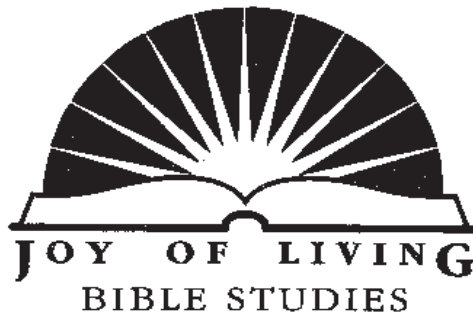


Nehemiah

Lesson 1



Introduction to Nehemiah¹

At first glance Nehemiah seems to be merely the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, but a closer look reveals the story of God's faithfulness to His people and His ability to restore not only a wall but people to a place of blessing.

God's Call, God's Promise

Genesis 11—35

Although Nehemiah takes place around the middle of the fifth century B.C., the story begins with one man over a thousand years earlier in the city of Ur of the Chaldees (see map, page 7). The descendants of Noah had spread out, multiplied and populated the earth and they had again abandoned the God who created them.

Yet God had not abandoned man. He called one man, Abram, and told him that if he would leave his country and go to a land God would show him, He would give Abram that land, make a great nation from his descendants, and bless all the world through him. (It would be through his descendants that the Savior of the world would come.) In faith Abram (later called Abraham) obeyed God. Abraham had a son, Isaac, to whom the promise was given and he in turn had a son, Jacob, to whom the promise was given.

From a Family to a Nation

Genesis 46—Exodus 18

Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel, had 12 sons. When Jacob was an old man he, his sons and their families (70 people in all) went into Egypt to escape starvation during a great famine. One of the sons, Joseph, was already there and in great power. He was second only to the Pharaoh and because of this the family was well cared for.

However generations passed and the children of Israel grew in numbers. A new pharaoh arose and was fearful of this great number of people living within the borders of his land. To protect himself and his country, he placed the Israelites in bondage where they remained for nearly 400 years.

As always God was faithful, and in His time He raised up a man named Moses. With great and mighty miracles God delivered the Isra-

elites from the Egyptians and led them to the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

A Covenant Made — A Covenant Broken

Exodus 19 — 1 Samuel 7

Prior to entering the Promised Land, the general area of Israel today, God made a covenant with the Israelites. At Mount Sinai they agreed to serve the Lord and obey His commands. He gave them His Law and promised to bless them as long as they served Him. But even as God gave them His glorious Law they were rebelling against Him and worshipping other gods. And so began the cycle of God's blessing, Israel's rebellion, God's disciplining, their repentance, God's deliverance and blessing again.

The Israelites were told to drive the heathen nations from the land. They were to make no covenants with them, but they disobeyed and were led into idolatry by them.

The Kingdom

1 Samuel 8 — 2 Chronicles 36

Israel had the perfect government with the Lord Himself as King, and the Law of the Lord as the law of the land, yet they weren't satisfied. They wanted to be like the nations round about them. They wanted a man as their king. God granted their desire.

Saul, their first king, didn't fully obey the Lord so God gave the kingdom to David, a shepherd who loved the Lord. Although David made many mistakes, God said, "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). God promised David that one of his descendants would have a kingdom without end. He was referring to Jesus Christ, the coming Savior, who would pay the price for the sins of the world and redeem mankind.

David's son Solomon inherited the kingdom from him, but because of Solomon's sin the kingdom was divided in the days of Solomon's son Rehoboam. The northern kingdom was known as Israel with Samaria as the capital. The southern kingdom was known as Judah with Jerusalem as the capital. As long as a godly king was on the throne the kingdoms tended to serve the Lord, but all too often there were ungodly kings and the people followed the practices of the heathen nations which included burning their children as sacrifices to the demonic god, Molech.

1. Lesson 1 commentary is by Nancy Collins.

In His love and compassion God sent prophets to warn them to turn from their wickedness but with stiff necks and hard hearts they refused. So, after hundreds of years of rebellion and warnings the northern kingdom, Israel, was carried away into captivity (about 722 B.C.) by Assyria (2 Kings 17:6-18). As the people of Israel were taken away and settled in other lands, the king of Assyria brought people from other conquered nations and settled them in the land of Israel.

Except for brief periods of revival and despite seeing God's judgment fall upon the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom, Judah, continued in a path toward judgment and destruction, until finally a little over a hundred years later Judah was conquered by the Babylonians (2 Chronicles 36:6).

