

April 18 Lesson 7 (NIV)

THE RESTORING BUILDER

DEVOTIONAL READING: Daniel 9:4–6, 15–19

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 2:11–20; 13:1–22

NEHEMIAH 2:11–20

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

KEY VERSE

I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

—Nehemiah 2:17

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

Unit 2: Prophets of Restoration

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the results of Nehemiah's nighttime excursion around Jerusalem.
2. Explain why faith in the Lord and careful planning are not necessarily contradictory.
3. Prepare a testimony of how God's hand has been at work in his or her life.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Upgrading the Ugly
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Surveying the City (Nehemiah 2:11–16)
 - A. Arriving and Waiting (v. 11)
 - B. Diagnosing the Damage (v. 12–16)
Assessing the Situation
- II. Summoning the Leaders (Nehemiah 2:17–18)
 - A. Encouragement to Build (v. 17)
 - B. Evidence of God's Hand (v. 18)
The Importance of Buy-In
- III. Scorning the Critics (Nehemiah 2:19–20)
 - A. Words of Contempt (v. 19)
 - B. Words of Conviction (v. 20)

Conclusion

- A. Good Hands
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Ammonite *Am-un-ite*.

Artaxerxes *Are-tuh-zerk-seez*.

Babylonian *Bab-ih-low-nee-un*.

Cyrus *Sigh-russ*.

Geshem *Gee-shem* (*G* as in *get*).

HananiHuh-*nay*-nye.

HoroniteHor-oh-night.

NehemiahNee-huh-**my**-uh.

PersiaPer-zhuh.

SanballatSan-*bal*-ut.

SusaSoo-suh.

TobiahToe-*bye*-uh.

UzziahUh-*zye*-uh.

Introduction

A. Upgrading the Ugly

In my city, I occasionally see signs that read, “We Buy Ugly Houses.” Apparently the persons or companies who post these signs are interested in renovating “ugly houses” in order to sell them for a profit. The original home was undervalued because of its various flaws; the refinished product is intended to have good return on investment. The proliferation of television shows, magazine articles, and websites devoted to “flipping” houses demonstrates the wide appeal of this business.

Long ago, Nehemiah was interested in renovating an “ugly city,” the once great city of Jerusalem. He wanted to address a condition of disrepair and confusion in Jerusalem, but his deeper motives and his leadership skill in so doing still have much to teach us today.

B. Lesson Context

Jerusalem had been a distinguished city, the political and spiritual capital of the nation of Israel under David’s leadership (1 Chronicles 11:4–9; 15). Solomon added to its greatness by the magnificent temple that he built there (2 Chronicles 3). But following the division of the nation and the rise of ungodly kings who allowed idolatry and accompanying abhorrent practices to flourish in the land, Jerusalem became filled with such wickedness and evil that the judgment of God fell on it. In 586 BC the Babylonians finally breached the city walls, following a siege of 18 months (see lesson 8). The city’s state of massive disrepair still existed in the time of Nehemiah, some 140 years later.

Nehemiah was cupbearer to Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 1:11), king of the Persians, who ruled from 465 to 425 BC. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians in 539 BC. Cyrus, ruler of the Persians at the time, had permitted any of the Jews who desired to do so to return to their home.

Approximately 50,000 did (Ezra 2:64–65), but there were those, such as members of Nehemiah’s family, who chose to remain in Persia.

Nehemiah 1 describes what happened in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, which would have been 445 BC. Nehemiah received news from his brother, Hanani, of the sad state of affairs back home in Jerusalem:

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 (Nehemiah 1:3).

Deeply troubled over such disheartening conditions, Nehemiah responded with tears, fasting, and fervent prayer (1:4). He confessed his own sins and the sins of his fellow Jews and begged the Lord to honor his promise to bless his people if they turned from their sinful ways (1:5–10).

Nehemiah then asked the Lord that he might receive favor from the king (Nehemiah 1:11). That involved Artaxerxes’s granting permission to Nehemiah to travel to his homeland of Judah and lead an effort to repair the wall and the gates of his beloved city of Jerusalem (2:1–9).

