

Nehemiah: The Captive Cupbearer Rebuilds a Nation

There was a Christian campus center here years ago," said Caitlynne.

"But was it actually on campus or near the campus?" asked J.D.

"What difference does it make? I heard it was just a house," objected Renell. "Besides, it will be too much work."

Caitlynne, a junior majoring in psychology, had shared her faith on campus regularly since she came to school as a freshman. There were students who were hurting and seeking God, while some Christians on campus wanted and needed encouragement and fellowship with other Christians.

Caitlynne learned that a Christian center had existed there about 15 years ago. She heard that a lack of interest had closed it down. However, now it seemed like misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and even a hostile environment were blocking efforts to create another one.

"I'm glad you all could make it today," Caitlynne said to a crowd of about 50. She had invited several Christian students and their parents, some local church leaders, a few university administrators, and two Christian attorneys to a meeting to discuss creating another Christian center.

"There will be time for various people to speak," continued Caitlynne. "However, I want to be clear: the Christians on this campus will not stop until we have a place to gather!"

"It may be a daunting task," she said, raising her voice over the applause, "but we will do it!"

1. When doing God's work for God's kingdom, why do we often face opposition?

2. Why is it important to keep building His kingdom despite opposition?

3. What Kingdom builder(s) have you admired most? Why?

LESSON FOCUS: Build God's kingdom in spite of opposition.

Nehemiah Takes a Scouting Trip

Nehemiah 2:11-16, KJV

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.

Nehemiah 2:11-16, NIV

¹¹I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹²I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Despite the authority and resources given him by King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah chose not to immediately exercise that authority upon his arrival in Jerusalem, nor even “[tell] anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem”

(vs. 12). After taking three days to regain his strength after the long trip from Persia, he scouted the walls of the city “during the night with a few others. . . . There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on” (vss. 11-12). It is likely that the purpose of this reconnaissance mission, taken with a few trusted colleagues (who probably came with him from the king’s palace), was not only to survey the damage but to try to accurately assess how much work needed to be done and what would be required to accomplish it. Before announcing his plan to reconstruct the walls, Nehemiah counted the cost—which, he quickly discovered, was a heavy one.

His scouting trip, with him riding a “mount” and his associates walking, took the group past several gates and landmarks of Jerusalem, starting from the west side of the city and moving counterclockwise (vss. 13-15). He now saw with his own eyes “the walls of Jerusalem . . . broken down, and its gates . . . destroyed by fire” (vs. 13). The walls had in fact been so devastated that Nehemiah’s mount could not get through the Fountain Gate; thus, he went through the Valley Gate, along the Kidron brook and into the valley of Jehoshaphat, examined the southern walls from there, then reentered the city through the same Valley Gate.

In verse 16, Nehemiah reiterated that during all of this he had said “nothing” to anyone else about his plans. Knowing the opposition he would encounter (vs. 10), Nehemiah decided not to draw attention to himself—nor give advance notice to the other Jewish leaders, or those he would employ to repair the walls—until he was ready to put his plan into action.

- 4.** *What did Nehemiah do after his arrival in Jerusalem?*
- 5.** *Where did Nehemiah go, and what did he see?*
- 6.** *Who else did Nehemiah tell about his mission at this time, and why?*

The Work, and the Opposition, Begins

Nehemiah 2:17-20, KJV

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.

Nehemiah 2:17-20, NIV

¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."¹⁸I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

¹⁹But 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?"

²⁰I answered them by saying, "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."

At last, Nehemiah came before the officials of Jerusalem. He reported to them the destruction that he had now seen firsthand, then announced his intent: "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace" (vs. 17). This "disgrace," of course, was not simply to do with the sad state they (and the walls) were in but the

genuine need to be protected from raids by people of the neighboring regions.

It is likely that the Jewish leaders had some trepidation about this plan, given the already established opposition from other influential leaders in Jerusalem (vs. 10). In addition, given that the walls had been in ruins for nearly 150 years, they likely just accepted their condition as “the way things are.” Thus, Nehemiah “also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me” (vs. 18). This was not just a great idea on Nehemiah’s part; both God and king were clearly with him in this venture. Thus, the leaders were convinced. “ ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work” (vs. 18).

However, their work was immediately challenged by the foreign-born officials in Jerusalem: Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab, who “mocked and ridiculed us,” not only questioning the work but accusing them of rebelling against the king (vs. 19).

Interestingly, Nehemiah doesn’t respond by citing his position with the king, nor the regal authority he had already been granted to do the work. His response is two-pronged: 1) It was God who had called them to this work; therefore, He who had authority over all kings would give them success. 2) Conversely, Nehemiah refuted the authority of these men: “you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it” (vs. 20).

This would lead to more heated confrontation and subterfuge from these officials as the work progressed, but in time, the God of heaven would indeed give Nehemiah and his people success.

7. *What did Nehemiah call the officials of Jerusalem to do? How did he persuade them?*

8. *What were the different responses to Nehemiah’s call in this passage?*

9. *How did Nehemiah respond to his opponents?*

Kingdom Building

Unlike Nehemiah, our Kingdom building often does not involve physically building something. Instead, when we build God's kingdom, we are helping bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus. As we say each time we repeat the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, KJV). One aspect of His kingdom coming is seeing it established here and now in the hearts of people who have committed to following Him and doing His will.

Like Nehemiah, we face opposition whenever we help advance the Kingdom. The apostle Paul told the new Thessalonian Christians that opposition would happen. They would be "counted worthy of the kingdom of God" because they were advancing it in spite of their "suffering" for it (2 Thess. 1:5). The key to their continuing to grow the Kingdom was their "perseverance and faith" (vs. 4) and "his power" (vs. 11) in them—the power of the Holy Spirit.

The world prefers that Christians stay in a box—a church building box—and not bother anyone outside that box. But that is not the mission of Christians and our churches. When we speak up or reach out, opposition will surface just as it did for Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 4 tells how the initial opposition of Nehemiah's enemies intensified, and at the crucial halfway point in the project it looked like it might fail (Neh. 4:6-12). However, Nehemiah and the laborers persevered, keeping one eye on their work and another on the opposition. That is a good strategy for us to follow as well. We can take courage in what Jesus said: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

10. *When have people ridiculed you for your faith?*

11. *In what ways are you and your church facing opposition right now?*

12. *How can reading about what Nehemiah did help us with the opposition we face?*

Let's Build

Nehemiah shows us that many impossible things are possible when people see that God is in their work and blessing it. With the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, we can, as the old hymn says, help “Christ’s great kingdom [to] come on earth, the kingdom of love and light.”

► *On a strip of paper, write one thing you believe you or your church could be doing now to help advance the Kingdom. Tape that strip on one of the blocks you used at the beginning of class, and put your block on top of other’s blocks as a symbol of your helping build God’s kingdom in your community.*

KEY VERSE

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. —Nehemiah 2:17, KJV

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” —Nehemiah 2:17, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

Week of April 19 through April 25

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Psalm 111—Praise for God’s Wonderful Works.
- Tues.** Zechariah 8:18-23—God’s Blessings Intended for All.
- Wed.** Psalm 102:12-22—The Lord, Our Sovereign.
- Thurs.** Psalm 79—Plea for Mercy for Jerusalem.
- Fri.** Jeremiah 9:17-22—Mourn the Destruction of Zion.
- Sat.** Lamentations 3:22-33—God’s Mercy and Love Never End.
- Sun.** Lamentations 5:1-22—Remember and Restore Us.