

# Nehemiah 1:1-4

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[0:00] That has also been turning to joy as we begin a new study together. And we'll spend most of this summer, the next couple of months, looking together at the book of Nehemiah. Let me begin this morning as I heard a sermon this week on this book.

There was a quote read from a book by a man named Wesley Finn called *Man Ruined and Restored*. I just want to begin reading to you this quote, this little story he told.

And a preacher made the mistake of showing two boys the text he would be preaching from that Sunday, the previous Saturday afternoon. When he turned his back, the boys glued some of the pages of his Bible together.

Not a funny joke, young men. So on Sunday, when he stood to preach, he read, And Noah, when he was 120 years old, took unto himself a wife who was, then turning the page, 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high, built of gopher wood, and pitch within and without.

Puzzled, he paused, read it again, and then looked up at his congregation and said, I have read the Bible through many, many times, but this is the first time I have ever read this.

[1:11] Yet I believe the Bible to be true from cover to cover, so I accept it as truth that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Reading that to you just to say, there are parts of our Bible that have yet to be peeled open.

And that's a sad thing in American Christianity, that we altogether have neglected whole sections of the Scriptures. Many Christians walk around acting as if the only inspired part of the Bible is the New Testament.

I made a little jest at you earlier. Some of us just carry New Testaments around with us, and that's okay. There's such valuable truths contained within, but it's certainly a mark of a mature Christian when we begin to value the Old Testament Scriptures.

We begin to see that they speak of Christ as well. And those of us who are standing on this side of the cross now have the ability to see all of the fulfillment of the promises of God.

And therefore, the Old Testament Scriptures become that much more precious to us. It's a people not looking to the promise, wanting to know how it is that this promise will be fulfilled, but having seen it fulfilled, we now get to take on a new and a deeper appreciation for the things contained in the Old Testament.

[2:25] And so, it's my hope as we peel the pages of Nehemiah open that you will begin to appreciate the Old Testament text as much of as the first.

Now, the book of Nehemiah today, I'm going to give you kind of a sweeping overview of it. It records events chronologically from Nehemiah's first term as governor of Jerusalem, those of you who care about dates, from about 445 to 433 B.C.

That's Nehemiah 1-12, to his second term as governor, possibly beginning about 424 B.C. That's the place that we put this book. Now, you may be a bit confused, because in your Bible, it's going to be ordered.

So, we have 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah. Where does Nehemiah fall, though, in the timeline of reality, of the actual world?

These are ordered by history books. It doesn't work out quite that way. At the same time as Nehemiah, we have Haggai and Zechariah, the events that happen in the book of Esdras, and then Malachi.

[3:30] Really, if we were going to put it in chronological order, it belongs towards the end of our Old Testament. This is after Babylonian exile. This is the people returning again to the land that God had given them.

God goes silent after Malachi comes and prophesies for 400 years, and then comes back on the scene when we see the heralding of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

So, that's where this fits. Some of you may have a chronological Bible, or they're kind of neat because they break things apart and put them in that proper order. Recognize that this is not laid out normally, normatively, in that way.

They're grouped by types of books. And here we have a book of history. So, that's where this falls. Nehemiah was not written by Nehemiah. It's widely accepted that it was written by Ezra.

In fact, the Latin Vulgate calls Nehemiah Ezra II. It's a continuation of. The early historical evidences actually show Ezra and Nehemiah as one book.

[ 4 : 33 ] Now, there's certainly some first-hand quotations believed to be taken from Nehemiah's own journal, Ezra pulled from. But the evidences we have, we see the recurrent phrase, hand of the Lord, very similar writing.

And then as well as Ezra's role as a priest-scribe, which would have granted him access to the royal archives of the Persian Empire. So, we see these vast lists of the numbers of people that returned to Jerusalem.

And Ezra would have actually had the access to those records, whereas Nehemiah would have not. So, it's widely accepted that Ezra was actually the writer of the book of Nehemiah. Now, at this point, you may be saying, great, fantastic facts.

We know where it falls in time. We know who wrote it. But why are we going to be using Nehemiah? I've said to you already, I hope to give you an appreciation of the Old Testament text. Is that really a good reason, though, to delve into it together?

It's a small reason, not a large reason, but it is a reason. The reason we're going to study Nehemiah together this summer is that I believe it's very timely for us. The place that our church is now.

