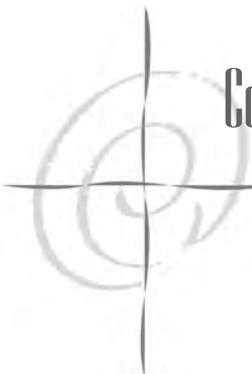


Creative Living Bible Study



Conquering Challenges-Fulfilling Dreams

Studies on the Book of Nehemiah

This book belongs to:



Conquering Challenges-Fulfilling Dreams

Studies on the Book of Nehemiah

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Conquering Challenges ~ Fulfilling Dreams

Studies from the Book of Nehemiah

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A man's best desires are always the index and measure of his possibilities; and the most difficult duty that a man is capable of doing is the duty that above all he should do.
Reverend Charles Brent, 18th Century

Lesson 1

Introduction

Life is full of dreams and challenges unique to us as individuals and to the seasons of our lives. Most of us are almost continually occupied with the quest to overcome some challenge or to see some dream fulfilled. Nehemiah contains the memoirs of a great and humble man who overcame incredible challenges and followed his God-given dreams to fruition. As we study his experience, we will observe important keys to having God's wisdom and power as we pursue the dreams and face the challenges unique to each of our lives.

But first, some background on the book of Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible, only being separated when the Scriptures were translated into the Greek Septuagint in 70 B.C. We are unsure of the author of these accounts, which include both Hebrew and Aramaic language and make up the last of the Old Testament historical books. The ending of 2 Chronicles is almost identical to the opening of Ezra, so some believe the "Chronicler" is the author. Others suggest that Ezra, a godly priest and biblical scholar, authored all these accounts. No one knows for certain.

We do know that the events of Ezra and Nehemiah hold an important place in God's overall plan of redemption, which is the theme of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This plan to mend our broken

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relationship with Him began in Genesis 3 when man's disobedience resulted in death, or physical and spiritual separation from God.

Yet even in the Garden of Eden, God, in His love for mankind, began to unfold a plan to bring us back into fellowship with Him (cf. Genesis 3:14-15; Colossians 2:13-15; Hebrews 2:14). This plan began when He called Abraham to be the father of a great nation and promised Abraham that this nation would forever inherit the land of Canaan and would bring God's blessing to the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:8).

Old Testament history documents Abraham's offspring becoming the nation of Israel. The New Testament goes on to record the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born among God's people to ultimately die on the cross to take the penalty for man's sin. The Son of God's life, death and resurrection made it possible for anyone in the world who believes in Him to be made right with God and live eternally.

How is the story of Nehemiah critical to God's plan of redemption? Because it shows how God re-established Israel as a nation after her people had been completely dispersed as punishment for years of disobedience and idolatry. The northern kingdom (ten tribes collectively called Israel) fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the people were scattered all over Assyrian territory. The southern kingdom (the tribes of Judah and Benjamin together called Judah),² was overrun by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The land was laid waste, Jerusalem and the magnificent temple destroyed, and the people taken into Babylonian exile.

About 70 years later, however, and in fulfillment of God's prophecy through Jeremiah (25:1, 11-12), the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. Rather than export captives from their homelands to keep them from rebellion, the new Persian King Cyrus courted cooperation from his captives by letting them keep their lands and forms of religion. Because of this, Cyrus allowed any Jews who so desired to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. This resulted in more than 42,000 Jews with servants and livestock making the five-month trip back to their ancestral land of Judah in Palestine in 538 B.C. (Ezra 2:64f). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, but with much opposition from neighbors who were not happy to see them back, they

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were able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem over the next 22 years, completing it in 516 B.C. (See Timelines, pp. 124, 125.) All attempts to rebuild the walls and secure the city, however, were thwarted.

Some 58 years later in 458 B.C., a second group of exiled Jews returned to Palestine with Ezra, a gifted priest and teacher of God's Word whom King Artaxerxes highly respected and charged to administer the affairs of the land (Ezra 7-8). With much prayer, Ezra led a national revival (Ezra 9-10), but all attempts to rebuild Jerusalem's walls were again thwarted.

