

What's the Message – Lesson 84

Our lesson this session teaches us about a faithful worker for the Lord – Nehemiah.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray that in this lesson you will see a model example of a person who was steadfast in his faith, one who was focused on the mission God had given him. Then we ask our Lord that He would strengthen you to grow in the mission He has given to you that you might bring it to a successful conclusion. Amen.

Last time we saw Ezra emphasizing to those who returned from the Babylonian captivity to learn from the mistakes of their past. They had been punished severely for breaking God's covenant. Therefore in the future they would make sure that God's Law was obeyed in every matter, and no failure to do so was too small to be ignored or accepted. In other words, they had become a cold, legalistic community focused on keeping the Law as perfectly as a human could possibly do.

The thought developed that if they could, as a nation, keep the Sabbath perfectly just once, the Messiah would come. Stress was placed on the matter of separation, as Moses had commanded. They would be withdrawn, focusing inward on themselves. It was a sick-room environment, one that could not reach out to be the blessing to others they were called to be. While unattractive to us, it may have been a necessary step in their growth, to protect them from the paganistic influences that swirled around them.

Now Nehemiah comes into our picture, and joins with Ezra some 17 years after his arrival in Jerusalem. We read that Nehemiah was the cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia. This meant that he was the one who would test the wine the king was to drink, to be sure that it had not been poisoned. This, in turn, meant that the king had utmost confidence in the loyalty of Nehemiah, and that Nehemiah had daily access to the king.

One day, one of Nehemiah's brothers returned from a visit to Jerusalem, and gave this report of the situation there: *Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.*

This news greatly disturbed Nehemiah, for it meant that Jerusalem was defenseless, and so he prayed to God confessing that his people had not obeyed the laws God had given Moses. But his prayer also included a request that God would move the king to grant Nehemiah's request. And that is exactly what happened. The next time Nehemiah served the king, his face was notably sad and downfallen. This was readily noticed by the king, who then asked for the cause of this concern.

When the situation was explained to the king, he then asked Nehemiah the specifics of what he wanted. His answer was that he be permitted to return to Jerusalem for a while and restore the walls and gates. The king agreed with the request, but insisted that Nehemiah come back to his position in the palace. He also issued letters to the provincial governors that they must assist in this effort. However, the news that someone from the king had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites was not welcomed by two powerful officials of the region, Sanballat and Tobiah.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah told no one of the purpose of his coming, but went by night to inspect the city walls. After this inspection, he told the priests and officials what the king had made possible for him to do, and they set to work. Groups of workers were assigned sections of the walls and gates to repair and replace.

And work progressed until the wall had reached half its intended height. At this point, however, Sanballat and Tobiah stopped using just words to oppose this construction, and plotted to come and fight against Jerusalem. Finding out about this plot, Nehemiah changed the organization of the work groups. Half would work on the walls, while the other half stood guard with their weapons to defend against any attack.

When the wall had been completed, before the doors of the gates were set in place, Sanballat and Tobiah changed their tactics and tried to get Nehemiah to come to a meeting with them. His reply is recorded in chapter 6, verse 3: *I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?* And then we read in verse 15: *So the wall was completed . . . in 52 days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were*

afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

And with the dedication of the walls, and appointment of singers, gatekeepers, and men to be in charge of the storerooms for contributions, the task Nehemiah had set out to do was essentially accomplished and he returned to king Artaxerxes and his duties there.

There is more to the complete story of Nehemiah, but this brief summary presents the highlights. It is an interesting story and an interesting life. But what does it mean for us? Teacher, what is the message we can take from this?

Let's begin answering your question by taking a closer look at Nehemiah, the person. Where had he been and what had he been doing? First of all, as cup-bearer, he was entrusted with the life of the king of the most powerful empire of his day. This meant he lived in the luxury of the king's palace. And yet, he asked permission to leave this comfortable life and go to a tiny back-woods piece of the empire, where he would face not only challenges, but also outright life-threatening opposition to his efforts. To put it in today's terms, it would be like going from the luxury of a billionaire's mansion in the United States to a small, impoverished and undeveloped third world country where there would be little choice of food, no clean water, and definitely no electricity.

Clearly, it is not a step many people here would seek out and take. So, in one sense, we might say that the story of Nehemiah does not fit us, is not pertinent to us. But we would be mistaken if we made that conclusion. The story of Nehemiah is applicable to everyone of us who has ever experienced challenges and obstacles that made our life miserable, even if only for a short while.

And everyone who has gone through such a period in their life – and overcame it – will tell you that it made them a stronger person. The key point to this story is found in the verse you cited earlier, in chapter 6, verse three: *I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?*

You see, Nehemiah knew he was doing the work God had called him to do, and he was focused on the completion of his task. The question we must answer is this: have we recognized what God has called us to do, and are we focused on doing His will – no matter what it takes – and achieving the goal God has set before us?

Next time we turn to the last book of prophecy in the Old Testament, the book of Malachi.