For Judah there were several deportations with opportunities for repentance in between, but they would not, as a nation, repent. We read in 2 Kings 24:13-14:

As the LORD had declared, Nebuchadnezzar removed all the treasures from the temple of the LORD and from the royal palace, and took away all the gold articles that Solomon king of Israel had made for the temple of the LORD. He carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans—a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left.

A Message of Hope – A Promise Made

But God does not abandon His people, nor does He leave them without hope. Even as the prophets were warning of judgment God had them prophesy a message of hope:

This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

A Promise Fulfilled

(Ezra — Nehemiah 1)

God was and is faithful. The Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and at the end of the 70 years prophesied by Jeremiah, Cyrus, king of Persia issued the following proclamation:

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem

in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

(Ezra 1:1-4)

And so in 537 B.C. the Jews, led by Zerubabel, returned to the land of promise. As with any work of God, there was opposition, but God's promise held true—the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt and sacrifice was restored. To keep the people from returning to the practices that caused God's judgment to fall on them, it would be necessary for them to know God's laws. In about 458 B.C. God raised up another man, a scribe named Ezra to lead another group back to Jerusalem. His desire was to teach God's law in Israel.

Thus the stage is set for Nehemiah. The scene switches to Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire where Nehemiah, a Jew, serves as cupbearer to the king. He knows of the rebuilding of the Temple, he knows that the sacrifices are being made and he knows of Ezra's journey and his desire to teach God's law. But Nehemiah also knows that the walls of Jerusalem have not been rebuilt and that leaves God's people vulnerable to those living round about them, those who were brought there by the Assyrians when the Jews were exiled, those who are not pleased that the Jews have returned. And so the story of Nehemiah begins.

A Hope for Us

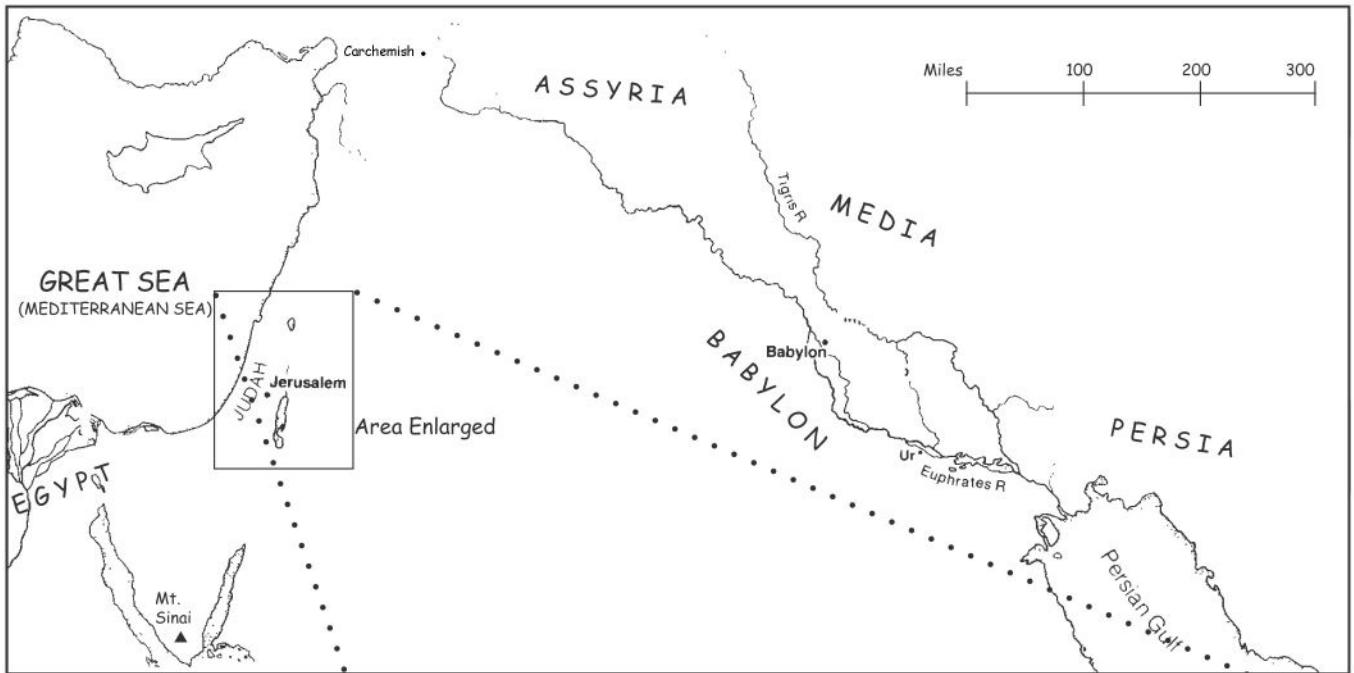
God never abandons His people. He has promised us that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). God may have to discipline us or through our own actions we may fall into bondage to some sin. But because of what Jesus Christ has done for us by His sacrifice on the cross, God is always ready to forgive and restore us to a place of blessing. Not only does He desire to bless us but He wants to rebuild the walls of our lives and teach us His ways so that we don't fall into sin and bondage again.

