

trusted position in the field of security for he was the Persian king's cupbearer, meaning he would always test the food and drink of the king to be sure that it was not poisoned in any way. We don't know if Nehemiah worked his way up to this position or if he was appointed by the king for it. Nehemiah must have proven himself as a very reliable and trustworthy person or he would never have been given that position. Doesn't that come too, by the way, with God's good hand upon you and with you? Then you are someone who shows and proves as very trustworthy indeed! His security guard position at that level made Nehemiah a respected individual, not only in the Jewish community but one who also could serve as close advisor and friend even with the king. God using also Nehemiah to bring comfort and help to His people and cause brings out that whatever place and position you may have in life, the Lord can and will lead and use you too for the advancement of His church and kingdom, if you have God's good hand upon you and with you.

Well now, let us meet the man with the good hand of the Lord upon him, whom God would so wonderfully use, as he is introduced to us in the first four verses. *"The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, [says Nehemiah] that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."*

We have to end just having read these first four verses of the book of Nehemiah. Next time we will study these verses. May God grant that this introduction whets your appetite to hear and learn more from this portion of God's Holy Word in the weeks and months ahead. "Lord, bless us with Thy good hand upon us, also in going through this book of Holy Scripture, and by Thy Holy Spirit, save sinners and build up Thy people also through these messages in the time ahead." Will this be your prayer with me? Amen.

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Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee that it may be displayed because of the truth. (Psalm 60:4)



THE GOOD HAND OF THE LORD THROUGH NEHEMIAH

In the months coming up I will have a series of messages on the book of Nehemiah. I encourage you to read through this very instructive, action-packed, Holy Spirit-inspired book. What comes through clearly in today's message and in the whole series on Nehemiah is the good hand of the Lord through Nehemiah. When you have the "good hand" of the Lord, also called the "strong hand" of the Lord, on you and with you, how blessed you are and what a blessing you also will be (Nehemiah 2:8 & 1:10).

Today's broadcast is an introductory message on the book, focusing especially on Nehemiah 1:1-4.. Let us first, however, consider some facts about the time and context of this book.

It is important to give here a brief review of the events in Israel and Judah explaining the book of Nehemiah. You know, I think, after Israel came into Canaan and became well established as a people especially under the reign of King David and King Solomon, there was a constant problem that repeated itself over and over. The people would forsake God and follow after the idol gods of the nations around them. Repeatedly, instead of listening to the Lord and His Word, they followed their own ways and became ungodly and worldly, just like the nations all around them. God warned them often that if they would continue in their sinful ways, they would be left to themselves and overtaken by the enemy nations around them. In the year 722 before Christ, the ten tribes of Israel were overtaken by the Assyrians. Then about 150 years later, because of ongoing idolatry and rebellion on the part of the two remaining tribes, in the year 586 before Christ's coming, Jerusalem was overtaken and destroyed by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. In the downfall and defeat of these tribes by enemy nations we learn what happens when people forsake the one true God. We learn what sinful, wayward people we are left to ourselves, even as God's covenant people, given so many favours from Him.

What is so wonderful to see though with all that sad history is how God always continued faithful in His promises and the keeping of His people. All through the sad wayward history there remained always a remnant of people who feared the Lord and walked in His ways, and looked to Him for help. And even with the prophecies about the coming overthrow of Israel first and then later Judah, God also gave promise that He would not forsake His people, and He would restore them. In both Isaiah and Jeremiah

where God's judgments are foretold, there the promise is also given on bringing the people back to Jerusalem one day, and even how long about they would be in Babylonian captivity, namely seventy years, and who the king would be that would give a decree that the Jews might return and build up their city and land again. Who was the king who gave the decree the Jews could return to their homeland? It was King Cyrus of Persia, as mentioned also in the last verses of II Chronicles 36.

Where do Nehemiah and the events of his book fit in this history? His book tells about the third wave of exiles coming to Jerusalem. In the first six chapters of Ezra we are told about the first wave of returning Jews under Zerubbabel and another Joshua. They came to Jerusalem around 537 BC. These people, numbering close to 50,000, focused their attention on the rebuilding of the temple. But they met with much difficulty and opposition and it wasn't until at least twenty years after their arrival that the temple was finally rebuilt. That whole story is in the first six chapters of Ezra.

