

Lesson 1: DISCOVERING OUR KINGDOM ASSIGNMENT

Focal text: Nehemiah 1:1-3, 11

Background: Ezra 1:1-5

MAIN IDEA: God has a kingdom plan for all of us just as He did for Ezra and Nehemiah.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE: How was Nehemiah prepared to lead when God gave him the opportunity?

QUICK READ: God was leading His people to come out of one of the darkest moments in their history using Ezra and Nehemiah to lead them.

INTRODUCTION

Nehemiah frequently sparks conversation about leadership. The book is used as a springboard to discuss conflict resolution and strategic vision. There is no doubt that Nehemiah provides a case study on the art of leading people and overcoming obstacles. Yet, upon closer inspection, Nehemiah first desired to be a servant of God. The noun “servant” is repeated throughout chapter one (verses 6, 7, 8, 10, 11). Nehemiah’s goal was not to build his own kingdom but serve in the Kingdom of God. The rock-and-roll poet, Bob Dylan, said, “It may be the Devil or it may be the Lord; But you're gonna have to serve somebody.” Jesus provided the ultimate model of servanthood, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).”

The world needs more people willing to be kingdom servants. Nicolas Herman lived some 300 years ago as a Christian layman in a French monastery. Herman was just the guy in the kitchen who prepared meals for clergy. He walked with a limp from injuries sustained as a soldier. His disability eventually became such a burden he was switched from the kitchen to repairing sandals. The world has long forgotten the hundreds of clergymen who lived at the Paris monastery, the ones whose stomachs and feet Nicolas Herman served. Yet, Herman is gratefully remembered as Brother Lawrence. After his death, fifteen of his letters and conversation recollections were gathered and published under the title "The Practice of the Presence of God." In that work, Brother Lawrence said, "I have been serving God simply, in humility and faith.

Out of love, I try not to say, do, or think anything that might offend Him. My only request is that He do whatever He pleases with me."¹

Like Brother Lawrence, Nehemiah both served God and kept a written record. In chapter one, Nehemiah received a devastating report on the condition of the walls in Jerusalem. Nehemiah's subsequent recorded prayer revealed his concern for the condition of the wall but also his greater concern for the spiritual condition of God's people.

Servants in the Kingdom of God must seek God and serve people.

Bible Context and Background

The Old Testament is the story of the people of God. God called Abraham and delivered the promise to make Abraham's family into a great nation which would bless the nations of the world (Genesis 12).

Abraham's descendants, known as Israel, functioned as loosely connected tribes. When the people rejected God and insisted upon a king (1 Samuel 8) – the loosely connected tribes became a United Kingdom (1 Samuel 9, 10). They were ruled by kings Saul, David, and Solomon until things fell apart. Upon the death of Solomon, civil war caused a division which ripped the United Kingdom in two – the northern kingdom referred to as Israel and the southern kingdom known as Judah (1 Kings 11). The two kingdoms were marked by idolatry and disobedience. God sent prophet after prophet to warn the people of the danger of sin and call the people to return to faithfulness. However, the people did not listen and therefore reaped the consequences.

In 722 BC, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians rounded up the best and brightest of the northern kingdom and sent them into exile. The southern kingdom experienced a similar fate in 587 BC as the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and sent people into exile as well.

The prophet Jeremiah told how God, the one who is always faithful, would bring the people of the southern kingdom home:

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place (Jeremiah 29:10).”

In God's timing, the decree of Cyrus allowed exiles to return home to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild. This back story is the context of Nehemiah.

¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 37.

COMMENTARY

Immediate Background (Ezra 1:1-5)

Ezra 1 sets the stage for the drama of Nehemiah. The events of Ezra 1 are presented as a direct fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah: “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia (Ezra 1:1).” God fulfilled His promise spoken by Jeremiah by moving the heart of Cyrus. In typical Old Testament form, Ezra ascribed the political activities of Cyrus as work of the Lord. The Lord is not only the God of Israel, but He's God of the entire world. The hand of God Almighty was at work to demonstrate His power, character, and love for His people. God can use exile *and* foreign rulers to draw people to Himself.

The people of God were given permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Cyrus made a proclamation throughout the realm which stated, “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah (Ezra 1:1).” An official written document was given as proof of the proclamation. It is likely the document was written in Aramaic, the language of diplomacy in the Persian empire (Also see Ezra 6:3–5).