Nehemiah's story began thirteen years later in 445 B.C. when this devout and humble leader left his prestigious position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes to become governor of Judah and orchestrate the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In spite of great opposition, the huge project was completed in just 52 days. Nehemiah and the people praised and thanked God, for He had not deserted, but rather acted again on behalf of, His people.

Nehemiah and those who worked with him could not have understood the importance of their work in God's plan of redemption, and specifically in fulfilling His promise to Abraham that all people of the world would be blessed through his offspring. As they fortified Jerusalem and once again united as a nation in the land God had given them, they laid the groundwork for the promised Savior and Messiah (Christ) Jesus, God's own Son, to be born in Israel about 430 years later. He would die on a cross outside Jerusalem and, through His death, provide redemption⁴ for all who would believe. This made Nehemiah's work as critical in God's plan as the works of men like Abraham, Moses, David, and the Apostle Paul.

As we study this critical part of biblical and redemptive history, we will see the great importance of walking with God as we face the challenges and pursue the dreams of our lives. In the memoirs of Nehemiah, a great and humble leader, we will also observe keys to receiving God's supernatural wisdom and enablement that alone can ensure our success. And as we look at the whole picture, we can be assured from Nehemiah's experience that the eternal good that will come from our choices to walk with God is beyond what we can ever imagine.

Lesson 1

Nehemiah and His Prayer

Nehemiah 1

“In the month of Kislev...I was in the citadel of Susa,” Nehemiah begins. The book continues like a journal as this God-appointed leader tells his awesome experience of seeing God do the miraculous: re-establish the walls of Jerusalem and the people’s commitment to love and serve Him. Having a key role in once again uniting God’s people on the face of the earth was no doubt an exhilarating experience for Nehemiah that he was compelled to document!

So the story begins with Nehemiah in the Persian city of Susa (see Map, p. 126), where he held the prestigious position of cupbearer to the Persian King, Artaxerxes. His job was to taste the king’s food and drink to be sure it was not poisoned, which meant he ate at the king’s table and shared his confidence. Certainly his life was comfortable.

But when Nehemiah received word from his brother Hanani, and others who had recently been in Jerusalem, that the walls and gates of the city were still in ruins, he became deeply burdened for the state of his ancestral home and the vulnerability of God’s people there. After some days of prayer and fasting, he humbly cried out to the LORD, “God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love him and obey His commands...” (1:5).

With this reverent address, Nehemiah went on to confess his sins and the sins of the Jewish people toward God that had led to their exile. Then he reminded the LORD of His promise to restore them in their land if they repented of their wickedness and turned back to Him (Deuteronomy 30:4; Ezekiel 29:14; Genesis 17:8). He beseeched God

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to honor his and others' prayers and give Nehemiah favor with King Artaxerxes, who held the keys to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring the strength of God's people there.

Read Nehemiah 1.

1. Who is telling the story, and how does he describe himself (1:1, 11)?

Reference: Note 1 *cupbearer to the king*, p. 14.

Note: Kislev is October-November on our calendar, and the 20th year of Artaxerxes' reign would be 445 B.C. Susa, located in modern-day Iran, Babylon and Ecbatana were the three cities Persian kings resided in at different seasons (See Map, p. 126).

2. a. Who came from Judah, and what did Nehemiah question them about (1:2)?

Reference: Note 2, *Judah, Israel*, p. 14.

b. What was their report (1:3)?

3. What was Nehemiah's response (1:4)?

4. How did Nehemiah address God? Whom did he know God to be (1:5)?

Note: LORD refers to Yahweh (Hebrew) or Jehovah (English), the personal name God used when relating to His people.

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5. a. What did Nehemiah humbly ask of his great, loving and faithful God (1:6a)?

b. It is easy to blame God for grave situations instead of remembering the true cause. What did Nehemiah humbly confess had brought about the present situation (1:6b-7)?

Reference: Note 3, *law you gave Moses*, p. 14, and General Timeline, p. 124.

