

Report from Jerusalem

1 The words of Nehemiah^a the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chisleva, in the twentieth year^b, as I was in Susa the citadel^c, ²that Hanani^d, one of my brothers^e, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.(A) ³And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province^f who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” (B)(C)

- Underline Key Words, Phrases, and People
- Highlight** words ‘Jews’ & ‘Remnant’
- [Bracket] Phrase: ‘who had survived the exile’
- {Curly Bracket} The report of Hanani and men
- Write out any questions that come to mind

Study

A. Specifically, what two items did Nehemiah ask Hanani and those with him about? (Hint: concerning...)

B. Specifically, what did they report about each?

C. Read Ezra 4:7-23

- This letter is included in Ezra 4 as an example of the adversity the Israelites were facing in the rebuilding project.
- What are the four main reasons the letter gives for stopping the reconstruction?(see verses 4:13-16)

- In our timeline of events, this letter and its response are likely the very cause of the situation Hanani and his compatriots report.
 - i. Based on the report how did the people opposing the Israelites apply “take care not to be slack in this matter” (Ezra 4:22) from Artaxerxes’ response? (What did they do?)

D. Read Esther 1-2 (Additional)

- Note when the events of this book take place. (see timeline on Wk2 Message Notes)
- In Esther 1:2, what major similarity between the opening of Esther and Nehemiah jumps out?

- Write down the names of the main characters the narrative introduces and what seems to guide their actions and thoughts.

Notes

- a) *Nehemiah* means ‘Yahweh (The LORD) comforts’.
- b) The early winter of 445BC. This would be the ‘twentieth year’ of Artaxerxes’ reign.
- c) Susa was the winter capital of the Persian Empire.
- d) *Hanani* is likely a shortened form of Hananiah which means ‘Yahweh (The LORD) is gracious’.
- e) Hanani is likely the actual brother of Nehemiah.
- f) Meaning the ‘Province Beyond the River’ from Ezra.

As has been stated many times in this study, the main character of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is God (Yahweh). However, the interplay of people and events He uses to move His plan of restoration forward changes constantly. In Nehemiah 1:1 a new perspective is taken and a new voice is added to the story. Nehemiah seems to speak directly to us as readers. It is likely that he, like Ezra, wrote down the events of this amazing story in memoirs as they unfolded or soon after he reflected upon all God used him and those around him to accomplish. He knew that this story was worth writing down.

The story reopens 13 years after Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem(458BC) and a full 70 years after the Temple had been rebuilt (516BC). That second number should spark a “wait a minute...” in our minds as 70 years was the amount of time God said the Israelites would be in exile in Babylon, the approximate amount of time between the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple, and is now the amount of time that the Temple has remained standing without a real wall around, without a legitimate city thriving around it. It’s as if world events and time are subject to someone’s control....

The scene opens up in the Persian capital of Susa with what should have been a happy reunion. Nehemiah’s brother Hanani returns to the great city with a small group of men from Judah (likely noting they were not only from Judea, the region around Jerusalem, but also that they are of the Israelites tribe of Judah in ancestry). We are left to wonder if there were any pleasantries or if concern for his people and homeland burned so fiercely that he could not stand to wait. His questions are about two things: His people (the Jews) and his city (Jerusalem). We should keep in mind that his deep

care was not for people he ever met or for a city he had ever seen. It is likely that was purely from a feeling of solidarity with his people and devotion to God that he cared so deeply for both.

Unfortunately, the report is not good. The remnant or ‘those who had remained through the exile’ were in great danger and they existed in a state of shame.

They were in danger because, very practically, they did not have a wall. Having a wall around your city was VERY important in ancient times because if outside attack came the only play for many smaller cities (especially those without a standing army) was to retreat inside the walls, lock the doors, and hope to outlast your assailant until the enemy was forced to leave either due to lack of resources or the coming of reinforcements to the aid of the city. Without a wall or a standing army, the people of God and the Temple they had worked so hard to complete were sitting ducks.

They were ashamed because the surrounding ‘people of the province beyond the river’ had made them second class citizens. The Israelites identified so closely with their city that the sight of it sitting in ruins was taken personally. If their city looked ruined, they felt ruined. They knew that this was not what God had promised through His prophets and they had not completed the task of rebuilding the city.

