445 - 425 BC.

We know it cannot be after that, because God called Nehemiah to serve in a **civil** role. This required the Persian king to appoint him. Artaxerxes, under whom Nehemiah served, died in 425 BC. The next 3 kings were the 3 sons of Artaxerxes. The first was killed by the 2nd, who was killed by the 3rd. All this happened within one year. The one who remained did not use the Jews in his service. So Nehemiah was no longer governor after 425 BC. While he no doubt remained in Jerusalem, but did not have a public ministry.

To us, the book ends abruptly. But it does not need to say anymore.

It has showed us that what God sent Nehemiah to do as a civil leader, he accomplished.

It has given us examples of **practical godliness** that we can use in our lives.

When others need to make life changes, but we cannot or should not say anything, the practical, godly way is to...

Pray and wait for them to bring up the subject.

We use the waiting time to plan what to say and how to say it.

When the opportunity comes, we pray for the ability to speak effectively and tactfully.

And unless they bring it up again, we do not keep nagging. Say it once and let the Holy Spirit take over.

When others are guilty of wrong actions including addictions or abuse and it affects our lives, we pray and think it thru.

Do we have the authority or right to take action.

What specifically are we going to say or do?

Are we willing to set boundaries, be involved with intervention or take legal action, such as reporting it to the police or taking it to court in the case of embezzlement.

If we are not willing, we should not say or do anything. We would only become part of the problem by enabling them to continue. It also means we need to get help for ourselves so we have courage to take godly, practical action.

In times of danger, of course we pray. But we also take action to protect our lives and property.

We lock the doors and windows of our home. We use the laws God gives us for our protection.

If we are falsely accused, yes, we ask God to defend us.

Then we put our denial down on paper and get it to the right people. We pray and document the situation.

When facing a major decision, to be godly and practical, we first take time to rest our mind and body.

We then pray, quietly collect the facts and weigh them, pro and con.

Once we know what to do, we move ahead, step by step in a logical, orderly way.

When other believers give us advice, we listen, pray and check with God's rules and boundaries in Scripture.

If there is a contradiction, we obey what God has said.

When others are discouraged, yes we encourage them to trust the Lord, to pray and read Scripture.

But we also do things to help them. We suggest others who can provide them with expertise and answers.

Like Nehemiah, God wants us to be **intensely spiritual**.

But He also wants us to be **perfectly natural and thoroughly practical**.

This is **practical godliness**!

EXTRA INFORMATION FOR THE STUDIOUS AND INQUISITIVE

From page 3: time taken for the journey – 2-3 months – How we get that amount of time

They had left the first month and finished the wall near the end of the 6th month = 6 months

The building of the wall took 1 ½ months (52 days)

They would have needed at least 1 ½ months to plan and collect timber and other supplies for the project

That leaves 2-3 months for the trip itself.

Nehemiah's frequent prayer, *Remember me* means *I obeyed, therefore I ask Your blessing on my life*.

Dates of building and their leaders

Zerubbabel – led in building the 2nd Temple 536-516 BC;

Nehemiah – led in rebuilding the Jerusalem wall 445-433