**Survey Old Testament**

**Nehemiah 1-3**

Whenever God wants to get a work done, He lays hold of willing people. The walls of Jerusalem had been ruined; a small remnant had returned; and there was much work that needed to be done. In 536 bc, Zerubbabel and Joshua had taken about 50,000 Jews back and had (by 516) rebuilt the temple. In 457 there had been a small revival under Ezra, but now it was 445, and God was looking for someone to go to the ruined city and restore safety and order. Nehemiah was to be that person. Notice Nehemiah’s activities in these three chapters.

**Nehemiah Prays for the Work (1)**

1. **The report** (v. 1–3). As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah (a Jew) held a high position in the court. But Nehemiah was not forgetful of his own people, for he eagerly asked his brother for news about Jerusalem. The news was distressing: the remnant was suffering shame, the walls were broken down, and the gates were burned.
2. **The response** (v. 4). Nehemiah was immediately burdened for his city. The fact that he was more than 700 miles away made no difference; nor did it matter that he was enjoying luxury in the palace of the king. Immediately his heart was touched and he wanted to do something to save his city. For four months (from Dec. to April; see 1:1 and  2:1) he wept and prayed.
3. **The request** (v. 5–11). This book shows Nehemiah to be a man of prayer. The book starts and ends with prayer! Verse 6 tells us he prayed day and night, so burdened was he for the city. Note that Nehemiah confesses his sins and the sins of his people. He also reminds the Lord of His gracious promises (vv. 8–9) and then offers himself to be God’s servant to do something about Jerusalem’s plight. “Here am I, Lord, send me!” In v. 11 we see that he has faith to ask God for servants, other Jews who would help him in the task.

**Nehemiah Prepares for the Work (2)**

1. **Nehemiah and the king (vv. 1–8).**  Four months passed during which Nehemiah waited for God’s time to approach the king.  But Nehemiah had a plan in his mind, given to him by the Lord, and he knew just what to do when the right hour arrived. No one was to appear before the king with sadness or bad news (Esther 4:1–2), but the burden on Nehemiah’s heart revealed itself on his face. Before taking his burden to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah quickly went to the throne of grace in prayer; then he told the king all his heart. He knew God would open the way (Prov. 21:1). So thoroughly had Nehemiah worked out his plan that he was able to give the king a time schedule (v. 6) and a list of the materials he would need to do the task (vv. 7–8). God’s strong hand did the impossible!
2. **Nehemiah 2 - Nehemiah and the ruins.** It took three months for Nehemiah to arrive at the city, and he arrived as a governor, not a servant. A man of patience, Nehemiah waited three days before taking any steps. The enemies were watching and Nehemiah had to be wise and cautious. Later he would discover that some of the nobles of Judah were allied with Tobiah, the enemy of the Jews (6:17–19). By night he investigated the situation, keeping his counsel to himself.
3. **Nehemiah and the Jews.** Nehemiah did not believe in a one-man ministry; he challenged the leaders of the remnant to work with him (not for him) in repairing the walls. The motive? “That we may no longer be a reproach.” He was concerned with the glory of God as well as the good of the nation. Nehemiah showed them the need, outlined the task, and assured them of God’s blessing. Immediately the opposition was aroused (as it always is), but Nehemiah knew that God’s hand was upon him and his work.