What could they do? It was the king himself who had empowered the local governors who opposed them to stop the work. It is likely they were also the ones who burned the doors and wrecked even the progress that had been made.

Something had to give. Someone had to step up. God had to move.

In one sentence or phrase, briefly sum up the Main Point(s) of what you read today:

Questions

Given the 'Yahweh-centered' names of Nehemiah and his brother Hanani, what might we guess about their parents and how they might have been raised?

In the New Testament, the Church (the sum total of all the smaller churches where the Holy Spirit is alive and disciples are being made) is identified as Jesus' body (1 Corinthians 12). The Church is also the people of God. How does Nehemiah's concern for the people of God and their state speak to us about our concern and care for the Church today?



Day 12: Nehemiah 1:4-11a

Nehemiah's Prayer

⁴As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love^a with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. (A) Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷We have

acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

- Underline Key Words, Phrases, and People
- Box Servant or Servants
- Highlight Words Nehemiah uses describing God
- [Bracket] Title: God of heaven
- {Curly Bracket} Requests of Nehemiah to God
 - Hint: Let _____
- Write out any questions that come to mind

Study

A. Read 1 Kings 8:22-62

- What similarities in language do you see?
- Pay special attention to verses 46-53. What verses or ideas does Nehemiah seem to be pulling from that of Solomon, the third and greatest king of Israel?

- In verses 62-63 we see the dedication offerings. Compare those numbers with those in Ezra 6:17, the scene of the dedication of the rebuilt Temple.

B. Read Esther 3-4 (Additional)

- What words in verse 3:8 jump off the page, based on what we have read in Jeremiah, Ezra, Deuteronomy, Haggai, and Zechariah?
- Read 4:3. Note how many times sorrow, prayer, and fasting have shown up together in the Scriptures we have studied so far.
- How do you read verse 4:14 with everything else we have seen God work together in Ezra?

state of grieving. He does not leave his home, he sheds many tears, and he refuses food. But he foregoes eating not out of debilitating sadness but out of a knowledge that fasting can be used to place himself where he can better connect with the One who has any measure of control of the situation. Nehemiah prays to his God, the God of heaven and everything under it.

Nehemiah includes the prayer he prayed in that moment. Within it we see a man who knows the Scriptures of his people; paraphrasing from the books of Moses. He seems to reference the prayers of king Solomon that he has in his heart from seeing them in the same Scriptures we have now (2 Kings) or from hearing the story told and retold as it was passed down through the generations.

We also see a man in touch with the failure of man and need for confession and honesty before God. Nehemiah includes himself and his family in the waywardness of the Jews. He takes responsibility for his part in the current state of his people.

Finally, we see a man who believes God can and will move on his behalf. Nehemiah knows God is not pleased with the current state of His people. Nehemiah asks for success and mercy before the king so that he can use it to help be a part of creating change for the people of God.

In one sentence or phrase, briefly sum up the Main Point(s) of what you read today:

Notes

- a) The Hebrew word behind 'steadfast love' is *hesed*. Here, its connection to the covenant relationship between God and His people of Israel is unmistakable. (See note c on page 17)
- b) 'this man' is King Artaxerxes
- c) Deuteronomy 28:1-14; 64 is once again making an appearance in this loose quotation. Leviticus 26:3-13; 27-33 is also clearly seen. Both outline the covenant relationship of blessing in obedience and cursing in rebellion.
- d) For the people of God even today, lives lived in danger and shame are common place. Visit OpenDoors and learn about believers who live in hardship because of their faith in Jesus.

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/>

Upon hearing the news of the state of the Jews and their city, Nehemiah breaks down. He goes into a



Questions

Have you ever been moved to prayer, deep sadness, and even tears over the distress of other people?

What can we learn about confession in prayer from Nehemiah's?

Talk with your table about what it means to be *redeemed* by God?



Day 13: Nehemiah 1:11b

Now I was cupbearer^b to the king.

- Underline the lowercase k.
- Highlight** 'l'.

Study

A. Read Esther 5-6 (*Additional*)

- What adjectives would you use to describe Haman?
- Which one of these adjectives (or maybe character traits) gets him in trouble when dealing with the king in verses 6:6-11?
- How many instances do you see where God seemed to move people and events in Esther's favor?

