

Autumn Ridge Church Women's Bible Study
Nehemiah 2
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Good morning/evening and welcome to Women's Bible Study. This is the second lesson in our study of the book of Nehemiah. You are in for a treat as we read a narrative every bit as dramatic as any television series or movie. Yet this is a true story. From it we will learn about God's gracious acts on behalf of his people and insights into a Godly life.

Historical Context

Let's recap a bit from last week. As Svea explained originally Ezra and Nehemiah were one continuous book. In fact, "There is no known Hebrew manuscript that separates the book into two parts before AD 1448."¹ Ezra and Nehemiah span about a 100 year time period from 538 B.C. to about 432 B.C. The book is not meant to be a complete historical record, but rather it highlights selected events.

At this point the Jewish people were dispersed in several areas of the Near East because their ancestors had disobeyed God. They refused to listen when his prophets warned them of impending judgment for their disobedience.

The threatened punishment came in stages:

1. Kingdom was divided after the death of Solomon into the Northern Kingdom, known as Israel and the Southern Kingdom known as Judah.
2. Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.
3. Southern Kingdom was destroyed by the Babylonians, a little more than 100 years later, in 586 B.C. The temple, city wall, gates, and most of the city were destroyed.

Most of the Jews continued to live in Babylon (MAP) where they had been brought as exiles. In fact, they had been instructed by God through the prophet Jeremiah to settle down to build houses, to marry, and to have children (Jeremiah 29). They were going to be there for a while.

Many also lived in a region known as Judea. There was also a significant community of Jews in Egypt and perhaps in small communities of Assyria. All of these Jews, with the possible exception of those living in Egypt, were under the rule of the Persian Empire, which had dominated the region since 539 B.C.² (MAP)

Threads

As we study chapter 2 look for these threads that run throughout the narrative.

¹ Nykolaishen, Douglas J.E. and Schmutzner, Andrew. Teach the Text Commentary Series: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2018. Print. Page 3.

²Nykolaishen page 6.

1. God is the hero of the story. While Nehemiah, his servant, figures prominently in the narrative. God is the one intervening and equipping to further his kingdom and his purpose.
2. Opportunities to serve in God's kingdom often come through faithfulness in the dailyness of life.
3. Kingdom workers will face opposition.

Review Nehemiah Chapter 1

In Chapter 1 we find Nehemiah serving King Artaxerxes in one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire, Susa. He requests an update from a delegation that is returning from Jerusalem which includes his brother Hanani.

The temple had been rebuilt a while back, but no progress had been made to rebuild the walls of the city. The temple was not protected and neither were Jerusalem's citizens. As a result they were a laughingstock and so was their God. Nehemiah is devastated by this news. He weeps, mourns, fasts, and prays. Let's pick up the narrative in the last verse of chapter 1.

Scripture Passage: Nehemiah 1:11-2:20³

"Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

In the Presence of the King

Cupbearer

Nehemiah's occupation in the Persian Empire was cupbearer. Since he tasted the wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned, he had to be trustworthy, but the cupbearer also stood close to the king in public and so he had to look the part. He needed to be cultured and knowledgeable in court procedures and decorum. He needed to be able to converse with the king and to provide advice when requested. His position allowed frequent access to the king. The fact that Nehemiah as a Jew occupied this important position speaks volumes about his character and his competency.

Dailyness

Four months have elapsed from hearing the report about Jerusalem to this encounter with the King. Perhaps Nehemiah through his prayers had determined that this was the day to approach the King or perhaps the King had been at one of his other palaces in the kingdom and was now returning to Susa. Whatever the reason, this is the day. Did Nehemiah wonder, like Esther in this same place, if he had been placed in the kingdom for such a time as this?

³ Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

He has spent months praying about the situation in Jerusalem, but at the same time he was engaged in the daily responsibilities of life. He was concerned about the kingdom of God, but he was doing his regular work.

David was tending his father's sheep when he was called in from the fields to be anointed as King of Israel. Peter, Andrew, and James were mending fishing nets when Jesus called them to be his disciples. Mary was a poor young woman living an ordinary life on an ordinary day in Nazareth when the angel informed her she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus.

Some of us here will be called into full time work as missionaries, but all of us are to be on mission for God in the dailyness of our lives whether that be at work, at home, in our community, or certainly in our church. Commentator Warren Weirsbe notes, "Like large doors, great life changing events can swing on very small hinges."⁴ Let us be faithful as we do the ordinary.

Scripture Continued: Chapter 2:1-4

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, ²so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, ³but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

⁴The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."

⁴ Weirsbe, Warren W. The Bible Exposition Commentary Old Testament: History Joshua - Esther. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook. 2003. Print. Page 632.

