

# If Walls Could Talk:

## Nehemiah Rebuilds Jerusalem's Wall

### Historical & Geographical Perspective

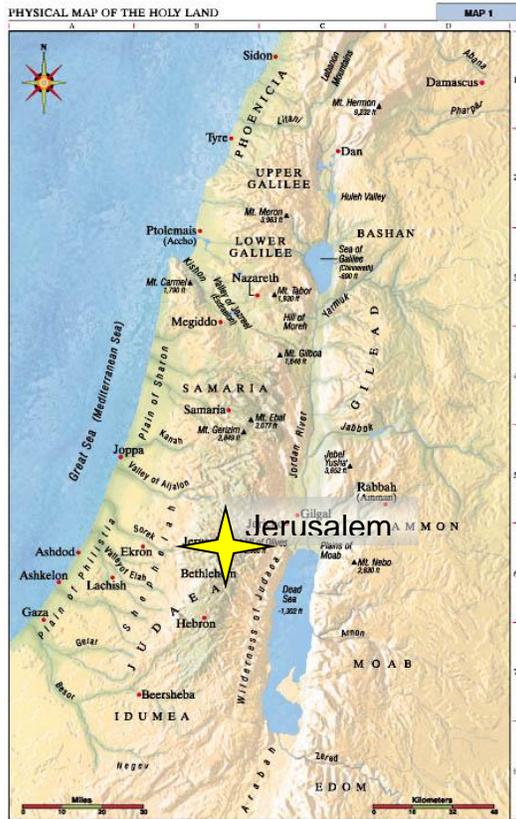


Figure 1: Physical Map of the Holy Land  
(<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/biblemaps/1>)

Jerusalem is one of the most famous cities in the world. It has been the epicenter of most of the world's most notable religions. It has been built up, destroyed only to be rebuilt a countless number of times. Nehemiah's story of rebuilding the city's walls is one of the most compelling, especially to faithful Christians who can appreciate the providence of God.

Jerusalem was protected on three sides by deep valleys. From east to west these were: the Kidron, the Central Valley, and the Hinnom. The Kidron, 150 feet below the top of the city, protected it on the east. Another valley was on the western side of the city. A third valley comes in from farther west and meets the first two. This is the Hinnom which came to be called Gehenna. The meeting of these valleys marks the southern limit of the city. Thus the original Jerusalem, about 300 yards long by 80 wide, had excellent natural defenses on all sides except the north, where a saddle (12 feet deep) linked it to the "plateau of Benjamin". These natural defenses were supplemented, just as in most other ancient cities, by a stone wall. This would be the wall that Nehemiah will rebuild in our story.

God's people of the Old Testament, the Israelites, were stuck in a cycle of 1.) obedience, 2.) disobedience, 3.) warning from God, and 4.) finally

judgment from God. They could not stay faithful to God. Every time periods of disobedience arose God would send a prophet to warn the Israelites that if they do not change their ways they will be judged by God. The time leading up to our story of Nehemiah rebuilding Jerusalem's wall is no exception.

The following are the major historical events leading up to our story:

- **722 BCE** – Israel (northern kingdom) falls to Assyria. Many Israelites are taken captive and disbursed into other lands.
- **650 BCE** – Assyrian empire is conquered by Babylon.
- **586 BCE** – Judah (southern kingdom) falls to Babylon. Solomon's temple and the city wall is destroyed and left in piles of rubble. More Israelites are taken captive and disbursed into other lands.
- **539 BCE** – Babylonian empire is conquered by Persia. King Cyrus allows some Israelites, led by Zerubbabel, to return. The rebuilding of the Temple is completed in 516 BCE. (cf. Ezra 1-6)
- **458 BCE** – The prophet Ezra returns to Jerusalem. (cf. Ezra 7-8)
- **445 BCE** – Nehemiah's story begins.

# God Delivers Jerusalem Through Nehemiah

## Nehemiah Learns of Jerusalem's Destruction

Our story picks up in Shushan, in present day Iran, in the court of king Artaxerxes. Nehemiah is an Israelite who serves as the king's cupbearer. He runs into a friend, Hanani, from Jerusalem who was left behind when he was deported. He asked about the people who had escaped the captivity and how everything in Jerusalem was. It was not good news. "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire." (Nehemiah 1:3)

This was devastating news to Nehemiah. He "sat down and wept, and mourned for many days." (Nehemiah 1:4)

## Nehemiah Fasts & Prays To God

Nehemiah had an appropriate reaction. He fasted and prayed. Fasting is voluntary abstinence from food in order to dedicate oneself to meditation and prayer.

