



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

Session 7: Wall Rebuilding in Spite of Opposition

July 30, 2024

6:30 PM

Opening Prayer

Dear Lord and Heavenly Father, there is so much for us to learn, and we pray that we would have teachable spirits. Thank You for the Scriptures and for Nehemiah the scribe and Eliashib the high priest, who faithfully carried out the work that You gave them to do with a willing spirit and joyful heart - and who became such good examples of faithfulness to emulate. Thank You for the gifts and graces that You have given to us. We pray that we would carry out the work that You have called us to do faithfully, and for Your glory. This we ask in Jesus' name, AMEN.

Session 6 Recap

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 faring 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 customary 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.

Opening Question...

Think of a time when you felt like giving up on a project. What motivated you to stick with it?

Nehemiah Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 Overview

Once in Jerusalem, Nehemiah leads the work of rebuilding and of trusting God throughout the process. We see the unity of God's people in spite of external opposition and internal strife. Two men specifically, Sanballat (the governor of Samaria) and Tobiah (the governor of the region east of the Jordan River), soon join forces to harass the people in their work. Nehemiah refuses to allow them to discourage him, and when these enemies see the wall is half-finished, they take it upon themselves to mobilize an armed aggression against the workers. Staying on task requires Nehemiah and his workers to persevere in these trials.

Nehemiah also had to deal with internal strife as the hands of his own people. Due to the hectic work schedule on the wall, many of the people did not have the time or the energy to attend to their own personal matters. As a result, some of the people were experiencing financial difficulties and even going hungry. When Nehemiah learns these workers are being exploited by the wealthy officials and nobles, he sets out to address the problem and provide help to the hurting. Finally, the wall is complete, the building accomplished with the help of God.

Scripture Focus – Nehemiah Chapter 3 (verses 1 – 32)

Vs. 1 - 2 – Jerusalem was a large city, and because many roads converged there, it required many gates. The wall on each side of these heavy wooden gates was taller and thicker so soldiers could stand guard to defend the gates against attack. Sometimes two stone towers guarded the gate. In times of peace, the city gates were hubs of activity – city council was held there, and shopkeepers set up their wares at the entrance. Building the city walls and gates was not only a military priority, but also a boost for trade and commerce.

The high priest is the first person mentioned who pitched in and helped with the work. Spiritual leaders must lead not only by word, but also by action. The Sheep Gate was the gate used to bring sheep into the city to the

temple for sacrifices. Nehemiah had the priests repair this gate and section of the wall, respecting the priests' area of interest and at the same time emphasizing the priority of worship.

All the citizens of Jerusalem did their part on the huge job of rebuilding the city wall. Similarly, the work of the church requires every member's effort in order for the body of Christ to function effectively. Are you doing your part? Find a place to serve God, and start contributing whatever time, talent, and money is needed.

Vs. 3 – 4 – One of the main roads through Jerusalem entered the city through the Fish Gate (2 Chronicles 33:14). The fish market was near the gate and merchants from Tyre, the Sea of Galilee, and other fishing areas entered the gate to sell their goods.

Vs. 5 – The nobles of Tekoa were lazy and would not help. These men were the only ones who did not support the building project in Jerusalem. Every group, even churches, will have those who think they are too wise or important to work hard. Gentle encouragement does not seem to help. Sometimes the best policy is to ignore them. They may think they are getting away with something, but their inactivity will be remembered by all who worked hard.

Vs. 6 – 12 – Shallum's daughters helped with the demanding work of repairing the city walls. Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls was a matter of national emergency for the Jews, not just a civic beautification project. Nearly everyone was dedicated to the task and willing to work on it.

Vs. 13 – 14 – The Refuse Gate was the gate through which the people carried their garbage to be burned in the valley of Hinnom.

Vs. 15 – 28 – The Horse Gate was at the eastern point of the wall, facing the Kidron Valley. Each priest repaired the wall in front of his own house, in addition to other sections. If each person was responsible for the part of the wall closest to his own house, (1) he would be more motivated to build it quickly and properly, (2) he wouldn't waste time traveling to more distant parts of the wall, (3) he would defend his own home if the wall were attacked, and (4) he would be able to make the building a family effort. Nehemiah blended self-interest with the group's objective, helping everyone to feel that the wall project was his own. If you are a part of a group working on a large project,

make sure each person sees the importance and meaning of the job that he or she has to do. This will ensure high-quality work and personal satisfaction.

Vs. 29 – 32 – The Inspection Gate was in the northern part of the eastern wall.

