

God Protects His People Through a Cupbearer

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God provides leaders to strengthen and help protect His people from their enemies.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Nehemiah 1–7

We often look back at personal experiences not just cognitively but emotionally. In fact, the deeper the emotion associated with a memory, the clearer the details become. I can tell you the date, time, location, and a myriad of other random details from the moment I was told my younger brother had been murdered. Even typing this brings the visuals of 2011 back to my eyes, the details back to my mind, and the emotions back to my heart. Such emotional experiences change everything for us—nothing in our lives will ever be the same.



What emotional experiences have changed everything for you?

Group Time

Point 1: God's leader feels burdened for the people and prays (Neh. 1:1-4).

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah was burdened by what he heard about the condition of his people and what he knew about the character, promises, and plan of God. It was a burden that came from the Lord. But Nehemiah didn't just charge out to change things; he petitioned the Lord, seeking His faithfulness and favor to carry out the restoration of his homeland. We shouldn't move too quickly from the simple yet profound truth that Nehemiah was moved deeply and subsequently moved to pray.



Why is prayer the best next step once we have a burden to act for God's glory and the good of others?

Nehemiah knew that if the walls of Jerusalem were to be rebuilt and the people of Judah restored, it would take more than him at the helm—it would take the hand of God. So he fasted and prayed day and night for many days (1:4,6). He didn't go to God one time and then go about his business; rather, he continually went to God as he was doing his business. He modeled a heart of dependence on and subsequent confidence in the Lord that showed up in how he lived and led.



Voices from the Church

"Never underestimate the power of self-deception and the pull toward self-reliance. Apart from the presence and power of God, these are irresistible. Do not trust yourself. Respond to God's call to be your source for everything. If you don't, you will damage God's work by extracting Him from the very thing He initiated in the first place."¹

—Crawford Loritts

Point 2: God's leader unites and strengthens the people for the work (Neh. 2:11-18).

¹¹ So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. ¹² Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. ¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. ¹⁵ Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. ¹⁶ And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." ¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

After securing the favor of King Artaxerxes because God's gracious hand was on him, Nehemiah set off to do what God had laid on his heart to do (Neh. 2:1-10). This scene ends with the people united and strengthened for the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but in order to bring the people together, Nehemiah needed them to know what they were being brought together for.



How does the gospel bring clarity and unity to believers?

Nehemiah's clear communication and call to action was more than a marketing ploy or a tug on the heartstrings; he firmly believed in a greater reality and connected the people to it, to the very heart and mission of God. He gave the residents of Jerusalem an honest assessment of the state of the city: "We're in trouble; we're a disgrace!" But then he moved from what they knew to be true and focused them on the hand and heart of God with his testimony.



What are some ways your strength and work are connected to God and His gospel mission?

Point 3: God's leader protects and encourages the people in the face of opposition (Neh. 4:11-14).

¹¹ And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." ¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us." ¹³ So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. ¹⁴ And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

The workers faced real discouragement and danger. As a godly leader, Nehemiah's response wasn't to ignore their fears or concerns; rather, he **protected them strategically** and **encouraged them deeply**. The goal of his strategic plan of protection was to help alleviate some of the fears that would empty the workers of their courage. Furthermore, Nehemiah encouraged the people with the character of God, leading to confidence in His power and assurance of His presence.



How have you been encouraged by remembering the great and awesome God?

Nehemiah led the people to remember the God on their side, which would encourage the Jews to stand strong for those around them, for their countrymen and their families. Similarly, this is what it means to be the body of Christ. Jesus leads the church as its head, and as believers know and follow their great God and Savior, they fight for the well-being of their brothers and sisters in Christ, pursuing their holiness and encouraging them in the fight against sin. They also join together for the Great Commission, which is beyond any human ability to accomplish.

Body of Christ: The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ's _____ here on earth, with Christ as its head. This means that the church is an _____ of Christ's _____, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission.

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Nehemiah 1

Twice Nehemiah asked the Lord to be attentive to his prayer (vv. 6,11). He was desperate for the Lord's help with the burden on his heart and also on behalf of his suffering people. Yet he grounded these calls for attention not in himself but in who God is (v. 5).

First, the Lord is the God of the heavens. He is the transcendent Creator over all that He has made. He is powerful and sovereign, superior to every other being. Recall Jesus' words when He taught His disciples to pray: "Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven'" (Matt. 6:9). Praying to God should come with a recognition of His heavenly station and sovereignty.

