

NOON BIBLE STUDY: NEHEMIAH 1 & 2

INTRODUCTION:

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH IS A COMPANION BOOK TO THE BOOK OF EZRA. IT CONTAINS THE HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE LIVES AND EVENTS OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD AFTER THEY RETURNED TO JUDEA FROM CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON. IN FACT, IN EARLY COPIES OF THE HEBREW BIBLE, EZRA AND NEHEMIAH WERE ONE BOOK.

THE FIRST GROUP OF THE RETURNING REMNANT WAS LED BY ZERUBBABEL AND JESHUA THE HIGH PRIEST. THEY WILL REBUILD THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM AND RESUME WORSHIP OF THE LORD IN THE REGION. YEARS LATER EZRA THE PRIEST AND SCRIBE WILL COME TO JERUSALEM TO HELP INSTRUCT THE PEOPLE IN THE LAW OF MOSES AND GET THEM BACK INTO OBEDIENCE TO THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. WE WILL READ ABOUT A FEW MORE SIGNIFICANT EVENTS OF THIS TIME DURING THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH. MOST NOTABLY, THOUGH THE TEMPLE WAS REBUILT, THE CITY OF JERUSALEM, AND THE WALLS OF THE CITY SPECIFICALLY ARE STILL BROKEN DOWN. NEHEMIAH WILL COME AND OVERSEE THIS PROJECT. HERE ARE SOME OTHER HELPFUL DETAILS:

"NEHEMIAH ARRIVED IN JERUSALEM IN 445 B.C., 13 YEARS AFTER EZRA ARRIVED. HE RETURNED FOR A FURTHER VISIT SOMETIME BETWEEN 433 AND 423 B.C. HE MAY HAVE MADE SEVERAL JOURNEYS BETWEEN PERSIAN CAPITALS AND JERUSALEM IN THIS PERIOD OF 20 YEARS.

"DURING THE TIME OF NEHEMIAH, THE PERSIAN EMPIRE HAD REACHED ITS GREATEST EXTENT, ENGULFING NEARLY THE ENTIRE NEAR EAST. IN 539 B.C. THE PERSIANS UNDER CYRUS THE GREAT DEFEATED THE BABYLONIANS AND ABSORBED THE LANDS OF ISRAEL AND

JUDAH (KNOWN AS BEYOND THE RIVER) INTO HIS EMPIRE. THE NEXT YEAR HE ALLOWED THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH (NOW CALLED JEWS) TO RETURN HOME AND REBUILD THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD. SEVERAL WAVES OF RETURNING JEWS CONTINUED TO RESETTLE IN JUDEA, AND NEHEMIAH WAS GRANTED PERMISSION TO REBUILD JERUSALEM'S RUINED WALLS AROUND 445 B.C. (ESV STUDY BIBLE)

NEHEMIAH IS STILL LIVING IN PERSIA AS THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH OPENS. WE WILL LEARN FROM NEHEMIAH 1:11B THAT HE WAS SERVING AS A CUPBEARER FOR THE KING OF PERSIA. AND WITH THOSE DETAILS IN MIND, WE BEGIN.



NEHEMIAH 1:1-3 - REPORT FROM BACK HOME

NEHEMIAH, LIVING IN PERSIA RECEIVES A REPORT FROM SOME BROTHERS FROM JUDAH ABOUT THE STATE OF JERUSALEM. THE REPORT OF HANANI WAS NOT GOOD. THE PEOPLE ARE IN "GREAT DISTRESS AND REPROACH" AND THE WALL OF JERUSALEM IS "BROKEN DOWN" AND ITS GATES "BURNED WITH FIRE."

THIS REPORT IS HARD TO EMPATHIZE WITH AS WE DO NOT HAVE A COMPARABLE SITUATION IN OUR DAY. PERHAPS IT WOULD BE LIKE LIVING IN EUROPE AND HEARING FROM A BROTHER THAT EVEN THOUGH THE WHITE HOUSE WAS STANDING, WASHINGTON DC WAS IN RUBBLE, THE CAPITOL BUILDING IN RUINS AND ALL OF THE MONUMENTS DESTROYED. IMAGINE HOW THIS NEWS WOULD FEEL.

THE JEWS HAD RETURNED FROM EXILE AND HAD RESUMED SOME SEMBLANCE OF LIFE AGAIN IN JUDEA. BUT THE PHYSICAL CITY IS BROKEN AND THE HEART OF THE PEOPLE SEEMS THAT WAY TOO.

