

Overcome

October 2, 2022

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Nehemiah 1:1–2:9

Session Outline

1. Brokenhearted (Nehemiah 1:1-4)
2. Moved to Prayer (Nehemiah 1:5-11)
3. Moved to Action (Nehemiah 2:1-9)

Theological Theme

As Christians we should be heartbroken over the same things as God. If the church wants to make a difference for the kingdom of God, we must care enough about other people, countries, and cultures that we are moved to prayer and action like Nehemiah was.



Leader Guide

Overcome

Introduction

Have you ever heard that the farther you get from home, the bigger your home gets? When you are in your hometown, you describe home as a specific address or neighborhood. If you are in a different state, home may be identified as a city or state. When you are overseas, you might claim the United States as home. Wherever you are, when the word home arises, certain feelings and emotions come with it. Home is special.

Plenty of classic books and popular movies include storylines with home at the center because this resonates with most audiences. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's quest for home reminds us all of the powerful motivation "home" inspires.¹

- ❓ What movie or book comes to your mind when you think about themes inspired by the idea of home?
- ❓ What emotions does the concept of home stir up in you?
- ❓ Why do you think the idea of home strikes a chord in most people?

Session Summary

Nehemiah was a Jew born during the time of captivity. He had never lived in Jerusalem but had been raised with Jewish traditions and culture. He served as cupbearer to the king and received word from his brother about the condition of life in Jerusalem that broke his heart. Though he had not lived in the Holy City himself, he still understood the significant role Jerusalem played in the lives of his people.

A remnant of Jews had returned to Jerusalem and had done some rebuilding, but much destruction and ruin remained. Nehemiah was broken over what he heard, and it moved him to weep, fast, and pray. He cried out to God and then was moved to action himself. Nehemiah is a great example of how God's people should respond to the condition of the world around us. Unless we are willing to love deeply and invest ourselves as God directs, we will not be able to have much influence and effect as a worker in His kingdom.

1. Brokenhearted (Nehemiah 1:1-4)

The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the city, its walls, and the temple. They deported most of the Jewish people, leaving Jerusalem as a virtual ghost town in ruins. After seventy years of captivity, the Jews were given the opportunity to return to the promised land. Only a small percentage of the Jewish people chose to go back to Jerusalem while the rest stayed in the homes they had built in Babylon.

Even though the Jews had built lives in Babylon or Persia, many of them continued with their faith and religious upbringing. They still followed God but were living in a foreign city with vastly different religious practices and beliefs. At the time of Nehemiah's book, it had been about 150 years since the original destruction of Jerusalem.

The book of Nehemiah begins by describing what he heard from a brother who had recently traveled back to Jerusalem. The men who had gone to Judah brought back details about the city and its condition that were concerning. Even though he had never lived in Jerusalem, it was still the home of the Jewish people and was very important. The Jews had an innate sense of devotion to and love for the city of Jerusalem that was passed from generation to generation.

The report was not good. Nehemiah heard about the suffering of the people and the state of the city. There had been some attempts at rebuilding various areas but because the walls were still in ruins, the people were continually vulnerable to attacks and opposition making progress was minimal. The poor state of the people was tied to the poor state of the walls because there was no defense or protection for them.

 What breaks your heart and moves you toward compassion and action? Are these the same things that break the heart of God? How can you know?

Nehemiah's Appeal

When Nehemiah heard Jerusalem was unprotected, he sought God's help through fasting and prayer. His appeal was based on God's covenant with Israel as given in Deuteronomy. There the Lord threatened the unfaithful but also promised to assist the repentant (see Deut. 9:29; 28:14; 30:1-4).

Without walls, the people were in a constant state of stress and tension. Walls were built to protect the people and things within. A city without walls was a place of constant fear and danger. Nehemiah could not stand the thought that God's people were living in such terrible conditions, and it affected him deeply. His reaction was extreme and comprehensive. His physical distress knocked him off his feet, and his mental and emotional distress caused weeping, fasting, and praying. Nehemiah mourned for people he did not know but loved because God loved them. When Nehemiah realized the situation, he did not waste time searching for answers anywhere else, he went straight to God.

 When was the last time you were so upset that your first response was to weep, pray, or fast?

 Application: How do you typically respond to heartbreak?

2. Moved to Prayer (Nehemiah 1:5-11)

When Nehemiah experienced deep mourning over the situation in Jerusalem, he did the best thing he could. He went straight to God in prayer. He did not waste time with other solutions that would not be enough, he took his concerns and stress to the Lord and poured his heart out before Him. Too many times we can be tempted to numb our concerns or stresses with things of the world when what we really need is to lay our hearts before God and trust Him to show us what to do with our heartbreak.