Notes

- a) While it is not done often, when people writing about the bible want to reference a part of a verse they will use 'a' and 'b' to mark out the first or last half of the verse. For this day's study, I have chosen to just

focus on the second half of verse 11 so it is marked with a 'b'. Remember, the chapter and verse numbers do not appear in the biblical manuscripts but are used in translations for easier study and reading of the bible, especially in group settings.

- b) While it does not sound like it, the cupbearer was an office of some distinction in the ancient world. The cupbearer's duties were to supply the king with drink but, more importantly, the cupbearer was there to guard the king against poisoning. Because of their protective role and the fact that the cupbearer was present for so many of the king's confidential discussions the cupbearer had to be someone of the utmost trustworthiness to the king.

In this half verse Nehemiah shares his profession. He was the cupbearer for the king of the vastest empire the world had ever seen. He stood near the throne daily where all of the most important decisions were made. He had access to the man who could literally change nations on a whim. Because of his role and trust that was foundational to even being considered for it, we can know a couple things about Nehemiah. First, we know he was trustworthy as a person, not just on the job. One did not just fall into that role but was likely selected by the king himself or people very close to him. You can imagine rigorous work was done into his background, his family, and his loyalty to the empire before he was even considered. Wherever they went inquiring they must have heard the same thing: Nehemiah is a man you can trust.

Second, we can know that Nehemiah knew what it was to be a servant of someone very powerful. His prayer of confession the word servant is used _____ (count in Neh 1:4-11a) times. Clearly he was comfortable with it.

Nehemiah gave his character and service to a king of an earthly kingdom by profession but he knew full well that as a man of God his ultimate service was to the King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the God of heaven. And this King not only demanded trust but would inspire it in return.

Did you notice the abruptness with which Nehemiah's accounting of events shifted? He comes out of a long and honest prayer to simply state: "I was cupbearer to the king." I cannot help but wonder if, as he fasted and listened to God in

the spirit of deep repentance and sorrow for his people, God did not speak to him something along the lines of, “*You* are the cupbearer to the king.”

Suddenly he realized that God might be raising *him* up to act on behalf of his people; calling *him* to use his position of influence for the good of Israel and for the glory of God. This realization was likely followed by a hard gulp and fresh anxiousness about how this would all play out.

But, alas, he was the cupbearer to the king...

In one sentence or phrase, briefly sum up the Main Point(s) of what you read today:

Questions

Is it possible that God has tried to show you that *you* are supposed to be a part of the solution to a specific need you see in your family, your neighborhood, your church, and our world? How might your outlook change if you listened and acted more swiftly when God asks you to be part of the solution?

How might your position or experiences in life help you in serving God’s people?

Nehemiah Sent to Judah

2 In the month of Nisan^a, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. ² And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves^b, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” ⁴ Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.” ⁶ And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him)^c, “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. ⁷ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

- Underline Key Words, Phrases, and People
- Box Servant or Servants
- **Highlight** Phrase: hand of God
- [Bracket] Title: God of heaven
- {Curly Bracket} Requests of Nehemiah to king
- Write out any questions that come to mind

Study

A. Read Esther 7-8 (*Additional*)

- Why do you think Esther setup this second meal in 7:1-6 when a similar offer was made by the king in chapter 5?

- Is the decree of Mordecai (8:11-12) more about defense or vengeance?

Notes

- a) This is likely about four months after Hanani arrived with news from Jerusalem.
- b) Persian culture greatly valued honoring one's ancestors.
- c) No modern commentary believes this to be Esther because Persian records name another woman as the 'official' queen during Artaxerxes' reign. However, it is possible that this is Esther as she would likely still be alive and living in Susa. This would also explain why her presence would be noted and helpful to Nehemiah.

This is a crucial turning point for the overall story of Ezra-Nehemiah. Up until the reign of Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia had been used by God to not only sanction the building of the Temple of God but also pay for it. It was not until Artaxerxes do we see a king of Persia give permission to actively stop the building of God's Temple or city (Ezra 4:7-22). This king had to be reached, his mind had to be changed, and the situation had to be ...stirred before anything could progress. But God knew

Artaxerxes' cupbearer and Artaxerxes' cupbearer knew God.

