

Extreme Makeover: Israel Edition

No Retreats, No Reserves, No Regrets

The TV show “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” is known for its positive twist on the “makeover” craze. Focused on finding needy families in need of home renovation, the show’s primary goal is to help people rebuild their lives by helping them restore their homes.

The story of Nehemiah is a similar story of rebuilding and restoration. The book (written around 430 B.C.) complements another Old Testament story, the book of Ezra. Whereas Ezra focuses more on the spiritual renewal of Jerusalem, Nehemiah focuses more on the physical and political restructuring. The authorship of the book is ultimately unknown, but since portions are written in the first person it is assumed that Nehemiah wrote at least part of the book.

The story begins in 586 B.C., with the Babylonian conquest of Judah. For decades, most of the people were exiled and Jerusalem was left vulnerable and exposed. When the story opens (about 444 B.C.), the city of Jerusalem is in ruins.

Wasting no time, Nehemiah begins to formulate a plan for how he can rebuild Jerusalem. His willingness to be faithful and God’s incredible plan meet up in this amazing story to illustrate how God can rebuild an entire community starting with the bold leadership and faithful obedience of one man...

Nehemiah.

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Session 1: Chapter 1



Laying the Foundation with Prayer

Helpful Hints:

- * Month of Kislev = November/December
- * The twentieth year = the twentieth year of the King, then King Artaxerxes.
- * Often the gates of a city acted as political and social centers (similar to the town hall).
- * As cupbearer, Nehemiah would have served very closely to the King in a protective role. He was responsible for tasting the King's food and drink to ensure that it was not poisonous or dangerous before the King partook of it. He would also have served as an aid

Study Questions:

1. The response to Nehemiah's inquiry regarding Jerusalem may not have been what he expected. The news was devastating.
 - a. What is the very first thing Nehemiah did in response?
 - b. What does this response teach us about dealing with difficult things in life?
 - c. It is important to note what Nehemiah did next. How does he give this burden to the Lord?
 - d. How do you share your burdens with the Lord?
2. Read Nehemiah's prayer.
 - a. What parts of the prayer are most noteworthy to you?
 - b. What is the first thing Nehemiah does in his prayer?
 - c. Much of the prayer seems to be Nehemiah "reminding" God of how he has been faithful in the past. Surely Nehemiah knows God doesn't need his reminder! Why do you think he includes those elements in his prayer?
3. It has been said that "A great leader takes less than his (or her) share of the credit and more than his share of the blame."

- a. Do you think this is true?
 - b. Do you see glimpses of this attitude anywhere in Nehemiah's prayer?
 - c. How might you incorporate this model into your prayers?
4. In verses 10-11, there is a very important word repeated four times. What is the word and why is it important?
 5. If you were to sum up the essence of Nehemiah's prayer in 3 words, what would they be?
 6. Verse 11 in Nehemiah's prayer is a plea for God to grant him success as he approaches "this man," the King.
 - a. What would you guess Nehemiah was thinking and feeling as he prepared to approach the King?
 - b. Have you ever been in a situation similar to Nehemiah's – when something BIG was on the line, or you had to approach a very intimidating person with a BIG request? How did you feel? What happened?
 7. The very last sentence gives us an important bit of information about Nehemiah's position. It also allows us to gain insight into the way he views his position. It seems that Nehemiah sees himself as a Jew who happens to be a cupbearer.
 - a. Do you see any difference between being a "Jew who happens to be a cupbearer" and a "cupbearer who happens to be a Jew?"
 - b. Evaluate yourself. When you fill in the equation below, what wins out... your profession or your faith?

"I am a _____ who happens to be a _____."

Session 2: Chapters 2-3



Presenting the Building Plans

Helpful Hints:

- * Month of Nisan = March/April
- * "The twentieth year" is the same year as chapter 1.
- * It was commonly considered a crime to be upset in front of royalty, which could result in demotion or even death. Nehemiah had _____ reason to be "very much afraid."
- * The journey from Susa to Jerusalem was about eleven hundred miles. Among other things, Nehemiah had requested and been _____ granted a military escort for protection as he traveled (v.9).
- * Sanballat was governor of Sumaria, and Tobiah was probably governor of the Persian-controlled Trans-Jordan. Nehemiah's coming to rebuild Jerusalem surely threatened their

Study Questions:

1. Chapter one opened in the month Kislev (Nov/Dec), and at the end of chapter one, Nehemiah indicates he is going to approach the king *today*. Yet, chapter two opens in the month of Nisan (March/April)! What do you think happened during those 4 months in between? Do you see any clues in the text?
2. In 2:2-3, Nehemiah takes a big step of faith....and he admits he is afraid.
 - a. Have you ever been called by God to step out in faith like this?
 - b. How did you feel about taking that step and how did it turn out?
3. Do you think that Nehemiah was a good employee of the King?
 - a. What makes you think yes or no?
 - b. Does Nehemiah's relationship with the King provide any insight into how we should relate to those people that have authority over us in the workplace?
 - c. How can you incorporate this teaching principle into your job?
4. Nehemiah makes some BIG requests from the King because he had faith in God's provision. What were Nehemiah's requests?