Nehemiah’s request included protection for the journey (contrast Ezra 8:22) and also provision of supplies needed for the projects that were planned. While the king did indeed grant Nehemiah’s request, Nehemiah knew that any favor he had been shown had come from the Lord to whom he had prayed (2:4) and whose “gracious hand” (2:8) would be seen time and again in the upcoming endeavors.

When Nehemiah arrived, he gave the territory administrators the letters provided by King Artaxerxes that verified the king’s support for Nehemiah’s undertaking. The letters also confirmed the king’s allocation of the resources needed for the rebuilding efforts (Nehemiah 2:7–9).

I. Surveying the City

(NEHEMIAH 2:11–16)

A. Arriving and Waiting (v. 11)

11. I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days

The journey from Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire, to *Jerusalem* was nearly 1,100 miles. A daylight walking pace of two miles per hour for six days per week (resting on the Sabbath) means a trip of about three months’ duration. The *three days* therefore provided some needed rest for Nehemiah after such a long journey. The break also gave him the opportunity to plan his strategy, an approach he would use again before confronting another problem (Nehemiah 5:6–7).

B. Diagnosing the Damage (vv. 12–16)

12. I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

Nehemiah was aware of the fact that not everyone in the territory was on board with what he was planning to do (Nehemiah 2:10). Thus an excursion by *night* under cover of darkness was

most likely the best way to examine the city and assess what needed to be done. Only a *few others* needed to accompany Nehemiah on such a mission; perhaps they were residents of Jerusalem who knew the layout of the city and could serve as guides. Or they might have been trusted advisers who had also traveled from Persia and could offer wise counsel. There was also no need for a large number of animals, whose sound might attract attention to the group (see 2:14, below).

Nehemiah was secretive about his intention to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and gates. Disclosing his plans too early could put the entire enterprise in jeopardy, so Nehemiah bided his time to gather information. His sense of appropriate timing was a quality that made Nehemiah a capable leader.

13. By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.

It appears that Nehemiah did not make a complete circuit of Jerusalem but only of the southern area (see Nehemiah 2:14–15, below). At the same time, locating precisely some of the places cited is difficult. *The Valley Gate* appears to have been at the southwestern side of Jerusalem. Second Chronicles 26:9 records that King Uzziah of Judah built a tower there. Nehemiah 3:13 notes the repairs done to the gate itself and this section of the wall and includes the detail that it covered “a thousand cubits” (or 1,500 feet).

The location of *the Jackal Well* is disputed, though it is often identified with the Pool of Siloam on Jerusalem's southern side. *The Dung Gate* may describe the gate leading to the trash dump in the Hinnom Valley, to the south of Jerusalem. This also required repair (Nehemiah 3:14).

The scene before Nehemiah was very much in keeping with what his brother Hanani had described to him (Nehemiah 1:3). Nehemiah's survey of the walls and gates must have disturbed him. It's one thing to hear a report of destruction (see Lesson Context) and quite another to see it firsthand.

14. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through;

The Fountain Gate was possibly situated in the southeastern wall of Jerusalem. *The King's Pool* may have been a part of King Hezekiah's project to bring water into the city to improve its odds of survival in a prolonged siege (2 Kings 20:20). The rubble at the pool was so excessive that the *mount* Nehemiah was riding could not *get through*. This detail emphasizes the enormity of the devastation he found in Jerusalem.

15. so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.

The valley mentioned here is probably the Kidron, a name also attached to the accompanying brook east of Jerusalem. Nehemiah thus retraced his path, going *back to the Valley Gate* where he started (Nehemiah 2:13).

16. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

This verse again highlights the secrecy of Nehemiah's journey by night (compare Nehemiah 2:12). In these initial planning stages, there was wisdom in gathering information and considering

his plans carefully without questioning a large group of people about the strategy needed to address the required repairs. To have done the latter may have resulted in immediate negativity—a “we can’t do that” attitude. See the better approach, next.

II. Summoning the Leaders

(NEHEMIAH 2:17–18)

A. Encouragement to Build (v. 17)

17. Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”

Nothing is said about the span of time between Nehemiah’s excursion and his meeting with the groups named in the previous verse. Most likely he convened them as soon as he could, given that the condition of *the wall* left *Jerusalem* vulnerable to attack.

