

# Nehemiah: The Captive Cupbearer Rebuilds a Nation

Bible Background • NEHEMIAH 2:11-20; 13:1-22

Printed Text • NEHEMIAH 2:11-20 | Devotional Reading • DANIEL 9:4-6, 15-19

## Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXAMINE why Nehemiah decided to restore the wall of Jerusalem and reform/revive the Sabbath law, APPRECIATE Nehemiah's feelings and behavior in restoring the wall and reforming Jewish worship, and IDENTIFY ways to restore worn parts of the faith community and revive traditions that honor God.

## In Focus

Gathered before Georgia were the leaders of one of the area churches in her denomination. The church was about 20 years old, and until a week ago, they all thought that it was in good condition. Then, the pastor and treasurer had both abruptly resigned, and the remaining church leaders discovered that the church's funds had been seriously mismanaged. The church's checking account was overdrawn by more than \$18,000, and checks were being returned for insufficient funds.

The denomination had called this emergency meeting of the Trustee Board. Georgia, the denomination's chief accountant, had only had two days to prepare for it. She had sifted through the years of statements and reports.

While her days had been spent sifting through piles of paper looking for answers, her evenings had been spent asking God how He wanted her to handle this awful situation. Despite the carelessness that had been shown, Georgia knew that these people were hurting. Yes, she wanted to blame them for not recognizing the church's situation for so long and take some corrective actions, but all of that could wait. What they needed right now was to know that she cared about them and what they were going through.

*Georgia wisely sought the Lord's counsel about how to proceed, rather than relying solely on her own abilities. When have you shown this wisdom? When have you wished you had acted on God's counsel?*

## Keep in Mind

"But now I said to them, 'You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!'" (Nehemiah 2:17, NLT)

## Words You Should Know

- A. **Pool** (Nehemiah 2:14) berekah (Heb.) — A reservoir at which camels kneel as a resting place
- B. **Reproach** (v. 17) kherpah (Heb.) — Disgrace or shame; a cause or occasion of blame, discredit, or disgrace
- C. **Portion** (v. 20) kheleq (Heb.) — An inheritance; a tract of land

## Say It Correctly

**Sanballat.** san-vah-LOT

**Horonite.** HOR-oh-nite

**Tobiah.** toh-BYE-uh

**Ammonite.** AH-moan-ite

**Geshem.** GEH-shem

## KJV

**Nehemiah 2:11** 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.

## NLT

**Nehemiah 2:11** So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later,

12 I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding.

13 After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates.

14 Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble.

15 So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate.

16 The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration.

17 But now I said to them, "You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!"

18 Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king. They replied at once, "Yes, let's rebuild the wall!" So they began the good work.

19 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. "What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" they asked.

20 I replied, "The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem."

## The People, Places, and Times

**Nehemiah.** Our only knowledge of this great builder and statesman comes from the book that bears his name. The man, whose name means "God has consoled," was born in exile, which began when Babylonia conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC. Nehemiah grew up in the faith of his fathers, and he loved Israel. Since no mention is made of a wife and since he served in such a high position to a foreign king, he was likely a eunuch. Nehemiah was well-qualified for the task of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. A true Israelite, he labored for the purity of

public worship, the integrity of family life, and the sanctity of the Sabbath. He was a courageous and God-fearing man who labored selflessly and served with an unswerving loyalty to God. After the work had begun, the wall was finished in only about two months. Persia. Persia's status as a world power was obtained through a succession of military conquests. Cyrus's victories instituted the empire, and the expansions of Darius' reign spread Persian control from the northern coast of the Aegean Sea to the Indus River valley and from the Caucasus Mountains to Egypt. The Jews, who had been taken into exile by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, were allowed to return soon after the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylonia.

## **Persian Kings in the Bible and Major Events of Their Reigns**

### Cyrus the Great

- 549 BC conquers the Medes
- 546 conquers Lydia
- 539 conquers Babylonia
- 538 authorizes Zerubbabel's first wave of returning exiles

### Darius the Great

- 521 gives funds to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple
- 515 conquers the Indus River valley
- 490 fails to conquer Greece

### Xerxes I

- unknown marries Esther
- 480 fails to conquer Greece

### Artaxerxes I

- 457 authorizes Ezra's second wave of returning exiles
- 445 authorizes Nehemiah's third wave of returning exiles

## **Background**

Nehemiah is the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I of Persia, an honorable and prestigious position of great trust. While serving in this position, Nehemiah receives visitors from Jerusalem and asks them about events going on back home (Nehemiah 1:1–2). They give him a very discouraging report about the disgraceful condition of the people and the deplorable state of the city. The crumbling walls had left the city, the Temple, and the people vulnerable to attack and gave their enemies cause to ridicule. Although Ezra was an excellent spiritual leader, the people lacked political leadership. They needed someone to motivate them, show them where to begin, and to direct their activities. On receiving this news, Nehemiah weeps and grieves for some days, fasting and praying. He knows he has to do something about the city's crumbling infrastructure, but what and how?