 What are some places people turn to numb their stress or concerns instead of turning to God? What are some things you might turn to outside of God?

There is much to be learned from Nehemiah's prayer. He started by addressing the Lord with awe and praise. He spoke to God with humility and complete dependence. When we recognize that God is all powerful, all present, and all knowing it helps us understand just how much we need Him. Nehemiah knew only God could help Jerusalem, and he sought that help on behalf of the Jewish people.

By confessing his sin alongside the sin of the nation of Israel, Nehemiah identified with the Israelites. Note that he did not offer excuses for how the people had sinned but humbly admitted they had done wrong before the Lord and asked for His mercy. He referred to Moses and the warnings given about the consequences of the people's rebellion then appealed to God's promise of restoration.



What sticks out to you from Nehemiah's prayer? How might you learn to turn to God from Nehemiah's example?

Holding to God's promises of restoration following repentance demonstrates an important approach to prayer. Nehemiah used God's character and His promises as the foundation for his request that God listen to his prayers and do something for His people. Though it was a conditional promise that Nehemiah quoted, and he could not ensure faithfulness from all the Jewish people, he personally turned from sin and toward God. He took responsibility for what he could and trusted God for the rest.

Nehemiah didn't just offer his words to God; he had a heart ready for action. He wasn't content to only mourn the situation and petition God about it. He didn't ask that someone else would step up and do something. He prayed with a readiness to do something himself. By asking God for favor when he approached the king, Nehemiah was willing to risk it all to be part of the work of God.



Application: What is a common subject of prayer for you recently? How might you pray toward this with a heart ready for action?

3. Moved to Action (Nehemiah 2:1-9)

The dates stated by Nehemiah were important because they showed the length of time that Nehemiah prayed and prepared before he had the opportunity to talk to the king was about four months. These dates also served to establish the occurrence of events that verify the accuracy of prophecies concerning Jerusalem and the coming Messiah.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king, a position of honor and trust. He was often in the presence of the king and had to be careful about each detail of his appearance, even his countenance. As Nehemiah prayed and fasted for four months, it affected him physically and the king noticed. This was a defining moment that could have gone a very different way. When the king responded favorably, Nehemiah knew it was time to speak up and make a significant request. After preparing for months, it was time to act on the burden he felt. Think about how different the world would be if more believers cared enough to pray and act. When the king asked for Nehemiah's request, he knew God had been working and his prayers were answered.

-  What responsibility did Nehemiah have when given the opportunity to make his request? When was a time prayer led you to act?

As Nehemiah laid out his request to go be part of the rebuilding, he did so with respect and humility. The king reacted reasonably, and God had been at work, so the request was received favorably. Once Nehemiah saw he was received well, he continued with his request.

Eventually, Nehemiah received permission to go and help in the building efforts, letters to help pave the way in his travels, military escorts, and resources to build the wall. This pagan king responded positively to all that Nehemiah asked and this could only be attributed to the power of God at work.

-  When was the last time you saw an answer to prayer that could only be attributed to God?

God provided for Nehemiah's needs in abundance. This began with a man of faith who trusted God enough to be bold and humble in his requests. Because his heart broke when he learned about the city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was moved to pray and to get involved, and eventually the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt. As we align our hearts with the heart of God, praying and acting in accordance with His will, He will be faithful to work in our lives too.

-  Application: What does this text teach you about being bold in your faith? How is God calling you to respond to Him today?

Conclusion

Nehemiah is an excellent example of how we should care about the things God does. Are we willing to love people to the point that we mourn when they suffer? Too many Christians live in apathy toward others. We are so concerned about what affects us, we don't take the time to see how God might want to use us in His plan to help others.

If we want to be part of kingdom work, we must open our eyes to what is happening and be sensitive to what the Holy Spirit tells us. We can be committed to praying. We can be bold and willing to step out and get involved. We can encourage others to join us in the activity of God. We can step out in faith when we have the opportunities. Nehemiah is an example of what can happen when we boldly trust God and do what He calls us to do.

- ① What situation breaks your heart in our world today? What have you been doing about it? What are you going to do about it now?
- ① How is God calling you to act on behalf of another today? How will you respond?
- ① Who might God be calling you to have a gospel conversation with? How do you need to act in obedience?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for how He offers opportunities to get involved in what He is doing around you. Ask for eyes to see like He sees and courage to jump in with a willing heart.

