

PREVIEW OF NEHEMIAH

The Book of Nehemiah is a sequel to the Book of Ezra. Whereas Ezra records the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem, Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Chronologically, much of Ezra and all of Nehemiah follow the Book of Esther. The account of Esther probably preceded Ezra's journey to Jerusalem by about seventeen years and Nehemiah's journey by about thirty years. It may well have been Esther's marriage to King Ahasuerus that made possible the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Queen Esther was King Artaxerxes' stepmother.

The main character in the book is Nehemiah himself. Since he often refers to himself as "I" or "me," Nehemiah apparently authored or compiled the book. Nehemiah's main work—rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem—presents a beautiful picture of our great work today—building the New Testament church.

The Book of Nehemiah can be divided broadly into two main sections. Chapters 1-6 recount the stirring events that preceded and accomplished the rebuilding of the walls. Chapters 7-13 record the efforts of Nehemiah and Ezra in the people's spiritual revival. The first section covers approximately nine months (four months between 1:1 and 2:1, and five months between 2:1 and 6:15). The second section apparently covers approximately twelve years (compare Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1 with 13:6).

Building the walls required purpose, zeal, and determination. The enemy tried to hinder the work from without and from within. Yet the great task was completed in just fifty-two days—less than two months! By the grace of God, the same qualities in the lives of the faithful today will assure success in the even greater calling of building the church. Studying this book should inspire us to take our places among the remnant of the revived in our day.

Lesson 4 24 November, 2013

A Burden for the Work

Lesson Scope: [Nehemiah 1:1-2:11](#)

Lesson Focus

Approximately ninety-five years had elapsed since Zerubbabel had returned to Judah from Babylon with a company of nearly fifty thousand people. They laid the foundation for the house of God, but the Samaritans and their allies immediately opposed them. With the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was rebuilt after many years' delay. The walls of Jerusalem, however, remained broken down. Approximately seventy years after the temple was rebuilt, Nehemiah returned from Babylon with the express mission of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

The first two chapters of Nehemiah give the background to the main story of the book.

God's people cultivate a deep concern for the prosperity of His kingdom. This burden compels one to assist in the need of the hour.

Take time to read the lesson scope and to acquaint yourself with God's work in the postexilic period. Study the lesson in harmony with the lesson aim, making it practical to yourself with questions and applications for today. See God's work as a large work, and inspire an interest in God's work beyond the home or your community or congregation.

Lesson Aim: To promote personal responsibility for the welfare of God's people.

Theme Verse: [Isaiah 62:1](#). For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.

Lesson Text

The Need

[Nehemiah 1:1-3](#) ¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in

Shushan the palace, ² That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and *certain* men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

The Burden

Nehemiah 1:4-11 ⁴ And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, ⁵ And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: ⁶ Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. ⁸ Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, *If* ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: ⁹ But *if* ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, *yet* will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there. ¹⁰ Now these *are* thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

Nehemiah 2:1-3 ¹ And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, *that* wine *was* before him: and I took up the wine, and gave *it* unto the king. Now I had not been *beforetime* sad in his presence. ² Wherefore the king said unto me, Why *is* thy countenance sad, seeing thou *art* not sick? this *is* nothing *else* but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid, ³ And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the

place of my fathers' sepulchres, *lieth* waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?

The Mission

Nehemiah 2:4-11 ⁴ Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it. ⁶ And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. ⁷ Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; ⁸ And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which *appertained* to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me. ⁹ Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard *of it*, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. ¹¹ So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

Questions for Study

The Need

1. What motivated Nehemiah's inquiry?
2. Where is the line between being a sincere inquirer and being a busy-body?

The Burden

3. Why was Nehemiah sorrowful about the report from Judah?
4. What does Nehemiah's prayer reveal about his understanding of his responsibility to God? his responsibility for his brethren?
5. How can we personally take responsibility for the welfare of our brethren?

The Mission

6. How did Nehemiah act responsibly with the burden he had for the

Lord's work?

7. What are our personal responsibilities in the Lord's work?

Analyzing the Passage

By saying, "We have dealt very corruptly" (Nehemiah 1:7), Nehemiah was acknowledging the seriousness of the people's sins. He understood that they had been carried to Babylon because of those sins.