[ 5 : 41 ] And I'll share a little more with you as we go on through this Sunday and in the coming weeks. And you'll begin to understand, I think, why I believe that to be the case. But let me just say to you, as an overarching reason, is that Nehemiah was a man who cared deeply about the glory of God and the good of God's people.

He cared deeply about the glory of God and the good of God's people. And I think that this can speak to us where we are. So, let's look at the text together.

Nehemiah chapter 1. We're just going to read together the first four verses. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah. Now, it happened in the month of Chislev in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. So he said, how are things going back in Jerusalem? And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exiles is in great trouble.

This word in Hebrew is the opposite of peace. They're in turmoil and shame. They were being ridiculed because the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.

[ 6 : 59 ] And this grieves Nehemiah. Deeply grieves him. Look at verse 4. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Now, to understand why Nehemiah may have felt this way, I think it's important that we get a little bit of a background. We set a stage leading up to this very point.

Remember that the nation of Israel was formed around a patriarch, Abraham. Abraham was called by God to be a people for his possession. He promised to bless the nations in him.

Gave him the name Abraham. And this nation grew. And of course, there's a lot of events. I'm sweeping through Old Testament history here. Grew to a nation that was ruled by three kings.

Saul, David, and Solomon. This was Israel's golden age. They were the power to be reckoned with in that region. Mighty. David.

[ 7 : 56 ] You read the stories of David and the conquering that he did in those days. But because Solomon compromised so greatly with the things of God, God promised to bring calamity.

Bring a judgment upon them. But because God loved David the way he loved him, he told Solomon that it wouldn't come to pass until Solomon died. And that's what happened.

That's exactly what happened. A civil war broke out. The nation became divided. Israel, the group in the north, took the name Israel. Judah in the south.

It was the most prominent tribe. They took the name Judah in the south. In 722 BC, the Assyrians, a great world power at the time, came and sacked, conquered in the northern kingdom.

Pillaged, plundered, thousands died. They carried away captives. The tragic time for the northern kingdom. And then in roughly 605 to 586, the Babylonians did the same in the south.

[ 8 : 56 ] Turn with me back just a couple of books to 2 Chronicles. So you're going to have Ezra before Nehemiah and then 2 Chronicles right at the end, chapter 36. You read with me a little bit about this.

2 Chronicles 36, beginning in verse 15. The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by His messengers because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place.

But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising His words and scoffing at His prophets until the wrath of the Lord rose against His people until there was no remedy. Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, Babylonians, interchangeable words here, who killed their young men with a sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or a virgin, old man or aged.

He gave them all into His hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these He brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God, and here you go, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels.

He took into exile He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to Him and to His sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia.

[ 10 : 24 ] So here you see the destruction of Jerusalem to the degree that they actually tore down the walls. And the walls were significant both practically and symbolically. Practically, they protected the city.

People came inside and they closed up the gates as a way they fended off attackers. Symbolically, it meant that the city was healthy. It meant that it had power because of the might of the walls.

And the Babylonians knew this, and therefore they destroyed it. They laid it to waste. Jerusalem was ruined. And they carried everybody off. These dark, dark days.

It's prophesied in Jeremiah chapter 25 that they would be gone for 70 years. And this is exactly what happened. What happened to cause the tide to turn? What was it that began to allow the Jews to enter back into the promised land?

It was a handing off of world power. The Persians conquered the Babylonians about 539 B.C. Such a cool picture of God's providence and the way He works in the world.

[ 11 : 29 ] He used the pagan peoples to judge His own, to judge Israel. And then He uses pagan peoples coming and conquering the Babylonians to send them back.

The way He works and uses world events is rather incredible. And so we see that they were then sent back. 2 Chronicles 36 22-23 Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up in the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that He made a proclamation throughout all His kingdom and also put it in writing, Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you all of His peoples, may the Lord His God be with you. Let Him go up. So we begin to see a movement back towards the promised land.

So, if you'll allow, we'll call the first group Group A, right? This is who Cyrus sends, the people that went back, they were led by a man named Zerubbabel, which is a fantastic name to say.

I got to say it over and over this week, right? A man named Zerubbabel led them back, right? Took them 20 years to rebuild the temple, but that's what they set themselves to doing when they returned.