The rebuilding of the Temple was a major event in the story of God’s people. With the Temple rebuilt, the sacrificial system could be reinstituted and “the promises of God to bless and bring blessing from Israel seemed possible again. All of these events moved the biblical story closer to its goal. The task of resettling and rebuilding was yet complete, but God would send others to direct that work.”²

Cyrus

King Cyrus reigned over Persia between 539-530 BC and is mentioned more than 30 times in the Bible. He proclaimed himself “king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth), son of Cambyses, great king, king

² Preben Vang and Terry Carter, *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End (Second Edition)* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2012), 194.

of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, of a family (which) always (exercised) kingship.”³

In the first year of his reign, Cyrus declared his intent to permit exiled Jews to return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Cyrus had the policy of allowing conquered peoples to worship their own gods and establish some semblance of autonomy as long as they paid taxes to the empire and remained loyal citizens. He encouraged people who had been uprooted from their homelands and religions to return home and reestablish the worship of their gods with the blessing of his government.⁴ Isaiah mentioned Cyrus’ commission to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple (Isaiah 44:28). In Isaiah 45 Cyrus is described as the Lord’s “anointed” who would subdue nations and open the gates of Babylon. When the exiles faced opposition to the rebuilding work, they reminded their opposition that King Cyrus had given them permission to rebuild (Ezra 5:13-17; 6:1-13).

God used a pagan king to help the people of God, fulfill the prophecy of God, and do the work of God. Nothing and no one is beyond the mighty hand of God. Kingdom work cannot be thwarted.

Compassion for his People (Nehemiah 1:1-3)

The book of Nehemiah begins by alerting the reader that what follows will be “the word of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah (Nehemiah 1:1).” “Nehemiah” means “The LORD comforts.” The words from Nehemiah’s pen reveal how the LORD comforts His people in times of great desperation and need. Nehemiah 1-7 and 12:31-13:31 are written as journal entries. With each entry, the reader is given greater insight to the character of Nehemiah and the character of God. All of God’s people would benefit from keeping a written record of answered prayer and mighty works of God.

The events of Nehemiah begin in “the month of Kislev,” which spans parts of November-December. Although no king’s names are given here, it has been assumed that Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in the “the twentieth year” of Artaxerxes I (465-425 BC). This assumption is confirmed by a letter found among the Elephantine papyri dated 408 BC.⁵ This leads scholars to believe that the events of Nehemiah began in 445 BC. The book begins with Nehemiah in

³ James B Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton University Press; rev. ed., 1955) as quoted in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible A-D Volume 1* (Abingdon Press NY, 1962), 755.

⁴ TJ Betts, *Nehemiah: A Pastoral and Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 6.

⁵ Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 182.

“Susa,” the king of Persia’s winter residence. The events of Esther, and the vision of Daniel 8, also took place in Susa.

Nehemiah questioned “Hanani, one of my brothers” and “other men” about the “Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:2).” “Hanani” is likely Nehemiah’s biological brother in light of the reference to “my brother” in 7:2 when Hanani is appointed to a high office. “Jewish remnant” is a reference to the exiles who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra.

Nehemiah’s questions about the remnant in Jerusalem displayed his concern for his people. Our desire to be a servant begins with humility before God and moves to compassion toward people. Our kingdom assignment is often discovered when our God-given gifts meet our God-given burden. Frederick Buechner said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s hunger meet.”⁶

The report Nehemiah received was grim. The people were reported to be “in great trouble and disgrace” and the wall of Jerusalem was “broken down (Nehemiah 1:3).” Nehemiah’s shock gives indication that the reference to broken walls is not the result of destruction by the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC but to damage done to the rebuilt walls referenced in Ezra 4:12. The people of God have experienced another setback. Setbacks often lead us to stress, worry, and complaints. This report led Nehemiah to prayer.

Prayer to his God (Nehemiah 1:11)

Nehemiah was confident he could help his people and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Yet, he was wise enough to know that it was impossible without God. He pled for God’s intervention. He asked God to grant him favor with the king of Persia.

He prayed, “Let your ears be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name (Nehemiah 1:11).” Nehemiah made no demands. Rather, he approached the God of Heaven in humility and submission. He presented himself as a servant who sought God’s will and honored God’s name.

Prayer is an intimate conversation between God and His people which leads His people to the will of God.⁷ It is intimate because in prayer we speak to the God who created us, sustains us, redeems us, and knows us better than we know ourselves. It is a conversation because prayer is

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1993), 118-119.

