

## **Ezra and Nehemiah**

### **Nehemiah**

Lesson #2 for October 12, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 1-2; Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 23:1-6; Numbers 23:19.

1. In this lesson we will pick up where we left off in our last lesson by discussing some details about Nehemiah, the second main character in our studies for this quarter.
2. Following orders from Cyrus, Zerubabbel and Joshua/Jeshua had returned with about 50,000 people to begin the rebuilding of the temple as well as Jerusalem and the country of Judea following the Babylonian exile. Because of much opposition from surrounding nations and groups, the building of the temple slowed down and stopped. Then, a second decree from Darius, and the urging of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, stirred the people to complete the building of the temple. But, there was still no completed wall around the city of Jerusalem, and there was no real safety for the people who lived there.
3. Nehemiah was working in Susa or Shushan in the country of Persia, now known as Iran, far away from Jerusalem. He had the very responsible position of serving the emperor his wine and other drinks and tasting them first to make sure they were not poisoned in some way. We do not know how long Nehemiah had been working for the emperor; however, he had come to be a trusted part of the emperor's inner circle of workers.
4. But, Nehemiah was concerned about news coming from Jerusalem. Despite the two decrees which had been issued already from two different emperors, progress toward establishing a safe place to live and rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the country of Judea had essentially ground to a stop.
5. Read Nehemiah 1:1-4; compare Daniel 1:1-2 as background.

**Daniel 1:1-2:** <sup>1</sup> In the third year that Jehoiakim was king of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia attacked Jerusalem and surrounded the city.

<sup>2</sup>The Lord let him capture King Jehoiakim and seize some of the temple treasures. He took some prisoners back with him to the temple of his gods in Babylon, and put the captured treasures in the temple storerooms.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Daniel 1:1-2). New York: American Bible Society.

**Nehemiah 1:1-4:** <sup>1</sup> This is the account of what Nehemiah son of Hacaliah accomplished.

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year that Artaxerxes was emperor of Persia, I, Nehemiah, was in Susa, the capital city. <sup>2</sup>Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived from Judah with another group, and I asked them about Jerusalem and about our fellow-Jews who had returned from exile in Babylonia. <sup>3</sup>They told me that those who had survived and were back in the homeland were in great difficulty and that the foreigners who lived near by looked down on them. They also told me that the walls of Jerusalem were still broken down and that the gates had not been restored since the time

they were burnt. <sup>4</sup>When I heard all this, I sat down and wept.—*Good News Bible.*\*

Hanani, probably a blood-brother of Nehemiah, had arrived with some friends from Jerusalem and brought the news that every time the Jews tried to rebuild a portion of the wall around Jerusalem, their enemies would either tear it down or burn it down. Things were not going well in his ancestral home.

6. As we will learn in later lessons, it is possible to date the events in these two books quite precisely. It is likely that the arrival of Hanani occurred between the middle of November and the middle of December of 445 B.C.
7. Ezra had been in Jerusalem for about 13 years already. Despite the fact that he had been given permission to use money which was left over from the gifts he had brought from the emperor, the wall was far from completed.
8. Furthermore, following a letter written by their enemies, King Artaxerxes himself had sent a decree for them to stop building the city and the wall.

**Ezra 4:23:** As soon as this letter from Artaxerxes was read to Rehum, Shimshai, and their associates, they hurried to Jerusalem and forced the Jews to stop rebuilding the city.—*Good News Bible.*\*

9. So, even though the temple had been rebuilt, it was not really safe for people to live in Jerusalem and to carry out the normal temple services.
10. What would you have done if you had been in Nehemiah's place? Nehemiah began a campaign of praying, fasting, and weeping.

**Nehemiah 1:5-11:** <sup>5</sup>“LORD God of Heaven! You are great, and we stand in fear of you. You faithfully keep your covenant with those who love you and do what you command. <sup>6</sup>Look at me, LORD, and hear my prayer, as I pray day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. **I confess that we, the people of Israel, have sinned. My ancestors and I have sinned.** <sup>7</sup>**We have acted wickedly against you and have not done what you commanded.** We have not kept the laws which you gave us through Moses, your servant. <sup>8</sup>Remember now what you told Moses: ‘If you people of Israel are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the other nations. <sup>9</sup>But then if you turn back to me and do what I have commanded you, I will bring you back to the place where I have chosen to be worshiped, even though you are scattered to the ends of the earth.’

<sup>10</sup> “Lord, these are your servants, your own people. You rescued them by your great power and strength. <sup>11</sup>Listen now to my prayer and to the prayers of all your other servants who want to honour you. Give me success today and make the emperor merciful to me.” In those days I was the emperor's wine steward.—*Good News Bible.*\*†

Notice the clear pattern in Nehemiah's prayer with progressing and retracing:

1. God, You are great and have mercy (*Neh. 1:5*).
2. Hear me (*Neh. 1:6*).

3. Confession of sins (*Neh. 1:6, 7*).
4. Remember Your promises (*Neh. 1:8, 9*).
3. You have redeemed us (*Neh. 1:10*).
2. Hear me (*Neh. 1:11*).