5. Do you think God likes it when we approach him in prayer and “ask BIG?” If so, what are some areas of your life where you could “ask BIG?”

6. As Nehemiah sets out for Jerusalem, he says, “I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.”
 - a. Why keep it to himself?

 - b. Can you think of anyone else in Scripture who “treasured up in her heart” what God was going to do?

7. The falling of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews was shameful for them.
 - a. Why do you think that destruction of the city was a source of disgrace for the people?

 - b. What do you think God was communicating by letting this happen?

8. How does the way God related/communicated to Jews then differ from the way he relates/communicates to Christians now?

9. What is the first thing mentioned about each gate in chapter 3? What value do you think this emphasized?

Session 3: Chapters 4-5



Pressing on despite adversity

Helpful Hints:

- * Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite probably sensed that Nehemiah's plans threatened their ability to control and intimidate the Jews living in their region. Their attack of Nehemiah was rooted in insecurity and fear.
- * Nehemiah prepared his guards well in case of attack. Each guard was armed with swords, spears and bows—weapons designed for both long-range and close combat.
- * Persian kings were notorious for overtaxing and depleting the wealth of the regions they governed. So in chapter 5, the nobles were probably modeling what they had seen other rulers do. Nehemiah demands that Jerusalem will be different.

Study Questions:

1. In his task to rebuild Jerusalem, Nehemiah experienced various types of conflict and opposition. The theme of chapter 4 seems to be external opposition. What are some of the pressures that Nehemiah experienced? How did outsiders oppose his efforts?
 - a. In 4:1-3?
 - b. In 4:7-8?
2. Do you think that Nehemiah responded well in these situations? What would you have done?
3. In 4:5, Nehemiah asks God to “deal with” the people who have wronged him. Do you find this admirable or harsh? Why?
4. In 4:6 we see that the people *worked* with all their heart. We often think of *loving* with all of our heart, but what about *working*? What does this description tell us about these people and about Jerusalem?
5. The people worked constantly either guarding the city or helping rebuild. This was no doubt exhausting labor. What two things does Nehemiah encourage the people to do in 4:14?

6. James wrote that we should, “consider it pure joy when [we] face trials of many kinds...”
 - a. What are some ways that the threat of attack may have been advantageous to the builders?
 - b. Are there ways that mockery and persecution can serve as an encouragement to believers?
 - c. Are there any applications to your own life?

7. In chapter 5 there is also conflict, but it is internal – Nehemiah is forced to deal with sin “within the camp.”
 - a. Verse 6 says that Nehemiah was very angry. Why?
 - b. Nehemiah boldly rebukes the people in charge. What steps does he take & how do they respond to his rebuke?
 - c. What do verses 18-19 reveal about Nehemiah’s character?

8. Within these chapters, we see Nehemiah do two things consistently: PRAY and PREPARE. How did these two qualities make him a stronger leader?

Session 4: Chapters 6-8



The Return of the Law

Helpful Hints:

- * The Valley of Ono, where Sanballat and Geshem wanted to meet Nehemiah, was about 20 miles away in “no man’s land.” It would have taken Nehemiah a long day’s travel just to get there.
- * In chapter 6 the basic defensive wall around Jerusalem is completed. Miraculously, after lying in ruins for more than 140 years, it was completely rebuilt in only 52 days!
- * Nehemiah was a layman, not a priest, so it was illegal for him to enter the temple. Shemaiah’s suggestion, therefore would have contradicted God’s law. This may be one thing that helped Nehemiah to know that Shemaiah was not a prophet of God.

Study Questions:

1. Chapter 6 brings more threats from outside. How was Nehemiah opposed:
 - a. In 6:5-8?
 - b. In 6:13?
2. When the enemies of Jerusalem heard that the wall was completed, they were afraid and lost confidence because they knew that the work had been done with the help of God (6:16). When was the last time something happened that you KNOW could only have been done with the help of God?
3. Chapter 7 describes some of the *physical* renewal of the city. Now that the city walls were completed, Nehemiah began bringing people back to Jerusalem. Why do you think it was important to repopulate the city quickly?
4. Hanani and Hananiah are put in charge of Jerusalem.
 - a. Why does Nehemiah choose them? (7:1-3)
 - b. Can you see these character qualities manifested in your life?
5. If the theme of chapter 7 is physical renewal, what would you say is the theme of chapter 8?