[ 12 : 49 ] You can read about this in the book of Ezra, right? Eighty years later, we've got Group B, and this is when spiritual reform begins to take place.

And then 13 years later, here we have Nehemiah hearing the news of what's going on. So, we know the temple's been restored, some spiritual revival is beginning to happen there, but the walls are still not built.

It's been 90 years since the people were released by Persia to go back, and yet, the city still lays in shambles. It's fascinating that Nehemiah was a layman.

Here we find him serving the now king of Persia, King Artaxerxes, as his cupbearer. He was the guy that drank the wine before the king to be sure that it wasn't poisoned.

A layman used in such a powerful way by God. It's an encouragement to me as a fairly uneducated, unequipped man. Nehemiah was used in mighty ways, and he was uniquely fitted for the task.

[13:57] Uniquely fitted for the task that was ahead of him. He was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes, which meant that if a cupbearer did his job well, he became a trusted friend of the king.

He stood at his side all the time. Anytime the king drank, the cupbearer was there with him, served him as a friend. Often they became great counselors to the king.

The king would bounce ideas off of the cupbearer. And here you see as Nehemiah is serving in his presence, chapter 2, that his face is long.

He's sad, which was not a thing you did in front of a king. Kings wanted joyful people around them. I could say that of myself. Like, don't come around me and be sad. That's just depressing. Be happy around me.

But here he is with a long face, risking his very life, but he's in such mourning and torment over what's happening in Israel that the king asks him, why are you so sad?

[14:53] And he shares with the king and the king does a phenomenal thing. Again, moved along by the prominence of God and gives to him basically a blank check. He says, well, go then.

Go back and build the walls. Writes him letters. Gives him an armed escort to go back. Gives him letters to reap harvest of lumber from Lebanon to build precious, precious lumber in this area to build back up the wall.

It's a great, great, great picture of this and as Nehemiah himself says, the good hand of God was upon me. Nehemiah was a man zealous for the glory of God.

The reason that he's so torn, that he weeps and mourns for days, that he risks his own life being sad in the presence of the king is that the state of Israel in these days was the visible glory of God. It was the manifestation of God's goodness, of his character to his people. And the fact that they were in such shambles was an affront to what God had done for them.

[16:05] The fact that the people for 90 years had yet to put themselves to the work of rebuilding that, of properly displaying what God had done for them is why he's torn up. He cares about the good of God's people, but he primarily cares about the glory of his God.

That people would properly worship him, properly see him for who he is. He was zealous for God's glory. And he was a man of prayer.

We see in 13 chapters, we see him pray on 10 separate times. The book of Nehemiah both opens and closes with Nehemiah in prayer. because he understood the sovereign hand of God and his great necessity of it.

So Nehemiah was uniquely fitted for this task that was set before him. So we see here in this story, to kind of give you the framework, and we're going to go back and fill in the pieces here, that he travels back to Israel with an armed guard sent by the king.

When he gets there, he spends three days examining the situation. He even goes out by night to see the condition of the wall, to see what kind of task was set before him. And then he calls together the people to build.

[17:21] And the text records for us that they brought their hands to bear, for the people had a mind or a heart to work. So he rallies them together to do this great work that's ahead of them.

And it'd be really great at this point if the story ended and we just said, well, fantastic, and they built the wall and everybody lived, happily ever after. But it didn't go so easy for them, right? There was much opposition to the work.

And at this point, we can pause and reflect upon our own lives and the opposition that we experience in them. This morning, Sam allowed me to come up to the building early and just do a little bit of last preparation for the day.

But I was thinking about it being Father's Day and I was thinking about dads loading kids into vans and the screaming and the wanting of juice and crackers and those of you who are without children will not understand the chaos sometimes that happens on a Sunday morning before we come here. There's opposition to the work, right? Like dads, how many times do you feel like just turning around and going back to the house saying, fine, this is not going well for us this day, right?

[18:31] There's much calamity, many things battling against us to do the work that's set before us by our Lord. That's a very minor example, I'm aware.

But there's much opposition. The peoples of the land as they're referred to here in Nehemiah don't want to see Israel rebuild the walls. They don't want to see them fortify and protect themselves. They want glory and honor to belong to King Artaxerxes, not to the God of these people.