1. God, grant prosperity and mercy (*Neh. 1:11*).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Monday, October 7.

11. In several ways, Nehemiah's prayer resembles the prayer of Daniel recorded in Daniel 9. Do you think that Nehemiah might have actually read the book of Daniel? We do not know how those original manuscripts of Scripture were preserved and copied or memorized.
12. But, like Daniel, Nehemiah did not start his prayer by crying for help. He recalled God's great mercy, he claimed God's goodness, and he confessed his sins and the sins of his people. Then, he asked God to remember His promises; he reminded God that He had rescued them from problems in the past; and he believed that God could do it again.
13. What could we learn from Nehemiah's prayer? Is it appropriate to remind God of His previous promises? We know that there is nothing faulty in God's memory. But, in the context of the great controversy when we openly remember God's promises and admit our mistakes and then ask for help, it gives God permission to turn to the Devil and say: "You see, these people are asking me to do something. I am not forcing Myself on them as you, Satan, try to do! I will now act."
14. Nehemiah was not only a man of prayer, but also he was a man of action.

Nehemiah had often poured out his soul in behalf of his people. But now as he prayed a holy purpose formed in his mind. He resolved that if he could obtain the consent of the king, and the necessary aid in procuring implements and material, he would himself undertake the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring Israel's national strength. And he asked the Lord to grant him favor in the sight of the king, that this plan might be carried out. "Prosper, I pray Thee, Thy servant this day," he entreated, "and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Four months Nehemiah waited for a favorable opportunity to present his request to the king.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings\** 629.3-630.1.

15. Do you think Nehemiah's prayers might have taken the form of planning with God what needed to be done? Would God guide someone like Nehemiah and us to discuss together plans for accomplishing what needs to be done?
16. Following those four months of weeping, fasting, and praying, Nehemiah's opportunity came. Do you think he ever got tired of appealing to God? Does this prayer as recorded in Nehemiah 1 represent more or less the same things that he prayed about each day?

**Nehemiah 2:1-8:** One day four months later, when Emperor Artaxerxes was dining, I took the wine to him. He had never seen me look sad before,<sup>2</sup> so he asked, "Why are you looking so sad? You aren't ill, so it must be that you're unhappy."

I was startled<sup>3</sup> and answered, "May Your Majesty live for ever! How can I

help looking sad when the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

<sup>4</sup> The emperor asked, "What is it that you want?"

I prayed to the God of Heaven,<sup>5</sup> and then I said to the emperor, "If Your Majesty is pleased with me and is willing to grant my request, let me go to the land of Judah, to the city where my ancestors are buried, so that I can rebuild the city."

<sup>6</sup> The emperor, with the empress sitting at his side, approved my request. He asked me how long I would be gone and when I would return, and I told him.

<sup>7</sup> Then I asked him to grant me the favor of giving me letters to the governors of West Euphrates Province, instructing them to let me travel to Judah.<sup>8</sup> I asked also for a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal forests, instructing him to supply me with timber for the gates of the fort that guards the Temple, for the city walls, and for the house I was to live in. The emperor gave me all I asked for, because God was with me.—*Good News Bible.\**

17. Nehemiah very carefully structured his request to the emperor. Initially, he did not mention Jerusalem. However, he talked about the place of his fathers' sepulchers. (Nehemiah 2:5) To the people of antiquity, and even to many people in our world today, respect for ancestors and even their proper burial sites is very important.
18. After he had wept and prayed and fasted for four months, do you think Nehemiah had a fairly clear plan in his mind about what he would ask of the emperor and then what he might be able to do in Jerusalem? Do you think God had anything to do with the fact that Nehemiah looked sad on that special day when he spoke to the emperor? Did Nehemiah recognize that he was asking this Medo-Persian emperor to reverse his former decree? Remember that the laws of the Medes and Persians were not supposed to be changed. Review the story of Esther.
19. Have you ever prayed for some important thing that seemed to be God's will and, yet, nothing seemed to be happening? Are you willing to let God fulfill His promises in the way and time that He sees best?
20. Nehemiah recognized that he was making a remarkable request. He probably knew that Artaxerxes himself had been the one sending a decree in response to the letters of Sanballat and Tobiah, giving them permission to stop the work on the city of Jerusalem. Then, he was asking Artaxerxes to give him permission not only to restart the building of that wall, but also the authority to collect the wood and the money necessary to rebuild as well as appointing him to be the governor of Judea.
21. Do you think Nehemiah was hoping that the emperor had forgotten about his former decree to stop the building in Jerusalem? Was he prepared to speak up about that former decree if necessary?
22. It is quite interesting to notice that when this very special conversation took place, the empress was there alongside the emperor. Normally, the women would not have been present when matters of state were being discussed. Perhaps, this was a special more private setting arranged by the emperor to discuss this delicate issue.