6. Ezra brings the “Law of the Lord” to the people (8:1-6).
 - a. As he opened it before the people, what did they do and what attitude toward the text did this action reflect?
 - b. What kind of response did the opening of the Law create?
7. What does it mean that “the joy of the Lord is your strength?” (8:10)
What is one thing that would change about your daily life if you constantly thought of the joy of the Lord as your strength?
8. As they read the Law, the Israelites realized that they had been neglecting some of God’s commandments (such as celebrating the feast of booths). Can you remember a time when you suddenly realized that something you were doing or not doing violated God’s law?
9. As the Israelites obeyed God, they experienced great joy.
 - a. Does obedience to God always give us great joy?
 - b. What about happiness? Do you think there is a difference between joy and happiness?

Session 5: Chapters 9-10



REMEMBER ME

Helpful Hints:

- * In chapter 9, the people fast, wear sackcloth, and throw dust on their heads. These are all signs of deep spiritual distress.
- * Sackcloth was a garment of dark, coarsely woven goat or camel hair. It was often worn as a sign of mourning. Its rough texture served as a means toward chastisement among the repentant.
- * Throwing dust on one's head was a way of saying something like, "I wish I were dead."
- * The covenant agreement signed here required the people to give less than the Law of

Study Questions:

1. What actions by the Israelites (9:1-4) let us know that genuine spiritual revival is taking place in Israel?
2. In 9:3-4, notice how long they stood there. Why do you think they stayed there so long?
3. What does verse 8 tell us about the reason that God keeps his promises? What does it say the Israelites did to deserve God's faithfulness?
4. The majority of chapter 9 is a LONG prayer in which we get a summary of Jewish history. What are some things you notice about God's character as you read?
5. Why do you think it is important for the Israelites to remember their history at this point in the story?
6. Remembering their history and reflecting on their current condition causes Israel to repent. What does this repentance lead them to do in chapter 10?
7. List the major components of the agreement made by the people.

8. This agreement is a promise to God, but it also says something significant about the Israelites relationship to one another. Why do you think this agreement was important to the *community* of Israel?

10. What are some similar “agreements” that you have with other people/organizations in your life?
 - a. Why is it important to have these agreements either written down or memorialized in some way?
 - b. Have you ever made an “agreement” like this with the Lord? Are you keeping up with it?

Session 6: Chapters 11-13



A Few Good Men

Helpful Hints:

- * The chief officer of the Levites who oversaw their work in Jerusalem was Uzzi, a famous psalmist responsible for twelve of the Bible's psalms.
- * Zerubbabel served as the new governor. The prophet Haggai referred to him as God's "signet ring" who possessed God's divine authority and through whom God would shape Israelite society.
- * Dating back 500 years to the days of King David, it was traditional for the Levites to provide both instrumental (cymbals, harps, lyres) and vocal music for big events, such as

Study Questions:

1. The people who volunteered to live in Jerusalem were commended (11:1-2). Why do you think most people were reluctant to move there?

2. One of the important reforms that Nehemiah made was the exclusion of all Moabites and Ammonites from Jerusalem (13:3). Today we would see that as hateful – why was it important for the Jews to be exclusive, as God commanded?

3. Verses 13:6-12 talk about Nehemiah being away and certain events that occurred. What does this say about the people and their ability to remain faithful?

4. In 13:13, Nehemiah passes the baton of leadership to those he chose to succeed him. Do you think this was difficult for him? Imagine doing something or starting something like Nehemiah did – how would you feel about trusting other people's leadership?

5. Following that, verse 14 expresses Nehemiah's prayer after he has successfully rebuilt the city of God.
 - a. What impresses you about this prayer?

 - b. Do you think you would struggle with pride in Nehemiah's shoes?

 - c. Do you think he did?

6. In 13:15-22, there were some problems related to how the people were treating the Sabbath.
 - a. How do we treat our Sabbath day today?
 - b. What changes, if any, should you make in how your Sabbath is treated?
7. The Jewish Law was very specific with things they could and could not do (such as NOT marrying foreign women). What does man's inability to live up to the law teach us about:
 - a. Ourselves?
 - b. About God?
8. Paul wrote, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly...No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly..." (Rom. 2:28-29)
 - a. What do you think this means?
 - b. Did Nehemiah exhibit this characteristic?

Reflect:

9. Do you see any similarities Israel's situation in the book of Nehemiah and our own in America? Is there anything we, as Americans, can learn from this text?
10. Before Nehemiah dealt with the spiritual renewal of Jerusalem, he dealt with the physical aspects of rebuilding. Do you think that was "coincidence" or strategic? Does this idea have any applications to your life?
11. Finally, Nehemiah means "the Lord is compassionate." How was compassion displayed in this story?

References

(These are great materials for further study)

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