



NEHEMIAH

a Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 1

Nehemiah 1

The story of Nehemiah begins in 445 B.C. in Susa, the capital of the Persian (Achaemenid) Empire. Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king. Because of his position and location, Nehemiah was in the most comfortable and secure place an Israelite at the time could have hoped to be.

At this time, however, the city of Jerusalem was left in rubble and the Israelites who had already returned to the land of Israel were vulnerable. When Nehemiah learns this from his brother Hanani, he weeps.

With intentions of asking the king of Persia for permission to leave and rebuild the city walls, Nehemiah prays to God, an instinct we see in him through the book of Nehemiah.

Components of Nehemiah's prayer:

- Acknowledgment of the supremacy of God
 - We see a parallel between Nehemiah's prayer to how Jesus taught his disciples to pray.
 - See Matthew 6 and Luke 11
- Confession of the sins of he and his people
 - See Daniel 9, Deuteronomy 4 and 30
- An appeal to God's faithfulness and promises
- A request for God to give him favor with the king

Nehemiah left the comfort and security of his royal position to help his people. Jesus left the glory and power he had in heaven to come to earth to save all people.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Philippians 2: 1-11
- John 1:14
- Hebrews 4:14-16
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- Like Nehemiah's response to the news that Jerusalem and the Israelites were in trouble, are there issues that evoke your compassion and concern?
- How might God be calling you to act in response to that concern?
- In what ways could you more readily turn to God in prayer when you face difficulties?
- What features of Nehemiah's prayer could be incorporated more in your prayers?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 2

Nehemiah 2:1-10

After making his request to God, Nehemiah makes his request to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. Artaxerxes notices Nehemiah's sadness. After Nehemiah expresses his concern for Jerusalem and the Israelites, he asks Nehemiah: What do you want?

Because Nehemiah's heart is devoted to noble, godly things, when he gets the opportunity, he makes three bold requests:

1. Permission to leave the king's service for a season to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem.
2. Letters for safe passage
3. Supplies for the rebuilding effort

The king grants all Nehemiah's requests, even exceeding what he asks for by sending guards with him for protection.

Jesus teaches us to pray boldly. While it must be according to the will of God for God to do what we ask, he invites us to ask for what we want.

Jesus modeled this bold prayerfulness, submitted to the will of God, in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his death.

In the case of Nehemiah and Jesus, their hearts were devoted to things that matter to God. They did not use their opportunity to receive something for selfish purposes. This is a good example of how we should approach praying boldly.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Luke 11:5-13
- Matthew 21:18-22
- Luke 18:1-8
- Mark 14:35-36
- James 4:1-3
- James 5:13-20

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- If the most powerful person in the world asked, "What do you want?" what would your response be?
- In what ways could your prayers be bolder?
- What are some things you could ask God for right now that you haven't previously asked him for?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 3
Nehemiah 2:11-3:32

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah investigated the city walls and found that they were indeed lying in rubble. After conversing with local leadership in the Israelite community, the building project begins!

Like in times past in the history of Israel, the rebuilding effort illustrates God's design for a collaborative community. As in the case of the initial construction of the tabernacle, individuals were named and given specific tasks on the project. This is a microcosm of how the Israelite community worked as a whole with various roles within the community. For example, all priests came from the tribe of Levi.

A number of unlikely construction workers are identified:

- Eliahshib, the high priest
- Hananiah, the perfume maker
- Shallum and his daughters
- Hanun and residents of Zanoah
- Men of Tekoa

These people were likely not typically involved in masonry, but the needs of the community and the empowering work of God through his people enabled the project to move forward.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- 1 Corinthians 3
- 1 Corinthians 12

In the body of Christ, the church, there are many roles and functions. Like a natural body, all the parts contribute and are important to the whole.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are some ways that you enjoy contributing to the community of the people of God?
- When or how have you noticed that God was enabling you to serve in a way that was difficult for you?
- What are some ways God might be calling and equipping you for future service?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 4

Nehemiah 4

In Nehemiah 4, the first major episode of opposition to the rebuilding project occurs. There had been some small moments previously, but in this case, there was a more concerted effort to discourage and distract Nehemiah and the workers from the task of constructing the city walls. Sanballat and Tobiah voiced disparaging statements about the weakness of the Jews.

