

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-41 Rebuilding Jerusalem

Anyone who has tried building a wall or building a house by hand knows it is hard work. It becomes even harder when other people are hindering instead of helping the building process. Today's lesson shows how one man, with God's help and the help of the community, turned a crisis situation into a success.

The temple was rebuilt, but Jerusalem was still empty. Few people would live there because it was not safe. All the protective walls had been broken down. Reports came back to the Jews left in Persia, "Those who went back to Judah are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned."

One Jewish man, named Nehemiah, served the Persian king as cupbearer. When he heard the news about trouble in Judah, he sat down and wept. For days he mourned, fasted, and prayed. In his prayer, he humbled himself before God, and said, "Remember what you said to Moses, 'If the people of Israel are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there. I will bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' Lord," he prayed, "give me, your servant, favor as I go before the king" (Neh 1:8-11).

One month went by and Nehemiah decided to talk to the king about Judah. He brought wine to the king, as his cupbearer. He was usually cheerful, but today his face was sad. The king asked him, "Why are you so sad? You're not ill, are you?"

Nehemiah was afraid, but said a quiet prayer and replied, "May the king live forever! Why should I not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins? Its walls are broken and its gates burned."

"What do you want from me?" asked the king.

Nehemiah answered, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah so that I can rebuild it."

"How long will your journey take?" asked the king. The queen was listening as well. "When will you get back?" The king agreed to send him to Judah, and he set a time for departure.

Nehemiah continued, "May I have letters to guarantee my safety on the journey? And may I have permission to cut timber in the royal forest for the gates and for my house?" The king agreed, and provided officers and mounted soldiers to go with him to protect him (Neh 2:1-9).

No sooner had Nehemiah arrived in Judah, than two men, Sanballat and Tobiah, opposed him. They were leaders in neighboring regions, and resented the royal favor shown to Nehemiah. They didn't want the Jews to prosper. He waited three days. Then with a few men he rode around the ruins of the city and inspected the broken walls and gates. He did this by night in secret.

The next day he called the Jewish officials together and said, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins. Come, let us rebuild the wall, and we will no longer be in disgrace." Then he

told them how God had blessed him and given him favor with the king of Persia. The officials agreed with Nehemiah, and so the work began.

Families and neighborhoods took responsibility for various gates and adjoining walls. People were working well together under Nehemiah's leadership. One section was even repaired by a local mayor and his daughters.

But the enemies of the Jews were angry. They stood outside and shouted ridicule at the workers. They brought along some of their soldiers to threaten to kill the workers. "What are those feeble Jews doing?" they shouted. "Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to usefulness—the ones that are burned and lie in rubble?" Tobiah jeered, "What are they building—even a fox climbing up on their wall would break it down!" (Neh 4:3)

Nehemiah prayed, "Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on them. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins. They are throwing insults at the workers." The people kept on working until the wall reached half its height. The gaps between the gates were being closed.

Again, Sanballat, Tobiah, and others increased their opposition. They plotted together to fight against the builders and stir up trouble. They decided to sneak in among the workers and kill them. So the Jews posted men to guard the wall day and night. There was so much rubble that the workers became discouraged. Enemies threatened the workers every day. Nehemiah then stationed the people, family by family, in places where the wall was low. They were armed with swords, spears, bows, and armor. They guarded the workers while they worked. The workers themselves carried materials with one hand and a weapon in the other.

Besides enemies from outside, there were troubles among the Jews. Wealthy landowners were mistreating fellow Jews. "We're having to mortgage our fields and vineyards and homes to get enough food to keep from starving. We're even selling our children as slaves to get food. Besides this, we have to pay taxes to the Persian officials."

Nehemiah became angry and called the nobles and officials together. "We did everything we could to redeem our people from slavery, and now you're putting them back into slavery! What you are doing is wrong. Don't you have any reverence for God? You're no better than the godless nations around you! As governor I have loaned all the money I can, and my workers have, too."

"We'll give it all back," the officials and nobles said. "We'll do everything you say" (Neh 5:1-12).

Israel's enemies tried another tactic. "Come down from the city and meet with us so we can talk," they said.

Nehemiah replied, "I'm doing a great work: I cannot go down. Why should the work come to a standstill, just so I can go down to see you?" They even bribed a false prophet to tell Nehemiah that he should hide in the temple to avoid assassination. But Nehemiah sensed that God had not sent this so-called 'prophet.'

Finally, after 52 days the wall and the gates were finished. Israel's enemies heard about it and lost their confidence. They realized that God himself was behind this work (Neh 6:2-15).

Author Eugene Peterson reminds us that “Nehemiah started out as a government worker in the employ of a foreign king. Then he became a building contractor, called in to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His co-worker Ezra was a Bible scholar and teacher. Both were called of God. Neither job—working with stones and mortar or working with Scripture—was more important or holy than the other. Nehemiah needed Ezra, and Ezra needed Nehemiah. God’s people needed the work of both of them.”

This story is **important** because God promised that a remnant of his people would return from exile in Babylon, and now he was keeping his promise. Not only was the temple rebuilt, but the walls and gates of Jerusalem were now back in place. The city could now be protected from its enemies and the homes of the people rebuilt too. This project took the help of men and women, girls and boys. Everyone had a part to play in its success. Nehemiah could not have done it alone.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God was keeping his promise to bring the people back to Judah and establish them once more in the Promised Land. Though they had no king, and were under the authority of the Persian Empire, they had relative safety and peace.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. Why did Nehemiah request permission to leave the capital of Persia and return to Judah? [Pause]
A. If you said, “He knew he was a Jew, and that the future of Jewish exiles included a return to Judah and the restoration of the capital city of Jerusalem,” you are correct.
2. What kind of opposition did Nehemiah face when he arrived and started building? [Pause]
A. If you answered, “Nearby leaders ridiculed the workers, threatened them with soldiers and death, and tried to trick Nehemiah himself,” you answered correctly.
3. How long did it take the exiles to finish rebuilding the Jerusalem walls and its gates? [Pause]
A. If you said, “It took only 52 days to finish the enormous and dangerous task,” you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell someone else the story in your own words as you remember it. Then listen to the story again and re-tell it until you feel sure you are repeating the words and actions correctly. Share the story of Nehemiah with the group of friends that you lead.

The apostle Paul often wrote about the different parts of the human body and compared them to the parts of Christ’s Body, the Church. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us” (Rom 12:4-6). Each part must do its work and each part must value the work of the other parts. No one can say that they do not need someone else in the body. “There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work” (1Cor 12:6). Take the opportunity of showing appreciation to each person in your group. Pray together that each one may be faithful to what God has called them to do.