



Unit .18

Session .02

God Protects His People Through a Cupbearer

Scripture



Nehemiah 1:1-4; 2:11-18; 4:11-14

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the fortress city of Susa, **2** Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah, and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile. **3** They said to me, “The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem’s wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned.” **4** When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens. ... **11** After I arrived in Jerusalem and had been there three days, **12** I got up at night and took a few men with me. I didn’t tell anyone what my God had laid on my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the one I was riding. **13** I went out at night through the Valley Gate toward the Serpent’s Well and the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. **14** I went on to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but farther down it became too narrow for my animal to go through. **15** So I went up at night by way of the valley and inspected the wall. Then heading

back, I entered through the Valley Gate and returned. **16** The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, for I had not yet told the Jews, priests, nobles, officials, or the rest of those who would be doing the work. **17** So I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned. Come, let’s rebuild Jerusalem’s wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace.” **18** I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me, and what the king had said to me. They said, “Let’s start rebuilding,” and their hands were strengthened to do this good work. ... **11** And our enemies said, “They won’t realize it until we’re among them and can kill them and stop the work.” **12** When the Jews who lived nearby arrived, they said to us time and again, “Everywhere you turn, they attack us.” **13** So I stationed people behind the lowest sections of the wall, at the vulnerable areas. I stationed them by families with their swords, spears, and bows. **14** After I made an inspection, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord, and fight for your countrymen, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes.”

Intro Options



Main Point:
**God calls us to
lead in the strength
He provides.**

Option 1

We often look back at personal experiences not just cognitively but emotionally. In fact, the deeper the emotion associated with a memory, the clearer the details become. An emotional moment in Nehemiah's life involved hearing distressing news from his homeland. God used this to awaken in his heart the desire to see the dignity and protection of his countrymen restored so God would be praised among His people and throughout the nations. Nehemiah's direction in life changed with this encounter, and he took the opportunity to work faithfully on behalf of God and His people.

▪ **What emotional experiences have changed everything for you?**

God is determined to protect and revive His people, and in His kindness, He raises up the right leaders at the right times for the tasks at hand. God used Nehemiah as a catalyst of courage, a man who was burdened, a cupbearer who knew he was called to do something beyond himself for the sake of others. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, providing protection and dignity to the people of God. In his story we see a framework for how God uses believers to protect, revive, restore, and build a people who believe in Jesus.

Option 2

Have you ever noticed that when life is going smoothly and everything seems safe and secure, it does not seem to occur to us to pray? Sometimes we like to think of ourselves as pretty self-sufficient. We like to believe we have it all under control. Perhaps this contributes to the lack of a solid prayer life.

However, throughout the Bible, prayer is mentioned as a primary and regular discipline in the Christian life. In fact, regular prayer could be noted as a testament of one's spiritual integrity. Prayer is a willful dependence on God for all things (Matt. 6:11-13). It is an attitude of the heart that says, "God, may your will be done above all things" (Matt. 6:10).

From the beginning, Nehemiah's story makes it clear that God's people were in trouble. Their situation was such that God had to intervene to accomplish His will. Because of their circumstances, they were totally dependent on God.

▪ **Why do you think it is the case that people most often run to God in prayer during the difficult times in life? Why is it important to pray during all seasons of life—when things are difficult and when things are calm?**

TEACHING PLAN

Read Nehemiah 1:1-4.



The news of Jerusalem's condition crushed Nehemiah. For days he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed to God. As his prayer records (vv. 5-11), Nehemiah knew that the trouble and distress of his people in Judah resulted from his people's unfaithfulness, both past and present. But notice that he didn't just charge out to change things; he petitioned the Lord, seeking His faithfulness and favor to carry out the restoration of his homeland. The plan to bring restoration wasn't just a good idea from a wise man but God's idea put into Nehemiah, anchored in the promises of God. The details of Nehemiah's prayer enlighten us for our own prayer times, but the fact that he prayed should challenge us too. We shouldn't move too quickly from the simple yet profound truth that Nehemiah was moved deeply and subsequently moved to pray.

A burden always moves people from feeling to action. Our standard grid for strategic action is ready, aim, fire. Nehemiah, however, went beyond that grid and followed a spiritual paradigm. His example teaches us that when our burdens come from God, it's imperative we go back to God for what's next. He didn't take random action or even humanly wise steps; instead, he turned to the heart of God in prayer for wisdom and favor to carry out what he was burdened by God to do.

- **Why is prayer the best next step once we have a burden to act for God's glory and the good of others?**

Nehemiah knew that if the walls of Jerusalem were to be rebuilt and the people of Judah restored, it would take more than him at the helm—it would take the hand of God. So he fasted and prayed day and night for many days (1:4,6). He didn't go to God one time and then go about his business; rather, he continually went to God as he was doing his business. He modeled a heart of dependence on and subsequent confidence in the Lord that showed up in how he lived and led.