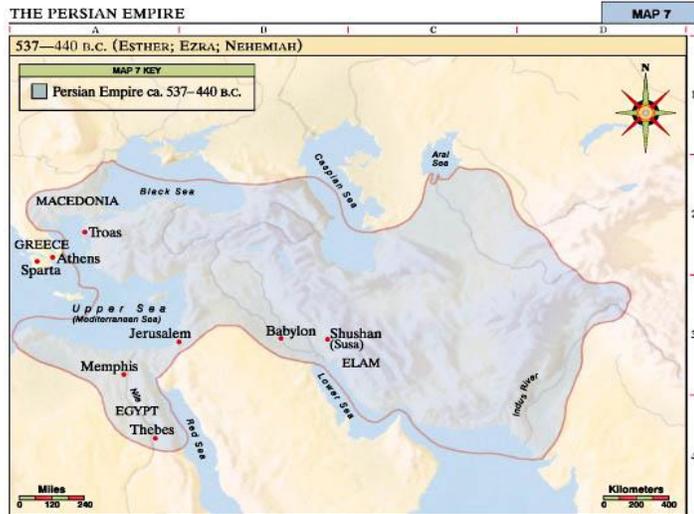


Figure 2: The Persian Empire During the Time of Nehemiah (<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/biblemaps/7>)

Prayer is an important communication tool to the Christian. We should be in constant communications with God. We should "pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17) It is especially appropriate to pray when your heart is burdened with troubles as Nehemiah's was on this occasion.

Prayer played an important role in Nehemiah's story and success. He not only prayed when he was saddened but also when he was challenged, successful and had needs. This is a great example for our lives today. The importance of prayer can not be overstated.

## The Anatomy of Nehemiah's First Prayer

"I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.' Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." (Nehemiah 1:5-11)

Nehemiah said a great prayer before God. It's a prayer that, you'll see as we go through the story, was heeded by God. Therefore, we should look at how Nehemiah approached God and imitate that in our prayers everyday.

Nehemiah's prayer included the following:

- Expression of reverence towards and faith in God.
- Request for God's attention.
- Expression sorrow over his fathers' & his own sins.
- Confession of sins:
  - 1.) acted corruptly against God, and
  - 2.) have not kept His commandments.
- Recognition of consequences of such actions: "I will scatter you among the nations".
- Recognition of God's promise to bring His people together if they repented and returned to Him.
- Confession the fact that he and his kindred are His people who desire to make things right with God.
- Request for favor in the sight of Artaxerxes, the Persian king.

We should always have an attitude of reverence and thanksgiving, as Nehemiah did here, when we pray to God. Nehemiah recognized many things in this prayer, such as God's promises to scatter his people if they are not faithful and His promise to restore them if they will repent. Nehemiah wasn't instructing God, for God no doubt remembered His promises, but rather demonstrated to God that he understood his promises and had confidence in God's faithfulness and ability to follow through on His promises. Prayer is a prime opportunity for us to recognize the

great things that God has both done for and promise to us.

Another notable feature of Nehemiah's prayer is his contrite heart as he confesses both his and his people's sins. It's important to note that this was not an admission, i.e. "sorry we got caught", but a confession, i.e. "sorry we did wrong". Coupled with his contrition was his change in action. He confesses to God that His people want to make things right and have changed their hearts.

Nehemiah also doesn't hesitate to request of God the things he needs in prayer. It's an important part to any prayer even though God knows what we need before we ask. (Matthew 6:8) The only way to be sure that God doesn't know what you need is to not ask. We must be specific with God about the things we need in our life.

#### *Nehemiah Makes A Request of King Artaxerxes*

One day as Nehemiah was serving Artaxerxes in his court the king noticed Nehemiah was sad. Because Nehemiah had never been sad in the king's presence, he asked "*Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.*" (Nehemiah 2:2) Nehemiah was scared to tell the king what was on his mind so he prayed to God.

This is a notable example of a time when someone in the Bible prayed a quick prayer before making an important move in his life. This also shows the importance of prayer as well as the fact that prayers don't have to be long and wordy to be effective. This was most probably a prayer said in silence before the king asking God to give him the strength to do what he needed to do. We should make use of these types of prayers in our lives as well.