⁷ Definition crafted by the author.

designed to be two-sided. We speak to God and God speaks to us. Ultimately, this intimate conversation leads us to God's will. Nehemiah prayed in order that he might do the will of God. He desired to help the condition of the Jerusalem walls and the spiritual condition of God's people. He needed God's help. He needed a kingdom assignment.

The Old Testament is filled with call stories. Noah was called to build an ark (Genesis 6). Abraham was called to father a great nation (Genesis 12). Moses was called to lead God's people out of Egypt (Exodus 3). Samuel was called out of a deep sleep (1 Samuel 3). Jonah was called to preach to Nineveh (Jonah 1). God has a long and storied history of calling specific people at specific times for specific purposes. God still calls today.

In the New Testament, Paul was called to be an apostle (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1). He was adamant that every follower of Jesus Christ is gifted for some form of service (See Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11). God often accomplishes His will through the calling and gifting of His people.

How do we discern God's plan for our lives?

- **Seek God above all else:** Before we seek the opinion or approval of man, we seek God Almighty. He is our Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Redeemer. We must trust in his character and stand upon his promises. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33).
- **Study the word of God:** The more we know the Bible, the more we know the character of God and His will. The word of God is central to the story of Nehemiah and Ezra. Ezra read from the Book of the Law "day after day" (Nehemiah 8:18). The word of God renews minds and breaks patterns of this world (Romans 12:1-2).
- **Pray and pray some more:** We are to bear our hearts before God. Allow Him to comfort and convict. Allow Him to rebuke and correct. Allow Him to course correct and lead you along His path. Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
- **Don't settle on a predetermined outcome:** Many approach God with a predetermined outcome in mind. Many will create a plan and then ask God to bless it. Such an approach will leave us stubborn and lead us astray. If you want God to give you wisdom, you must be content with praying, "Your will be done – not mine" (Matthew 6:10 and Luke 22:42).
- **Identify gifts:** In many situations, having a grasp on your personal spiritual gifts can be a tremendous help. If God has gifted you to serve in a particular way, use that gift with joy. If God has called you to preach, a decision that leads you away from preaching must

come with a very clear reason. Put your gifts to work as an act of worship (Romans 12:3-8).

- **Community:** God works through Christian community. Walk through life side-by-side with mature followers of Christ. Allow them to support you and encourage you. Allow them to challenge you unto deeper faith and obedience. If a decision is being weighed, take it before Godly counsel. Allow the message of Christ dwell among you and teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16).
- **Persevere:** Once you've been given a kingdom assignment, keep moving forward. Don't allow weariness or opposition function as a roadblock. Opposition will become a major theme in Nehemiah. Fix your eyes on Jesus who provided an example of facing opposition without growing weary and losing heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Kingdom Cupbearer

Nehemiah 1 ends with the note, "I was cupbearer to the king (Nehemiah 1:11)." It was the task of the cupbearer to taste the king's wine to ensure it was free from poison. Obviously, this was an important role and one which required an enormous level of trust. It was a position of honor and influence. The cupbearer was intimately associated with king's household, which usually required the cupbearer to be eunuch. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, eunuchs were excluded from the "assembly of the Lord." Yet, Isaiah 56:3-5 provides evidence that this restriction might have been abandoned by Nehemiah's day.

Before giving the note that he served as cupbearer, Nehemiah prayed, "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." Nehemiah needed the king's permission to help with the rebuilding of the wall. While Nehemiah had the ear of the king of Persia, he more importantly had the ear of the King of Heaven. While earthy kings carry power, they cannot compare to God Almighty. Before he spoke to an earthy king, Nehemiah spoke to the King of Kings.

CONCLUSION

Fanny Crosby was born in 1820 and became blind at six weeks old. Her father died when she was six months old. She was raised by her mother, Mercy, and her grandmother, Eunice. As Fanny grew, Eunice described the world to her and introduced the Bible.

In 1828, Mercy and Fanny moved to the home of a Mrs. Hawley. Mrs. Hawley encouraged Fanny to memorize Scripture. Moved by the biblical language, Fanny began to write and recite poems. She believed God had given her a gift and a call upon her life.

At the age of 14, Fanny enrolled at the New York Institution for the Blind in 1835. She spent eight years as a student and remained another two years as a graduate pupil. In those ten years, she learned to play the piano, organ, harp, guitar, and developed her singing voice. By the time of her death, through the gifting and calling of God, Fanny Crosby composed more than 8,000 hymns. Her hymns, still sung today, include “To God Be the Glory,” “Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It,” and “Blessed Assurance.” Like Nehemiah, Crosby had a kingdom assignment.