NEHEMIAH 1:4-11 - NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE

NEHEMIAH IS DEVASTATED AND TURNS HIS DEVASTATION TO PRAYER. WE SAW DANIEL DO THE SAME THING (DANIEL 9) AND EZRA TOO (EZRA 9). THIS SEEMS TO BE A GOOD MODEL FOR MEN AND WOMEN OF FAITH. BAD NEWS? -- PRAY. TROUBLED IN YOUR SOUL? -- PRAY. UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO? -- PRAY. REALIZED YOU HAVE STRAYED FROM GOD? -- PRAY.

HIS PRAYER ENDS WITH A REQUEST TO BE SHOWN FAVOR BEFORE "THIS MAN" - THE KING OF PERSIA.

HERE ARE A TWO ELEMENTS OF HIS PRAYER THAT CAN HELP US TODAY:

FIRST, NEHEMIAH CONSIDERS THAT THE REASON FOR THE LACK OF PROGRESS IN THE CITY AND MISSING JOY OF THE PEOPLE IS POTENTIALLY A RESULT OF THEIR SIN IN THE PAST - NEGLECTING AND BREAKING THE COVENANT WITH THE LORD. HE CONFESSES HIS SIN AND THE SIN OF HIS FATHER'S HOUSE (AKA THE GENERATION BEFORE HIS) ON BEHALF OF THE NATION. HE DOESN'T BLAME GOD. HE ISN'T SHOCKED THAT THINGS ARE GOING PERFECTLY FOR THEM SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE "BELIEVERS". HE HUMBLER HIMSELF AND ASKS GOD FOR FORGIVENESS FOR HIS ROLE IN THIS MESS.

SECONDLY, NEHEMIAH RECOUNTS THE PROMISES OF GOD TO HIMSELF AND ACTUALLY TO GOD AS WELL. HE REMEMBERS THE WORDS OF GOD AND APPEALS TO THE CHARACTER OF THE LORD AS HE PRAYS FOR HELP. HE ESSENTIALLY SAYS *"LORD, YOU SAID YOU WOULD FORGIVE US IF WE SOUGHT YOUR FACE! YOU SAID YOU WOULD RETURN TO US IF WE RETURNED TO YOU! ANSWERING THIS PRAYER WILL GIVE YOU GLORY! YOU SAID YOU WERE THE MERCIFUL GOD - I'M APPEALING TO THAT MERCY NOW!"* THIS ISN'T ARROGANT ASSUMPTIVE PRAYER BUT RATHER RECOGNIZING THAT WE CAN AND SHOULD PRAY ACCORDING TO WHAT GOD HAS ALREADY SAID HE WILL DO.

NEHEMIAH 2:1-5 - NEHEMIAH'S REQUEST

NEHEMIAH WAS SERVING AS THE "CUPBEARER" FOR THE KING OF PERSIA (1:11). THIS ROLE WAS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE AND GAVE NEHEMIAH ACCESS REGULARLY TO THE KING. APPARENTLY THE SADNESS THAT NEHEMIAH WAS SHOWING THIS ONE DAY (A FEW MONTHS AFTER CHAPTER 1) WAS UNUSUAL AND SO IT PROMPTED THE KING TO INQUIRE AS TO WHY NEHEMIAH WAS SAD. THIS WAS HIS OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK ABOUT HOW HIS HEART WAS HEAVY BECAUSE OF THE STATE OF JERUSALEM.

NEHEMIAH 2:6-8 - THE KING'S REPLY

THE KING INQUIRES HOW LONG NEHEMIAH WILL BE GONE FOR AND THEN AGREES TO LET NEHEMIAH MAKE THE TRIP TO JERUSALEM. NEHEMIAH GIVES CREDIT TO THIS FAVORABLE OUTCOME TO THE FACT THAT "THE GOOD HAND OF MY GOD WAS UPON ME (V. 8)."

NEHEMIAH 2:9-11 - NEHEMIAH'S APPROACH TO JERUSALEM

NEHEMIAH MAKES HIS WAY TOWARDS JERUSALEM UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE KING. VERSE 10 INTRODUCES US TO SOME KEY CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY - SANBALLAT AND TOBIAH. THESE TWO MEN WILL LEAD OPPOSITION TO NEHEMIAH AND HIS PLAN. THEY REPRESENT THE ADVERSARIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE AND THE MAIN VOICE OF DISCOURAGEMENT NEHEMIAH WILL HAVE TO FIGHT.