Sanballat:

- Questioning their identity
- Questioning their ability

Tobiah

- Questioning their progress

Nehemiah turned to prayer when this opposition came. And while he stationed guards to keep the work going, he knew it was God who would be their protector. He also set an example for the people by staying vigilant himself, not even changing his clothes to get comfortable at night.

Jesus faced similar questions and accusations about his identity. When he was tempted in the wilderness, the devil framed temptations, “If you are the Son of God...” trying to cast down on Jesus’ own self-understanding. Similarly, when he was crucified people mocked him saying, “If you are the Messiah, save yourself.” Jesus promised that his followers would face similar discouragement.

We too can trust God to be our defender and continue in the work he has given us to do as his followers.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Matthew 13:31-32
- Hebrews 12:2
- Romans 12:19
- 1 Timothy 1
- Ephesians 6

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are some times you have felt discouraged about doing something you felt that God wanted you to do?
- How natural or unnatural is it for you to immediately go to prayer when facing a difficulty?
- What is something in your life right now that you can pray about for God’s help?
- What are some ways you could further depend on God?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 5

Nehemiah 5

Nehemiah 5 records the difficulties the Israelites had within their own community during this season when Nehemiah was leading the people. So the people faced discouragement and threats from the outside, but this is a reminder that there can be internal challenges in the community of the people of God.

Several issues are brought to Nehemiah by people facing hardship.

- They didn't have grain.
 - God's instruction against this - Leviticus 23:22
- They had to mortgage their fields to get grain, which would have further impoverished them. They had to take loans to pay taxes.
 - God's instruction against this - Exodus 22:25-27
- And worst of all, some of their children had been enslaved.
 - God's instruction against this - Exodus 21:1-6 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18

Like Jesus, Nehemiah led through sacrificial service to others. He did not take advantage of the privileges he had as a governor of Jerusalem. He paid for his own food and even fed others. Whereas he had been at Artaxerxes table in Persia, now he was hosting over 150 people at his own table.

Like Jesus was on occasion, Nehemiah was moved to anger by the injustices. He responds to each item with a call to generosity. All of these issues are addressed in the Law of Moses, but this illustrates how the community had lost their familiarity and obedience to the Law.

Devotion to God takes tangible expression in the kind treatment of others.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Matthew 20:18-28 and Mark 10:32-45
- John 13:1-17
- Galatians 5:14
- Matthew 22:34-40

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are some injustices that make you angry?
- What are ways you have seen a breakdown within the community of the people of God?
- What are some ways that God could use you to bring goodness to the difficulties in your community?

Nehemiah: a Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 6

Nehemiah 6

This chapter records a second, intensified episode of opposition to the rebuilding effort. In this case it is directed more personally at Nehemiah. There appears to be an increased risk of physical harm and shaming for Nehemiah.

Three specific tactics utilized by Nehemiah's enemies:

1. Assassination Attempt - They try to lure him to a remote area where they can do harm to him.
2. A Misinformation Campaign - They send a public letter falsely accusing Nehemiah of planning a revolt against the king of Persia.
3. Temptation to Compromise His Integrity - They pay a guy to request Nehemiah to meet him within the temple, which Nehemiah indicates would be sinful for him to do.

As he had done before, he prayed for God to strengthen him.

Jesus similarly faced three specific temptations in the wilderness and succeeded in all three.

In this section we can see a model of response to opposition: pray, resist, and persist. Nehemiah prays for strength. He resists the temptations to pull him away from the work of rebuilding the walls. And he persists in doing the work. We can pray.

Simply continuing to do the work God has given us is a strategy unto itself in the face of opposition.

The chapter ends on a high note. After 52 days of work, the city walls were finished.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Ephesians 6:12
- 1 Peter 5:8
- 1 Timothy 4:1-5
- Luke 5:15-16
- James 4:7

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are some things you could pray about right now to ask for God's strength to endure?
- What would it look like for you to "resist the devil" in your current situation?
- What work does God have for you that simply persisting in doing would be an expression of faithfulness in the face of opposition?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 7

Nehemiah 7

Following the successful effort to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah 7 records the beginning of the re-establishment of civil and religious life in the Holy City. This will be developed from here to chapter 12.

