

GC2 Press® Premium Commentary for Kingdom Assignment: The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience (A Study of Nehemiah) By Dr. Jeff Gravens, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Sulphur Springs, Texas

Lesson 3: ARISE AND BUILD!

Focal text: Nehemiah 2:11-20

Background: Nehemiah 2:1-20

MAIN IDEA: When God called Nehemiah to rebuild the wall, He also provided resources to accomplish this task. Nehemiah developed a plan and called on the people to stand with him and rebuild the wall.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE: What do we learn from the leadership of Nehemiah as he confronted the king, his adversaries, investigated the need, and challenged the people?

QUICK READ: Nehemiah was prepared when he stood before the king, addressed his critics, investigated the problem and challenged the people.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Dr. Curt Cutrell was in Colorado for a Community Bible Study (CBS)¹ leadership conference. He walked into a room and saw several CBS studies in Spanish. Dr. Cutrell said, “Somebody needs to take these to Nicaragua.” Through the First Baptist Church of Sulphur Springs, Texas, Dr. Cutrell had done medical missions in Nicaragua for nearly two decades. Standing before these studies in Spanish, he said once again, “Somebody needs to take these to Nicaragua.” Upon repeating the phrase for the third time in an effort for someone to hear him, Dr. Cutrell is convinced that God impressed upon him, “Well, you’re the only one in the room.”

This began Dr. Cutrell laying the groundwork for getting CBS into Nicaragua. The CBS study of Nehemiah titled, “If You Will Pray” was launched in a rundown church building with four people in Ocotal, Nicaragua. The dilapidated church building gave access for donkeys to walk through the sanctuary and interrupt the lessons. Yet, more people came each week and encountered God through study of the Nehemiah. When the study concluded, the church of four people had grown to 36 people and the people rallied together to repair the church walls.

There are now roughly 2,000 people studying the Bible through CBS in Nicaragua. It began with Dr. Cutrell’s burden for the people. It’s a true modern day Nehemiah story.

¹ communitybiblestudy.org

In Nehemiah 2, the work to restore the wall began. Nehemiah, due to his kingdom assignment, stood before the king, addressed critics, assessed the task, and began to lead the people.

Kingdom assignment sadness (Nehemiah 2:1-2)

In Nehemiah 1:11, Nehemiah prayed that the Lord would grant him success “today” in the presence of the king. At the beginning of Nehemiah 2, the story has moved to “the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.” While Nehemiah wanted success “today,” he saw 180 days pass. Psalm 40:1 says, “I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.” We all know that patience is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Nehemiah had spent time in prayer and preparation for his kingdom assignment. When the moment arrived, he was ready.

JI Packer framed the 180 days as a test of Nehemiah’s faith:

For how many days did Nehemiah have to pray, “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man”? Nehemiah tells us by the dates he records. In 1:1 we learn that the bad news from Jerusalem came in the month Kislev. In 2:1 we hear that his prayer was answered in the month of Nisan. From Kislev (November-December) to Nisan (March-April) is over a hundred days, more than three months, perhaps more than four. For at least three months, then, Nehemiah and his friends waited on God, asking each day that God would act today – and nothing happened: nothing, at least, of what they were hoping to see. But something was happening, nonetheless. God was testing their faith, and they were passing the test, it would seem, with flying colors.²

The size of the task weighed heavy upon Nehemiah. Yet, he still functioned in his role as cupbearer. Nehemiah was able to keep his emotion hidden until his sadness broke through for the king to see.

This sadness peaked the king’s curiosity. He asked Nehemiah “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart (Nehemiah 2:2).” More could have been at play than the king checking on Nehemiah’s physical or emotional health. “Sadness of heart” can also mean bad or evil heart.³ The king might have interpreted Nehemiah’s sadness

² JI Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom From the Book of Nehemiah* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), 62.

³ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (The New American Commentary)* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 199), 175.

as a signal of bad motives. This is likely why the king's question made Nehemiah afraid (Nehemiah 2:3).

The acknowledgement of fear revealed Nehemiah's humanity. It is easy to preach Nehemiah as a super-hero with no faults or weakness. Yet, this note of Nehemiah's fear allows readers to picture him with shaky hands and sweat upon his brow. We are more like Nehemiah than we thought at first glance. His strength came from the Lord, not from superpowers. We see this same spiritual principle in the New Testament:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us (2 Corinthians 4:7).