**Nehemiah 3 - Nehemiah Prospers in the Work (3)**

1. **The pattern.** The work was organized and directed, with the spiritual leaders taking the lead (v. 1) and the people cooperating. God noted each worker and put their names in the book. Each one had a specified area of responsibility. No one can do everything, but every person can do something. Of course, you will never have 100 percent cooperation; in v. 5 we find some of the nobles refusing to get involved. There were forty-two groups of workers.
2. **The people.**  What a variety of workers—priests (v. 1), rulers (vv. 12–19), women (v. 12), craftsmen (vv. 8, 32), and even Jews from other cities (vv. 2, 5, 7). Note that some were willing to do extra work (vv. 11, 19, 21, 24, 27, 30). Some did their work at home (vv. 10, 23, 28–30), and this is where Christian service ought to begin.
3. **The places.** There is a definite spiritual lesson in each of these gates. **The sheep gate** (v. 1) reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (John 10). This was the first gate repaired. Note that the sheep gate had no locks or bars, for the door of salvation is ever open to the sinner. This is the only gate that was sanctified, setting it apart as a special gate. **The fish gate** (v. 3) reminds us of soul-winning, being “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). **The old gate** (v. 6) speaks of the old paths and the old truths of the Word of God (Jer. 6:16 and 18:15). **The valley gate** (v. 13) reminds us of humility before the Lord. We do not enjoy the valley, but often God must take us there to bring a blessing to our lives. Verse 14 introduces **the dung gate.** Apparently this is the gate through which the waste of the city was taken. Certainly this speaks to us of the cleansing of our lives (2 Cor. 7:1; Isa. 1:16–17). **The gate of the fountain** (v. 15) illustrates the ministry of the Holy Spirit; see John 7:37–39. It is interesting to note the order of these gates: first, there is humility (the valley gate), then cleansing (the dung gate), and then the filling of the Spirit (the fountain gate). **The water gate** (v. 26) speaks of the Word of God, which cleanses the believer (Eph. 5:26; Ps. 119:9). Note that this is the seventh gate mentioned, and seven is the Bible number for perfection—the perfect Word of God. Note too that this gate needed no repairs! “Forever, O Lord, Your Word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89, nkjv). **The horse gate** (v. 28) introduces the idea of warfare. Certainly there are battles in the Christian life, and we must be ready to fight. See 2 Tim. 2:1–4. **The east gate** (v. 29) makes us think of the second coming of Jesus Christ (Matt. 24:27). In Ezek. 10:16–22, the prophet saw God’s glory depart from the temple by the east gate; see also 11:22–25. But later (43:1–5) he saw God’s glory return “from the way of the east.” **The gate Miphkad** (v. 31) speaks of God’s judgment. The Hebrew word miphkad means “appointment, account.” Certainly God is going to call all souls up for judgment one day. As you review these gates and their order, you can see the suggestion of the full picture of the Christian life, from the sheep gate (salvation) to the final judgment.

**Nehemiah 4–7**

Whenever the people of God start doing the work of God, there will be opposition. A worker of weak faith and purpose will quit, but a person of resolution and confidence will overcome the opposition and finish the task. Nehemiah was such a person. Notice in these chapters the opposition that he faced (from both within and without the city) and the victories that he won.

1. **Ridicule (4:1–6)** God’s people always have enemies. These three wicked men were outside the nation of Israel. Their first weapon was ridicule; they mocked the “feeble Jews” openly before the leaders of Samaria. Satan is a mocker (Luke 22:63; 23:35–37). How did Nehemiah answer them? He prayed to his God! His concern was only for the glory of God and the testimony of the nation, so do not read personal revenge into his prayer (see Ps. 139:19–24).
2. **Discouragement (4:10)** The battle moves now from outside the city to inside. How discouraged the workers were, with all that rubbish on the inside of the city and the danger lurking on the outside. Discouragement and complaining spread rapidly and hinder God’s work. We do not read that Nehemiah paid much attention to their complaints; he kept on building, watching, and praying.
3. **Fear (4:11–23)** Fear and faith can never abide in the same heart. In v. 11, we have a rumor the enemy started that their armies would suddenly invade Jerusalem. The Jews living outside the city heard this report and carried it to Nehemiah ten times. How persistent Satan’s workers can be. Finally, Nehemiah set the guard on the walls and encouraged the people not to fear. Note that the work stopped from v. 13 to v. 15—exactly what the enemy wanted. Nehemiah saw the folly of this plan, so he put the workers back on the job, a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other. He also set a special watch with trumpets (vv. 19–20), but he did not allow the work to stop. These Jews are wonderful examples of what a Christian worker ought to be: they had a mind to work (4:6), a heart to pray (4:9), an eye to watch (4:9), and an ear to hear (4:20).
4. **Selfishness (5)** This is a sad chapter, for in it we see the Jews selfishly preying upon one another. No building is recorded in this chapter. There were great economic burdens upon the Jews, not only because of the famine (Hag. 1:7–11), but also because of the taxes and tributes. The Jews were being robbed by their own people through mortgages and servitude. How did Nehemiah act in this crisis? First, he was angry (v. 6) because his people were so spiritually backslidden as to rob one another. Then he rebuked the people (vv. 7–11), reminding them of God’s goodness to their nation. “We have been set free by the Lord,” he argued; “will you now put one another in bondage again?” He appealed to the OT Law as he commanded them to restore their ill-gotten profits (Ex. 22:25). The people vowed to obey the Word—and they did!
5. **Slander (6)** The people went back to work, and so did the enemy. This time Sanballat and his men aimed their attacks on Nehemiah the leader. Sanballat invited Nehemiah to a friendly meeting but Nehemiah refused. God’s separated servants dare not walk “in the counsel of the ungodly” (Ps. 1:1). Four invitations came (v. 4) and Nehemiah refused them all. “I am doing a great work and cannot come down!” The fifth time the messenger came, he brought an “open letter” filled with slanderous accusations against Nehemiah and his people. Nehemiah detected the scheme and immediately exposed the lies in the so-called “open letter.” His life and character refuted every lie in the letter. Note how Nehemiah again prayed for God to overrule (v. 9). Servants of God cannot help what people say about them, but they can help what kind of character and testimony they have.

