



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 27, 2009  
Released on Wednesday, September 23, 2009**

**"Nehemiah: A Motivator for the People"**

**Printed Text: Nehemiah 2:5, 11-20**

**Background Scripture: Nehemiah 2:1-20**

**Devotional Reading: Isaiah 62:1-7**

**Nehemiah 2:5, 11-20**

**5 And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.**

.....

**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.

**Today's Aim**

**Facts:** to identify the steps that Nehemiah took as a leader to motivate his people to rebuild the walls that were in ruins.

**Principle:** to demonstrate that one godly leader can motivate a people to join in the work of God.

**Application:** Assess the need in one specific ministry area in his or her church and volunteer to be a leader (or assist a leader) in that area.

### **How to Say It**

ARTAXERXES. Are-tuh-zerk-seez.

HORONITE. Hor-oh-night.

PAPYRUS. puh-pie-russ.

SANBALLAT. San-bal-ut.

TOBIAH. Toe-bye-uh.

### **Introduction**

Worldly power is a great temptation for a man. He may tell himself that he will use his position of influence to further the work of God's kingdom. And indeed there have been godly men in history who have also been great political leaders. But there have also been those who compromised their principles in order to cling to power.

Nehemiah is an example of a political leader who remained faithful to God and His purposes. He had a great passion for God's people and for the nation to be in a right relationship with the Lord.

Nehemiah did not seek to rule by brute force. He realized that if Israel was going to do a work for God, it had to come from a willing heart. Our lesson title refers to him as a motivator. Being able to inspire people to pursue God's will is the secret of true leadership, and this is not possible unless the leader is dedicated to the cause.

### **Lesson Background**

Artaxerxes I came to the throne in 464 B.C. when his father was assassinated. He permitted Ezra to return in 458 B.C. with other Jews (Ezra 7, 8). About 13 years later, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah's brother arrived in Susa and told him of the plight of the Jews back in Jerusalem. The walls were still broken down, and a city without walls had no respect or defense. Nehemiah evaluated the matter, developed a plan of action, and waited for the right opportunity to present it to the king.

The last verse of Nehemiah 1 notes that he was the king's cupbearer, a very responsible position of influence. Nehemiah could have used this opportunity to explain why he should stay in Susa in order to use his influence to help those in Judah. But this man of prayer decided that the task was his.

### **Nehemiah's Desire (Nehemiah 2:5)**

#### **1. What request did Nehemiah make to the king of Persia? (Nehemiah 2:5)**

The prophet Nehemiah held a position of great trust in the kingdom of Persia, the dominant kingdom of his day. As the cupbearer of the king, he was responsible for the king's welfare. Nehemiah would make sure that none of the foods the king ate were poisoned. He probably first partook of the food himself in order to protect the king. As a cupbearer, he had other duties which included managing the king's household finances and being a custodian of the king's seal, which represents his authority.

Through this time, Nehemiah developed a great relationship with the king. However, since Nehemiah loved his homeland, it began to affect his demeanor in the presence of the king. This can be interpreted as being unhappy with the king, and it puts a person at risk of being thought of plotting a coup.

By entering the king's presence in a depressed state, Nehemiah was risking his life. The king asked what was wrong. Nehemiah was worried, but before he responded, he offered a prayer to God (vs. 1-4).

Nehemiah was very respectful when he addressed King Artaxerxes with his request. Nehemiah framed his request in such a way that it would be the king sending him to Judah. He would still be under the authority of the king as he went. He found common ground with Artaxerxes by noting that Judah was the home of his ancestors, reflecting a sentiment that would be understood by any reasonably sensitive fellow man. Certainly the king would see as a legitimate and understandable motivation the desire to rebuild the city of one's ancestors. There was nothing threatening in that.

### **Nehemiah's Request (Nehemiah 2:11-16)**

Nehemiah makes his journey to Jerusalem with official papers and a military escort (Nehemiah 2:7-9). The soldiers provide protection, and their presence adds to the credentials and purposes he gives to the regional governors. His having an escort is different from Ezra's refusal to have such (Ezra 8:22). Ezra thought that having soldiers to accompany him would demonstrate a lack of faith. Nehemiah believes it is necessary for the purposes he has in mind.

After securing not only the permission but also the assistance of Artaxerxes (vs. 6-8), Nehemiah set out for Jerusalem. Even before he began to work. The Scripture writer informs us, opposition to him arose (vs. 9-10).