"SANBALLAT THE HORONITE IS KNOWN FROM OTHER SOURCES TO HAVE BEEN GOVERNOR OF SAMARIA AT A LATER TIME, AND MAY BE SO ALREADY. HIS BABYLONIAN NAME DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN THAT HE WAS BABYLONIAN; HE PROBABLY CAME FROM UPPER OR LOWER BETH-HORON NEAR JERUSALEM (JOSH. 16:3, 5). TOBIAH IS A JEWISH NAME, YET AS AN AMMONITE HE BELONGS TO A PEOPLE THAT WAS ONE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORIC ENEMIES (2 SAM. 10:1-11). THE TERM SERVANT HERE MAY MEAN THAT HE IS AN OFFICIAL, ALSO FROM SAMARIA. THESE SAMARIANS APPARENTLY WANTED TO ASSERT THEIR AUTHORITY IN JUDAH." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, NEHEMIAH 2:10)

NEHEMIAH 2:12-16 - NEHEMIAH'S NIGHT SURVEY

AFTER THREE DAYS IN JERUSALEM, NEHEMIAH AND A FEW OTHER MEN GO OUT TO INSPECT JERUSALEM'S WALLS. HE HAD NOT TOLD ANYONE WHY HE WAS IN JERUSALEM (V. 12).

NEHEMIAH 2:17-20 - NEHEMIAH REVEALS HIS PLAN

AFTER A FIRST HAND SURVEY OF THE BROKEN WALLS, NEHEMIAH TELLS THE OTHER LEADERS IN JERUSALEM THAT HE WANTS TO REBUILD THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM. HIS WORDS ARE VERY ENCOURAGING ("COME, LET US REBUILD...SO WE WILL END THIS DISGRACE, 2:17 NLT) AND HE SHARES WITH THE GROUP HOW THE LORD HAS ALREADY WORKED WITH THE SITUATION WITH THE KING. AND SO THE PEOPLE JOIN IN!

YET ALMOST IMMEDIATELY THESE ADVERSARIAL VOICES START TO MOCK (AND ISN'T THAT HOW THE ENEMY TRIES TO WORK?!). SANBALLAT AND TOBIAH MOCK AND ACCUSE THE PEOPLE OF REBELLION AGAINST THE KING.

BUT NEHEMIAH RESPONDS WITH POWERFUL TRUTH:

"THE GOD OF HEAVEN WILL HELP US SUCCEED. WE, HIS SERVANTS, WILL START REBUILDING THIS WALL." (NEH 2:20, NLT)

IN OTHER WORDS, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THERE WAS A BIG PROJECT AHEAD OF THEM, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY HAD OPPOSITION TO THEIR WORK FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, THEY WERE GOING TO PROCEED IN DOING THE LORD'S WORK. IN OTHER WORDS:

"IF GOD IS FOR US, WHO IS AGAINST US?" (ROMANS 8:31B)

AND WITH THIS WE SEE AN EARLY GLIMPSE OF THE GREAT LEADER NEHEMIAH WILL BE. HE IS NOT HASTY IN HIS ROLE - HE FIRST QUIETLY EXAMINES THE PROBLEM (THE BROKEN WALL) AND COUNTS THE COST. HE THEN CHARGES THE PEOPLE THAT IT'S TIME FOR THEM TO "RISE UP" (AND BUILD, NEH 2:18, ESV). HE TELLS THE PEOPLE WHAT THE LORD HAS ALREADY WORKED (IN THIS CASE THROUGH THE FAVOR OF THE KING) TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO JOIN IN. AND THEN HE IS NOT DETERRED BY ATTEMPTS TO DISCOURAGE OR RESIST BUT PUSHES ON KNOWING THAT IT IS GOD THAT WILL GIVE HIM THE VICTORY IN THE END.

NEHEMIAH IS A MAN WITH A TENDER HEART, A MAN OF PRAYER, COURAGE, WISDOM, CONFIDENCE AND FAITH. AND HIS RESPONSE AND BEHAVIOR IN THIS MOMENT IS A GOOD EXAMPLE FOR US TO FOLLOW TODAY.