Nehemiah is a message of hope and restoration. What God did for them, He will do for us. He will take the broken places of our lives and rebuild them for our protection and His glory.

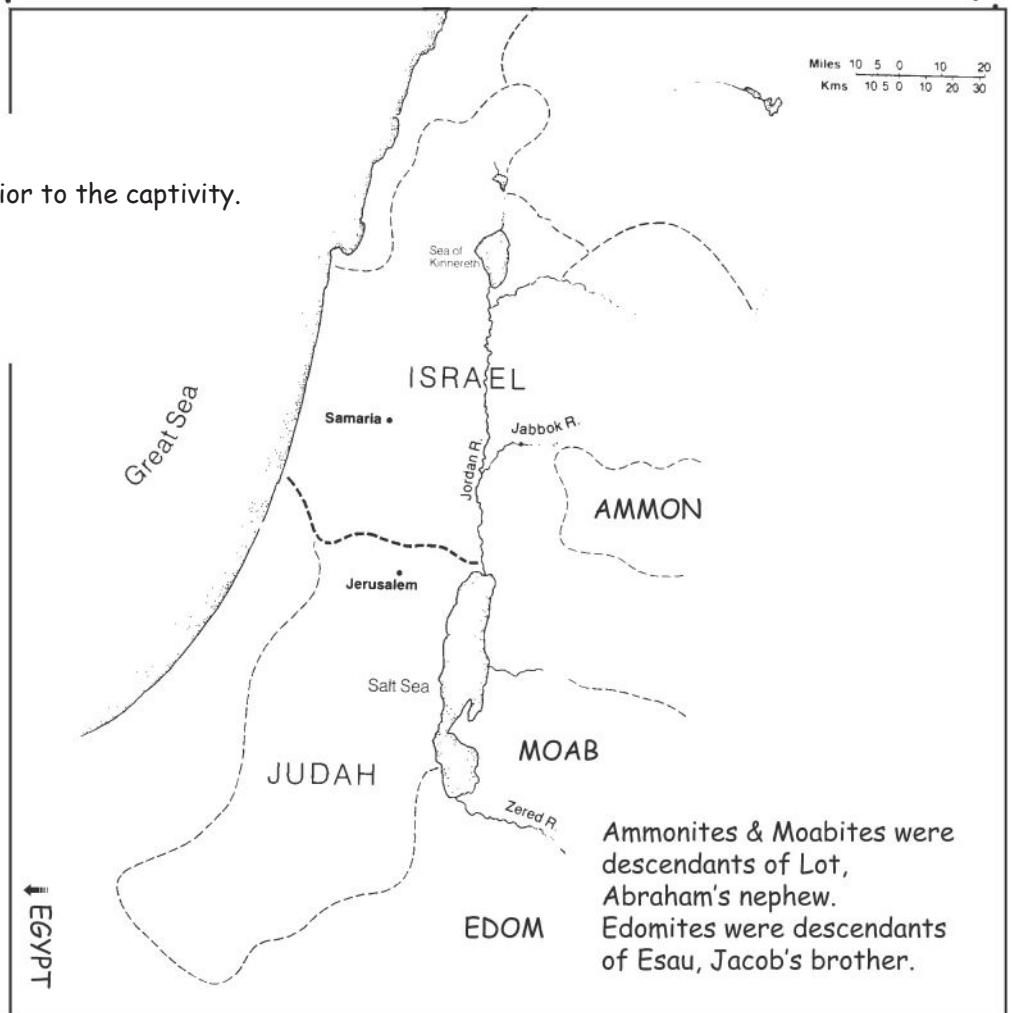
Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