23. Nehemiah had carefully calculated what he would need to accomplish what had to be done. He needed time; he needed authority from the emperor to deal with Israel's enemies; and he would need supplies, especially wood for construction. He even mentioned specifically what he would need the wood for.
24. Clearly, the emperor must have trusted Nehemiah and recognized his administrative skills in order to allow him to do such a thing.

**Nehemiah 2:9-10:**<sup>9</sup> The emperor sent some army officers and a troop of horsemen with me, and I made the journey to West Euphrates. There I gave the emperor's letters to the governors.<sup>10</sup> But Sanballat, from the town of Beth Horon, and Tobiah, an official in the province of Ammon, heard that someone had come to work for the good of the people of Israel, and they were highly indignant.—*Good News Bible.\**

25. Nehemiah departed probably late in 444 B.C. with an armed guard and arrived in the province of West Euphrates—sometimes called Beyond the River—and handed to Sanballat and Tobiah the two decrees from the emperor giving him permission to collect the necessary supplies and to take charge of the work in Jerusalem. Nehemiah delivered his letters of authority to the appropriate enemies of the Jews. He knew that before long, they would mount as much opposition as they could. So, he did not waste time.
26. Do you think Sanballat and Tobiah were shocked to receive those letters? Were they disappointed? It is interesting to notice that the one in charge of the emperor's forest was named Asaph, which is actually a Jewish name.
27. Tobiah, one of the opponents of the Jews, also had a Jewish name although he was the governor of Ammon at the time. Sanballat the governor of Samaria and Geshem an Arab in charge of the former territories of Moab and Edom were also determined to prevent what Nehemiah had come to do.

His [Nehemiah's] arrival in Jerusalem, however, with a military escort, showing that he had come on some important mission, excited the jealousy of the heathen tribes living near the city, who had so often indulged their enmity against the Jews by heaping upon them injury and insult. Foremost in this evil work were certain chiefs of these tribes, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. From the first these leaders watched with critical eyes the movements of Nehemiah and endeavored by every means in their power to thwart his plans and hinder his work.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings\** 635.1.<sup>‡</sup>

28. Try to imagine how you would feel handing letters of authority to people who, in fact, wanted you dead.
29. Read **Nehemiah 2:11-20**. What can we learn from Nehemiah's experience when first arriving at Jerusalem? Nehemiah recognized that there were probably spies in and around Jerusalem that would report to his enemies whatever he did. So, he did not make his plans known even to the Jewish people. He quietly arrived in Jerusalem and settled in for three days. Before he talked to anyone, he wanted to make sure exactly what needed to be done. And he did not just guess; he wanted to see it for himself. He went out in the middle

of the night with a very few trusted friends and walked around the rubble which used to be the wall of Jerusalem. He found that there were significant portions of the wall which had already been built; but, there were also huge areas where there were gaping holes.

30. Then, Nehemiah did something very important. Having assessed the situation, he called the Jewish leaders together and told them his own story. He showed them that he had authority from the emperor to do what he had come to do. The Jewish leaders must have realized that what they were hearing was already a result of several miracles.
31. When speaking to the Jews, he reminded them of how shameful and disgraceful their condition had become. In many ancient systems, there was a shame-and-honor system. Honor was the most important value, and shame must be avoided at all cost. So, Nehemiah convinced the Jews that they needed to take care of the shame that they were experiencing and restore their honor.
32. Try to imagine being among that group that gathered around Nehemiah at the time when he proposed his plans. There was not much time to think about what to do. Plans had to be laid almost immediately, and the work had to begin. Nehemiah challenged them to trust in God since He had already performed miracles, and He would help them to finish the job. God had prepared the way for the wall to be rebuilt, and they responded boldly and courageously saying, "Let's begin building!"
33. Did Nehemiah talk about God's promises that he had been praying about for four months? Did he perhaps quote passages like Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 23; or even Numbers 23:19 to assure the people that God would be with them and help them?
34. Do we know for sure that God wants to help us finish the gospel, carrying it to every person in our world? Does God know exactly how this can be done? Is He asking for our help? Why doesn't He just send some angels to do the job? God recognizes that we need to be a part of this final effort in the great controversy.
35. We should note also that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah could have accomplished what they did accomplish without permission from the emperors involved. Those emperors were pagans. We are not exactly sure what motivated them to do what they did; however, they recognized—and we should recognize—that God is, ultimately, in charge. But, we should not be afraid to work with non-church organizations or people if it looks like that is what is necessary to accomplish God's work.
36. We should not need to be reminded that Satan is alive and well on this earth. Whenever it is possible, he will oppose the progress of God's people because, of course, for him it is a life-and-death issue.
37. Are there promises that God has made to us in our day that we could claim and should be claiming? Or, are we like the people in Jerusalem that had apparently given up?
38. As we have seen, Nehemiah had done his praying, his fasting, his careful planning, and then it was time for action. What would you have done?

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