Scripture Focus – Nehemiah Chapter 4 (Verses 1 – 23)

Vs. 1 – 8 – Almost 300 years before Nehemiah's time, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered, and most of the people were carried away captive (722 BC). Sargon of Assyria repopulated Israel with captives from other lands. These captives eventually intermarried with the few Israelites who remained in the land to form a mixed race of people who became known as the Samaritans. The Jews who returned to Jerusalem and the southern region of Judea during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah would have nothing to do with the Samaritans, whom they considered to be racially impure. Relations between both groups grew progressively worse – 400 years later, the Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, the region just north of Judea where Jerusalem was located. Sanballat may have hoped to become governor of Judea as well, but Nehemiah's arrival spoiled his plans. Sanballat tried to scare Nehemiah away or at least discourage him by scorn, threats, and bluffs.

Ridicule can cut deeply, causing discouragement and despair. Sanballat and Tobiah used ridicule to try to dissuade the Jews from building the wall. Instead of trading insults, however, Nehemiah prayed, and the work continued. When you are mocked for your faith or criticized for doing what you know is right, refuse to respond in the same way or to become discouraged. Tell God how you feel and remember his promised to be with you. This will give you encouragement and strength to carry on.

Nehemiah is not praying for revenge, but that God's justice would be carried out. His prayer is similar to many of David's prayers that we see in Psalms. The work of rebuilding the wall progressed well because the people had set their hearts and minds on accomplishing the task. They did not lose faith or give up, but they persevered in the work. If God has called you to a task, determine to complete it, even if you face opposition or discouragement. The rewards of work well done will be worth the effort.

Vs. 9 – 14 – Nehemiah constantly combined prayer with preparation and planning. His people trusted God and at the same time kept vigilant watch over what had been entrusted to them. Too often we pray without looking for what God wants us to do. We show God we are serious when we combine prayer with thought, preparation, and effort.

Accomplishing any large task is tiring. There are always pressures that foster discouragement – the task seems impossible, it can never be finished, or too many factors are working against us. The only cure for fatigue and discouragement is focusing on God’s purposes. Nehemiah reminded the workers of their calling, their goal, and God’s protection. If you are overwhelmed by an assignment, tired and discouraged, remember God’s purpose for your life and his special purpose for the project.

Vs. 15 – 20 – The workers were spread out along the wall, so Nehemiah devised a plan of defense that would unite and protect his people – half the men worked while the other half stood guard. Christians need to help one another in the same way because we can become so afraid of possible dangers that we cannot get anything done. By looking out for each other, we will be free to put forth our best efforts, confident that others are ready to offer help when needed. Don’t cut yourself off from others; instead, join together for mutual benefit. You need them as much as they need you.

To further relieve the anxieties of the people, Nehemiah set up a communication system. The man who sounded the trumpet stayed with Nehemiah, and the people knew what to do if they heard it. We have no record that the trumpet was ever used, but simply knowing it would issue a warning when needed was reassuring. The promise of open, immediate communication helped the group accomplish its task.

Vs. 21 – 23 – Although the exact meaning of the Hebrew phrase, “even to the water” is unclear (it has been translated “in his right hand” or “at his right hand at night”), the point is that each man always had his weapon close at hand. The guards were prepared and took their responsibilities seriously.

Follow Up Questions...

1. How did Nehemiah respond to the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah? How did he and his workers respond when their enemies banded together to fight them?

2. What leadership qualities did Nehemiah possess that enabled his people to persevere?
3. When is a time in your life that you had to persevere in a situation? What rewards did you realize as a result of your perseverance?
4. How can persevering in a trial – even if you do not receive the outcome that you want – serve to strengthen your relationship with God?
5. How can persevering demonstrate to the world your complete trust in God?

Scripture Focus – Nehemiah Chapter 5 (verses 1 – 19)

Vs. 1 – 5 – Who were these bitterly resented Jews? They were either (1) Jews who become wealthy in exile and brought this wealth with them to Jerusalem, or (2) descendants of Jews who had arrived almost a century earlier during the first return under Zerubbabel and had established lucrative businesses.

Vs. 7 – 9 – Many of the returned exiles were suffering at the hands of some of the rich countrymen. These people would lend large sums of money; then, when the debtors missed a payment, they would take over their fields. Left with no means of income, the debtors were forced to sell their children into slavery, a customary practice of the time. Nehemiah was angry with these Jews who were taking advantage of their own people in order to enrich themselves. Usury is the practice of charging excessive interest. These practices violated the law set forth in Exodus 22:25.

Vs. 9 – 11 – God’s concern for the poor is revealed in almost every book of the Bible. Here, Nehemiah insisted that fairness to the poor and oppressed was central to following God. The books of Moses clearly spelled out the Israelites’ responsibility to care for the poor (Exodus 22, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 14 and 15). The way we help those in need ought to mirror God’s love and concern.