"The king's cupbearer" (Nehemiah 1:11) was responsible not only to serve the king drink but also to prepare it and ensure its safety.

Approximately four months elapsed between Nehemiah's hearing the sad news of his brethren (Nehemiah 1:1-3) and his discussing the need with the king (Nehemiah 2:1-3). Nehemiah's concern for his brethren was not just a passing impulse; it was a continuing burden.

What the king granted was "according to the good hand of my God upon me" (Nehemiah 2:8). Nehemiah recognized that it was the Lord who moved the heart of the king to allow and support his efforts to help his brethren.

The word welfare (Nehemiah 2:10) means "peace" or "good." Tobiah and Sanballat did not want God's people to prosper and have peace. Nehemiah had a burden that Israel find rest. Keeping the Jews from building the wall was fairly easy if the enemies could keep them distracted by strife and unrest.

Principles and Applications

The Need

1. A responsible person takes an active interest in the cause of God's kingdom (Nehemiah 1:1-2). Even though his fellow Jews were far away, Nehemiah took an interest in God's work among them and desired that they have peace. The New Testament teaches members of Christ's church to express similar concerns. "Bear ye one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

2. Affliction and reproach among God's people cause grief to a responsible person (Nehemiah 1:3-4). The child of God realizes that when a fellow Christian fails, he gives the enemy an excuse to blaspheme God's holy Name. Strife and backbiting among professing Christians bring

shame upon the church and her cause. Jesus laid out the ideal for which we must strive: "That they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21).

The Burden

3. The needs of God's people move a responsible person to pray and fast (Nehemiah 1:4-5). Nehemiah understood the serious condition of God's people. Unless they had God's blessing, they would be destroyed, even though they had returned to the Promised Land.

Sometimes church problems seem to multiply, and responsibilities weigh us down. We cannot force others to change; but as we seek God's will through prayer and fasting, our own hearts are prepared to serve as God directs.

4. A responsible person identifies with the needs of God's people (Nehemiah 1:7). Nehemiah knew why the Jews at Jerusalem were in trouble, but he did not consider himself better than those who had failed. An effective prayer warrior is willing to admit his own sinful tendencies and failures. He desires that those in need have the same grace that has been effective in his own life.

5. Acknowledging God's interest in His covenant people brings rest (Nehemiah 1:10). When we realize that God cares more about the distress of His people than we ever could, we find rest in believing He will work things out for good. God is sovereign, and He can bring good out of circumstances that to us appear hopeless.

6. A responsible person desires to serve God's cause under His blessing (Nehemiah 1:11). The responsible child of God does not just pray and then passively wait; he is willing and prepared to act. Nehemiah did not ask God to send him to Jerusalem to help his brethren who were in distress, but he prayed for the welfare of those who yet served God. Prayer is an important element of our calling. It not only moves the hand of God but also prepares us for service in kingdom work.

7. A responsible person exercises patience in waiting for God's timing (Nehemiah 2:1). Although Nehemiah was concerned about his brethren, he did not make immediate plans to go help at Jerusalem. He continued faithfully serving the king as cupbearer.

The Lord knows best how and where and when each of His children can contribute most effectively. We need discernment so that we do not neglect entering open doors of opportunity. Neither should we try to force

our way through doors that God has closed.

The Mission

8. Responsible people live with a constant sense of dependence on God (Nehemiah 2:4). Nehemiah breathed a prayer for God's direction in answering the king. It was the instinctive response of a heart in close fellowship with God. Do we sense our need of divine guidance, even in the everyday decisions and responsibilities of life? God often chooses for greater responsibilities those who are faithfully and humbly serving in obscurity.

9. Willing sacrifice for the cause marks one with a sense of personal responsibility (Nehemiah 2:5-6). Nehemiah left what was likely a secure and well-paid position in the palace so that he could undertake a long and dangerous journey to Jerusalem. The task that awaited him would involve strenuous labor, weariness, and stout opposition.

Church life calls for sacrifice, but it should not all fall upon our leaders. Serving on committees, visiting the sick, and reaching out to the needy often needs to take precedence over business pursuits and personal interests. Without willing sacrifice, the work will be hindered.

