

**Nehemiah-Introduction**  
**Jan 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010, Oaklands Chapel**

Reading Psalm 3 and  
**Nehemiah 1:1-3**

So we are now into 2,010, -“two O one O”, or “O,10” however you say it, it sounds funny. However, by the end of January we will have got use to it and our New Year will settle into being just ‘another year.’ I remember, as a young boy, growing up in the 40’s and fifties, when my father talked about the 1920’s and my grandparents talking about times in the late 1800.s. Those dates seemed so ancient and the pictures, what few there were, showed people, vehicles, clothes and activities that looked as if they had come from another planet. Now when I talk about the 19’fifties my kids look at me with that same look I gave my parents, my grandkids just shake their heads, and I realize that times keep moving on.

For some of you life has not changed much over this past year, for others 2009 leaves behind some tattered remnants that are best forgotten. For all of us, as always, the future holds many uncertainties. What sort of year lies ahead? For many Canadians the suggestion that our economy is on the rebound may give some the confidence that, perhaps, this may be an OK year. However, Canada is only a small drop in a worldwide sea of activity. Some of the things going on around the world may seem remote but they are making their presence felt in many ways. The ugly face of terrorism has been raised again reminding us that we live in very challenging times. Although those who believe in Jesus Christ keep him in their thoughts constantly, this past Christmas season has given everyone the opportunity to once again focus on the birth of the Messiah which took place in the Middle East over two thousand years ago. However, who knows how our

lives may be affected by those, in the Middle East of today, who are driven by a theology that is determined to bring about the arrival of their own Messiah. Radical Muslims, led by Iran's president Ahmadinejad, believe that their Messiah, the twelfth Imam, will not come until they have launched a final Holy war against Christians and Jews. As Iran develops its Nuclear technology the threat of a Nuclear strike becomes an increasing reality. One thing is very evident; what you believe is very important. North Americans have had the luxury of being very casual about what we believe but today, and in many places it has always been true, what you believe really defines not only your destiny but how you respond to life around you day by day. Whether you face domestic problems, social concerns or you are caught up in the wider concerns of world politics, what you believe will dictate how you react to those around you, how you deal with the issues, and how you see the future.

The psalm that was read to us this morning; Psalms 3, reveals how David, the chosen King of the great and powerful nation of Israel, in the midst of an incredible national crisis, and a painful and sad family calamity, leans upon what he knows about God and finds peace, security, comfort, and confidence for the future. The God of David is one in whom he could place all his trust. I have two questions for you to think about this morning. **1. How confident are you in God?**

**2. Does your confidence lead you to a state of peace and into an attitude of willing service?**

We may not agree with them but radical Muslims are prepared to put their own lives on the line because of what they believe. Are we who believe in Jesus Christ as passionate? As we look at our own local church, our own community, our own country,

and the world around us, we see some huge challenges. How do we respond to them?  
How should we respond? What does God want us to do?

These are important questions but quite often we do not even want to consider them. We either feel it does not concern us, or we just want to get on with our own lives. Over the next few weeks you are going to look at the life of a man who faced similar challenges. His name is **Nehemiah**-. Those who have trouble remembering names may want to remember that he was one of the smaller men in the Bible: Knee-hi-miah. He was not the smallest however because in the book of Job we are introduced to Bildad the shuhite. Some have suggested that Peter was even smaller because he slept on his watch. **Nehemiah- whose name means- comfort of God or God is comfort** is of interest to us today because through his character and his story we can learn how we can lean upon God in the midst of some incredible circumstances. Gene Getz in his book titled “**Nehemiah –man of prayer and persistence**” suggests that this man models for us lessons that we can use in our day today struggles to deal with the difficulties that life throws at us. He suggests that through the study of the book of Nehemiah we can learn:

- **How to pray when there seems to be no human solution to our problems**
- **How to blend human and divine factors when facing these predicaments**
- **How to keep God’s sovereignty and our human responsibility in proper balance.**
- **How to ‘plan our work and work our plan’ and rely on God all at the same time.**
- **How to handle discouragement in ourselves and others.**
- **How to set goals and achieve them when everything around us seems to be against us.**
- **How to motivate others when morale is slipping.**
- **How to cope with personal anger and other negative emotions.**
- **How to respond to false accusations.**
- **How to look at and deal with our own personal problems first.**

We had the opening verses of this book read to us earlier and the very first verse contains information that could be mystifying to anyone who does not have any background

knowledge of the History of Israel but they take us right back into the heart of the Middle east, that area that dominates much of our modern daily news.

**1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:** We have no other pedigree of Nehemiah other than this

**In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa,**

Each of those terms needs some explanation

The month **Kislev is our November-December** time.