### **2. Why did Nehemiah undertake a nighttime tour of the city wall before approaching the people of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11,12)?**

We should note that before Nehemiah did anything, he waited for three days. Though he wanted to rebuild the city, Nehemiah knew that he had to survey the situation before he could take any action. We should learn a lesson from Nehemiah. In our zeal for action, we should always remember that God has given us minds to think with. Though God may give us a mission, He still wants us to take time to prayerfully mull over any situation before we act.

Nehemiah eventually took a nighttime tour of the city wall. He did not want to disclose his plan until he was absolute ready. His desire for secrecy is also indicated by his taking only a few men along with him. He did not share his plans with anyone at this point. By taking only one animal along for the trip he was about to make, he removed another element that might have called attention to his doings.

### **3. What did Nehemiah encounter that emphasized the magnitude of the task before him (vs. 13-15)?**

Nehemiah saw the Dung Gate led to the Valley of Hinnom (or "Gehenna," based on the Hebrew), the garbage dump of Jerusalem used in Scripture as a picture of hell's fiery desolation (cf. Matt. 23:33; Mark 9:43; Jas. 3:6; "hell" in these verses is "Gehenna").

As he walked, he inspected the remains of the walls of Jerusalem. Fire had destroyed the gates of the city. He continues his appraisal by walking up the "gate of the fountain" (v. 14). This provided water for Jerusalem. Nehemiah 2:14 also mentions the "king's pool." This was the "Pool of Siloam" to which Jesus would direct a leper He was healing (cf. John 9:1-7).

Nehemiah came up on some debris that he couldn't cross while on the donkey, so he had to travel by foot. Nehemiah continues his inspection as he moves along *the wall* to the north. Most scholars think he turns around and retraces his route to the first *gate*. Nehemiah got the picture of the task at hand. It was going to take a lot of hard work to rebuild Jerusalem.

### **4. How did Nehemiah preface his proposal to rebuild the walls? (v. 16)**

Nehemiah made sure that the people understood that the city had no idea of what he had done. He emphasized and made clear this point by mentioning every possible element of the population. Ecclesiastes 3:7 states that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent. Nehemiah knows the difference. In his wisdom, he determines when others will be informed. Not everyone is entitled to know everything all the time, in spite of wanting to have his or her curiosity satisfied.

Perhaps Nehemiah was making it clear what was about to happen was not the result of some covert politicking on his part. The good result would come through a heartfelt response to God's grace.

### **Nehemiah's Exhortation (Nehemiah 2:17-18)**

#### **5. What was a time when you needed to form a plan of action before sharing with others what was on your heart? What negative consequences could there have been of sharing prematurely?**

Some of the most difficult conversations are those that involve confronting others about sin or setting some boundaries on the behavior of certain people in our lives. Prayer and forethought are essential because of the potential for an emotional reaction and a rift in the relationship.

Often, churchgoers find it easy to identify areas where ministry can be improved. Suggestions or criticisms are sometimes unwelcome to overworked church leaders. However, suggestions that are paired with a thoughtful proposal of how to solve the problem and a person willing to volunteer to lead the effort can be a great blessing.

#### **6. How did he encourage the people that they could accomplish the task? (vs. 17-18a)**

The time has come, and Nehemiah is ready to make his announcement. His audience probably includes the groups cited in the previous verse. Have the people of *Jerusalem* become accustomed to their unpleasant and uncomfortable existence? Things can be in a certain state for so long that people get used to it. They may be unable to envision circumstances being any other way. So Nehemiah needs to cast a vision of a better tomorrow. This starts with a frank assessment of the current situation.

The visual aids are all around. He reviews the troubles, the rubble, and the situation of the *gates* (v. 17). He has been in Jerusalem only a few days, but he identifies with the people by using the word *we*. He is the governor, but they are in this together.

Nehemiah called on the people to rebuild the wall. He appealed to their sense of national pride. He emphasized that if they stuck together, their enemies would not disrespect them for their weakness.

To encourage the people, he tells the people how God had blessed Him (v. 18). He recognized the "hand of God" in the events.

His mention of the king of Persia served two purposes. First, it would reassure the people to know what Nehemiah was proposing was not being hidden from the mighty Persian king. They understood that going against the king's wishes would not be a wise course of action. Second, and even more important, the fact that the king of Persia would be behind Nehemiah's efforts was strong proof of God's mighty hand at work on behalf of His people.

#### **7. What was the people's response to Nehemiah's plan (v. 18b)?**

The people responded well to Nehemiah's words. With the evidence of God's sovereign arrangement of events, they were willing to build the wall. Nehemiah's wisdom in preparing for action paid off.

