

Ezra – Nehemiah

NEHEMIAH: THE CAPTIVE CUPBEARER REBUILDS A NATION

Focal Verses • NEHEMIAH 2:11–20

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXAMINE why Nehemiah decided to restore the wall of Jerusalem and reform/revive the Sabbath law, APPRECIATE Nehemiah’s feelings and behavior in restoring the wall and reforming Jewish worship, and IDENTIFY ways to restore worn parts of the faith community and revive traditions that honor God.

In Focus

Gathered before Joyce were the leaders of one of the area churches in her denomination. The church was about 20 years old, and until a week ago, they all thought it was in good condition. Then, the pastor and treasurer had both abruptly resigned, and the remaining church leaders discovered that the church’s funds had been seriously mismanaged. The church’s checking account was overdrawn by more than \$18,000, and checks were being returned for insufficient funds.

The denomination had called this emergency meeting of the Trustee Board. Joyce, the denomination’s chief accountant, had only had two days to prepare for it. She had sifted through the years of statements and reports.

While her days had been spent sifting through piles of paper looking for answers, her evenings had been spent asking God how He wanted her to handle this awful situation. Despite the carelessness that had been shown, Joyce knew that these people were hurting. Yes, she wanted to blame them for not recognizing the church’s situation for so long and take some corrective actions, but all of that could wait. What they needed right now was to know that she cared about them and what they were going through.

Joyce wisely sought the Lord’s counsel about how to proceed, rather than relying solely on her own abilities. When have you shown this wisdom? When have you wished you had acted on God’s counsel?



Keep in Mind

“Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach” (Nehemiah 2:17, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV Nehemiah 2:11 So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.

13 And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.

16 And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

17 Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

18 Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?

20 Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

The People, Places, and Times

Nehemiah. Our only knowledge of this great builder and statesman comes from the book that bears his name. The man, whose name means "God has consoled," was born in exile, which began when Babylonia conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC. Nehemiah grew up in the faith of his fathers, and he loved Israel. Since no mention is made of a wife and since he served in such a high position to a foreign king, he was likely a eunuch.

Nehemiah was well-qualified for the task of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. A true Israelite, he labored for the purity of public worship, the integrity of family life, and the sanctity of the Sabbath. He was a courageous and God-fearing man who labored selflessly and served

with unswerving loyalty to God. After the work had begun, the wall was finished in only about two months.

Persia. Persia's status as a world power was obtained through a succession of military conquests. Cyrus's victories instituted the empire, and the expansions of Darius' reign spread Persian control from the northern coast of the Aegean Sea to the Indus River valley and from the Caucasus Mountains to Egypt. The Jews, who had been taken into exile by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, were allowed to return soon after the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylonia.

Persian Kings in the Bible and Major Events of Their Reigns		
Cyrus the Great	549 BC	conquers the Medes
	546	conquers Lydia
	539	conquers Babylonia
	538	authorizes Zerubbabel's first wave of returning exiles
Darius the Great	521	gives funds to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple
	515	conquers the Indus River valley
	490	fails to conquer Greece
Xerxes I	unknown	marries Esther
	480	fails to conquer Greece
Artaxerxes I	457	authorizes Ezra's second wave of returning exiles
	445	authorizes Nehemiah's third wave of returning exiles

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 visitors from Jerusalem and asks them about events going on back home (Nehemiah 1:1–2). 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 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 is still very distressed and the king asks what troubling him (2:1–2). By God's grace, 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.

How have you used your position of privilege to help others?

At-A-Glance

1. Survey the Situation (Nehemiah 2:11–15)
2. Calls the People to Work (vv. 16–18)
3. Respond to Opposition (vv. 19–20)

In Depth

1. Survey the Situation (Nehemiah 2:11–15)

Although he has the full support of the king, Nehemiah does not immediately rush into action or expose his plan to the people (2:11–12). Instead, Nehemiah secretly inspects the wall to assess the damage and estimate the work needed to rebuild it. After staying in Jerusalem for three days, Nehemiah embarked at night on a survey of the damage. The walls of Jerusalem were in such a state of ruin that rubble and debris had strewn the valley floor so that he could not even ride his mount through it. During his late-night ride, he finds that the reports he had received were true: The walls of Jerusalem and its gates are in ruins. Nehemiah says nothing to anyone until he first explores the extent of the damage for himself. We can take a page from Nehemiah’s playbook when we are facing recovery in our own lives. First, we have to acknowledge the truth for ourselves. Then—and only then—should we tell others.

2. Call the People to Work (vv. 16–18)

Nehemiah calls a meeting of the city leaders and discloses why he has come to Jerusalem. Nehemiah appeals to the leaders’ pride in Jerusalem as God’s holy city. Next, he appeals to their love for God and their desire not to bring Him shame. He acknowledges God and

His divine guidance in the plan to rebuild the wall. Then, he tells of King Artaxerxes’ support.