After prayer, Nehemiah is still very distressed and the king asks what troubling him (2:1–2). By God's grace, Nehemiah obtains permission from the king to go to his native country and rebuild its walls and gates. Nehemiah left the comfort of a king's palace to return to his ancient homeland to challenge his countrymen to get busy and reconstruct the walls. Armed with letters of safe passage and a full military escort provided by the king, Nehemiah faced the almost 1,000-mile trip to Jerusalem.

*How have you used your position of privilege to help others?*

### At-A-Glance

1. Survey the Situation (Nehemiah 2:11–15)
2. Calls the People to Work (vv. 16–18)
3. Respond to Opposition (vv. 19–20)

## In Depth

**1. Survey the Situation** (Nehemiah 2:11–15) Although he has the full support of the king, Nehemiah does not immediately rush into action or expose his plan to the people (2:11–12). Instead, Nehemiah secretly inspects the wall to assess the damage and estimate the work needed to rebuild it. After staying in Jerusalem for three days, Nehemiah embarked at night on a survey of the damage. The walls of Jerusalem were in such a state of ruin that rubble and debris had strewn the valley floor so that he could not even ride his mount through it. During his late-night ride, he finds that the reports he had received were true: The walls of Jerusalem and its gates are in ruins. Nehemiah says nothing to anyone until he first explores the extent of the damage for himself. We can take a page from Nehemiah’s playbook when we are facing recovery in our own lives. First, we have to acknowledge the truth for ourselves. Then—and only then—should we tell others.

**2. Call the People to Work** (vv. 16–18) Nehemiah calls a meeting of the city leaders and discloses why he has come to Jerusalem. Nehemiah appeals to the leaders’ pride in Jerusalem as God’s holy city. Next, he appeals to their love for God and their desire not to bring Him shame. He acknowledges God and His divine guidance in the plan to rebuild the wall. Then, he tells of King Artaxerxes’ support.

Nehemiah uses the pronoun “we” rather than “you” or “I.” Wise leaders understand they must identify themselves with the need to motivate others to assist them. This reminds us that a Christian can’t live an independent life, because we are called to function in the community of believers. The religious, political, and other leaders overwhelmingly accept Nehemiah’s plans. Collectively, they say, “Let us rise up and build” (v. 18). Nehemiah challenges and inspires the people, and God strengthens them to complete the work. Spirit-led projects carried out under spiritual guidance succeed when measured by God’s definition of success.

**3. Respond to Opposition** (vv. 19–20) Anytime people start the process of recovery, they should expect to meet with some resistance. The Scriptures tell us that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem tried to stop Nehemiah’s rebuilding effort. All three were political leaders from the Persian provinces surrounding Judah to the north, south, and west. Understandably, they did not want Jerusalem to become a strong and well-defended city, because trade routes and economic advantages would shift in favor of Jerusalem. Hence, their attempt to stop Nehemiah was politically motivated. Nehemiah could have argued that what he was doing had higher political backing. Instead, Nehemiah simply stood on the promises of God. He did not waste a minute of his precious time or energy trading insults with them; he simply spoke the truth. Nehemiah tells them that the land has been given to the Children of Israel, and Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem did not have any right to even be in the land of Jerusalem (v. 20). Whenever we are attacked by circumstances contrary to God’s Word, we need to speak the Word to our tormentors and ourselves. We can do this in boldness and rest in God’s promise that we now have a share of that great inheritance when Jesus returns and God’s kingdom finally comes.

*Nehemiah worked carefully to bring the Israelite leaders on board with his plan to rebuild. Why not try to make these foreigners into allies?*

### Search the Scriptures

1. When Nehemiah revealed his plan, what was the people’s response? (Nehemiah 2:18)
2. What did the people in Jerusalem do to show that they were ready to follow Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall? (v. 18)

**Discuss the Meaning**

1. Why is it important to begin any task with prayer?
2. Making decisions is a part of life. Sometimes what we decide to do or say forces us to oppose the majority. How do we know whether we have made the right decision? How do we encourage people to stand by their decisions?
3. Nehemiah was able to motivate the other Jews to embrace his vision of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. What factors determine how flexible you are in sharing a vision with people? When are you flexible, and when are you more assertive?

