



“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”

Session 6: A Third Return by God’s Good Hand

July 25, 2024

6:30 PM

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the exemplary life of Nehemiah and for the wonderful way that He immediately turned to You in humble prayer and supplication. As we study his story this evening, may we too embrace prayer when confronted with insurmountable difficulty and when life is full of ease. May we, in like manner, not sidestep Your sufficient provision nor try to solve the problems of life on our own. When we see the increasingly tense situation on today’s world scene, may we turn to You in loving trust, praying for Your will to be done in all circumstances. In Jesus' name. AMEN.

Session 5 Recap

Last week in Session 5, we concluded our study of Ezra. As Ezra prepared to lead the Jewish exiles back to Judah and arrives in Jerusalem, he becomes aware of another problem – a spiritual problem – that he must address. Many of the Jewish people had taken foreign spouses – sinful practices that had led the nation into captivity in the first place. The issue was not “intermarriage” but religious defilement – five of the nations mentioned were the nations that Joshua was supposed to have driven out when they first entered the Promised Land, while the others had been especially hateful to the nation of Judah. Ezra is stunned by the news and he gathers the people together to address the situation through a prayer of confession. As Ezra corporately confesses to God, the people all gathered around him and began to weep. They promise they will make amends to put themselves back in line with God. When Ezra hears this response, he leads the people in making the reforms.

Opening Question...

Think of a recent situation in your life that caused you to go to God immediately in prayer. What happened as a result of your prayer and action?

Nehemiah Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 Overview

When the story of the Jewish exiles picks up in the book of Nehemiah (around 446 BC), approximately twelve years have passed since Ezra led the second wave of people back to Judah. At the time, a man named Nehemiah – a cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes I – is living in the citadel of Susa when he receives word that the second wave of exiles are not fairing well. After all these years, the walls of Jerusalem still lie in ruin, and the people are being continually harassed by the enemies in the region. Nehemiah responds with grief...but also with prayer and action.

Nehemiah approaches the Persian king about his concerns. In Nehemiah's day, it was common practice for the king's subjects to appear happy and content when in the king's presence, as this demonstrated the king was a wise ruler. To appear unhappy could lead to the king's wrath. So for good reason, Nehemiah is afraid when the king notices his cupbearer's sadness. Nehemiah quickly seizes the opportunity to explain the plight of his people, and confidently asks for the king's help in allowing Nehemiah to rebuild the city's walls.

Scripture Focus – Nehemiah Chapter 1 (verses 1 – 11)

Vs. 1 – Nehemiah would be the third leader of Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem, behind Zerubbabel and Ezra. Nehemiah's journey would take three months, and he would see the rebuilt Temple and become acquainted with those exiles who had already returned. What we will see in this book is that Nehemiah found a disorganized group of people in Jerusalem, along with a defenseless city with no walls to protect it. Before the exile, Israel had its own language, king, army, and identity. At this time, it had none of these. What the Jews lacked most was leadership – there was no one to show them where to start and what direction to take as they tried to rebuild the city. When Nehemiah arrived, he began a back to basics program. He helped care for the people's physical needs by setting up a form of government and then

rebuilding the walls. He also cared for the spiritual needs by rebuilding lives. Nehemiah was a model of committed, God-honoring leadership.

Vs. 2 – 4 – Nehemiah was concerned about Jerusalem because it was the Jews' holy city. As Judah's capital city, it represented Jewish national identity, and it was blessed with God's special presence in the Temple. Jewish history centered around the city from the time of Abraham's gifts to Melchizedek, king of Salem, to the days when Solomon built the glorious Temple, and throughout the history of the kings. Nehemiah loved his homeland even though he had lived his whole life in Babylon. He wanted to return to Jerusalem to reunite the Jews and to remove the shame of Jerusalem's broken-down walls. This would bring glory to God and restore the reality and power of God's presence among His people.

Nehemiah broke down and wept when he heard that Jerusalem's walls still had not been rebuilt. Why? Walls mean little in most present-day cities, but in Nehemiah's day, they were essential. They offered safety from raids and symbolized strength and peace. Nehemiah also mourned for his people, the Jews, who had been stifled by a previous edict that kept them from rebuilding their walls (Ezra 4).