Risk

Nehemiah comes before King Artaxerxes, officially known as King Artaxerxes Longimanus, who ruled Persia from 464 B.C. to 423 B.C. He takes a great risk being sad in his presence. Eastern monarchs were sheltered from anything that might bring them unhappiness. Those serving in the king's presence were expected to be cheerful certainly not despondent.⁵ The King could have him banished or killed.

Preparation

Prayer

In this exchange we see evidence of the preparation of Nehemiah. Clearly, the biggest preparation was prayer. We often forget that, thinking we need to charge right into the solving of kingdom problems or everyday challenges, but here we see a clear example of the importance of praying as part of our preparation.

Now before he answers the king he sends up a quick request for help. Note he doesn't have to get away or assemble the perfect environment, he can pray right where he is. He only has seconds because too much of a delay will create suspicion in the mind of the king. We too can quickly pray first and then answer the person in front of us whether it be our boss, colleagues, employees, husband, children, or our friends.

Tact

We also observe great wisdom and tact on the part of Nehemiah. Did you notice how he defines the problem to the king? Rather than focus on the possible political ramifications of his request to rebuild Jerusalem, he frames it a way that will resonate with the king.

He focuses on the personal connection he has to the problem. He also appeals to the fact that Persians revered their ancestors and graves were considered sacred places.

Commentators Nykolaishen and Schmutzer note that "Nehemiah was completely honest with Artaxerxes, but did not mention that the city's name was Jerusalem and probably did not explain to him at any time that God planned eventually to have a son of David rule the whole world."⁶

We are not to be deceptive in our work or requests on behalf of the kingdom, but we are to use good judgment in deciding what information to share and when to share it. Jesus advised his disciples to be, "shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

Nehemiah also showed appropriate respect and deference to the king. He worked within the system he was placed. God of course is able to use organizational structures and even unbelieving leaders to build his kingdom. We too can show tact and wisdom.

⁵ Nykolaishen, page 111.

⁶ Nykolaishen page 114.

Bold Request

Conceptually it was bold for Nehemiah to discuss the issue with Artaxerxes. However, specifically it was very bold because years earlier when the temple and walls of Jerusalem were being rebuilt, the king in response to a complaint letter had sent this reply regarding the rebuilding project:

Greetings.

The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence. I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition.

Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans-Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them. Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order. (Ezra 4:18-21)

Nehemiah was asking the king to overturn a previous decree to stop the work. Additionally the specificity of his requests are shocking.

Scripture Passage Continued: Nehemiah 2:6-9

⁶Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. ⁷I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? ⁸And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. ⁹So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

Specifics

Breathtaking! Nehemiah will need time off from work to travel to Jerusalem which is 900 miles away. At a rate of 9-10 miles a day this will take about 4 months. He will need time to oversee the project. He will need provisions for travel. He will need building materials.

He gets all of that and more. He receives time off, he actually ended up serving as the governor of Jerusalem for years. He is given a military escort for travel with officers and horses. He will be arriving in an official capacity from the king which will give him great authority in the region. He also is given the building materials he will need for the gates, wall, and for his own living quarters.

Incredible! Who would have thought a pagan nation would fund the leadership and building materials to rebuild Jerusalem? But all of this success is not to due to Nehemiah or just a great formula for leadership.

His success is because God is overseeing the events of human history. They may not be unfolding in the way or time frame we desire, but ultimately all history is under his direction. We should never underestimate God's ability to change the course of events.

Contrast between the King of Persia and God⁷

The King of Persia had to extend an invitation for Nehemiah to share his sorrow. The King of Kings provides us with an open invitation to come to him anytime.

The King of Persia could see the outward distress of his servant. The King of Kings knows our hearts and our minds, our joys and our sorrows. He even knows our past, our present, and our future.

Nehemiah feared the reaction of the King of Persia. What if he were in a bad mood? He could banish or kill Nehemiah.

We can come boldly to The King of Kings knowing that he is always ready to receive with mercy and grace those who come to him. God has given you easy and frequent access to his throne. Are you using the opportunity you have been given?

Opposition

¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

It doesn't take long for the opposition to be identified. Commentator Raymond Brown referred to them as the troublesome trio.⁸ We meet two of them right away and the third later in this chapter. They are Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem.

Sanballat, we learn from writings from the fifth century B.C. recovered from Egypt, was likely the governor of Samaria which was to the north of Judea. (MAP) He may have been given authority over this region after the decree that stopped the building project earlier.⁹

Tobiah was probably a Samaritan official subordinate to Sanballat, although he was of Ammonite descent. Since his name is Jewish instead of Ammonite he may have been of mixed descent. Tobiah and his son are both married to Judean women and so they will have connections to collect intel when Nehemiah reveals his plans to the people.

⁷ Paraphrased and based on Weirsbe page 638-639.