Nehemiah responded, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" (Nehemiah 2:3) This got the king's attention and he asked what Nehemiah wanted to do about it. It was at this point that he asked to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." He granted him his request. That gave Nehemiah the confidence to ask for men, "captains of the army and horsemen," (Nehemiah 2:9) and supplies as well. The king likewise complied with his request and sent royal letters with him giving him authority in the region. Essentially he made Nehemiah the governor of Judah.

#### *Nehemiah and the People Set To Work*

Nehemiah's arrival stirred up the authorities that were already in place in the region. "*When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.*" (Nehemiah 2:10) Once they arrived in Jerusalem Nehemiah was there three days and he set the people to work. "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach." (Nehemiah

2:17) The people, after hearing Nehemiah's story of how God had given him favor in the sight of the king, responded, "Let us rise up and build." (Nehemiah 2:18)

#### Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem Mock the Israelites

The Israelites' neighbors with their power threatened mocked, "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?" So I answered them, and said to them, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem." (Nehemiah 2:19-20)

Notice the fact that Nehemiah's response was to rely on God for vengeance and just set to the work. This is a precept found in the New Testament as well. "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:19-21) Nehemiah is a great example of overcoming evil with good.

As the work continued the opposition continued especially from Sanballat and Tobiah. They continued to deride the efforts of Nehemiah and the Israelites. "But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish--stones that are burned?" Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall." (Nehemiah 4:1-3) They did not believe that the Israelites could accomplish what they had set out to do.

Nehemiah once again went to God in prayer, "Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders." (Nehemiah 4:4-5) He asks God for vengeance but continues his own work as we should when we are faced with opposition to our righteous works today!

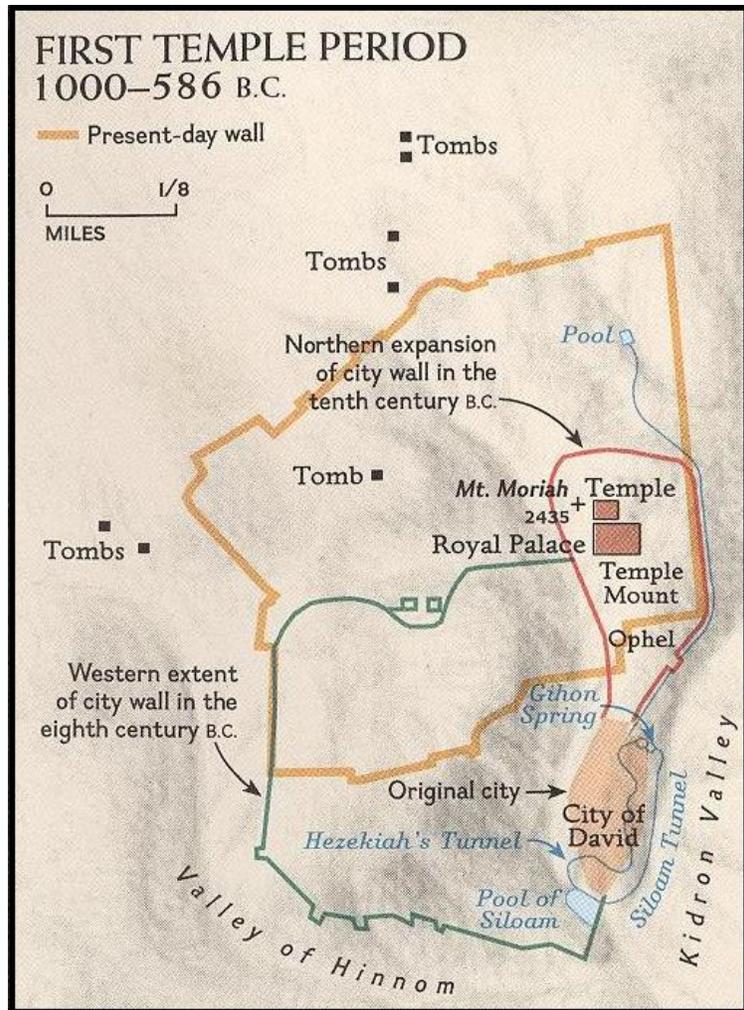


Figure 3: Jerusalem As It Was Before Being Destroyed in 586 BCE  
(<http://s178.photobucket.com/albums/w272/huyendam/?action=view&current=firsttempleperiod.png>)