**Liberating Lesson**

Many American communities are crumbling around the people who live there. Slumlords, a lack of funding rooted in historical inequities, and unethical policing practices account for much of the problem, but cleanliness and maintenance are problems the residents can solve. Should a church’s vision for its community include upkeep and maintenance? What are some ways the church can motivate members to clean up and maintain their neighborhoods? What are some ways the church can pressure the cities’ leaders as Nehemiah did so that they take action?

**Application for Activation**

In today’s lesson, we read that once Nehemiah safely arrived in Jerusalem, he went around inspecting the city walls at night and conducted a thorough survey of exactly what damages needed to be repaired. If we are truly concerned about rebuilding parts of our lives, we need to prayerfully assess what will be required. This week, make this a target of prayer in your own life. Be honest with yourself. Ask God to show you exactly what steps need to be taken. Only when we change lazy or sinful habits can we be freed to be what God wants us to be.

**Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

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**Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

Nehemiah 2:11–20 The book of Nehemiah is about one man’s love, dedication, and faithfulness to both his God and his country. It is a journal or memoir of one man’s determination to make a difference for his people—to rebuild, in spite of enormous opposition from their enemies and detractors. The book demonstrates how one person can motivate a whole nation to accomplish things that they would not be able to do under normal circumstances. It demonstrates Nehemiah’s love for his nation, his personal sacrifice of an enviable position (2:5) for the cause of his people. This kind of sacrifice exemplifies the type of unselfish and motivational service always needed when a great work is to be achieved. The narrative also demonstrates God’s faithfulness and authority over humankind’s affairs, when we put all our problems, wills, and desires into His hands.

**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.**

Armed with the king’s permission, letters for free passage through the territories, and authorization for the supply of materials for the reconstruction, Nehemiah heads home. He arrives in Jerusalem and spends three days without anyone’s knowledge of his presence, most likely praying and resting after a long journey (cf. Ezra 8:32).

After the three days of rest, Nehemiah takes a few men with him by night and surveys the city. He rides around the city to see for himself the extent of destruction. The reason for going by night and taking just a few men is obvious: He wants to keep his actions secret until he ascertains the magnitude of the damage and extent of work to be done. The statement, “neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon” indicates that he went around the city without his entourage, which accompanied him from Persia (Nehemiah 2:9–12). The office of a cupbearer in ancient times was a high and respectable position. Such a tour with a person of such prominence, the king’s cupbearer, would require a big entourage and fanfare, but Nehemiah chose to tour the city privately to avoid public exposure or attracting attention.

**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.**

Verses 13–15 give a detailed record of the tour. The mention of different areas and sections of the wall in these verses indicate that he made a thorough inspection and study of the situation to understand the extent of work to be done. The recurring phrase, “I went out by night ...” or “... in the night” (vv. 12–13, 15) could show that it takes him more than one night, perhaps several nights to complete the survey: section by section. There is debate as to how far west the city stretched at this time, but we can use the information provided here to track Nehemiah’s route around the southern half of the city. The “gate of the valley” is on the southwestern side of Jerusalem, and the “dung port” is at its southern tip. Nehemiah’s trek then turns north by the fountain and pool, where he continues on foot to the brook running on Jerusalem’s eastern side. From this vantage point, he can see much of the rest of the city walls, including those that stretch north of his position and around the Temple. He then retraces his path back into the city. He finds the ruins just as the delegates have reported—the walls of Jerusalem are broken and their gates consumed with fire. In some of the places, such as the Fountain Gate and King’s Pool, the rubble is so extensive that his mount could not get through (v. 14).

**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.**

Nehemiah did not tell anyone—the priests, nobles, rulers, or even the rest of the people—what the Lord has led in his heart and the favor He granted him through the king to rebuild the walls. Why did he keep it a secret?

One reason is to hide it from their enemies (v. 10) until everything is ready and all plans are finalized so they cannot jeopardize the work. Nehemiah has already seen that Sanballat and Tobiah want to oppose this work and will soon see them do it. Another reason would probably be that he kept them away from the people until everything was in place to avoid discouragement for them because of the immensity of the job facing them.