New leaders are appointed to oversee Jerusalem. A genealogical record is brought out to establish the tribal territories and roles in the community.

Three important functions of the genealogical record:

1. Verification that you belong to the covenant community - see Genesis 12
2. Historic rights to the land - see Joshua 13-21
3. Roles in the community, specifically priests and kings

Those with uncertain ancestry are forbidden from serving as priests. See Nehemiah 7 & Ezra 2.

Further financial contributions are made by the people to resume the work in the temple. See Exodus 25.

In Christ, a new spiritual lineage is established. This new lineage is a continuation of the promises of God made to Abraham in Genesis 12.

Members of God's covenant community are now given an inheritance greater than the land of Israel: eternal life.

We are given roles in the global community of God. God is faithful to carry out his promises, even if those take on new and surprising forms.

In Christ we are the people of God, living in his kingdom and working in his service across the whole planet.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Matthew 12:46-50
- Romans 4:13-17
- Ephesians 2:19-21
- Titus 3:7
- Romans 8:17

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are ways that your own personal family lineage has impacted your self-understanding or practical experiences of your life?
- What does it mean to you to be included in God's family?
- What roles or work in the community is God calling you

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 8

Nehemiah 8

In Nehemiah 8, it is the seventh month of the Jewish religious calendar. For any number of reasons, the community calls for a public reading of the book of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Ezra the priest is the primary reader and several speakers and translators relay the message to the large crowd gathered near the Water Gate of Jerusalem.

Three reasons for this public reading of Scripture:

1. The average person was illiterate.
2. The average person didn't own a copy of the Law.
3. Some of the crowd did not know Hebrew.

As Ezra reads, the people begin to weep. Perhaps they are realizing how far off they are from faithfulness to God's law. But Nehemiah says that today is a day for rejoicing, and he instructs them to have a joyful celebration that night, sharing food with those who need it.

The next day the people regather for further reading of the Law. They appear to get to Leviticus 23 where the instructions are given for Sukkot ("The Feast of Tabernacles"). They disperse to prepare for the coming festival later that month.

Two features of the people's response to the reading of the Law are worth emulating:

1. Instant obedience - When they learn about Sukkot, they drop everything and hold the feast.
2. Joyful obedience - They respond to the call from Nehemiah, and in Leviticus 23, that it be a joyous celebration, even though their initial feelings caused them to weep.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Philippians 4:4
- Galatians 5:22-25
- Romans 14:17-18

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are ways that delayed obedience could be considered disobedience?
- What are some feelings you have right now or have had recently that should be turned to rejoicing?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 9

Nehemiah 9

After celebrating Sukkot (“The Feast of Tabernacles”), on the day that would have immediately followed the last day of the festival, a public time of confession is recorded. This may seem strange coming out of the celebratory tone of Sukkot and the events of Nehemiah 8. Perhaps they realized they hadn’t celebrated the Day of Atonement that was supposed to precede Sukkot. Perhaps they simply desired to further express to God their desire to be more faithfully committed.

Psalms to review: 78, 105, 106, 135, 136

Like Nehemiah’s praying in Nehemiah 1, the people acknowledge their own sin and the sin of their ancestors. They contrast this with God’s generosity and faithfulness in creation, deliverance from slavery in Egypt, provision in the wilderness, and entrance into the land of Israel. In spite of God’s faithfulness and patience, the people had rebelled. The people in Nehemiah 9 identify their current situation under the rule of Persia as continued discipline because of that rebellion.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- 1 John 1:9
- James 5:16
- 1 John 2:2
- 1 Corinthians 11:36

In the Christian practice of communion, there is an opportunity to experience a mixture of confession and celebration of God’s grace. We acknowledge that our sin was so grievous that it cost the blood of Jesus to atone for it. But in light of that forgiveness, we can feel grateful and joyful. Additionally, it is a declaration of God’s grace.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- Are there specific sins that you should acknowledge and confess to God?
- Are there specific sins that you should confess to a fellow believer?
- What are some ways you can share about the grace you have received from God with someone else?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 10

Nehemiah 10

Flowing out of the acknowledgment of their sin in Nehemiah 9, the leaders of Israel signed a written pledge to be faithful to God's law. Nehemiah leads by example again by being the first name listed to sign the pledge.

