

NEHEMIAH: THE CAPTIVE CUPBEARER REBUILDS A NATION

Bible Background – NEHEMIAH 2:11-20; 13:1-22

Printed Text – Nehemiah 2:11-20

Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Wall

¹¹ So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later,

¹² I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding.

¹³ After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates.

¹⁴ Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble.

¹⁵ So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate.

¹⁶ The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not

yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration.

¹⁷ But now I said to them, "You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!"

¹⁸ Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king. They replied at once, "Yes, let's rebuild the wall!" So they began the good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. "What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" they asked.

²⁰ I replied, "The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem."

-----New Living Translation

Lesson Introduction

We know nothing of Nehemiah other than what appears in the book of Nehemiah. These passages tell us that he held a high position in the court of King Artaxerxes I, ruler of the Persian Empire. Although Nehemiah was born in exile, he was a God-fearing man who loved the nation of Israel. In today's lesson we will study his motivation to restore the ravaged city walls of Jerusalem and reform Jewish worship. If we can identify with Nehemiah, perhaps we can identify ways to restore and revive our faith communities in ways that honor God.

Background: Nehemiah is the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I of Persia, an honorable and prestigious position of great trust. While serving in this position, Nehemiah receives

April 18, 2021 – Study Guide 7

visitors from Jerusalem and asks them about events going on back home (Nehemiah 2:1-2). They give him a very discouraging report about the disgraceful condition of the people and the deplorable state of the city. The crumbling walls had left the city, the Temple, and the people vulnerable to attack and gave their enemies cause to ridicule. Although Ezra was an excellent spiritual leader, the people lacked political leadership. They needed someone to motivate them, show them where to begin, and to direct their activities. On receiving this news, Nehemiah weeps and grieves for some days, fasting and praying. He knows he has to do something about the city's crumbling infrastructure, but what and how? After prayer, Nehemiah obtains permission from the king to go to his native country and rebuild its walls and gates. Nehemiah left the comfort of a king's palace to return to his ancient homeland to challenge his countrymen to get busy and reconstruct the walls. Armed with letters of safe passage and a full military escort provided by the king, Nehemiah faced the almost 1,000-mile trip to Jerusalem.

-----*Precepts for Living*, the UMI Annual Commentary 2020-2021, p. 391

Survey the Situation

Nehemiah 2:11-15: Nehemiah was most distressed about the condition of the city of Jerusalem. From the reports he had heard, he knew that the newly restored Temple and the residents of the city were all vulnerable to Israel's enemies. In his disappointment, he asked the king for permission to return and to rebuild (Nehemiah 2:1-10). He was given permission to return with all the legal authority he needed to do the work of restoration. Nehemiah was a devoted man of God, and much prayer and fasting went into his decision to carry out God's mission to rebuild (Nehemiah 1:4-11). Once he returned to Jerusalem, we are told of his detailed survey of the condition of the city wall. Observing for himself that the wall was burned, crumbling and a disgrace, he initially told no one of his plan. In fact, it was under the cover of night that he went out to examine the extent of the damage.

Calls the People to Work

Nehemiah 2:16-18: Nehemiah was guarded concerning his initial surveillance and his reconstruction plans. He told no one, including the priests, nobles, rulers, or the Jews. Perhaps he was making sure the enemies would not know and have the opportunity to jeopardize the work. Or perhaps he wanted to know the extent of the work that needed to be done before sharing with the people. But the time came for him to share the mission with the people and to call them to restore the desolated city. Despite his position in the king's administration, he sees himself as a member of the community. He calls an assembly, reveals his plans, all the time reminding them of the ridicule and reproach they suffer, and that reconstruction of the city can remove the shame. He shared with them that the "good hand of God" was upon him to do this work and that they also had the support of the king. Even, though Nehemiah was a high official of the king, he identified with his suffering brethren. This level of confident, inspiring, and empathetic leadership motivated the assembly so they "strengthened their hands for this good work" (v. 18).

Respond to Opposition

Nehemiah 2:19-20: It took no time for members of the surrounding countries to ridicule the people and the restoration project, challenging even the authority under which they labored. Nehemiah could

April 18, 2021 – Study Guide 7

have, and rightfully so, claimed the authority given him by king, but he boldly declared that this work was guided by the “God of heaven.” With confidence, Nehemiah declares that this work will indeed go forth for God will “prosper us.” The hecklers have no part in it and no right to stop God’s purpose.

Conclusion

In his prayer and petitions to God, Nehemiah, as Ezra before him, acknowledged the disobedience and rebellion against God’s Law as the reason for all that had befallen the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, with a repentant heart and contrite spirit, Nehemiah asked God for restoration on behalf of the nation. In our communities and our personal lives, we can do the same. If we seriously want to rebuild what has been damaged, we must prayerfully assess the situation and sincerely seek God. Ask Him what steps need to be taken. Then be diligent and intentional about changing slothful or sinful habits so that we can be what God has called us to be.

Sources:

Banks, M. (Ed.). (2020). Call in the New Testament. *Precepts for Living*, 23(Spring Quarter), 386-396. The Urban Ministries, Inc. Annual Commentary 2020-2021.
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April 18, 2021 – Study Guide 7

Lesson for Next Week – April 25, 2021 – Study Guide 8

A PLEA FOR RESTORATION

Bible Background ♦ LAMENTATIONS 5

Printed Text ♦ LAMENTATIONS 5

Devotional Reading ♦ LAMENTATIONS 3: 22-33

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Praise for God's Wonderful Works
(Psalm 111)

TUESDAY

God's Blessings Intended for All
(Zachariah 8:18-23)

WEDNESDAY

The Lord, Our Sovereign
(Psalm 102:12-22)

THURSDAY

Plea for Mercy for Jerusalem
(Psalm 79)

FRIDAY

Mourn the Destruction of Zion
(Jeremiah 9:17-22)

SATURDAY

God's Mercy and Love Never Ends
(Lamentations 3:22-33)

SUNDAY

Remember and Restore Us
(Lamentations 5:1-22)