Nehemiah was grieved, but he did not just brood about it. After his initial grief, he prayed, pouring his heart out to God, and he looked for ways to improve the situation. Nehemiah put all his resources of knowledge, experience, and organization into determining what should be done. When tragic news comes to you, first pray. Then seek ways to move beyond grief to specific action that helps those who need it.

Vs. 5 – 11 – In the first part of his prayer, Nehemiah reminds God of His covenant with His people. He speaks of God's promise to love the descendants of Abraham. This covenant is repeated in Deuteronomy 7:7-9.

Nehemiah fasted and prayed for several days, expressing his sorrow for Israel's sin and his desire that Jerusalem would again come alive with the worship of the one true God. Nehemiah demonstrated the elements of effective prayer – praise, thanksgiving, repentance, a specific request, and commitment.

Heartfelt prayers like Nehemiah's can help clarify problems that we may be facing. They can also help clarify God's great power to help us, and the task that we have to do. By the end of his prayer time, Nehemiah knew what

action he had to take. When God's people pray, difficult decisions fall into proper perspective, and appropriate actions follow.

Nehemiah was in a unique position to speak to the king. He was the trusted cupbearer who ensured the safety and quality of the king's food and drink. Nehemiah was concerned, prayerful, and prepared as he looked for the right opportunity to tell the king about God's people. Each of us is unique and capable of serving no matter what our position. Just as Nehemiah used his place as the king's trusted servant to intercede for his people, so we can use our present positions to serve God.

Nehemiah also prayed for success in this venture, not just for the strength to cope with his problems. Yet the success he prayed for was not for personal advantage, position, or acclaim. He requested success for God's work. When God's purposes are at work, do not hesitate to ask for success.

Follow Up Questions...

1. What does Nehemiah's prayer reveal about his view of himself and of God?
2. How do you think prayer prepared Nehemiah to lead his people?
3. Why would Nehemiah's position as cupbearer to the king have been an asset in improving the situation?
4. How does prayer clear our vision and cause us to give control of the situation to God?
5. How does prayer quiet our hearts and activate our faith?
6. In what ways has prayer changed your attitude toward a difficult situation you were facing?

Scripture Focus – Nehemiah Chapter 2 (verses 1 – 20)

Vs. 1 – 3 – The king noticed Nehemiah's sad appearance. This frightened Nehemiah because it was dangerous to show sorrow before the king, who could execute anyone who displeased him. Anyone wearing sackcloth (mourning clothes) was barred from the palace (Esther 4:2).

Nehemiah was not ashamed to admit his fear, but he refused to allow fear to stop him from doing what God had called him to do. When we allow our fears to rule us, we make fear more powerful than God. Is there a task God wants you to do, but fear is holding you back? God is greater than all your fears. Recognizing why you are afraid is the first step in committing it to God. Realize that if God has called you to a task, He will help you accomplish it.

Vs. 4 – 5 – With little time to think (or was it...), Nehemiah prayed. Eight times in this book we read that Nehemiah prayed spontaneously. Nehemiah prayed at any time, even while talking with others. He knew that God is always in charge, is always present, and hears and answers every prayer. Nehemiah could confidently pray throughout the day because he had established an intimate relationship with God during times of extended prayer. If we want to reach God with our emergency prayers, we need to take time to cultivate a strong relationship with God through times of in-depth prayer.

Vs. 6 – 8 – The king asked Nehemiah how long he would be gone. The Bible does not record Nehemiah's immediate answer, but he ended up staying in Jerusalem 12 years.

After his prayer, Nehemiah asked the king for permission to go to Judah. As soon as he got a positive answer, he began asking for additional help. Sometimes when we have needs, we hesitate to ask the right people for help because we are afraid to approach them. Not Nehemiah! He went directly to the person who could help him the most. Do not be reluctant to ask those who are most able to help. They may be more interested and approachable than you think. God's answers to prayer may come as a result of our asking others.