Additional Resources

- *Be Determined* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: Thru the Bible Commentary Series* by J. Vernon McGee
- *Nehemiah for You* by Eric Mason

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



For Next Week

Session Title

- When You Had No Idea How Bad It Was

Main Passages

- Ezekiel 3:1-15

Session Outline

1. Taking in the Word (Ezekiel 3:1-4)
2. Strong for the Call (Ezekiel 3:5-11)
3. Overwhelmed (Ezekiel 3:12-15)

Memorize

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.

- Nehemiah 1:4

Historical Context of Nehemiah

Purpose

The events which occurred in Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilt temple, the stabilizing of Jerusalem, and the Jewish community that developed, all played key roles in the life and ministry of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. The rebuilt temple may have paled in comparison to the temple that Solomon built, but it would serve the Jews for centuries until Christ removed the need for a physical temple.

Author

Ezra and Nehemiah are anonymous. Ancient Jewish sources usually credit Ezra as the author of Ezra-Nehemiah. More likely Ezra-Nehemiah was written by the “Chronicler,” the person (or persons) responsible for 1 and 2 Chronicles. Not only is Ezra-Nehemiah linked to Chronicles at its introduction (Ezr 1:1–2 = 2Ch 36:22–23), it also shares many similarities in language, terminology, themes, and perspective.

Setting

It is probably safe to assume that Ezra-Nehemiah was written soon after the conclusion of Nehemiah’s ministry. Most likely the book was written no later than 400 BC.

In Ezra-Nehemiah it is clear that Ezra came to Jerusalem first, probably in 458 BC, and that Nehemiah followed him thirteen years later, probably in 445 BC. Nehemiah made no mention of Ezra, his ministry, or his reforms. Ezra and Nehemiah appear together in only two texts (Neh 8:9; 12:36). The two events in which Ezra and Nehemiah were together were significant. In Nehemiah 8, the context is the reading of the law to the people, while in Nehemiah 12 the two joyous processions walking around the city walls in the dedication ceremony include Ezra (Neh 12:36) and Nehemiah (Neh 12:38).

Special Features

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah bear the names of the key person in each of the books. Until the third century AD, though, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were regarded as a single book. Each contains material found in the other, and they complete each other. The separation of the book in the Christian community took place through the influence of the Vulgate, the Latin translation prepared by Jerome, who, following Origen before him, separated Ezra-Nehemiah into two distinct books. In the Jewish community, Ezra and Nehemiah were not separated into two distinct books until the fifteenth-century printing of the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah is part of the third division of the canon, called the Writings (Hb ketuvim).

Extended Commentary

Nehemiah 1:1-2:9

1:1 In both the Hebrew and the Greek OT, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single book. Yet the connection between them is rather abrupt and without any real transition (see note at Ezr 10:44). Nehemiah, whose name means “Yahweh has comforted,” is identified as son of Hacaliah, to distinguish him from other people named Nehemiah (3:16; 7:7; Ezr 2:2) in the same era. The prophet Nahum’s name is a shorter form of Nehemiah’s.

The text does not identify the twentieth year, but the context from Ezr 10 along with the statement of Neh 2:1 identifies it as the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes of Persia (445 BC). The mention of the month of Chislev is difficult because 2:1 describes a later event occurring in the month of Nisan, also in the twentieth year. Chislev was parallel to our late November to early December, while Nisan was in the spring. Since Nehemiah served in the royal Persian court, it is possible that he used the official regnal calendar in which the year began in the month a king came to power. In such a calendar Nisan could follow Chislev. Susa, in southwestern Iran, became the capital of Persia during the time of Darius. Later kings such as Xerxes and Artaxerxes used it as their winter palace.

1:2 Hanani is described by Nehemiah as one of my brothers. While this could be used loosely to refer to his Jewish companions, it probably means his literal brother due to the mention of Hanani in 7:2.

1:3 The people in the province of Judah (v. 2), which the Persians called (Hb) Yehud, were suffering because their city was in such terrible condition. Many scholars maintain that Nehemiah’s response (v. 4) suggests this was a recent development, possibly referring to Rehum’s opposition (Ezr 4:9–16). The CSB translation of the verbs here, has been broken down . . . have been burned, reinforces this understanding of the passage.

1:4 Nehemiah’s response was like that of his predecessor, Ezra (Ezr 9:3–5), who humbled himself before God.