⁸ Brown, Raymond. The Message of Nehemiah. Downer's Grove. Inter-Varsity Press. 1998. Page 58.

⁹ Nykolaishen, page 117.

Geshem was an Arab. He ruled a league of Arabian tribes that controlled territory east, south, and southwest of Judea.

These men with their political roles effectively surrounded the area. Nehemiah's arrival reduced their influence in the region. They are not happy. Remember their names and background because we will see them again and again and again.

Journey to Jerusalem

Rest

11 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, Notice here even in the midst of major spiritual task there is a need for physical rest, spiritual refreshment, and psychological recovery. After all, Nehemiah had likely travelled for four months. It is interesting to note that Ezra who had travelled there in the 7th year of King Artaxerxes' reign also rested three days when he arrived in Jerusalem. It was now the 20th year of the king's reign.

We too require rest. We are not made to run and work at full speed continuously. Burnout by Christian leaders and people even in their 20's is a very real issue in our society. After an intense time in their ministry, Jesus in Mark 6 tells his disciples to "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." (Mark 6:31). Included in your notes are helpful books if you need encouragement in that area.^{10,11}

Night Tour

Nehemiah sets out at night with a few trusted colleagues and goes to survey the situation for himself. He is careful not to publicly proclaim his intentions until he has viewed the problem firsthand, a very wise leadership strategy.

Call to Action: Nehemiah 2:17-18

After the survey of the city, he is ready to take action. He calls a public meeting and addresses the people. *17* Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." *18* I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Note the use of plural pronouns, they will do this together. He invites them to be a part of the solution to address the defenselessness of the city and the humiliation they are suffering. Commentator Raymond Brown notes, "The sight of those collapsed walls for well over a century had created the impression in the pagan mind the Israel's God has abandoned his rebellious people and is no longer on their side".¹²

¹⁰ Swenson, Richard. *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits*. NavPress. 2014.

¹¹ Nieuwhof, Carey. *Didn't See It Coming: Overcoming the 7 Greatest Challenges That No One Expects and Everyone Experiences*. New York: WaterBrook. 2018.

¹² Brown Page 56.

But God is definitely on their side and a new day is dawning in Israel's history. To reassure them of this fact he tells them about the faithfulness of God. He recounts the story of his conversation with the King and provisions they have to do the work.

Opposition Intensifies: Nehemiah 2:19

But of course we haven't heard the last from the opposition. ¹⁹ *But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"*

The troublesome trio is not just vaguely grumbling about Nehemiah's presence, now they engage now in conversation. Their attacks come in two common forms. First, they hurl verbal insults, ridiculing the workers. Then they attack the team's motives. In this case they charge them with rebellion against the king. That might sound like a reach, but it had worked before.

Remember that letter back in Ezra chapter 4 that the King sent telling them to stop the work? Here are some excerpts from the original complaint letter that had been sent to

To King Artaxerxes,

From your servants in Trans-Euphrates:

The king should know that the people who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations.

Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and eventually the royal revenues will suffer. Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king, so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors.

In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place with a long history of sedition. That is why this city was destroyed. We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates. (Ezra 4:12-16)

King Artaxerxes by the group that had opposed the earlier efforts at rebuilding. This wasn't an idle threat the troublesome trio directed at Nehemiah, it had worked before. The last time the work was ground to a halt for years.

Nehemiah's Response: Nehemiah 2:20

²⁰ *I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."*

Interestingly Nehemiah does not engage in an argument with them. He affirms his faith in God. He is clear, the work is going to proceed. He is clear that the troublesome trio are not going to be part of the project nor have authority over Jerusalem.

We will have an opportunity to see this strategy again as the narrative unfolds. Nehemiah is very good at staying focused on his mission.

As we finish up this chapter it is helpful to remember that we will face opposition as we do kingdom work. We should not be surprised by it, we should expect it. Nehemiah provides a great example of how to deal with opposition, but not get sidetracked by it.

Secondly, we need to prepare each day as we go about the dailyness of our lives for God to intervene and ask us to play key roles in the building of his kingdom. We are not in the business of rebuilding ancient walls of a city, rather we are engaged in building the church, the body of Christ, his kingdom here on earth. The best way to discern those opportunities to which God is calling us is by prayer and by studying his word, the Bible.

Finally, while Nehemiah is an incredible example of faith, he is not the hero of the story. In fact, Nehemiah means, "The Lord has comforted".¹³ God is the one behind all of the events of Nehemiah. He is the one who stands behind all of history, we each just have a little part in the unfolding story. He is moving nations and individuals to accomplish the building of his kingdom on earth.

God is still drawing people to himself. He is still reaching through history and through the dailyness of our lives to let us know that he desires to be in relationship with us. He desires to trade our sins for his righteousness. He is just as present today as in the day of Nehemiah.

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¹³Wiersbe page 632.