10. God blesses the efforts of His faithful servants (Nehemiah 2:8). No doubt Nehemiah marveled at the provision God made for him through the king. As we move in harmony with God's Spirit and God's people, His blessings will often exceed our expectation.

11. A responsible person perseveres in the work in spite of opposition (Nehemiah 2:9-11). Our enemy does not overlook an effective work for God. In Satan's view, such a work merits strong opposition. The apostle Paul interpreted opposition as a signal of opportunity and a reason to persevere. While at Ephesus, he wrote, "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Corinthians 16:9). History indicates that times of persecution often coincide with phenomenal growth of the church.

Important Teachings

1. A responsible person takes an active interest in the cause of God's kingdom (Nehemiah 1:1-2).

2. Affliction and reproach among God's people cause grief to a responsible person (Nehemiah 1:3-4).

3. The needs of God's people move a responsible person to pray and fast

(Nehemiah 1:4-5).

4. A responsible person identifies with the needs of God's people (Nehemiah 1:7).

5. Acknowledging God's interest in His covenant people brings rest (Nehemiah 1:10).

6. A responsible person desires to serve God's cause under His blessing (Nehemiah 1:11).

7. A responsible person exercises patience in waiting for God's timing (Nehemiah 2:1).

8. Responsible people live with a constant sense of dependence on God (Nehemiah 2:4).

9. Willing sacrifice for the cause marks one with a sense of personal responsibility (Nehemiah 2:5-6).

10. God blesses the efforts of His faithful servants (Nehemiah 2:8).

11. A responsible person perseveres in the work in spite of opposition (Nehemiah 2:9-11).

12. God can give a responsible person the courage and calmness to overcome fears (Nehemiah 2:2-3).

Answers to Questions

1. What motivated Nehemiah's inquiry?

Even though Nehemiah lived far away from his brethren at Jerusalem, he cared enough to inquire about their welfare.

2. Where is the line between being a sincere inquirer and being a busy-body?

Sincere inquiry seeks the truth rather than a few juicy tidbits of gossip to pass on to others. One with genuine interest is glad when things go well for others and sad when things do not go well. He is eager to do whatever he can to help.

3. Why was Nehemiah sorrowful about the report from Judah?

Nehemiah loved his brethren and was sad that they were in difficulty. He wanted to hear that the work of God was prospering in Jerusalem.

4. What does Nehemiah's prayer reveal about his understanding of his responsibility to God? his responsibility for his brethren?

Nehemiah understood his responsibility to live in holiness before God. He also understood that he and his people had failed to live up to God's standard of holiness. He understood that it was only through the mercy

of God that he would be able to do anything to help relieve his brethren. Nehemiah understood that God might have wanted to use him to minister to the needs of his brethren.

5. How can we personally take responsibility for the welfare of our brethren?

Pray for them. Know their struggles and be ready to assist.

6. How did Nehemiah act responsibly with the burden he had for the Lord's work?

Nehemiah kept his burden to himself and God while he continued serving the king. He confessed his sin and the sin of his people. He delayed answering the king's question until he had sought God's direction. When he arrived at Jerusalem, he evaluated the need before he presented his solution.

7. What are our personal responsibilities in the Lord's work?

Each of us is responsible to maintain a walk of integrity before God. God expects us to be godly examples to our families, our church brethren, and our associates in daily life. We should support the work of the church with fervent prayer and active participation.

Summarizing the Lesson

I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of Thine abode—
The Church our blest Redeemer saved
With His own precious blood.
I love Thy Church, O God,
Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And graven on Thy hand.
For her my tears shall fall,
For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be giv'n
Till toils and cares shall end.
Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heav'nly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,
Her hymns of love and praise.
—Timothy Dwight

Research Guide

1. Look up cupbearer in a Bible dictionary and note a cupbearer's duties. See also Genesis 40:1-2; 1 Kings 10:5; and 2 Chronicles 9:4.
2. Look up historical information about Nehemiah in a Bible dictionary or a Bible encyclopedia.
3. The Book of Ezra, as well as the Books of Esther, Haggai, and Zechariah, gives some events from the same time period.