Nehemiah had position, power, and many good organizational skills, but he acknowledged that God's gracious hand was upon him. He knew that without God's strength his efforts would be in vain. Do you acknowledge God as your power source and the giver of your gifts? Daily?

Vs. 9 – 10, 19 – When Nehemiah arrived in Judah, he was greeted with opposition. Opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem had been going on for 90 years by those who had settled in the area when the Jews were taken captive. In every generation, there are those who hate God's people and try to block God's purpose. When you attempt to do God's work, some will oppose you; some will even hope you fail. If you expect opposition, you will be

prepared rather than surprised. Knowing that God is behind your task is the best incentive to move ahead in the face of opposition.

Sanballat was governor of Samaria, and Tobiah was probably governor of Transjordan under the Persians. Why were these government officials so concerned with the arrival of Nehemiah and his small band of exiles? There are several possible reasons. (1) When Zerubbabel first returned with his group, his refusal to accept help from the Samaritans had caused bad relations. (2) Nehemiah was no ordinary exile. He was the king's personal adviser and cupbearer, arriving in Jerusalem with the king's approval to build and fortify the city. If anyone could rebuild Jerusalem, he could. A rebuilt Jerusalem was a threat to the authority of the Samaritan officials who had been in charge of the land since Judah's exile. (3) This was the third group to return from exile. The increasing number of people in Jerusalem made Sanballat and Tobiah angry. They did not want returned exiles taking control of the land and threatening their secure position.

Vs. 11 – 16 – Nehemiah arrived quietly in Jerusalem and spent several days carefully observing and assessing the damage to the walls. Following the time of thoughtful consideration, he confidently presented his plan. Nehemiah demonstrated an excellent approach to problem solving. He got firsthand information and carefully considered the situation. Then he presented a realistic strategy. Before jumping into a project, follow Nehemiah's example and plan ahead. Check your information to make sure your ideas will work – be realistic. Then you will be able to present your plan with confidence.

The walls were so broken down that Nehemiah's mount could not get through. Nehemiah had to inspect sections on foot. Nehemiah kept his mission a secret and surveyed the walls by moonlight to avoid unhealthy gossip about his arrival and to prevent enemies from being alerted to his plans. Only after planning carefully would he be ready to go public with his mission from God. A premature announcement could have caused rivalry among the Jews as to the best way to begin. In this case, Nehemiah did not need tedious planning sessions; he needed one plan that would bring quick action.

Vs. 17 – 18 – Spiritual renewal often begins with one person's vision. Nehemiah had a vision, and he shared it with enthusiasm, inspiring

Jerusalem's leader to rebuild the walls. We frequently underestimate people and do not challenge them with our dreams for God's work in the world. When God plants an idea in your mind to accomplish something for Him, share it with others, and trust the Holy Spirit to impress them with similar thoughts. Do not regard yourself as the only one through whom God is working. Often God uses one person to express the vision and others to turn it into reality. When you encourage and inspire others, you put teamwork into action to accomplish God's goals.

Vs. 19 – 20 – Sanballat and Tobiah labeled the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls as rebellion against the king, probably threatening to report the builders as traitors. These enemies also ridiculed Nehemiah, saying that the walls could never be rebuilt because the damage was too extensive. Nehemiah did not tell them he already had permission from the king to rebuild. Instead, he simply said he had God's approval – that was enough.

Follow Up Questions...

1. Why did it take courage for Nehemiah to speak to the king of behalf of the exiles?
2. How did Nehemiah demonstrate he sought God throughout this exchange with the king?
3. How do you respond to the idea that God wants you to be bold in your prayers and approach His throne with confidence?
4. What is a problem you are facing right now that you need to pray about with confidence?

Closing Prayer

Father, You are our fortress, our refuge, and our safe harbor. Teach us to run to You whenever we feel overwhelmed with a problem and trust that You can solve it. Help us to be bold and confident in our requests – knowing there is nothing too great for You to handle. Amen.

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Session 7 – Wall Rebuilding in Spite of Opposition

Tuesday, July 30 6:30 PM

Nehemiah Ch. 3 - 6

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