1:5–11 Nehemiah’s prayer, while shorter than Ezra’s (see note at Ezr 9:6–15), is also written in late biblical Hebrew style found in other penitential prayers of that era (Neh 9:5–37; Dn 9:4–19). Like them it reflects the language of Deuteronomy, acknowledging that Israel’s adversities had resulted from the nation’s covenant unfaithfulness and that their present survival was due solely to God’s abundant mercy.

1:5–7 Addressing God as Lord, the God of the heavens is not common in the OT, but it does occur several other times (Gn 24:7; 2Ch 36:23; Jnh 1:9). This description of God is similar to the opening verse of Daniel’s prayer: “the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands” (Dn 9:4). Like Ezra (Ezr 9:6), Nehemiah also identified with the sin of his people, confessing that both I and my father’s family have sinned.

1:8–9 Nehemiah alluded to Moses’s warning (Dt 4:27; 28:64) that God would scatter Israel among the peoples if they were unfaithful to the covenant, and then he summarized God’s promise through Moses (Dt 30:1–5) that repentance would bring restoration (Neh 1:9). Repentance is described as

return to me, using the primary OT term (Hb shuv) for repentance that depicts a turning from sin toward God.

1:10 Just as Moses had interceded for his sinful people, reminding God that Israel was his people whom he had brought out of Egypt (Ex 32:11), so too Nehemiah reminded God that they were his servants and his people whom he had redeemed.

1:11 The reference to this man has led some scholars to suggest impropriety on Nehemiah's part for referring to King Artaxerxes in such a way. But the context here is a private prayer addressed to God who knew very well who "this man" was and that Nehemiah would need divine help in dealing with him. The Persian rulers were famous for the irrevocability of their laws, as Daniel discovered when the "law of the Medes and Persians" (Dn 6:8, 12, 15) was brought against him. Nehemiah faced the daunting task of asking Artaxerxes to reverse his previous proclamation (Ezr 4:23) stopping all construction in Jerusalem. Only at the end of the prayer does it become clear why a Jewish man like Nehemiah thought he would ever get to address the Persian king: I was the king's cupbearer. The cupbearer was not only responsible for choosing appropriate wines for the king, but he tasted them himself to ensure they were not poisoned.

2:1–3 It is not clear why Nehemiah waited nearly four months (the year was 445 BC) to bring his request to King Artaxerxes (see note at 1:1 for the month of Nisan). It is possible that the king spent the winter in Babylon rather than in Susa. Ancient records attest to this happening occasionally. It is also possible that Nehemiah waited for the (Hb) tukta, a Persian feast in which the king would often grant the requests of his supplicants. Nehemiah's explanation for his sadness was carefully expressed. He did not mention Jerusalem by name, since it may have carried negative connotations from the past (Ezr 4:12), but he referred to it as the city where my ancestors are buried. The Persian rulers went to great expense building tombs for their ancestors. Nehemiah's concern for the condition of his ancestors' tombs would certainly strike a sympathetic chord with the Persian king.

2:5 Nehemiah's request to rebuild Jerusalem was bold in light of the king's earlier decision (Ezr 4:12–16) to stop all construction on the project.

2:6 The word queen here is a rare term (Hb shagel) that occurs only here and in Ps 45:9. Both ancient and modern commentators suggest that this term identified this woman as a concubine or a sexual favorite of the king. This is suggested because the term derives from a verb (Hb shagal) that often indicates illicit sexual activity.

2:7–8 Nehemiah needed not only time away from Artaxerxes's court, but also official royal documents for the governors ... west of the Euphrates River (lit "Beyond the River") who were opposed to any building in Jerusalem (v. 10). His request for timber for the gates of the temple's fortress probably refers to a military structure north of the temple that provided protection for the temple and its worshippers, and probably included the two towers mentioned in 3:1.

2:9 Some have criticized Nehemiah for accepting military protection, which Ezra refused (Ezr 8:22–23). Nehemiah's decision did not reflect a lack of faith on his part, but rather his trust that this was part of God's provision for him.²

References

1. *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2014), DVD.
2. *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

Author Bio

Warren Wiersbe (Be Determined)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of Back to the Bible, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as “the pastor’s pastor.” He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.

J. Vernon McGee (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)

Dr. J. Vernon McGee (1904-1988) spent more than 50 years teaching the Bible on his “Thru the Bible” radio broadcast. He pastored for more than 40 years and has authored many best-selling books, including *Doctrine for Difficult Days*.

Eric Mason (Nehemiah for You)

Eric Mason is cofounder and lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He holds degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary (ThM) and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (DMin). Eric and his wife have two children.