Nehemiah told the rich Jews to stop charging interest (“usury”) on their loans to their needy brothers. God never intended people to profit from others’ misfortunes. In contrast to the values of this world, God says that

caring for one another is more important than personal gain. When a Christian brother or sister suffers, we all suffer. We should help needy believers, not exploit them. The Jerusalem church was praised for working together to eliminate poverty (Acts 4). Remember, “He who gives to the poor will never want.” (Proverbs 28:27) Make it a practice to help those in need around you.

Vs. 12 – 13 – This symbolic act was a curse. Nehemiah shook out the front of his garment and pronounced that anyone who did not keep his promise would likewise be “shaken out and emptied,” losing all he had.

Vs. 14 – 19 – This comment by Nehemiah is a parenthetical statement comparing his 12 years as governor with the unjust proceedings in the land before he arrived. The governor was appointed by the Persian king, not elected the by the people.

Nehemiah led the entire construction project, but he also worked on the wall alongside the others. He was not a bureaucrat in a well-guarded office, but a leader who got involved in the day-to-day work. He did not use his position to lord it over his people. A good leader stays connected with the work to be done. Those who lead best lead by what they do as well as by what they say.

Scripture Focus – Nehemiah Chapter 6 (Verses 1 – 19)

Vs. 1 – 9 – Sanballat and Tobiah were desperate. The wall was almost complete, and their efforts to stop its construction were failing. So they tried a new approach, centering their attacks on Nehemiah’s character. They attacked him personally with rumors, deceit, and false reports. Personal attacks hurt, and when the criticism is unjustified, it is easy to despair. When you are doing God’s work, you may receive attacks on your character. Follow Nehemiah’s example by trusting God to accomplish the task and by overlooking unjustified abuse.

The plain of Otto, mentioned in verse 2, was about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem. If Sanballat and Geshem could get Nehemiah to agree to meet them there, they could ambush him on the way.

During these days, prophets such as Malachi proclaimed that coming of the Messiah (Malachi 3). Sanballat, with his usual flair for stirring up trouble, tried to turn Nehemiah’s people against him by saying that Nehemiah was

trying to set himself up as the king. Sanballat also tried to turn the local officials against Nehemiah by threatening to report to the king of Persia that Nehemiah was starting a revolt. The fact that Sanballat had an open, or unsealed, letter delivered to Nehemiah shows that he wanted to make sure the letter's contents were made public. But Sanballat's accusations were untrue and did not divert Nehemiah from his work.

When opposition builds up against you or God's works, it is tempting to pray, "God, get me out of this situation." But Nehemiah prayed, "Strengthen my hands." He showed tremendous determination and character to remain steadfast in his responsibility. When we pray for strength, God always answers.

Vs. 10 – 14 – Shemaiah warned Nehemiah of danger and told him to hide in the Temple. Nehemiah wisely tested the message, exposing it as another trick of the enemy. People may misuse God's name by saying they know God's will when they have other motives. Examine self-proclaimed messages from God to see if they stand up to the test of being consistent with what is revealed in God's Word.

Nehemiah did not have the full support of the people. Shemaiah, Noadiah, and many of the nobles were working against him. When Nehemiah was attacked personally, he refused to give in to fear and flee to the Temple. According to God's law, it would have been wrong for Nehemiah to go into the Temple to hide because he was not a priest (Numbers 18:22). If he had run for his life, he would have undermined the courage he was trying to instill in the people. Leaders are targets for attacks. Make it a practice to pray for those in authority. Request God to give them strength to stand against personal attacks and temptation. Then need God-given courage to overcome fear.

Vs. 15 – 19 - Daniel, who was among the first group of captives taken from Jerusalem to Babylon (605 BC) predicted the rebuilding of the city (Daniel 9:25). Here his prophecy comes true. He, like Nehemiah, was a Jew who held a prominent place in the kingdom where he had been exiled. The twenty-fifth of the month Elul corresponds to October 2.

They said it could not be done. The job was too big, and the problems were too great. But God's men and women, joined together for special tasks, can solve huge problems and accomplish great goals. Do not let the size of a

task or the length of time needed to accomplish it keep you from doing it. With God’s help, it can be done.

Follow Up Questions...

1. How did Nehemiah come to the defense of those who were suffering?
2. According to Nehemiah, people who fear God should treat the poor with kindness and deference. How does that apply to believers in the world today?
3. How has God used your “hands” as instruments of grace?
4. How does the story of the suffering exiles in Nehemiah show that God cares for the hurting?
5. Who is one hurting person that you can reach with God’s love this week?

Closing Prayer

Father, we are grateful you are concerned with our needs. You comfort the hurting, provide for the poor, and deliver the oppressed. Help us today to be your “hands and feet” in the world so we may be your instruments in alleviating the suffering of others. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

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

Session 8 – People Rebuilding Around God’s Word

Thursday, August 8 7:00 PM

Nehemiah Ch. 7 & 8

Facebook Live