Nehemiah did not just rush out and ask the king the next day to allow him to rebuild Jerusalem. He likely sweated out four months of wondering when God was going to open an opportunity for him to inquire of the king. He also probably made a commitment to himself that he would not do anything to 'force' God's hand. That might be why in verse 1b Nehemiah mentions that he had not been sad in front of the king.

But the king is perceptive. Nehemiah was probably not himself, no matter how hard he may have tried to keep things together. His people were in danger and shame. Nehemiah could not just go about business as usual. So the king inquires as to why his heart is so sad. And Nehemiah tells him.

Through the trepidation of fear he relays the report he received. But he adds what may have been a very strategic detail. He says that this city that lies in ruins is the place of 'my fathers' graves', speaking of his ancestors. Having been within ear-shot of many of the king's conversations Nehemiah might have known that adding this piece of information would have resonated with the king.

After the king hears him he asks the question Nehemiah had likely been hoping to hear for four months: "What are you requesting?" That had to be music to Nehemiah's ears. But he did not simply charge ahead and starts listing things. He prayed in the moment to the God of heaven. This moment was not about him, it was about God using him and he wanted to be in step with God.

The queen beside him seems to be mentioned because she was a positive influence somehow in the request Nehemiah was making. Artaxerxes would not be the first man to want to appear generous and powerful in front of his wife.

Whatever the stir-fry of reasoning, it 'pleased the king' to give Nehemiah his request as long as he agreed to return after a specified time period.

Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls

⁹Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.^a ¹⁰But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite (B) servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

¹¹So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. ¹²Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. ¹³I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. ¹⁵Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. ¹⁶And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision^b." ¹⁸And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the

There is also a bold request at the end of the discussion about getting letters from the king detailing his wishes. Obviously, the last letter from Artaxerxes had been devastating. This time, Nehemiah did not want to struggle with local governors who opposed to the project. He wanted stamped approval not only for the work but for the materials as well. Nehemiah probably had a sense that things would be difficult enough and he would need to gain every advantage he could to see this project not only get done but be completed quickly.

In one sentence or phrase, briefly sum up the Main Point(s) of what you read today:

Questions

What might have caused Nehemiah to be fearful when asked about his sadness?

Have you ever felt you had such favor with someone that it was somewhat unexplainable? Is there anyone in your life you wish God would touch so they could understand your perspective or intentions more meaningfully?

good work. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” ²⁰ Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”

- Underline Key Words, Phrases, and People
- Box Servant or Servants
- Highlight Phrase: hand of God
- [Bracket] Title: God of heaven
- {Curly Bracket} Leader’s response to Nehemiah
- Write out any questions that come to mind

Study

A. Read Esther 9-10 (*Additional*)

- Reading chapter 9 of Esther often results in mixed feelings from contemporary readers. What factors could have set the stage for bloodshed on this day?

- What is done on the Jewish holiday of Purim and how was it named?

- What does the chapter say becomes of Mordecai? The Hebrew word behind ‘peace’ in verse 3 is *shalom*. How does this color our understanding of his intentions for his people? (Hint: see Day 1 Notes)

B. The relationship between Ammon and Israel

- Read Ezekiel 25:1-7
 - i. What action does the prophet Ezekiel say God takes special exception with?

- Read Judges 10:6-18 & 2 Samuel 10:1-11:1.
 - i. Do you get a sense of the history of animosity that grew between Ammon and Israel?

Notes

- a) Notice that, unlike Ezra, Nehemiah does not refuse this royal escort of soldiers. Things were now tense and uncertain in the land.
- b) Derision: the state of being laughed at or ridiculed. (Merriam-Webster.com)

All systems go! Nehemiah’s prayers to the Lord had been answered in quick succession: the King notices his sadness, approves Nehemiah’s request to take leave, and gives ample supplies for the mission ahead. His prayers answered, Nehemiah reflects on the cause of these events declaring that “the gracious hand of my God was upon me” (1:8b). Unlike Ezra, Nehemiah heads to Israel with a royal guard, displaying the King’s approval of his mission; however, no sooner does Nehemiah arrive Beyond the River than signs of opposition appear.