6. Nehemiah points to God's promise to Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 30:1-5. What was this merciful promise (1:8-9)?

7. a. How did Nehemiah describe the people who needed God's help in Israel (1:10)?

Reference: Note 4, *Redeemer, redemption*, p. 14.

b. Nehemiah and others must have considered that God may have placed Nehemiah next to the king on purpose. What was Nehemiah's plea (1:11)?

Note: *this man* was the king—the one person who could enable Nehemiah to re-establish Jerusalem and Israel.

BUILDING ON THE BASICS

Knowing God

With a broken heart, Nehemiah humbly approached God over the trouble and disgrace of His people in Judah. Nehemiah wanted to help and was willing to leave his comfortable position in the king's palace to dedicate himself to the work. But he knew God would have to bring about the circumstances that would make it happen.

So he put it all before the LORD, remembering that in the Name, or character, of the LORD, there is infinite power, love, faithfulness, forgiveness, mercy and redemption. Nehemiah remembered who God was as he faced the challenge and dream of re-establishing Jerusalem and God's people. Because he knew God, Nehemiah didn't waste any time considering how he himself might persuade the king to help. He asked God to move in Artaxerxes' heart. Perhaps Nehemiah knew the promise of Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases."

What we believe about God's character and nature as we face the challenges before us and pursue our dreams makes all the difference in how we approach our circumstances. In the situations we face on a daily basis, or in the bigger issues that challenge us, how we see God determines whether we pray for the supernatural or just sadly discuss our problems with Him. If we see the greatness and love of God as Nehemiah did, we will believe Him for great and loving answers to our prayers and will experience His supernatural power in our journey.

In this lesson, we will look at the importance of knowing who God is as we face the challenges and follow the dreams on our hearts.

1. a. What was Nehemiah's emotional state after hearing the news about the situation in Judah (1:4)?

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b. What challenges and dreams became clear for Nehemiah from that time forward? (Commentary paragraph 3, p. 6.)

2. a. After this, Nehemiah prayed about these dreams and challenges with a clear picture of God's greatness. List the phrases he used to approach God, and what each says about who Nehemiah knew God to be (1:5)?

b. What can we know as we come to the LORD with the challenges and dreams on our hearts?

Colossians 1:16-17

Note: These verses refer to God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ; cf. John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:2-3a.

Ephesians 3:20

Mark 10:27

c. Nehemiah's immediate fasting and prayer showed his utter dependence on God. What must be our attitude in order to draw on the supernatural power of God in our challenges and dreams?

Psalm 62:5-7

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Psalm 62:8

Proverbs 3:5

3. Nehemiah realized the need to confess the sins that had led to their situation. What did he know about God's character as he took this important step in securing the LORD's supernatural help?

Psalm 103:3a

Psalm 103:8-10

Psalm 103:11-14

4. a. How did Nehemiah refer to himself and the people of Israel, and what did this infer about the role God played in their lives (1:10-11)?

b. Why is this perspective important as we seek God's help?

c. What does Psalm 18:27 promise?

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5. a. Nehemiah referred to God's redemption of His people (1:10). He was thinking of historical events like the Exodus and Red Sea crossing. But ultimately, the redemption of all believers comes through God's Son, Jesus Christ, as He took all mankind's sin on Himself on the cross. What does Romans 3:23-25a teach about this truth?

b. Why do you think it is important to remember that God has redeemed us as we seek His help in the challenges of our lives?

Reference: Note 4, *Redeemer, redemption*, p. 14.

c. What does Romans 8:31b-32 add to this perspective?

6. Nehemiah also stood on the faithfulness of God to fulfill His promises to Israel, specifically citing His promise to Moses to restore Israel to their land if they repented and turned back to Him (Deuteronomy 30:3-5).

What are some promises that we can trust God to keep as we seek His supernatural help?