Then a second wave of exiles came back from Persia, about 80 years after the first group, a much smaller group this time, led by the priest and scribe, Ezra. Ezra 7-10 tells their story and how Ezra was used especially to lead the people in spiritual and moral reform, for again there was much decline from the true worship and ways of the Lord among the people. Ezra came to Jerusalem about the year 458 before Christ's birth.

From the book of Nehemiah we learn that about thirteen years later, around 445 BC, then Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem to help the people further along for they were not in a very good state at all, far from it, even. Almost seventy years after the temple had been rebuilt, still the city by and large lay in ruins and was subject to opposition and oppression from the enemy people all around. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem, sent and used by God, especially to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and to help the people be more protected but also to become more stable in God's ways.

A second question we should ask here is, 'Why is the book of Nehemiah placed where it is in the Old Testament?' It is placed at the end of the history section of the Bible, after II Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, and really it gives us the last part of Old Testament Bible history before the time of Christ about 400 years later. If you wanted to put the book in its place with the section of the prophets, you would place it correctly just before the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi. The book of Nehemiah is a special history book for it tells us the last part of inspired Jewish history before the coming of Jesus to this earth, just over 400 years later. This is to help you understand the book of Nehemiah and because it should help drive home the message of this blessed book of the Bible. It will help to remember some of these details as we go through the book.

There are still two more short introductory questions. Do you know the meaning of the name, Nehemiah? It means literally "The Lord

comforts" or "Comforted of the Lord." Isn't that a beautiful name? This name and the meaning thereof should also tell us what the book of Nehemiah is really about. It is not about Nehemiah especially, but about God bringing comfort and help through Nehemiah. In the book of Nehemiah we see the LORD again come to the help and defense of His people, even when they proved themselves so unworthy of His saving help and comfort. Nehemiah is another book of history details telling us how God worked for the fulfilling of all His gospel promises and for the coming of His kingdom, yes, also especially for the coming of His long-promised Son as the Messiah King, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who would be born in Bethlehem in Judea. We don't read this book rightly if in studying it, all we see is Nehemiah and his commitment and skills and leadership, and so on. Rather, this inspired book is also part of the redemptive history of God our Saviour. As inspired Holy Scripture, you can say it is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of sinners. The book of Nehemiah points to and speaks ultimately of the great Rebuilder and Reformer of broken down lives, people in ruins and shambles through sin.

All the good that is in and with Nehemiah, and that he could do and did in his times is because the good hand of the Lord was on him, and God would comfort His people and promote His church and kingdom through this man. Studying this book together now, how we should praise God for His good hand on this man, and through this story of Nehemiah, who lived almost 2500 years ago, how we should pray that God's good hand may be on us as it once was on Nehemiah. After all, the Lord is still out to comfort His people, isn't He, and still out to add to and increase His church and establish His kingdom also in and through His people, yes, with His good hand upon us? Repeatedly you will find the phrase about the hand of God and the good hand of God upon Nehemiah or with him, and as with Nehemiah, if you and I would know God's comfort and will be a means of truly bringing comfort to others, it is with God's good hand, His favour, His saving power and Holy Spirit in us and with us in all our ways. The theme for this introductory message on Nehemiah is "The good hand of the Lord through Nehemiah". Do you personally desire and aim and pray and work that this may be the theme of your life too in our times? Isn't that the only right and wise and fruitful way to live?

Maybe someone says, "But we are not all 'Nehemiahs'." You are right, and certainly we don't need to be either. Here, however, let me ask my last question also before looking with you at the text itself. Do you know what was Nehemiah's position, actually, as we meet him in this first chapter? Nehemiah was not a political leader, nor a priest or prophet in his time, but he had the job of a security man. At our banks and in different places you will see security people hired to prevent harm and crime and danger. Nehemiah was a Jew with the job of security guard in a foreign land. Yes, he had a very