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Kingdom Assignment Request (2:3-5)

In response to the king's question, Nehemiah proclaimed, "May the king live forever (Nehemiah 2:3)." This same phrase is used in Daniel 2:4. Rather than denying any bad motives, Nehemiah answered clearly, but shrewdly. As Jesus said, "Be shrewd as a serpent, but innocent as a dove" (Matthew 10:16)."

Nehemiah passed along the report he received about Jerusalem to the king. He relayed the news of ruins, destroyed gates, and described Jerusalem as the place where "my ancestors are buried (Nehemiah 2:3)." This was a deeply personal matter, but it was also a matter which would have been an interest to the king. Ancient Near Eastern kings are known to have had a special interest in the perseveration of ancestral tombs. With this answer, Nehemiah maximized the personal element and minimized the political element.⁴

The king was moved by Nehemiah's burden and testimony. He asked Nehemiah in response, "What is it you want (Nehemiah 2:4)?" Before responding, Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven. Such an act of dependence upon God is not for show but a demonstration of Nehemiah's constant communication with God. His quick prayer was to the King of Kings in the presence of

⁴ Douglas Nykolaishen and Andrew Schmutzer, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther (Teach the Text Commentary Series)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 111.

the king of Persia. Nehemiah was well-aware of who had the power and whom he sought to please.

Nehemiah's prayer was short and likely the result of a well-developed spiritual habit. The Bible records many prayers and exhortations to pray, but the length of prayers is never prescribed. Yet, there is a precedent for short prayers. The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 provides an example of brevity. It also has a preamble which warns against heaping up empty words. Paul's letters contain short prayers (See Philippians 1:9-11 or Ephesians 3:14-21). Elijah provided a brief prayer in 1 Kings 18:36-37. Even Nehemiah's earlier prayer is short (Nehemiah 1:5-11). Short prayers seem to be the fruit of the Biblical exhortation to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Kingdom Assignment Provision (Nehemiah 2:6-10)

The king inquired how much time Nehemiah needed for the task: "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back (Nehemiah 2:6)?" The reader is not given Nehemiah's response. We are simply told, "It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time (Nehemiah 2:6)." Yet, Nehemiah 5:14 provides the details that Nehemiah spent 12 years as governor of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah requested letters from the king for safe travel and timber for the work. The king granted the request, but Nehemiah saw this as the product of God's gracious hand upon him: "And because the gracious hand of my God was on me. The king granted my requests (Nehemiah 2:8)." The language used here is also found in Ezra 7:6, 9 and Ezra 8:18. Nehemiah did not take credit for himself or give credit to the king. Rather, he gave glory to God.

Verse 10 introduces the reader to Sanballot and Tobiah who are "disturbed that some had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." These two will play bigger roles as drama unfolds. Most good stories involve antagonists. Nehemiah is a good story indeed.

Restful Clarity (Nehemiah 2:11-12)

Nehemiah headed into Jerusalem after staying there three days. He followed Ezra's example of rest detailed in Ezra 8:32. Jesus was also an advocate for rest, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest (Mark 6:31)." After four months of prayer and preparation, Nehemiah sought restful clarity for his kingdom assignment.

In verse 12, Nehemiah said, “I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.” This is not a pop culture message “go with your heart” or “do what makes your heart happy.” Afterall, the Bible says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9).” Nehemiah arrived at this plan through four months of weeping, fasting, and praying. He had confessed sin, prayed the promises of Scripture, and worshiped the God of Heaven. God, in turn, placed this kingdom assignment upon Nehemiah’s heart. Gordon McDonald, highlighting the work done to the foundation towers of the Brooklyn Bridge, said of leadership preparation,

The work done below the waterline (in a leader’s soul) that determines where he or she will stand the test of time and challenge. This work is called worship, devotion, spiritual discipline. It’s done in quiet, where no one but God sees.⁵

Nehemiah stepped into a task which was difficult and dangerous. He did this not to make his heart happy, but to please God Almighty.

Surveying the Assignment (Nehemiah 2:13-16)

Nehemiah took a nighttime tour of the walls to assess the situation. He went out with only his mount, likely a donkey or mule. He desired to be undetected. This section provides the names of gates and other locations. These details make the kingdom assignment very specific. The task is not abstract. The work is to be done among specific people and in a specific place.

