

## Lesson 116

# Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls

God used Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

# Overview

## Lesson Focus

When Nehemiah learned that Jerusalem was in ruins, he was distressed and asked King Artaxerxes for permission to rebuild. God gave Nehemiah favor with the king and the Jewish leaders, providing protection and means for rebuilding. Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem to oversee the reconstruction in the face of opposition.

## Key Passages

Nehemiah 1:3–7, 2:1–6, 2:17–20, 4:7–9, 4:16–20

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

Identify examples of Nehemiah's reliance on God.

Describe the connections between trusting in God and acting in faith.

## Memory Verse

Jeremiah 33:7–8 I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

## Prepare to Share

### Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

Just as the captivity of Judah came in three stages, the return to and restoration of Jerusalem was also in three phases. We have already learned about the first return in 538 BC as Zerubbabel led the rebuilding of the temple. Then we learned about the second return of Ezra in 467 at the direction of King Artaxerxes. In this lesson, we will see how Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem in 454 to finalize the restoration of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's brother, who had likely gone with Ezra to Jerusalem about 13 years earlier, had returned and given a report on the state of affairs there. The people were in distress, they were being oppressed, and the walls around the city were in ruins (Nehemiah 1:1–3). At this news, Nehemiah was grieved. He fasted and prayed, recognizing that God had redeemed Israel by his power and that it was only by God's hand that they could be restored (Nehemiah 1:10). Nehemiah

also knew that his prayers were to the God who held the heart of the king in his hand, and he cried out for favor in the eyes of the king.

As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah's job was to sample the wine and other beverages to ensure that they were not poisoned. As Nehemiah served the king, his sadness was apparent, and the king asked him for the reason (Nehemiah 2:1–2). Nehemiah prayed to God and then shared his concern for Jerusalem and asked the king's permission to rebuild. The king said yes! Then Nehemiah asked for supplies to rebuild the walls and gates and for letters to the local governors to support the project. And the king said yes! God's hand in the matter was the reason these requests were granted.

As Nehemiah set out for Jerusalem, he was accompanied by officers of the king's army, and he carried letters to the governors of the region. Nehemiah surveyed the task and then called the people to rebuild, even in the face of mocking from the regional governors. Nehemiah knew what God had called him to do, and he knew God would prosper the work.

Nehemiah 3 describes the work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem, listing all of the people involved. The work began in early July (month of Ab) and was finished in September (month of Elul)—only 52 days after they had begun (Nehemiah 6:15). During this period of building, the Jews were harassed by Sanballat and others who did not want to see Jerusalem rebuilt. These enemies mocked and threatened the Jews, but Nehemiah cried out to God for protection and encouraged the people to persevere as they trusted God (Nehemiah 4:4, 4:9).

But Nehemiah did more than pray—he acted! He trusted that God would protect the Jews while they worked, but he also understood the people's responsibility to defend themselves. Nehemiah knew that God uses people to accomplish his plans and that the threat of attack was real and required a response (Nehemiah 4:7–13).

Now, it is true that God acts in miraculous ways and that he could have killed the attacking enemies just as he did the Assyrian army that encircled Jerusalem 250 years earlier (2 Kings 19), but that miraculous activity seems to be the exception rather than the expectation. Nehemiah organized the people so that some would work while some would keep guard, and even those who worked had their weapons ready for battle (Nehemiah 4:14–23). Prayer and action are not contrary to one another, but both are ways to demonstrate faith and trust in God. Even though Nehemiah and the others were prepared for battle, the credit for their safety and their accomplishments was always directed toward God (Nehemiah 4:14–15, 4:20, 6:9, 6:12, 6:16).

God honors our prayers as well as our actions—the two should not be separated. If we are in need, to sit and pray for a miracle without being willing to work to meet our needs is not an attitude that honors Christ. However, we cannot fall into the opposite ditch of thinking that God only helps those who help themselves (a saying that many are surprised to learn is not in the Bible). Our responsibility to act and God's providence are both clearly presented in Scripture.

## Historical/Apologetics Background

As we have mentioned before, much archaeological evidence has been found that lines up with accounts from the Bible. That is exactly what we would expect from the trustworthy source of the Bible. Papyrus scrolls found in southern Egypt contain records from the time of Nehemiah. These Elephantine Papyri were recorded by a Jewish community there and were preserved in the dry climate to be discovered 1,200 years later. Within this collection is a letter to the Samaritan governor Sanballat. This is the same Sanballat who harassed the Jews as they sought to rebuild the walls. Also mentioned in these ancient documents is Jehohanan (Johanan), who is likely one of the two men by the same name mentioned in Nehemiah 6:18 and 12:23. These details in a source that is dated to the exact time of Nehemiah's return are a great confirmation of the truth we find in Scripture. God has given us a trustworthy revelation.

Why was Nehemiah so interested in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem? Walls were important for defense of ancient cities and their people. Nehemiah recognized the need for the protection of the city and the temple and for a place for the Jews to seek refuge under attack. The gates that had been burned and the sections of the walls that had been torn down left the Jews practically defenseless. In 2007, a portion of the wall constructed under Nehemiah's leadership was uncovered. Discoveries like these are consistent with the biblical accounts and give skeptics fewer and fewer reasons to doubt the truthfulness of Scripture. Of course, even without archaeological confirmations, we can trust the Word of the God who cannot lie.

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