Second, the Lord is the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps His covenant with His people. God is not some far-off deity but up-close, personal, and relational. He is gracious, even to His people who have sinned against Him and disobeyed His commands.

In light of who God is, Nehemiah confessed the sins of his people in hope that the Lord would restore them. Furthermore, he based that hope for restoration on the Lord's own words in the Law of Moses (see Deut. 30:1-5). Finally, he asked for blessing and success as he was about to act on the God-given burden weighing down his heart.

All of Nehemiah's petitions were shaped by his first confession about his good and sovereign God. Adoration of the Lord fuels the faith we express in our prayers to Him.




How are you cultivating a growing view of God as your Father in heaven?

Day 2: Read Nehemiah 2

Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 acknowledged the powerful hand of God in redeeming His people out of slavery in Egypt (1:10). In chapter 2, Nehemiah recognized that God's hand was on him as he spoke to the king regarding his plans for rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem (2:8). The Lord's powerful hand was gracious in steering the heart of the king to be favorable toward Nehemiah and his bold requests. Later, Nehemiah's testimony of God's gracious hand served to strengthen the hands of the people for their work of rebuilding Jerusalem (2:18).


The need for strength presupposes the presence of weakness. In our human value systems, we consider personal weakness to be unbecoming and offensive. Yet weakness is only a liability if we hide it and don't go to God for strength. The picture throughout Scripture is that God generously and graciously gives strength to those who come to Him in faith. The Lord strengthens those who come to Him not for personal power but for grace (Rom. 16:25-27).

 Where in your life do you currently need the grace-filled hand of God to strengthen you?

Day 3: Read Nehemiah 3–4

In Nehemiah 4:4-5 we see Nehemiah's honesty when praying to God in the midst of opposition. The task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem didn't take place in a field of roses but on a rugged hilltop where threats and opposition were regular and increasing. Nehemiah's first response was to pray to the Lord, and he asked for vengeance and judgment. He prayed to God for the exile of his enemies from the promised land. No withholding. No sugarcoating. He honestly laid his heart and emotions before God.

God is not intimidated by our emotions or prayers, and when we withhold these visceral parts of our hearts from the Lord, we actually keep ourselves from intimacy with the Lord. Nehemiah trusted the Lord for their vindication, and so did Jesus (1 Pet. 2:23), but where Nehemiah prayed for judgment, Jesus prayed for forgiveness (Luke 23:34). Let us be honest with the Lord in prayer, and let us also seek to have the mind-set of our Savior in prayer.

 What parts of your heart do you withhold from God in prayer?

Day 4: Read Nehemiah 5

This passage shows that while the work on the walls was progressing, it was taking a severe toll on the people. The difficult situation was exacerbated by injustice among the people of God. Leaders of the people were taking financial advantage of the workers and inhabitants of Jerusalem. The outcry didn't escape Nehemiah's ears, and he confronted the leaders, pointing out the hypocrisy and wickedness of their actions. He indicted them for their lack of fear of God as he stood up for those who were oppressed by them.

Nehemiah's confrontation led to repentance and celebration, but before he acted on what he was hearing, he felt deeply regarding the wrong and considered carefully the course of his actions. We would be wise to follow the pathway he created when surrounded by prevailing and pervasive injustice. We should weep with those who weep and seek the Lord's direction for how to confront evil and bring the light of the gospel and God's justice to the dark places in the world.



In what areas of your community are people crying out for justice?

Day 5: Read Nehemiah 6–7

Not everyone is ecstatic about the work of God being accomplished in the world. In fact, many will try to frustrate His plans, but no one can stand in His way (Job 42:2; Isa. 14:24-27). He is the sovereign God; He is the covenant-keeping God. No one can stop Him from fulfilling His promises and plans.

On numerous occasions, Nehemiah's enemies tried to intimidate him to keep him from his work of leading the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. They planned harm against him; they lied about him; they tried to deceive him. But each attempt failed because Nehemiah relied on the Lord for his strength and wisdom.

When enemies try to frustrate the work of the gospel in your community, what will your response be? The temptation will be to fight back in your own strength, but as Nehemiah prayed, the next step should always be toward the Lord for His strength and wisdom. Our plans may fail, but God's never do; so seek His kingdom and trust Him to fulfill His plans in the face of opposition and intimidation.



How do you need to trust God's sovereign power as you share the gospel in the world?

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Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to

transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatchling that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world's view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ's power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God's faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.