Valley Gate: Chief gate in the western wall overlooking Tyropoeon Valley.

Jackal Well: May have been on the east side of the Tyropoeon Valley and west or east of the wall.

Dung Gate: South end of the city where the Tyropoeon and Hianom Valley meet. It is usually equated to the Potsherd Gate of Jeremiah 19:2.

Fountain Gate: East near the south end of the city.

King’s pool: Considered to be at or near what was later known as the pool of Siloam. Most likely it was a receiving pool for the overflow of the Pool of Siloam. Archaeologist

⁵ Gordon McDonald, *Building Below the Waterline: Shoring up the Foundations of Leadership* (Peabody, MA Hendrickson), 1.

have found much debris and large stones here. Nehemiah decided to build not where the former wall was located but further up near the crest of the hill.⁶

With a nighttime tour, Nehemiah moved from secondhand information to eyewitness testimony. The information he received was accurate: Jerusalem was in ruins. His thorough assessment allowed him to prepare for the work laid upon his heart.

Recruiting Help for the Assignment (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

Nehemiah prayed and assessed the assignment before putting his plans on a billboard for all to see. In the proper time, he shared the plan. Nehemiah's plea for workers provides a masterclass in volunteer recruitment. Nehemiah's recruitment effort can be broken down as follows:

Assessment: He provided an honest and direct assessment of the situation. Jerusalem was in ruins. The gates were burned with fire. He did not sugarcoat the situation.

Call to action: He called the people, "Come let us rebuild ... we will no longer be in disgrace." Notice that Nehemiah included himself in the task with "we" language. A leader is a servant, not an outside observer, one who is in the trenches.

Testimony: He gave testimony of the "gracious hand of God." This was a big task in service to a bigger God.

The people replied, "Let us start rebuilding (2:18)." The united and eager response of the people was evident. Nehemiah likely saw this as further confirmation of his kingdom assignment.

Addressing Opposition (Nehemiah 2:19-20)

A hint of opposition appeared in verse 10, "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." That opposition became a reality in verse 19, "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. 'What is this you are doing?' they asked. 'Are you rebelling against the king?'"

⁶ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (The New American Commentary)* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 181.

First, the opposition criticized the efforts of the workers. They mocked and ridiculed them (verse 19). The book of James 3:3-6 speaks of the power of the tongue,

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Sanballat and Tobiah used their tongue to criticize the workers and attempt to halt the kingdom assignment.

Second, the opposition questioned the motives of the workers. They asked “What is this you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” These allegations posed a great threat to the work and the workers. Ezra 4:12-16 details how the previous attempt to rebuild the walls was halted by accusations of political disloyalty.

Nehemiah was not deterred. He answered the opposition, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it (Nehemiah 2:20).” The opposition was no match for the God of heaven. Nehemiah knew that the success of the work would be due to the mighty and gracious hand of God.

A word of caution regarding opposition is needed. First, opposition is not a barometer for wrong or right. You can be wrong – and face opposition because you're wrong. You can be right – and face opposition because you're right. One must genuinely seek God. Arriving at God's will provides confidence. Second, God's work does not always lead to earthly success. As we'll see, Nehemiah will be successful at the rebuilding of the walls, but that does not mean earthly success is guaranteed for those doing God's will. Look no further than the original disciples who were persecuted and died a martyr's death. Of course, one can also look to the cross, upon which Jesus, the very Son of God, was opposed unto death (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Kingdom assignments will be opposed. Thus, kingdom servant should expect opposition.

Conclusion

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The critical moment of every good work is the point of challenge and opposition. Kingdom assignments can expect sabotage:

Sabotage is normal. Acts of sabotage are not the bad things that evil people do to stop good being done in the world. Acts of sabotage are the human things that anxious people do because they fear they are losing what little good is left in the world. Sabotage happens every time a leader takes initiative to start a change process.⁷

In my nearly 20 years of pastoral ministry, I've seen many anxious people sabotage kingdom assignments. It begins with questions, moves towards rallying support, and culminates in deliberate obstruction. Leaders will always be tested. It is the task of the spiritual leader, to ensure they are seeking to accomplish a kingdom assignment.

Nehemiah initiated change and was met with opposition. This will be a theme repeated throughout his memoirs. Yet, Nehemiah remained steadfast. He was confident that he was doing the work of God.

⁷ Tod Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 24.