Prayerless leaders will always lead in their own strength, but their own strength isn't good enough to accomplish God's plans. Thankfully, Nehemiah didn't live or lead that way; he gave us an example of a more excellent way, one that Jesus followed and modeled to perfection. The pathway of prayerfulness enriches God's people with God's power so they can accomplish His purposes.

- **What are some reasons people choose not to pray about their burdens and circumstances in life?**

Read Nehemiah 2:11-18.



After securing the favor of King Artaxerxes because God's gracious hand was on him, Nehemiah set off to do what God had laid on his heart to do (Neh. 2:1-10). The scene ended with the people united and strengthened for the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but in order to bring the people together, Nehemiah needed them to know what they were being brought together for.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God calls us to
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Nehemiah 1

1-3. At this point in their history, the Israelites had been delivered from their second exile in Babylon. However, the remnant that returned to Jerusalem and Judea needed the comfort of God's protection as they inhabited a city with broken down walls. Either the wall had not been rebuilt, or King Artaxerxes had foiled the attempt to rebuild it (Ezra 4:7-23).

Nehemiah cried out to God, well aware of His promise to preserve His people (Ezra 1:1-11). The people needed the protection of their faithful God because, as the passage tells us, they were in great trouble (1:4).

4. "Nehemiah weeps, mourns, and fasts before the God of heaven, appealing to the "great and awesome God," but to a God who is also a God of love who remembers those who love him and obey his commands (Deut. 10:12–21). His prayer includes: (1) a cry for God's ears to be attentive and his eyes open to what his servant has to say on behalf of the Judeans; (2) a confession of sin to God in intercession for his people who have acted wickedly and are in exile as a just punishment by God for their sins; (3) a call upon God to remember his promise to Moses that when Israel would, in exile, confess their sins and pledge themselves to obey his word, then he would bring them back to their homeland (Deut. 32:36–43); (4) a reminder to God that the remnant who had returned to the land are indeed his servants whom he has redeemed; and (5) a plea that God's ears be attentive to the prayer of his servant as well as the prayers of all those who delight to honor his name. Nehemiah also asks God for success in the presence of Artaxerxes."¹

Nehemiah 2

18. What had been a faint aspiration in their hearts was stirred by a new vision of what God could do with them based on what He had already been doing. Nehemiah connected the people and their work to a transcendent reality that spoke to their hearts—their great God and a great mission. This allowed the strength of God to flow into them, encouraging them for the work and the trials ahead.



99 Essential Doctrines (p. 88, DDG)

Body of Christ

The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ's representative here on earth, with Christ as its head (Col. 1:18). This means that the church is an extension of Christ's ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). In addition, the picture of the church as the body of Christ shows us the interconnectedness of individual Christians, with each member dependent upon one another for growth and sanctification (1 Cor. 12).

TEACHING PLAN

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he didn't immediately tell the people why he was there or what the plans of his heart were. Instead, he surveyed the work in front of them, assessing the condition of the walls and gates. His account of the survey revealed him to be a man of intentionality and precise planning, even advanced planning, as he had requested material aid from King Artaxerxes prior to his departure for the rebuilding project. Nehemiah's foresight and focus were evident, and these were used to unify the people for the work.


After his assessment, Nehemiah communicated the burden of his heart with integrity and passion, inviting the residents of the city to do what seemed impossible but was absolutely necessary. Many factors contributed to the unity that followed, but an undeniable one was the presence of clarity regarding both the situation and the plan. In order to bring people together, you, and they, have to know what you're bringing them together for.


In order to strengthen people for their God-given work, you have to connect their strength and work to something beyond themselves—to God and His mission. We see this in Nehemiah. His clear communication and call to action was more than a marketing ploy or a tug on the heartstrings; he firmly believed in a greater reality and connected the people to it, to the very heart and mission of God. He gave the residents of Jerusalem an honest assessment of the state of the city and then He told them how God's hand had been on him in his interaction with the king. Now he invited them to share in the story of what God was doing in and through him. Hearing Nehemiah's testimony, the people were roused, strengthened, and ready to work.

- **What are some ways your strength and work as a student are connected to God and His gospel mission?**

Read Nehemiah 4:11-14.



In the strength of God, the people of Jerusalem took up their tools and began rebuilding the walls and gates (Neh. 3). Great progress was being made, but along with their progress came an escalation in mockery and threats (4:1-12). Enemies mobilized to attack the Jews living nearby and the people working on the walls. 

The workers faced real discouragement and danger. As a godly leader, Nehemiah's response wasn't to ignore their fears or concerns; rather, he protected them strategically and encouraged them deeply. Nehemiah stationed armed people at the vulnerable parts of the wall to protect the inhabitants of the city. He also split the work force in half so people could continue working on the wall while surrounded by an armed guard. The goal of this strategic plan of protection was to help alleviate some of the fears that would empty the workers of their courage. 