Other historical sources describe Sanballat as the governor of Samaria around this time.¹ There is evidence to show that Sanballat acknowledged Yahweh but did not follow Him faithfully. Even less is known about Tobiah but what we do know is that he is a member of the Ammonite people, a long standing enemy of the nation of Israel. Nehemiah continues his mission by building support in secret, but eventually word gets to the growing list of those who oppose him. His detractors respond with criticism and threats (v19). Rebelling against the King was a very serious charge that had previously stalled rebuilding the wall for years (Ezra 4:23-24).

¹ Green, Douglas J., *Ezra, Nehemiah*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

Undeterred, Nehemiah does not shrink back from their accusations. Instead he does two things (v20): Highlights that God Himself (not just the work of

one man) will allow the Israelites to prosper and those who oppose this project are enemies of God. On this earth, there are both good and evil powers at work. Nehemiah quickly identifies the men's comments as evil, not aligned with the goodness of God. Even with ample evidence showing that Yahweh is supporting and leading this mission, Nehemiah will continue to face obstacles after each period of success.

In one sentence or phrase, briefly sum up the Main Point(s) of what you read today:

Questions

Today, as God's chosen people through faith in Christ, how are we to understand roadblocks on our journey to faith? What can we learn from how Nehemiah and other leaders we have seen so far in our study? Jot down a few main ideas.

Reflect on situations where you faced setbacks from a path you believed was Spirit led. How did you respond at that time? What may you do different in the future?



Wk3- Message Notes

- The story of Nehemiah actually begins with a letter that we find in _____.
- The report Nehemiah's brother and the men from Judah give concerning the _____ and _____ is not good.
- In his prayer, Nehemiah calls himself and Israel the Lord's _____.
- Nehemiah was the _____ for the king.
- The king _____ Nehemiah's _____.
- The king _____ to Nehemiah's _____.
- The king provides Nehemiah with _____.
- When Nehemiah arrives he _____, _____, and _____.
- When faced with opposition, Nehemiah lets them know that he is a _____.

JERUSALEM IN THE TIME OF NEHEMIAH (C. 444–420? B.C.)

Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Upon their return from exile in 536 B.C., the Jews, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, first restored the altar and then laid the foundation of the Temple. Twenty years later, in 516 B.C., the Temple was rebuilt. This time period is referred to as the Second Temple period. Later on, and under very difficult circumstances, Nehemiah restored the city wall. This is described in great detail in ch. 3. There is ample archaeological evidence, both positive and negative, to show that only the Eastern Hill of Jerusalem was fortified at that time and that the eastern wall of the city was built higher up the slope than the previous wall, so that the city was smaller than that of Solomon.

The Valley Gate (2:13, 15; 3:13), the remains of which were excavated in 1924, was part of the western city wall. The other gates and the Tower of the Ovens, mentioned in chs. 3 and 12, are unattested to in the archaeological record, but are placed in the drawing in the order in which Nehemiah records them.

The Western Hill was not occupied at this time. However, the ruins of the Broad Wall (3:8; 12:38), the Middle Gate (cf. Jer. 39:3), and the destroyed houses remained part of the landscape of Jerusalem. This area was not rebuilt until the middle of the second century B.C.

The Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, the Sheep Gate, the Gate of the Guard, and the Corner Tower add strength to the northern wall of the Temple Mount, which also served as the northern city wall in this area.

The Temple and the altar were rebuilt soon after the return from exile. The dimensions of the temple, given as 60 cubits (90 feet/27 m) high and wide (Ezra 6:3), probably refer to those of the porch. (For a cutaway illustration of the temple, see p. 813.)

The Temple Mount was restored by Nehemiah as part of the fortification of Jerusalem.

The Great Projecting Tower (3:25–27) was tentatively identified by Charles Warren in 1867.

The Siloam Pool was again used as the city's water source. There is no mention in ch. 3 of the Gihon Spring, probably because it was no longer accessible after the Babylonians had destroyed its protective towers.

The central section of the eastern city wall was built higher up the hill than the wall that preceded it. The two points where the new wall diverged from its original course were each called "the buttress" (3:19, 24, 25).

Remains of ancient walls used to support agricultural terraces.