**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.**

After getting a handle on the situation, Nehemiah now calls an assembly and tells the leaders his plans. He first calls their attention to their plight, reminding them of their suffering, and the deplorable condition of their city. Nehemiah, as an individual, could be excluded from the suffering (being one of the highest positions of that time, a cupbearer to the most powerful king); however, he identifies with the suffering of his people. He sees himself as a member of the suffering community. He never allowed his personal comfort in the king's palace blind him to the suffering of his people in Judah or to separate him from the community of his people. Rather he includes himself saying, "Ye see the distress that we are in." Great leaders never allow personal gains and comfort entice them away from their calling or accomplishing what they have been called to do.

He reminds them of the humiliation facing them as a result of the desolation of their proud city and "how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire." Nehemiah does not bother to point out that the walls have been in disrepair for almost a hundred years. Instead, he appeals to what they can do in the immediate situation. He challenges them to work. With the imperative "come," he summons them to the task ahead saying, "Let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." The word "reproach" is from the Hebrew (kherpah, kher-PAW), which means scorn, shame, or ridicule. In order to remove reproach or ridicule from his enemies, Nehemiah urges them to get to work to rebuild the city and its walls. Just as Ezra identified with the sin of his people and interceded for them (Ezra 9:5–11, 15), Nehemiah sees himself as a member of the suffering community.

**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.**

To assure them of the possibility of the work ahead and gain their support, Nehemiah tells the assembly how God's hand has been with him in the plan, and how God has so far provided for him in the project. Multiple times, both Nehemiah and his contemporary Ezra speak of "the good hand of the Lord" being upon them (Ezra 7:9; 8:18; Nehemiah 2:8) as a sign of His blessing. Nehemiah informs the leaders of Israel also of the king's approval and support, morally and materially (2:8). Nehemiah never doubted that he was on a mission for God. God's hand was upon him not only to reconstruct the wall but to establish the economic and social stability of the Jewish community as well. Leadership ability is often confirmed by the attitude and actions of one's followers. Challenged by the speech and encouraged by the information of God's providence, which they have hitherto experienced through Ezra's undertaking in the Temple building, the people exclaimed with one voice, "Let us rise and build!" The effect is instantaneous and wholehearted for the people who "strengthened their hands for this good work," i.e., they set out to work with vigor. Nehemiah, as the leader with confidence in the Lord, the testimony of His work, and His presence, encourages and motivates the people to work. Nothing motivates people more than a personal encounter with the Lord and His agents.

**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.**

As the work commences, the news of the project reaches neighboring countries. It comes to the attention of Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, enemies of the Children of Israel (v. 10), that the Israelites are rebuilding the city. They scornfully laugh at them. They deride them, and mockingly ask what they are doing and suggest Nehemiah's actions are seditious. In answer to this challenge of his authority, Nehemiah affirms the ultimate source of his authority. He does not attribute it to the king, even though he actually has the king's backing and the fact that the king was the authority the enemies were appealing to. Nehemiah instead attributes his authority to the God of heaven (though God used the king as the vessel to accomplish His purpose). Nehemiah declares boldly, "the God of heaven" is guiding their work. The hecklers have no right to stop the work, neither do they have "portion" in Jerusalem. The word "right" is derived from the Hebrew *tsedaqah* (tsed-aw-KAW), meaning "rightness, righteous justice" with the idea "to act justly." In other words, these enemies have no justification to interfere with the work. However, "right" in combination with "portion" (Heb. *cheleq*, KHAY-lek), meaning "an allotment, inheritance, part," indicates the scorners will have no part or any privilege in Jerusalem when it is finished. They will also have no "memorial" (Heb. *zikron*, zik-RONE), which were usually set up as a monument to some act of God. These men will not be remembered, nor their story passed down because they are not the ones who have helped Israel regain its position. God is. Nehemiah is confident in the Lord he serves that the work will be completed, whether these people like it or not.

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

Daniel Intercedes for Jerusalem  
(Daniel 9:4–6, 15–19)

## **TUESDAY**

Nehemiah Orders Temple Cleansing and Restoration  
(Nehemiah 13:4–9)

## **WEDNESDAY**

Nehemiah Restores Ministries of Levites, Singers  
(Nehemiah 13:10-14)

## **THURSDAY**

Nehemiah Reforms Sabbath Observances and Practices  
(Nehemiah 13:15-22)

## **FRIDAY**

Nehemiah Sets Standards for Jewish Marriages  
(Nehemiah 13:23-27)

## **SATURDAY**

Nehemiah Sent to Rebuild Jerusalem  
(Nehemiah 2:1-10)

## **SUNDAY**

Nehemiah Inspires the People to Rebuild  
(Nehemiah 13:23-27)