

Lesson 8 – Nehemiah 1-3

Significant Figures and People: God, Nehemiah, Artaxerxes, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem

Key Passages:

- Nehemiah 1:4-11 – Nehemiah was a man of prayer; he fasted and prayed to God concerning Jerusalem.
- Nehemiah 2:4-5 – Nehemiah prayed before requesting permission of the king to return to Jerusalem.
- Nehemiah 2:10, 19 – There were men who opposed Nehemiah and his work; still, Nehemiah continued.

Main Storyline:

Thirteen years after Ezra had gone to Jerusalem, Artaxerxes was still reigning as king over Persia (compare Ezra 7:8 with Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1). Nehemiah, a Jew, continued to serve Artaxerxes as his cupbearer, a position of honor and prominence. One day, Nehemiah asked Hanani about the Jews that had returned to Jerusalem; Hanani was a Jew who had returned from Jerusalem. Hanani told him that they were in great distress, and the wall of Jerusalem was still broken down.

When Nehemiah heard the news, he was very upset, weeping and mourning for many days. During that time, however, he was also fasting and praying to God (Nehemiah was one who prayed often and earnestly). Nehemiah confessed to God that the children of Israel (including himself) had sinned greatly against Him. He admitted that they had not kept the commandments of the Law of Moses. However, Nehemiah asked God to remember the commandment He had given Moses concerning those who would repent (compare Nehemiah 1:8-9 with Deuteronomy 30:1-5). Nehemiah prayed to ask God to honor his prayer by granting him mercy and favor in the sight of the king.

A short time later, as Nehemiah was performing his duties as cupbearer before King Artaxerxes, the king noticed that Nehemiah was looking sad. Nehemiah was terrified because it was against the law to show personal grief in front of the king. Nehemiah confessed that he was upset because of the condition of Jerusalem. The king asked Nehemiah what he wanted to be done. Nehemiah took a moment to pray to God before giving his answer. He then requested that he be sent to Judah to lead an effort to rebuild the city.

Artaxerxes was pleased to send Nehemiah, and he made provisions to aid Nehemiah (letters to permit him to pass through various regions and materials to aid in the reconstruction). Nehemiah recognized that this favor was due to the good hand of the Lord being upon him. Nehemiah was then escorted to Jerusalem by the king's captains and horsemen. After assessing the city and the wall, Nehemiah assembled the Jews and explained how God and the king had shown favor to him in his desire to rebuild the wall. When the people heard what Nehemiah had to say, they were eager to build, and they immediately set about to do the work.

Though he had been granted permission by the king, there were three men (Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab) that were very upset that someone had come to help the Jews. Most likely, these men and their people had prospered during the absence of the Jews, and they were not eager to see them return to prominence. These men laughed at the Jews and made fun of them, questioning them if they had decided to rebel against the king (compare to the events in Ezra 4). Nehemiah told the scoffers that the Lord was prospering the Jews, His servants, but that they had no share or claim to the city whatsoever.

Nehemiah divided the task of reconstructing the wall among the families of the Jews in Jerusalem. Each group was responsible for repairing a part of the wall, or a gate, or both. Nehemiah 3 lists the assignments that were given to each of the groups, and it contains several interesting details regarding the workers. For example, even though the nobles of the Tekoites did not help with the reconstruction, that did not deter the rest of them from completing not just one section, but two (Nehemiah 3:5, 27). Even the women were contributing to this effort (3:12). Those of all different vocations were involved (3:8). They all worked together to complete the job.

Lessons/Applications:

- 1.) Wherever we find ourselves, we must remember the importance and power of prayer (James 5:16).
- 2.) There are those who oppose our obedience to God, but God will be victorious (Romans 8:28-31).
- 3.) When all of God's people are working together to contribute, we fulfill God's plan (Ephesians 4:1-16).