### Opposition Stiffens

Nehemiah was making progress; they were able to build the wall to half its previous height at this point. There is an interesting note in the account at this point. Nehemiah attributes the success of the effort to the people, saying *“for the people had a mind to work.”* (Nehemiah 4:6) The opposition from Sanballat and Tobiah, however, is about to get serious. They begin to attack them militarily as they are working on the wall. The Israelites respond, once again, with prayer and planning. They set watchmen (Nehemiah 4:9) to protect the workers. As the tactics of the attackers changed, the defense evolved as well. They had to set watchmen at the bottom of the wall and all of the openings as well. (Nehemiah 4:13)

As the opposition began to wear on the people's mind to work, Nehemiah encouraged the people, saying *“Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”* (Nehemiah 4:14) Everyone returned to work! *“So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me. Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.” So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, “Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day.” So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing.”* (Nehemiah 4:16-22)

Sanballat and Tobiah even conspired to kill Nehemiah. First they tried to draw him to a house on the plains of Ono, under the guise of diplomatic talks, in order to kill him. Nehemiah knew of their plans and only sent a messenger. (Nehemiah 6:1-4) When that didn't work they sent a messenger telling Nehemiah that they would bear false witness before the king of Persia that he was trying to subvert his government. This did not phase Nehemiah because they were liars and he was doing a good work with God on his side. (Nehemiah 6:5-9) Then they sent a man posing as a prophet of God to lure him into the inner chambers of the Temple in order to reproach him. (Nehemiah 6:10-12) None of these attempts were successful and the work carried on.

### The Work Requires Sacrifice

As the work continued, people went deep into debt to be able to build the wall and live. These became great burdens to the work and Nehemiah enacted changes that called for sacrifice from all of the Israelites. He instructed the nobles and rulers to sacrifice for the work. *“According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?”* Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Then I said, *“What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them.”* (Nehemiah 5:9-11)

Nehemiah demonstrated the type of sacrifice that was required. *“Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!” and praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.”* (Nehemiah 5:13) This is a great illustration for the kind of sacrifice we should be willing to make for God today as well, shaken out and emptied.

Nehemiah, himself, also sacrificed not taking the governor's provisions of food but rather putting it to work feeding the people.

*Construction of the Wall Is Complete!*

The wall was completed in only fifty-two days!! (Nehemiah 6:15) This is a feat that, even with modern means and methods, we would be hard pressed to reproduce. It was only done by care and providence of God. Even the enemies of Nehemiah and the Israelites realized this. *“And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.”* (Nehemiah 6:16) Nehemiah continues the building and reform of Jerusalem and eventually, with the help of the prophet Ezra, rededicates the people and the wall to God. (Nehemiah 7:73-10:39; 12:17-43)

## **Prayer, Persistence and Adaptability**

Nehemiah's prayer, persistence and adaptability were all keys to his success. His faith that God would hear his prayers and answer them in the best way is worthy of imitation in our lives. When you face terrible news and adversity in your lives take Nehemiah's example to heart! Also lean on God and be in constant communication with Him through prayer. When enemies attack, do not give up. Trust that God will deliver you and persevere through the difficulties. As Satan changes his means and methods of temptation you must likewise change your defenses as Nehemiah did while building the wall of Jerusalem. You must be agile and mobile in the face of *“your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.”* (1 Peter 5:8-9)

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. From what two perspectives was Jerusalem protected from her enemies?
2. Why was Jerusalem invaded and destroyed in 586 B.C.?
3. When did Nehemiah live and what was his occupation before King Artaxerxes I?
4. How did Nehemiah ever get involved in building Jerusalem's walls?
5. How does prayer and fasting work well together in our spiritual relationship with God ?
6. From Nehemiah's prayers, what do you learn that helps you in your own prayers to God?

7. What did Nehemiah request from the King Artaxerxes I that were needed to start rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem?
8. What signs of a good “leader” were manifested by Nehemiah when he arrived in Jerusalem?
9. What signs of a good “governor” were manifested by Nehemiah when famine and selfishness caused problems among the people?
10. How did Nehemiah “strengthen the hands” of the people for the difficult “but good work” ahead of them?
11. What barriers did Nehemiah and the people rise above in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem?
12. How long did It take to complete the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem?
13. What indication do you have showing that this was a remarkable time line in completing this monumental work?
14. Through what three means did God’s providence work in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem under the governorship of Nehemiah?