The last statement of verse 18 indicates that they went about the work with great vigor. They picked up on Nehemiah's lead and encouraged one another.

### **Nehemiah's Confidence (Nehemiah 2:19-20)**

#### **8. What was the attitude of Sanballat and the others who rose up against Nehemiah and his plan? (v. 19)**

When God's people begin to take action for the Lord, it is not surprising that enemies will come out of the woodwork. In this case, a trio of villains is mentioned. Nehemiah's response to his opposition should serve to encourage us if we meet with enemies in our spiritual labors. Experiencing opposition and difficulties does not necessarily mean we are doing something wrong. It could mean just the opposite (cf. 2 Tim. 3:12).

Sanballat was perhaps the most famous of Nehemiah's enemies. Sanballat is mentioned earlier in verse 10 as being aware that Nehemiah has arrived to promote the general welfare of the Israelites. Sanballat's name has been found on a papyrus in Egypt, dated just 37 years later; he is identified as the governor of Samaria (compare Nehemiah 4:1, 2). Samaria is the capital of this immediate area, and fortifying Jerusalem is seen as a political threat.

Tobiah's area is to the east, across the Jordan River. He is, at least, a *servant* to the king of Persia. A person with that name could not prove his Israelite heritage (Ezra 2:59, 60). He and his descendants (the Tobiads) are renowned far into the period between the Old and New Testaments. *Geshem* is a powerful *Arabian* leader to the south (Nehemiah 6:1). His name has also been found in Egypt.

Thus the people of Judah and Jerusalem have enemies on three sides: north (Sanballat), east (Tobiah), and south (Geshem). Later, Nehemiah 4:7 says that the people of Ashdod, which lies to the west, join this confederation. Thus the opposition surrounds Nehemiah and his followers.

The enemy leaders know that using force against Nehemiah can bring the wrath of Artaxerxes. So they resort to a war of words: mockery, threats, and ridicule. Perhaps they hope that Nehemiah will retaliate with force, for that will justify the accusation of rebellion *against the king*.

#### **9. What was the basis of Nehemiah's confidence in his response? (v. 20)**

Nehemiah's response to the three leaders also gives encouragement to the residents of *Jerusalem*. There are three parts to Nehemiah's reply. They include a strong statement of trust in *the God of heaven*, a mutual affirmation of determination, and a recounting of three ways that the opponents are excluded from any participation in a project ultimately intended to bring honor to God and His people.

This thrilling chapter comes to a close at this point. It has been exciting from its tense beginning in a capital city of Persia, to the secretive nighttime inspection of the walls, to the challenges to a lethargic people, to the forceful response of scorn from enemies who plan to hinder and stop Nehemiah from achieving his goals. The next few chapters tell of more opposition and of the remarkable success of organization and leadership. The gates and walls are built in 52 days in the summer of 444 B.C. (Nehemiah 6:15)—what previous generations could not do in 140 years.

### **Practical Points**

- 1.** Faithfulness in daily duties often opens doors for greater work for God (Nehemiah 2:5).
- 2.** What God puts in our hearts need not be shared immediately with everyone (vs. 11-12).

3. It is never wise to jump into a work or ministry without first learning the nature and scope of the work (vs. 13-16).
4. God shows us needs but also supplies plans and leaders to meet those needs (vs. 17-18).
5. Wherever God is at work, there will be opposition (v. 19).
6. If we know we are in God's will, there is nothing to fear from others (v. 20).

### **Conclusion**

A person may read about Nehemiah's life of prayer, trust, and accomplishment and be moved to take risks beyond Nehemiah's example. Some make major purchases without any means of making the payments, for they have "faith" that God will somehow provide at the right time. There are incidents in which the funds did arrive at the last minute, but there are also the failure accounts in which people had to move or surrender what they bought. The failures do not make good illustrations in lessons or sermons!

Nehemiah is an outstanding example of a person who had goals and plans, but he was also realistic. He planned and investigated in order to cause his dreams to become reality. Throughout his book he mentioned times when he prayed to God, for his was a reasoned faith. When the king of Persia granted him the unlikely request, he was on solid ground.

### **Prayer**

Lord, we are thankful for the examples of leadership and trust in the life of Nehemiah. Whether it is ours to lead or to follow, may we do so with a complete trust in You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Thought to Remember**

Leadership may include sacrifice.

### **Anticipating Next Week's Lesson**

"Looking for Jesus," the title of the lesson next week, is an essential part of covenant living. Jesus' promise is that if we truly seek after Him, we will find Him. Study Mark 1:35-45.

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