- **How have you been encouraged by remembering the great and awe-inspiring Lord?**

Nehemiah was sure of God's protection and provision in this task. He called the people not to be afraid but to remember their God, how great and awesome He is, and to fight for the stake of their families and homes. Nehemiah's trust was founded on his knowledge of God, who would fight for them, just as He had done in generations past (4:14,20).

- **What are the "wise" aspects you see in Nehemiah's response to the opposition he faced? What would have been an unwise response?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
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Nehemiah 4

7-14. The initial request to rebuild the city was endorsed by the king, and carried out under his protection and support. But would they achieve this ambitious plan? In this section of Scripture, the likelihood of achieving their goal became grim, at least by human standards.

God's people were confronted with additional difficulties. First, God's people were despised by Sanballat and his associates—the men who were set on stopping God's people from building the wall.

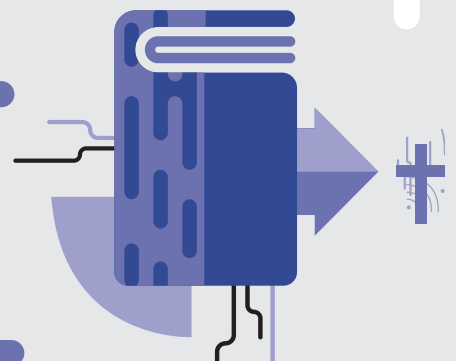
Second, the foundations of the wall were in ruins. God's enemies mocked the Israelites, pointing out that the wall's foundations were rubbish, and a mere fox could knock down their feeble work. By all human standards, the possibility of achieving their goal did not look good.

The primary reason Sanballat and his associates were so adamant about stopping this work was because they were seeking their own good at the expense of God's people. Once the walls were built and God's people could begin living under His law with one another, it would be very hard for the enemies of God to exploit the Israelites.

The good news was that while the enemies of God's people plotted together to stop their task (4:8), God's people stood confident in the face of conflict. The Israelites armed themselves with prayer and persevered in obedience. Simply put, in the face of opposition, God's people guarded one another and continued building the wall.

(p. 90, DDG) Christ Connection

Nehemiah led the people to join together to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem and protect the city from their enemies, but that protection was not permanent. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He made a way for His people to be protected from the enemies of sin and death forever.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



What does this account in Nehemiah teach us about God's character?

What are some ways the story of Nehemiah points to Jesus?

Heart



What is the difference between humble confidence in God and confidence in ourselves?

Why is confidence in God more helpful and satisfying than confidence in self?

Hands



How does this story challenge the perception that Christianity is merely a set of beliefs to be held and not a life to be lived?

How does this story encourage us with the truth that God is with us as we seek to live out our Christian beliefs?

Main Point: God calls us to lead in the strength He provides.



Head

The great and awe-inspiring Lord stirred the heart of Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem's walls for the dignity of his people and the glory of his God. The Lord also paved the way for Nehemiah to act on this burden of his heart. Nehemiah led courageously and strategically, and the people were successful, rebuilding the walls in fifty-two days, and all the glory went to the Lord (Neh. 6:15-16). Yet this leader and this work were temporary; Nehemiah would die and the walls would eventually fall once again because of sin. But Nehemiah and his walls were a shadow of a greater leader and protector to come. Jesus came with the burden of compassion for sinners and the determination to die on behalf of sinners to save them from sin and death. But He rose from the dead and now protects His people with His presence for all eternity. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39).



Heart

The courage that comes from knowing God is characterized by a solid, humble confidence and shouldn't be mistaken with bravado. It's very easy to pass off bravado as courage because they both express confidence, but bravado makes itself known in excessive boasting. Furthermore, bravado often serves to psych oneself up to overpower fear. Godly courage, however, overpowers fear in the heart with truth, not filling the heart with fickle or fleeting emotions.

Bravado, recklessness, and even an authentic human-level courage will only take you so far regarding the things of God because God regularly calls people to actions beyond their capacity. He does this so that our confidence cannot be grounded in ourselves but must be grounded in who God is. This is what we see God accomplishing through Nehemiah as he encouraged them to fight.



Hands

Nehemiah led the people to remember the God on their side, which would encourage the Jews to stand strong for those around them, for their countrymen and their families. Similarly, this is what it means to be the body of Christ. Jesus leads the church as its head, and as believers know and follow their great God and Savior, they fight for the wellbeing of their brothers and sisters in Christ, pursuing their holiness and encouraging them in the fight against sin. They also join together for the Great Commission, which is beyond any human ability to accomplish. Led and strengthened by the Spirit of Christ, Christians don't fight against their enemies but share the gospel with them to turn enemies into family members. Regardless of these overwhelming challenges before us, Jesus, our great leader, has promised to be with us, so let us overcome our fear and act with courage for the sake of the gospel.