Nehemiah uses the pronoun “we” rather than “you” or “I.” Wise leaders understand they must identify themselves with the need to motivate others to assist them. This reminds us that a Christian can’t live an independent life, because we are called to function in the community of believers.

The religious, political, and other leaders overwhelmingly accept Nehemiah’s plans. Collectively, they say, “Let us rise up and build” (v. 18). Nehemiah challenges and inspires the people, and God strengthens them to complete the work. Spirit-led projects carried out under spiritual guidance succeed when measured by God’s definition of success.

3. Respond to Opposition (vv. 19–20)

Anytime people start the process of recovery, they should expect to meet with some resistance. The Scriptures tell us that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem tried to stop Nehemiah’s rebuilding effort. All three were political leaders from the Persian provinces surrounding Judah to the north, south, and west. Understandably, they did not want Jerusalem to become a strong and well-defended city, because trade routes and economic advantages would shift in favor of Jerusalem. Hence, their attempt to stop Nehemiah was politically motivated.

Nehemiah could have argued that what he was doing had higher political backing. Instead, Nehemiah simply stood on the promises of God. He did not waste a minute of his precious time or energy trading insults with them; he simply spoke the truth. Nehemiah tells them that the land has been given to the Children of Israel, and Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem did not have any right to even be in the land of Jerusalem (v. 20).

Whenever we are attacked by circumstances contrary to God’s Word, we need to speak

the Word to our tormentors and ourselves. We can do this in boldness and rest in God's promise that we now have a share of that great inheritance when Jesus returns and God's kingdom finally comes.

Nehemiah worked carefully to bring the Israelite leaders on board with his plan to rebuild. Why not try to make these foreigners into allies?

Search the Scriptures

1. When Nehemiah revealed his plan, what was the people's response? (Nehemiah 2:18)
2. What did the people in Jerusalem do to show that they were ready to follow Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall? (v. 18)

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why is it important to begin any task with prayer?
2. Making decisions is a part of life. Sometimes what we decide to do or say forces us to oppose the majority. How do we know whether we have made the right decision? How do we encourage people to stand by their decisions?
3. Nehemiah was able to motivate the other Jews to embrace his vision of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. What factors determine how flexible you are in sharing a vision with people? When are you flexible, and when are you more assertive?

Liberating Lesson

Many American communities are crumbling around the people who live there. Slumlords, a lack of funding rooted in historical inequities, and unethical policing practices account for much of the problem, but cleanliness and maintenance are problems the residents can solve. Should a church's vision for its community include upkeep and maintenance? What are some ways the church can motivate members to clean up and maintain their neighborhoods? What are some ways the church can pressure

the cities' leaders as Nehemiah did so that they take action?

Application for Activation

In today's lesson, we read that once Nehemiah safely arrived in Jerusalem, he went around inspecting the city walls at night and conducted a thorough survey of exactly what damages needed to be repaired. If we are truly concerned about rebuilding parts of our lives, we need to prayerfully assess what will be required. This week, make this a target of prayer in your own life. Be honest with yourself. Ask God to show you exactly what steps need to be taken. Only when we change lazy or sinful habits can we be freed to be what God wants us to be.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

Martin, William C. *The Layman's Bible Handbook*. Nashville, TN: The Southwestern Company, 1964. 388-89.
Packer, J.I., and M.C. Tenney, eds. *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1980. 148–153.
Strong, James. *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Say It Correctly

Sanballat. san-vah-LOT.
Horonite. HOR-oh-nite.
Tobiah. toh-BYE-uh.
Ammonite. AH-moan-ite.
Geshem. GEH-shem.

Daily Bible Readings

DAY 71

Joshua 5–8

DAY 72

Joshua 9–11

DAY 73

Joshua 12–15

DAY 74

Joshua 16–18

DAY 75

Joshua 19–21

DAY 76

Joshua 22–24

DAY 77

Judges 1–2

About the Book of Ezra

The book of Ezra is an account of Jewish history, which records their release from their 70 years of exile in Babylon as prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:11) and the return of the first wave of Jews in 537 B.C. through the second wave in 457–458 B.C. The first half of Ezra chronicles the rebuilding of the Temple after its destruction in 586 B.C. under the leadership of Jeshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem. One of the key tasks of these leaders in restoring the Temple is to reinstitute worship according to the Law of Moses by offering up sacrifices unto God. The people were called upon to consecrate themselves and submit freewill offerings unto the Lord as well as provide the resources and talent to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 3:1–7). By the hand of God, the Jews also received favor from King Cyrus as he brought back the vessels of worship from the house of the Lord that King Nebuchadnezzar stole during their conquest (Ezra 1:7). Restoring worship and honor to God was very important to accomplishing the task of rebuilding the Temple and turning the people's hearts back to God since their captivity was a consequence of their idolatry.

For a more in depth study of Ezra, visit preceptsdigital.com.