And so there's plotting against them or we're going to study some of that together. There's times at which they're both building the wall and they've got swords on their sides. There's times at which they're carrying things in one hand and a sword in the other hand.

But they were so determined. They had their minds, their hearts, set to the work before them. And so they complete the wall. I hope I'm not breaking, shattering your spoiler alert here for the story. They do in fact build the wall. They build it in 52 days. Something that hadn't been completed in 90 years. They set their minds to it.

[ 19 : 34 ] They work hard in spite of the opposition and they build the wall in 52 days. And we see this record through to chapter 7 of the book. And it doesn't end there.

The building is not yet done. The spiritual rebuilding begins at that point. As I told you, there's some things beginning to happen. Some spiritual revitalization happening back with that second movement we called Group B.

But it really takes off at this point. In chapters 8-13 we see this. And 8-10 we probably have the greatest record in the scriptures of spiritual revival. They pull out the law and they open it and it's read before them by Ezra and there's this great repentance followed by wonderful praise of the things that God has done for them.

This huge, huge revival that happens and we get the great privilege of getting to look at that together and what revival looks like in the land.

And I want to tell you I've got four objectives in our time together over the summer. Four things that I hope to accomplish as we study this together. Firstly, I want to expand your appreciation for the inspired words of God.

[ 20 : 46 ] As I said before, the whole thing is inspired and given to us for our instruction. I want you to really take hold of that. Now it's going to be a challenge for me. I really much prefer to preach verse by verse through the epistles.

The teaching, the doctrinal parts. This is narrative. It's going to be a little bit challenging for me, but as I've discovered that 40% of our scriptures is narrative. 40% of it is narrative.

It is a wonderful, wonderful way to understand and to see the great truths of God as we see the stories of God being played out. There's evangelistic movements around the world right now that are using storytelling to present the gospel.

It's a valuable way for us to learn information. Some of you may remember some of the books that you were forced to read in high school and the themes contained within them because you remember the story. You get the story.

Still, right now *The Great Gatsby* has come out in a movie. I was forced to read that book in high school and I remember the themes of that story because I can remember what happens in it.

[ 21 : 51 ] So I hope that you'll appreciate better the inspired words of God in our study together which means I've got to work hard at showing it to you and showing you its great value. Secondly, I want to expose you to the character of God.

I want to expose you to the character of God and I know that that sounds lofty and academic. You certainly could take a lot of notes.

We could systematically work through the character of God but here we see it played out in a story and I can tell you that all the doctrines that really affect my life the things I really take hold of and work in me I came to by reading about stories of God.

Take for example the gospel of grace the doctrines of grace. This really began to mean something to me when I began to read stories like in Genesis the life of Joseph who was sold into slavery thrown into jail ended up in a prominent position that he might save his people and you see the sovereign hand of God working and moving and suddenly the little things of my life little things that are nothing like getting sold into slavery nothing like being thrown into prison for being righteous very unmonumental right?

Much of an effect as I see the sovereign hand of God working in things like this. I'll give you a list just in the book of Nehemiah the way that God is referred to here in the text and I don't believe this is exhaustive at all but listen to this he is called the great and awesome God the faithful God the loving God the powerful God the strong God the maker of the heavens the maker of earth and seas the life giver the sovereign God the righteous God the covenant keeping God the God who

performs signs and wonders the delivering God the providing God the forgiving God the God who is gracious compassionate and patient the teaching God the good God the judging God the admonishing God the just God the remembering God the rewarding God the God who is the giver of great joy just in the book of Nehemiah this is how Nehemiah speaks or Ezra speaks of [ 24 : 11 ] Nehemiah of his God many people would preach to you the book of Nehemiah and at the end of it you would say Nehemiah was a great guy we ought to be more like Nehemiah but I say to you if that's what we accomplished this summer we failed I failed you you failed in your listening that's not what we ought to walk away with we ought to walk away saying what a great God Nehemiah worshipped and served that's what we ought to walk away with because we do in fact serve a great God and Nehemiah is such a wonderful example of that the things that Nehemiah does in here are not a response to his own character right man that Nehemiah what a hard worker he built a wall in 52 days it's not a response to his leadership ability it's a response to who his God was and is for us that's what caused him that's what motivated him to work to lead in the way that he did we should walk away from here praising our great