The 20<sup>th</sup> year is the **20<sup>th</sup> year in reign of King Artaxerxes of Babylon who reigned around 464-423 BC**,[400 before Christ]

**Susa, or Shushan**, as some translations have it, was the winter retreat, or the winter palace, of the Persian Kings at this time. Before I connect the historical dots for you let me give you a piece of my personal history. It was the study of the book of Nehemiah that really started me off in my interest in the Bible as a whole. In my first year of my Teacher training College in 1960- I went with a group of Christian friends from College to a Bible retreat center for a week. Each day we had three sessions by three different speakers. On the first day as each speaker introduced his topic, one on prayer, one on leadership and one on the sovereignty of God. They had not corresponded with each so they were all surprised to discover that all of them had decided to use Nehemiah as their background. I remember that, after a couple of days, our chairman for the week said that Nehemiah had so captured his thoughts that when he received some mail that week it would not have surprised him to find it addressed to the `Palace at Susa`. In that week I learned to get really excited about biblical interpretation, biblical application and biblical history. Nehemiah has, ever since, been of great interest and inspiration to me. My prayer is that, through the weeks ahead, you will find this study to be a great blessing

And inspiration to you.

Let me place the times of Nehemiah into their correct historical context for you.

Israel was born through the **Promise of God to Abraham**, when he lived in Ur of the Chaldees, not far from where Nehemiah's story begins. **On the map you can see Ur – Susa- and Babylon**



God led Abraham through the region known as the **fertile crescent** to the land that we know as Israel today and promised to give that land to his descendents. Through circumstances, which you can read about in Genesis, Abraham's grandchild Jacob and his twelve great grandchildren, with their families, ended up in Egypt where they became slaves for 400 hundred years. When Moses led those descendents, , through what is called the ``**Exodus**`` back to the Promised Land they had multiplied from being a group of families to **a nation of over two million strong**. God promised this new Nation of

Israel that if they were obedient to him He would bring them blessings but if they were disobedient they would suffer. Over the next **four hundred years**, they had a roller coaster history of obedience and disobedience. This period is covered by the **book of judges**. Israel finally demanded a king, a choice that was not pleasing to God but, because of His love and patience, He allowed the choice but warned them that, depending on his obedience, the king could be either good or bad for them. Their first King, **Saul**, was a disappointment whereas **David**, his successor was a man after God's own heart and Israel prospered. **Solomon**, David's son, started well but ended badly. When Solomon's son **Rehoboam** took over, the Kingdom was in poor shape and in 931bc it split into two Kingdoms. **10 tribes gathered to the north**, and became known as Israel, and their capitol was Samaria. **Two tribes gathered in the South**, **Jerusalem** was their capitol, and they became known as Judah. The Northern kingdom's history is one of constant rebellion against God. They had **19 kings**, none of which pleased God in any way, and after 250 years God allowed them to be **destroyed by Assyria in 722bc**. Israel, that Northern Kingdom, **never recovered**. Down South, in **Judah, they had 20 kings**, 8 of which sought after God but, after **320 years** and because of disobedience, eventually God allowed Jerusalem to Fall to **Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians, in 605bc**. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. The people, who lived in Judah, were mostly **deported to Babylon**. This period is called **the Exile** and some of these years are described in the books of **Daniel and Esther**. However, **God does not forget His promises**. Through the prophet **Jeremiah** he had told the people of Judah that although he would punish their disobedience, with defeat and exile, he would restore the kingdom after 70 years. Sure enough in **539, in the reign of Cyrus the king**, a proclamation was

made announcing that any Israelite that so desired could return to their country and rebuild their Temple. Interestingly, **nearly one hundred and sixty years before king Cyrus** was ever born, God declared through the prophet **Isaiah [chapt.44-45]** that he would raise up this man, His shepherd, to rebuild His city, even though at the time of Isaiah, Jerusalem was prospering and wouldn't be destroyed for another 100 years by Nebuchadnezzar.