(Hebrews 13:8)

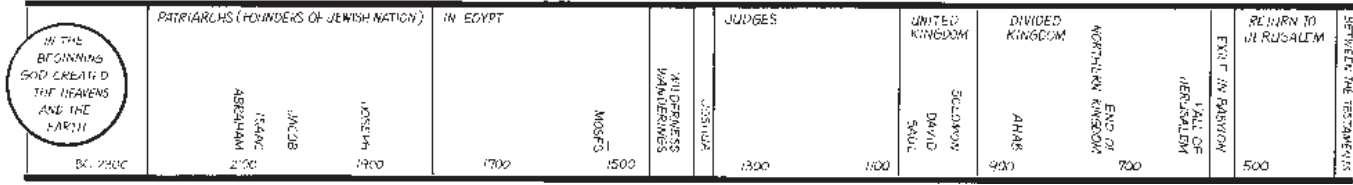
Where Nehemiah took place



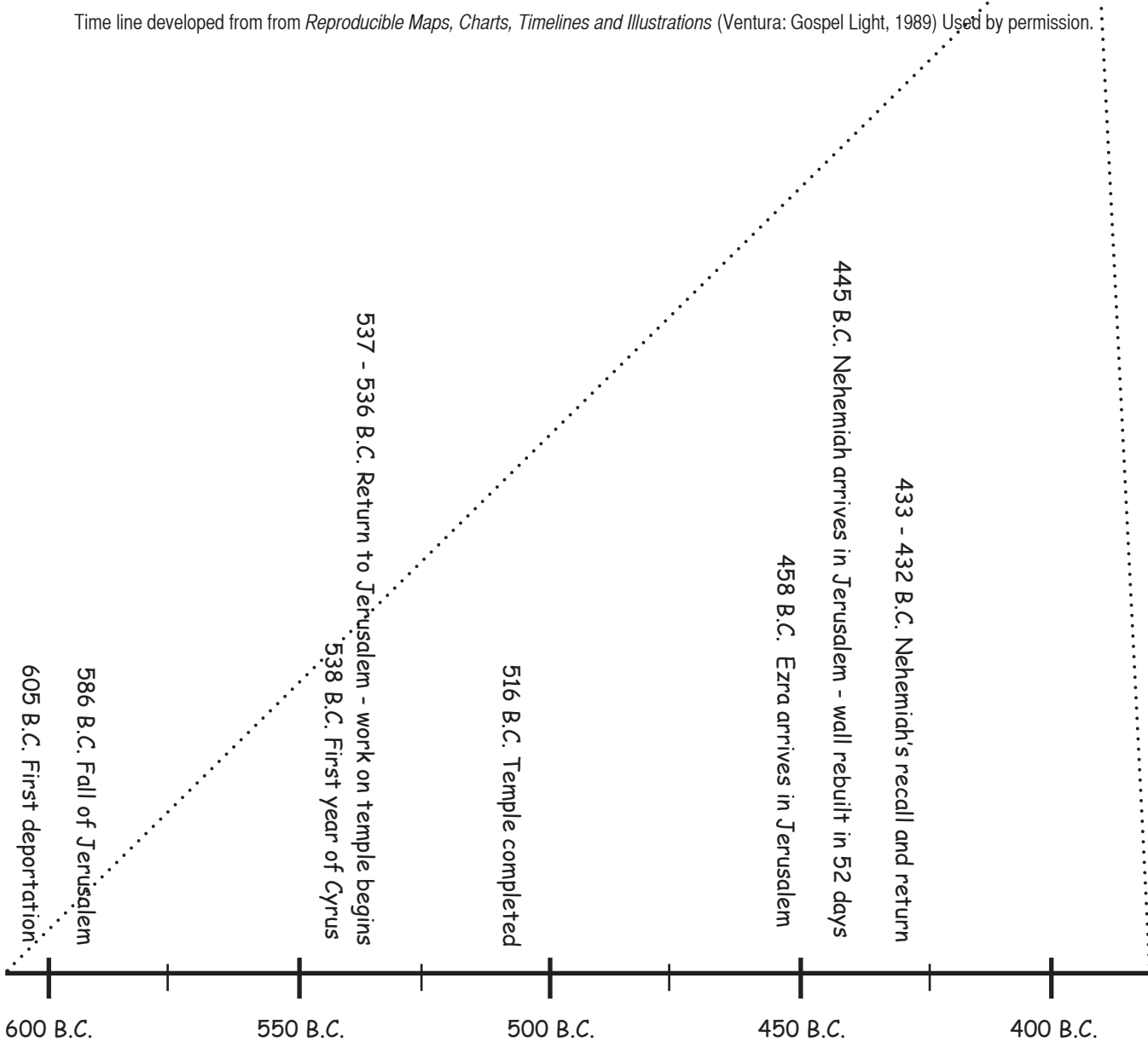
Division of the Kingdom prior to the captivity.
 (Northern Kingdom: Israel
 Southern Kingdom: Judah)