Psalm 32:8

Isaiah 41:10

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2 Corinthians 12:9

James 1:5

Philippians 4:13

S U M M A R Y

7. Are there specific challenges or desires in your life today where you need help from the LORD?

8. What difference does it make to remember who God is when you pray for Him to help you with these?

9. Why is it important to confess any sin, as Nehemiah did, and to continually thank God for His gift of redemption through Jesus Christ as you seek His help?

10. What promises of Scripture do you want to claim as you pray for God's help in the challenges and dreams in your life today? (Especially review Question 6.)

LESSON 1 NOTES

1 *cupbearer to the king* (1:11). “A cupbearer was the trusted servant who tasted all the king’s food and drink, making sure it was not poisoned. This was no menial position; of the thousands making up the king’s household, the cupbearer sat at the king’s table, shared his confidence, and even regulated access to the king’s presence. That a Jew should rise at this point in history to such a place—and that he should be willing to *leave* it—shows the providential working of God.” K. B. Nielson, *Rebuilt and Rebuilding*, p. 27.

2 *Judah, Israel, Jerusalem*. The following simple biblical definitions may help us in our study: **(bold print is the usage in Nehemiah)**

Judah: 1. The fourth son of Jacob, after whom was named one of the tribes of Israel, or

2. The name of the southern kingdom where Jerusalem was located that is referred to in Nehemiah.

Israel: 1. The new name God gave to Jacob, or

2. The whole nation of people who trace their ancestry to Jacob’s twelve sons, or

3. The northern kingdom, with Samaria as its capital, which was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Its people (10 of the 12 tribes of Israel) were exiled and dispersed.

Jerusalem: Capital city of Judah, called “the holy city,” with the temple at its center.

3 *laws you gave your servant Moses* (1:7). Moses was the leader God raised up to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage in 1450 B.C. and establish them as a nation. The laws God gave Israel through Moses began with the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17) and included the Book of the Law (Exodus 21-23) and laws of worship (Exodus 25-40).

4 *Redeemer, redemption*. *Redemption* in the biblical sense means “to buy out” or “to set free by the payment of a price (ransom)” and refers to a slave being purchased out of slavery. God did this with ancient Israel when He brought them out of slavery in Egypt by producing plagues on the Egyptian Pharaoh and people (Deuteronomy 4:34; 9:29). Then He established them as His chosen people and gave them the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 4:34; 9:29; Exodus-Joshua). The history and sacrifices and prophecies of the Old Testament, however, all point to the ultimate redemption payment for all mankind’s sin made by our redeemer, God’s Son Jesus Christ, through the cross. Romans 3:24 says

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we are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." As born sinners, we are in the slave market of sin, so to speak. But Christ, the only free man who ever lived (because He was sinless), paid the ransom price of His own blood to purchase sinners out of the slave market of sin and set them free to become sons of God. Only by the price of death can one be set free (Romans 6:23), and only one who is free (sinless as Christ was; cf. Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21) can buy a slave's freedom. By paying the ransom price of His shed blood, Jesus purchased the person who puts faith in Him out of the slave market of sin and sets him free to become a son of God (Galatians 3:13; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Galatians 4:4-5). God applied the redemption of Christ on the cross to those who had faith in Him in the Old Testament as He has to those who have received Him since. See also, Note 2, "Why did Christ have to die in my place?" p. 122, and *A Final Note* below.

A Final Note

The New Testament explains that a personal relationship with God begins with faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, as your Savior, or Redeemer (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26). In Revelation 3:20, Jesus states His desire to come into our lives: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in...."

If you have never personally accepted the gift of God's redemption through faith in Jesus Christ's work for you on the cross, the following is a suggested prayer:

Lord Jesus, I open the door of my life to you. Thank you for taking the penalty for my sins on the cross so that I could be redeemed from bondage to sin and eternal separation from You. Please forgive all my sins, come into my life, and make me the person you created me to be. Amen.

References: Romans 3:23-26; 6:23

If you prayed this prayer, Christ is in your life and will never leave you, and you can know that you have eternal life with your Redeemer. What does He promise you in Revelation 3:20 (above), Hebrews 13:5b and 1 John 5:11-13?