We are now on the doorstep of Nehemiah's story. In **538bc the first exiles returned to Jerusalem under their leader, Zerubbabel**, with the specific goal: **to rebuild the Temple**. Jerusalem was a mess and the people who had moved into the land were aggressive and unfriendly. The returned exiles got discouraged and so sidetracked by their own lives that the work on God's house stopped. After a while the prophets **Haggai and Zechariah** stirred up some enthusiasm and reminded the people why they had been sent back. Even today we can get discouraged and so busy with our own lives that we forget that God has a task for us to perform. We often need stirring up. **It took twenty years before this group of returnees completed their task in 516bc.**

It is never easy to be faithful to God in any age but these returnees made a valiant try. Although the Temple was up and many of the former rituals and ceremonies were faithfully carried out, there were constant pressures and temptations from the peoples around to which these exiles succumbed. **70 years pass** by before another group of people come to Jerusalem from Babylon and heading up this group is a priest by the name of **Ezra**. The book which carries his name and the book of Nehemiah cover similar periods of time and deal with the same group of people. Ezra is concerned about the **state of the worship and the spiritual life of the people in Jerusalem**. Although born and

brought up in Babylon he has spent his life studying the word of God and he has a **passion to teach the Word and help people live by the Law of the Lord.** What he discovers in Jerusalem is reason for dismay. There are **people who call themselves followers of God but they are living lives filled with paganism.** Ezra begins his task of bringing reform to the people. I wonder what Ezra would think about us. Are we people who he would look at say, “They are truly being obedient to God,” or would he see that we have allowed the world’s standards to infiltrate into our lives that there is a desperate need for reform? The beginning of a New Year is a great opportunity to examine our own hearts and prayer that great Prayer of King David recorded in Ps 139

**Ps 139:23-24**

**23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.**

**24 See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.**

It is only as we allow God to reveal what is in our hearts that we can truly be of service to Him.

**Ezra came to Jerusalem around the year 458bc.** Meanwhile back in Babylon Nehemiah, who is another Jew born in Babylon and who has surely heard about Ezra’s return, is living out his life as one of Babylon’s elite. Nehemiah, as we shall discover is the **cupbearer to the most powerful man in the world.** Just how he obtained this elevated position is not known but obviously he was a man of outstanding character, and had a reputation that gave him the trust of a king. George Rawlinson , in his book, “Their life and Times,” says;

“The special duty of the cupbearer was to fill the royal wine cup from the flagon and hand it daintily to the king, supporting it with 3 fingers, and presenting it in such a way that the king could take it without spilling a drop. Before filling the cup they ladled out a small quantity which they drank in the presence of the

king to demonstrate that it was not poisoned. When not engaged in this duty the cupbearer guarded the royal apartment and forbade or allowed entry to the king, at his discretion. Even princes had to submit to their authority and thus the power they had made their position one of high account and probably enabled the holder, if he so inclined, to greatly enrich himself.”

The kings and their cupbearers would obviously develop a close relationship and some writers have suggested that the cupbearers would become more like confidants than slaves. Nehemiah was in a very enviable position. As his story opens the king had moved from the great City of Babylon to the gentler and warmer climate of Susa 200 miles west and south and had of course taken his entourage with him. The year is 446. It is some 12 years since Ezra had left for Jerusalem. When Nehemiah sees Hanani we quickly see that this high society man has not allowed his position, his wealth, nor his important duties to squeeze out his interests in and concern for the people of God.

**Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.**

With all our modern news media and all the missionary bulletins that are sent out we should be the most informed generation. Many believers do take the opportunity and show interest in what the people of God are doing both here and around the world. However, there are others of us who show very little interest in what is happening to the church of God worldwide, some hardly take the time to read our own church bulletin, because the things of God are not that important to us. Nehemiah’s question was not idle curiosity but a genuine desire to know. Obviously he had heard some previous reports and he anxiously sought answers. He wanted to know about God’s people and their circumstances.

**They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."**

It would be easy to say, why should that surprise him? Every Jew born in Exile would have heard from their parents of the total destruction of their temple, and the burning of their beloved city of Jerusalem and its walls. But every Jew also would have known of the decree issued by Cyrus to allow exiles to go back and rebuild the Temple. News had dribbled back that the Temple was up and running. Rumors had been heard that the exiles had begun to rebuild the city and its walls. Ezra's journey 12 years ago was another ray of hope that the work might have progressed. A reading of Ezra's history tells us that there was a start made on the walls but political interference had stopped the builders and the enemies of Jerusalem broke down and burned what the exiles had started. That was the news that Nehemiah received. Things were not going well for God's people. God's work was being hindered. His kingdom was still in tatters.

Every day we hear news from around the world of Christians being imprisoned, killed, or struggling for a living because of their faith. Does it matter to us that people are suffering for God's kingdom? We do not have to go that far afield. Right here in our own backyard there is a constant need for people to get involved in the work of the Lord. We will see over the next few weeks how Nehemiah responds to this challenging news. We will learn how prayer, planning and a willingness to sacrifice are used by God to do what might seem impossible. We will also see how our God consistently fulfills his promises and rewards those who trust him.

- **Do you believe in a God who fulfills all His promises?**
- **Are you willing to put self aside to serve Him?**