God thirdly I want to show you the timeliness of these lessons for the work that's ahead of us as we build a church to the glory of God I'm going to draw a connection for you between those two as we as God's people should be desiring his glory the proclamation of his goodness to us we're building a church but we don't build a church with physical stones I'm not talking about this building I hope that you've gotten that here that this building is not the church we're the church and so we're building up a people for his praise that is the work that's ahead of us and I will probably affectionately call you the remnant a lot over the summer we're those that are here now I guess our college students have been carried off to exile I don't really know if we're going to draw it out quite that far but the task has been given to us to build to display God's glory we are now the visible display of God's goodness of his character in the world so there's a great connection between the two and we can learn and glean so much about

God's character to us and the work that we ought to be doing together as we look at the book of Nehemiah first Peter chapter two Peter speaks of us as living stones who's the chief cornerstone Christ right this this imagery of the building right we're chosen and precious and we're being built up as a spiritual house it's timely for us to be studying this together and then fourthly I want to exalt the person and the work of Jesus Christ which all good preaching does I want to exalt the person and the work of Jesus Christ now how is it exactly that we're going to do that in the book of Nehemiah the name Jesus Christ is never mentioned in these pages don't know he's not on the scene yet we don't know this to be the case turn with me to Luke chapter 24 I lose men who stand in pulpits or given positions of power to preach and they don't preach

Christ they preach tips for your life little ways you can better manage your business we're to preach Christ verse 13 chapter 24 this is after the resurrection that very day two of them disciples were going to a village named Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened when they were talking and discussing together Jesus himself drew near and went with them but their eyes were kept from recognizing them and he said to them what is this conversation that you are having with each other as you walk this must have been a very looking back on it for them a very comical conversation what is this conversation that you were having with each other as you walk and they stood still looking sad then one of them named Cleopas answered him are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days can you imagine how he felt after realizing who he been talking to yep a little bit of rhetoric there verse 19 and he said to them what things and they said to him concerning

Jesus of Nazareth a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death and crucified him but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel yes and besides all this it is now and enter into his glory so notice here he corrects them he rebukes them he calls them foolish slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken and he's referring here to everything Old Testament everything up to this point he's saying to them you had me you had this you had the very revelation of

[ 29 : 42 ] Jesus Christ coming and you've missed it verse 27 and beginning with Moses and the things concerning himself boy I wish we had the record of that that would that would make my job at Nehemiah a lot easier if I could have Jesus Christ commentary on the book of Nehemiah right a

wonderful thing for some reason it's excluded here um dependence on the spirit so that's my answer to that verse 28 so they drew near to the village to which they were going he acted as if he was going farther but they urged him strongly saying stay with us for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent so he went in to stay with him when he was at table with him he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them and their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he!

said to! each other did not our hearts burn within us while we talked to us on the road while he opened to us the scriptures and they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem and they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together saying the Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon and they told what had happened on the road and how he!

looked down at verse me and the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled he said remember I told you I would be the fulfillment of all these things including the promises in Nehemiah right verse 45 then he opened their minds!

to understand the scriptures he opened their minds! to understand the scriptures and recognize the point here being to understand the scriptures as they speak of him because every single page every word every bit of punctuation speaks of Jesus Christ until we read the Old Testament scriptures with a view to Christ looking for him in this way we are not reading it properly we have missed the point if we say look at David what a brave man willing to go out and face Goliath we should be brave like him there a lesson there certainly we should trust in God in that way but until we see that David is a type of Christ coming on our behalf to conquer sin and death we've missed it we've missed the ultimate point and we're not really reading the Old Testament properly missed we've preached

Jesus Christ even when we're studying Nehemiah and I want to show you how that's possible I've got a lot of work to do in that way but I hope that we'll exalt the personal work of Christ together let me read to you a quote from Charles Spurgeon on this matter from every town village and little hamlet in England wherever it may be there is a road to London and so from every text in scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the scriptures that is Christ your business is when you get to a text to say now what is the road to Christ and then preach a sermon or study it in that way if you're not a!

[ 33 : 30 ] a! running along the road towards the great metropolis Christ and that's what I hope to accomplish as we come together to this study to show you how it is that it's timely for us for the building of the glory of God to have you have a deeper appreciation of the scriptures which will accomplish primarily through getting you to see that every single word speaks of Christ let's pray together!