Approximate Times When Old Testament Events Happened



Time line developed from *Reproducible Maps, Charts, Timelines and Illustrations* (Ventura: Gospel Light, 1989) Used by permission.



Approximate dates for events relating to the return of the exiles, the rebuilding of the Temple and the eventual rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem.

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the "Challenge" questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the "Personal" questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Commentary.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the notes on the Introduction to Nehemiah, or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, or post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its "address" (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read all of Nehemiah 1, concentrating on verses 1-2.

1. Nehemiah was written in the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes (see Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1). Who wrote this book according to Nehemiah 1:1?

2. Where is he writing from? Locate this on the map on page 7.

3. Who was Nehemiah questioning and where had they come from? (See Nehemiah 1:2.) Locate this on the map. Note the distance it is from Susa.

4. What did Nehemiah want to know? (See Nehemiah 1:2.)

5. Personal: Like Nehemiah, is there anyone you are concerned about? Maybe you haven't heard from them for awhile. Pray for them right now. Write them a note or give them a phone call and let them know you are thinking of them and praying for them.

Third Day: Read all of Nehemiah 1, concentrating on verse 3.

1. In Nehemiah 1:3 who is in great trouble and disgrace?

- b. Personal: Has God ever had to discipline you? Write Jeremiah 29:11 inserting your own name.

Fourth Day: Read all of Nehemiah 1, concentrating on verses 3-7.

1. What was the condition of those who had survived the exile and were back in Judah? See Nehemiah 1:3a.
2. Why were the people in trouble and disgrace? See Nehemiah 1:3b.
3. Walls were a defense for a city and the gates were what allowed access to and exit from the city. According to Nehemiah 1:6-7, what had brought about this destruction of their defense?
4. What were Nehemiah's first steps to remedy the problem? See Nehemiah 1:4.
5.
 - a. Personal: Have the protective walls of your life been damaged, perhaps by sin and disobedience to God? Think about it carefully, and write your thoughts here.
 - b. Read James 4:8-10. What actions are you to take if you have sinned?
 - c. What promises does God give you in these verses?
 - d. Write a prayer thanking God for these promises.

Fifth Day: Read all of Nehemiah 1, concentrating on verses 8-9.

1. Whose promise is Nehemiah trusting in and what is promised in verses 8-9?
2. Challenge: Read Numbers 23:19 and Hebrews 6:18-19. What do they say about the character of God and the surety of His Word?

3. In Genesis 3:1-7 Adam and Eve chose not to believe and obey God and ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Read Romans 5:12. What happened because Adam didn't believe God?

4. What does God's Word tell us in Romans 5:8-9?

5. Personal: Read Romans 10:9-10. Do you believe what God has said? If so write a prayer telling Him that you believe that Jesus Christ died to take away your sins. Be certain to thank Him. Now tell someone that you believe God and have put your trust in Him.

Sixth Day: Read all of Nehemiah 1, concentrating on verses 9-11.

1. What action did God's people need to take? See Nehemiah 1:9.

2. Who was Nehemiah praying for? (See verse 10.)

3. To whom did Nehemiah want God to listen? (See verse 11.)

4. What do each of the following verses say about whom God does and does not listen to?
Psalms 66:18

Proverbs 15:29

John 9:31

James 4:3

James 5:16b

5. Personal: If there are areas of your life that aren't right, do like Nehemiah did and confess them to the Lord (see Nehemiah 1:6-7). This is the first step toward restoration. Write 1 John 1:9 inserting your own name.