



This Week: “Nehemiah – A Master Builder”
Nehemiah 4

Nehemiah - A Master Builder

The biblical character Nehemiah, which means “comforted of Yah” or “God comforts,” first appears in God’s Story in the book that is his namesake, the 16th of the 39 books of the Old Testament. The year is either 446 or 445 BC and the setting is in the finely appointed court of the King of Persia,

Artaxerxes, in the 20th year of his reign over the most powerful kingdom on earth at the time. Nehemiah, a Jewish exile from Jerusalem, is living a fairly plush life in the Shushan palace of the king at the capital city of Susa, which lay 150 miles east of the Tigris River in what is now modern Iran. Nehemiah was not only a trusted adviser and counselor to the king, but also was his cup-bearer, whose dubious distinction it was to taste the king’s wine to make sure it was not poisoned. As it was, his position as cup-bearer permitted him daily and intimate access to the king, a perk that Nehemiah took advantage of later on in the story of this patient, courageous and compassionate bible hero who turned out to truly become a Master Builder.

Early in Nehemiah’s tenure as cup-bearer, his brother Hanani delivered disturbing news about the lamentable conditions of the Jewish people who years earlier had been allowed to return to Jerusalem after their exile as well as the sad news that the gates and walls of Jerusalem were not functional and broken down. Greatly distressed, Nehemiah sought God’s will through fasting and prayer to determine what steps he should take to help rectify the deplorable conditions of his countrymen. He realized the urgency of the situation and prayerfully requested, “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man,” the king. His prayer, which encompasses the entirety of the first chapter of Nehemiah, is an example of humility and genuine faith in the mercy and power of God to intervene on his behalf.

However, it was four months before his prayer was answered with an opportunity to make his request to assist his fellow Jews to the king. Even while he was talking with the king, he silently prayed for favor. No specific reasons are given for this delay. Sometimes there may be an interval of time before God answers our prayers, and we have to learn to patiently wait until He does. Patience or long-suffering is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and there are rewards for those willing to put this character trait into practice. **Nehemiah was a man of patience**, and it is one of the reasons he is regarded as one of the greatest God-centered leaders of the Old Testament.

And so, Artaxerxes not only gave Nehemiah the blessing to return to Jerusalem that Nehemiah so desperately wanted but he also sent him to Judah as governor of the province with a mission to rebuild it, with letters explaining his support for the venture, and provision for timber from the king’s forest. Thus, we begin to see the emergence of this courtly state official who will become one of the greatest and most successful builders of all time, making the necessary logistical plans well in advance to secure the materials he knew he would need for this massive and aggressive re-construction project.

Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 444 BC and he immediately surveyed the damage to the entire city on his well-known night journey around the walls. He enlisted the help of the people to quickly restore the gates and repair the breaches in the wall. The hurried work of repairing and rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls and gates was

completed in just 52 days. An amazing feat for any builder, for sure, but it is made even more remarkable when it is noted that during the construction, his enemies, including the armies of Samaria, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites, threatened to attack.

Without hesitation, Nehemiah took charge. First, he sought God’s help: “Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God.” Then he armed the workers and encouraged them with these words: “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome...Our God will fight for us.” He further directed them to set up guards to defend against the constant threat of those who opposed their efforts. And, when these same enemies turned their attacks more directly on Nehemiah himself, by trying to set a trap for him by enticing him to seek shelter in the temple, he refused: “Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!” **Nehemiah was a man of courage**, who was able to lead men not only in a massive construction effort but also through a very dangerous security operation; it is one of the reasons he is so admired by the modern-day military engineer.

With re-construction of the gates and walls complete, Nehemiah then turned to the task of governing the Jewish people living in Jerusalem as directed by the king. He did so in a reasoned and fair manner. While so doing, one of his accomplishments was to make a record and genealogy of all the nobles, officials and people who were then living in Judah. And even though Nehemiah had the authority during his tenure as governor, he and his family did not extract taxes from the people; neither did he acquire real estate for his personal benefit and use. Rather, he focused his attention on the upkeep and maintenance of the city walls. It is remarkable that he also provided food for people who gathered at his table. Nehemiah showed care and concern for others: “Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor’s provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people”. **Nehemiah was a man of compassion** and is why he is known as a truly outstanding servant of God who was willing to set the high standard God required, even if it meant personal loss, discomfort or pain.

It should also be noted that when Nehemiah first went to Jerusalem in 444 BC, he met there another fairly well known Jewish exile, Ezra, who had preceded him by 13 years. This tandem, Ezra, a priest, and Nehemiah, a civil ruler, worked together in harmony to promote spiritual and economic reform within the community for 12 years. After that time, during which he ruled with justice and righteousness, Nehemiah returned to Susa.

Very little is recorded in the Bible of the waning years of Nehemiah’s life. Nevertheless, it is easy to conclude that he led a life of purpose. He will forever be known not just as a Master Builder but also a leader of the Jewish people who was instilled by God with strong conviction, determination and a deep sense of duty to the nation, but above all, to God.

At the end of the book, Nehemiah makes this statement: “Remember me, O my God, for good!” In Psalm 37:3 we read: “Trust in the LORD, and do good.” Our Christian duty is more than trusting in God; it is also doing “good.” Nehemiah was truly a leader who exemplified both of these fundamental concepts in his life.

In summary, Nehemiah presents a noble example of true patriotism, founded on the fear of God, and seeking the religious welfare of the state. His respect for the Divine Law, his reverence for the Sabbath, his devout acknowledgement of God in all things, his practical perception of God’s character, his union of watchfulness and prayer, his humility in ascribing all good in himself to the grace of God, are all highly commendable. Few characters of the Bible, indeed, demonstrate a richer illustration of true religion taught by example.