

The Jewish people had been taken as prisoners to Babylon. Approximately 70 years later, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylonia around 539 BC and declared that all the Jews could return to their home in Jerusalem and reconstruct the Temple. But not all the Jews wanted to return.

The book of Nehemiah opens in the year 444 BC. The Jew Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. One day as he was serving the king wine in a cup, the king saw that Nehemiah was very sad. He asked, "Why are you so sad?" Nehemiah told him about the difficulties in Jerusalem, the fallen wall around the city and the burned gates. He asked the king for permission to rebuild the city walls. The king agreed. So Nehemiah led a group back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah's expertise in the king's court equipped him adequately for the political and physical reconstruction necessary. The reconstruction of the walls and gates was very difficult. There was little money, food, water and clothing. The enemies of the Jews tried to stop the construction. In fact, the Jews would hold a weapon in one hand while working on the walls with the other hand. They trusted in God and helped one another. With Nehemiah's leadership and God's protection, they finished reconstructing the walls around Jerusalem in fifty-two days. The Jews united in Jerusalem and Ezra read the Book of the Law of Moses. These were the laws that God gave Moses. Afterwards, the Jews dedicated themselves to obey, serve and worship God. From the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New Testament four hundred years would pass without another prophet from God. The Jews waited for the promised Messiah.

Nehemiah's life provides a study on leadership. Nehemiah's humility before God provided an example for the people. He did not claim glory for himself but always gave God the credit for his successes. He overcame opposition from outsiders as well as internal turmoil. He exercised his administrative skills in his strategy to use half the people for building while the other half kept watch for the Samaritans who threatened attack. As governor, Nehemiah negotiated peace among the Jews who were unhappy with Persian taxes. He exhibited a steadfast determination to complete his goals. Accomplishing those goals resulted in a people encouraged, renewed, and excited about their future.