All of the elements of the pledge correspond with specific instructions given in the Law/Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). In essence, they are good things that give tangible prioritization to devotion to God and care for people.

Ways the people will obey God's law:

1. Not marry outside the covenant community of Israel
2. Keep the Sabbath
3. Give one-third of a shekel for each person each year for the temple
4. Provide wood for the temple altar
5. Give the first fruits of their crops as an offering
6. Tithe to support the Levites

It ends with a general pledge to not neglect the house of God.

In the New Testament era, John the Baptist calls the people to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. In Luke 19, Zacchaeus is an example of this. He pledges to give away half of his possessions and pay back anyone he has cheated four times what he got from them.

Good works follow an authentically repentant heart. It is not an effort to earn God's favor. But since we have his favor in Christ, it is our joy to live in a way that honors God and helps people.

New Testament Scriptures to read:

- Matthew 3:7-10
- Luke 19:1-10
- Ephesians 4:14-24
- Ephesians 5:8-14

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- When you think of your life before believing in Christ, what are some of the things you regret?
- What are some ways that you can do the opposite of those regrettable things now as an expression of your repentance?
- How do we pursue doing good deeds without thinking of those as something we do to earn God's approval?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 11
Nehemiah 11-12

This section finishes the sequence of events that began in chapter 7 reestablishing the civil and religious life of Israel after the completion of the walls had been rebuilt. It was mentioned in Nehemiah 7:4 that while the walls were completed, few Israelites were living in Jerusalem.

Reasons Israelites had not moved back:

1. Economic reasons
2. Family ties
3. Preferences

Nehemiah 11:1-2 describes a process by which the people selected one out of every ten people from throughout the nation to live in Jerusalem. Those people relocated away from their families and lands where they had settled to contribute to the thriving of the holy city.

Following in the footsteps of King David, Nehemiah:

1. Organizes divisions of Levites
2. Prioritizes worship

Two principles from this section:

1. Missional Living – The people transcended the natural ways people lived in order to contribute to the thriving of the community of God.
 - Jesus sent out his disciples to make disciples of all nations. This meant some of them would end up very far from home to proclaim the Gospel. We too can consider how our geographic location serves the mission of God.
2. A Worshipping Community – Human and financial resources were dedicated to the full-time work of worshipping God. There were even full-time musicians in the temple to ensure that God was praised and the people were spurred on in their worship.
 - Our destiny is to be a worshipping community in the presence of God. Revelation 7 records a vision of people from all nations before the throne of God worshipping. We too should prioritize worship in the community of God now.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What factors determined the location where you currently live?
- Should you consider relocating to be a witness for Christ in a place where there is less representation?
- What would it look like for your home to be a place that fosters worship of God?
- What are ways your church community could further emphasize worship to God?

Nehemiah: A Memoir of Restoration, Conflict, and Renewal - Session 12
Nehemiah 13

Unfortunately in the highs and lows of the narrative of Nehemiah, the story ends on a low note. Nehemiah had returned to Persia, and while he was gone the people turned back on the pledges they made in Nehemiah 10.

Nehemiah's visit to Jerusalem:

- Tobiah was given a room in the temple
- The Levites had left Jerusalem to go farm
- The people were working on the Sabbath
- Intermarriage to non-Israelites

Three times in Nehemiah 13 Nehemiah asks God to remember him with favor. In some sense, this book being included in Scripture is God's affirmation of Nehemiah. It is a cautionary tale for us and the difficulties we may face and rebellion of heart that we need to guard against. It is also an inspiration to selfless leadership and passion for God's honor.

Jesus demonstrated a similar righteous indignation when he cleared out the temple. In our era, we do not worship in the temple in Jerusalem. But a similar zeal for the house of God can characterize our lives. We can strive for pure hearts in ourselves and the community of God.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What elements of Nehemiah's leadership inspire you?
- What things are present in your life that may need to be cleared out for purified dedication to God?
- What would it look like for you to continue to strive for further refinement in the community of God?

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