

New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

Week 5 – Nehemiah 1-4

As we return to sanctuaries and church activities after such a long time being apart from one another and having our routines and practices disrupted, we know that things won't just "go back to normal" overnight. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the unique history of Israel's return to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns following around seventy years of exile in Babylon. The returning and rebuilding processes were messy, to say the least.

We're spending several weeks looking at these two books together, and seeing what the living Word has to teach us from their experiences for our situation today. Today we'll look at chapters 1-4 of Nehemiah, which give us our first introduction to Nehemiah, his background, and his commission to oversee some of the rebuilding efforts in Jerusalem.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11. You'll notice right away that, unlike most of what we've read so far from Ezra and Nehemiah, we are now in first person. Nehemiah hears news that not everything is going smoothly for the Jerusalem rebuild, and he mourns deeply, praying a prayer of repentance. He prays for God to be attentive to this prayer, and to remember God's promise to gather the people back together again. He also asks for God to give him success in what he's about to do in chapter 2.

Nehemiah is a cupbearer, an important officer in the Persian court: taster of the king's wine and guard of the royal apartment. Nehemiah therefore had great personal influence on the king's decisions. This scene takes place in Susa, the winter residence of Persian rulers, like King Artaxerxes here.

- It is common in the Old Testament for the people to hold God accountable to God's covenants and promises. Sometimes – and especially – when the people have messed up and are in the midst of the consequences of their actions, or while lamenting, they will say, "Remember your promise..." What do you ask God to remember? Have you ever prayed for God to remember God's own words?

Read Nehemiah 2:1-6. Nehemiah's mood catches the king's attention, and Artaxerxes asks what Nehemiah needs. Notice that Nehemiah never actually says "Jerusalem"; the city had a notorious reputation for being rebellious. The king knew full well the magnitude of Nehemiah's request, and the time and resources it would take to fulfill it. And Nehemiah knew full well the implications of the king's "yes": Nehemiah was now, in effect, the governor of Judah, alongside other regional governors.

- How does the phrase "the place of my ancestors' graves" hit you? Where would that be for you? Do you feel any responsibility for it?

- What's the biggest "ask" you've ever made? Looking at verse 4, do you ever pray before/during/after stepping out on a limb like this?

Verses 7-10 are Nehemiah's second set of requests, in essence a passport and a requisition for resources. We also meet Nehemiah's new governor neighbors for the first time, who are not very happy about his new position, or the walls he intends to build. Here's the geography of Nehemiah's antagonists: Sanballat of Samaria to the north; Tobiah of Ammon to the east; Geshem of Arabia (v. 19) to the south; and the "Ashdodites" (4.7) to the west. In other words: Judah was surrounded by hostile neighbors who did not want to see Jerusalem refortified. Verses 11-16 shows Nehemiah inspecting the city walls to see how much work has to be done.

- Who or what forces might be opposed to our own reopening and rebuilding processes as the church? (Keep in mind that the fastest growing religious demographic is "no religion," folks who are indifferent more than antagonistic.)

Read 2:19-20.

- How do you respond to critics/hecklers/rivals?

Chapter 3 lists out the work on the various gates and walls around the entire city, and also lists the various citizens sponsoring the work. It is more likely that the people listed were the financiers of the work on those sections than it is that they were personally doing the work themselves. It is noteworthy how many different people participate in the project – almost everyone is pitching in. The east wall needs the most work due to the damage from the Babylonian conquest and the terrain.

- What function will this wall serve? What function do the walls of a church building serve? Literally and figuratively?

Read 4:1-6. As the work on the walls continue, so does the scorn from Jerusalem's neighbors.

- One of the Lutheran mottos is "always reforming." What is our current "building project" on display for the world to see?

Read 4:7-11, 15-20. The Hebrews' attention is now split between rebuilding and defense.

There was strategy involved in this, too, though – here is one commentator's note:

"Nehemiah's tactic seems to have been to mass armed citizens in those places where the wall could be overlooked from outside the city, so as to give to enemy spies the impression of massive defensive forces."

- How well do you multitask? Does it energize you or exhaust you?

- This passage details a lot of the external challenges Jerusalem was facing (the threats and taunts of the neighboring peoples, as well as the rubble and ruins of the former fortifications). What external challenges are we facing right now, both in our post-pandemic reopening and in our overall church re-imagining?

New normals are messy all by themselves as we make adjustments for ourselves, but it gets more complicated when there are also external factors and obstacles. We'll get more of those next time, as well as some internal challenges and obstacles to boot.

For next week, please read Nehemiah 5-7.

Sources

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