**Nehemiah 8–13**

The walls were completed on the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month (6:15). This second half of the book begins on the first day of the seventh month (8:2), and the emphasis is on the people of the city and their dedication to God. The material building was now over. It was time to begin to build the people spiritually.

1. **Proclamation of the Word (8–10)** Ezra returned to Jerusalem to assist Nehemiah in the dedication of the walls and the sanctifying of the people. Do not confuse this scene with that in Ezra 3. It is significant that they gathered at the water gate, since this gate symbolizes the Word of God (3:26). The people had an appetite for the Word, for they asked Ezra to bring the Book and preach it. Ezra read the Word and explained it for many hours, assisted by the Levites. The people wept at hearing the Word, overcome with grief for their sins. But this was to be a day of rejoicing. The next day, the leaders met with Ezra and discovered the law concerning the Feast of Tabernacles. They proclaimed this law throughout the land, and as the people obeyed, there was “very great gladness” (v. 17). There is joy in hearing the Word, but greater joy at obeying it.  Ezra and the Levites taught the Word for three hours, then led the people in confession and prayer for three hours. The prayer in chapter 9 is a spiritual summary of the OT history of the Jews: the Creation (v. 6); the call of Abraham (vv. 7–8); the Exodus (vv. 9–14); the nation’s wilderness experiences (vv. 15–23); the conquering of the land (vv. 24–25); the period of Judges (vv. 26–29); the period of prophets up to the captivity (vv. 30–31). “Now therefore …” (v. 32) brings us up to Ezra’s day and the need of the nation to repent and confess sin. Chapter 10 gives the names of the brave and godly people who entered into the covenant with God that day. Little did they realize that their names would be recorded eternally in the Word! In vv. 28–39, we see the people applying the Word to their everyday lives.
2. **Dedication of the Walls (11–12)** Nehemiah returns now to the story of the walls, which he had interrupted to tell about the spiritual work under Ezra. The events in Nehemiah are not given in their exact order. Note the mention of singers (vv. 22–23). The Jews had no song during their years of exile (Ps. 137), but now they had the joy of the Lord as their strength. The actual dedication of the walls is described in 12:27–47. Ezra and Nehemiah divided the people into two great companies, with Ezra leading one and Nehemiah following the other (see vv. 31, 36, 38). They started probably at the valley gate. Ezra led his company along the east side of the city, then north to the temple area. Nehemiah and his company went straight north and then east, meeting the other company at the temple area. What a day of dedication that was! When dedicated people unite joyfully to dedicate God’s work, they will always experience God’s blessing.
3. **Condemnation of the Wicked (13)** From 13:6 and 7:2 we learn that Nehemiah returned to Babylon for a time, leaving the governing of the city in the hands of his brother. When he returned, he discovered that the people had fallen back into their old ways. He started at the house of God, where he discovered (v. 4) that the high priest was allied with the Jews’ enemy, Tobiah. It is a sad thing when the servants of God compromise with the enemies of God. Another sin was the failure of the people to support their spiritual servants, the priests and Levites. Malachi had something to say about this; read Mal. 3. Sabbath disobedience was another problem. The workers were employed on the Sabbath (v. 15), and the merchants were selling on the Sabbath (v. 16). Nehemiah reproved the Jews for dishonoring the Sabbath, and he closed the gates of the city against the Sabbath salesmen. See Jer. 17:21–27 with reference to v. 18. But note that even the Levites were guilty of desecrating the Sabbath (v. 22). Read Mal. 1–2 and you will see that the priesthood had fallen into shameful sins. The book closes with three prayers (vv. 22, 29, 31). Nehemiah has done his work, but only God can bless it and keep it going. Nehemiah would one day die, and the people would forget him. But God would never forget him!