There was an important emotional reason to have strong walls in a city, too. The city was an object of derision and mockery (a *disgrace*) in its current state (compare 2 Chronicles 7:19–22; Psalm 44:13–14). Jerusalem was the holy city, the site of God’s temple. It needed to be maintained in a way appropriate to this distinction. Thus Nehemiah described the decrepit state of Jerusalem as something that was not only troubling to the residents of the city but also disdainful to outsiders.

Nehemiah used the first-person plural pronouns *we* and *us*. He identified with those who were concerned about the dismal condition of Jerusalem. The solution as he saw it was of practical value. Rebuilding *the wall* offered protection as well as going a long way toward rehabilitating the feeling that Jerusalem itself was in ruins. Three considerations determined where ancient cities were built: (1) access to water, (2) access to trade routes, and (3) defensibility. A great city needed all three! A city without walls was vulnerable to enemy armies. Nehemiah 13:15–22 reveals a way that the completed walls would help the residents of the city obey God.

B. Evidence of God’s Hand (v. 18)

18a. I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

Nehemiah was speaking to people who perhaps had become rather skeptical concerning God’s plan and purpose for them and for the city of Jerusalem. Over the years since the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon, various attempts to rebuild Jerusalem had been thwarted (see Ezra 4).

At first Nehemiah’s proposal may have sounded like just another plan that would meet with failure and simply add to the people’s disillusionment. But when he spoke of *the gracious hand of my God on me*, he offered reason for new hope of success. Throughout the Old Testament, the mention of God’s hand represents the work that God does in the world (examples: Exodus 6:1; Joshua 4:24; Isaiah 41:17–20).

When Nehemiah came to the Lord in prayer after hearing of the sad condition of Jerusalem, he noted how the Lord had redeemed the covenant people, of whom Nehemiah was a part, with his “mighty hand” (Nehemiah 1:10). Nehemiah was able to provide evidence that God’s hand was at work on his people’s behalf. Previous rebuilding had been stymied by opposition (Ezra 4). But at this time Artaxerxes had given his approval and full support to the work in Jerusalem. Even so, the true king, the King of kings, was the one in ultimate control of his people’s welfare.

18b. They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

The people’s response must have emboldened Nehemiah and lifted his spirits. The fact of God’s powerful hand leading and blessing does not eliminate the need for human hands to do their part. He prefers to work through people instead of just accomplishing his purposes all on his own (compare and contrast Isaiah 6:8; Ezekiel 22:30).

We also note that group opinion that swings one way can just as quickly go the other, as in Nehemiah 4:10.

III. Scorning the Critics

(NEHEMIAH 2:19–20)

A. Words of Contempt (v. 19)

19. But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?”

Sanballat the Horonite and *Tobiah the Ammonite official* have already been introduced as villains (see Nehemiah 2:10). Any worthwhile undertaking for the Lord is bound to encounter opposition of some kind. Consensus is desirable but is not always achieved (compare Ezra 10:15).

The word *Horonite* may indicate that Sanballat is from Beth Horon, a town about 12 miles from Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 6:68). Though likely part of the northern Israelite tribe of Ephraim, he always opposed Nehemiah’s work on behalf of Judah and Jerusalem (example: Nehemiah 6). *The Ammonite* people, located east of the Jordan River, had long been enemies of Israel (example: Deuteronomy 23:3–4), and *Tobiah* was no exception. He was related by marriage to some of Nehemiah’s companions and had many supporters among the Jews (Nehemiah 6:17–19; see lesson 6).

Arabians were also a Transjordan people. During the Persian period (539–331 BC), they engaged in much trade and commerce. *Geshem* may have been opposed to any program promoting the welfare of the Jews if he saw it as a threat to his business dealings (vested interests).

An accusation of rebelling *against the king* had succeeded in halting an earlier rebuilding effort (Ezra 4). But Nehemiah had the full backing of the king. He knew the claims of his critics were baseless.

B. Words of Conviction (v. 20)

20a. I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding,

There is no record of Nehemiah's mentioning King Artaxerxes in his reply to the scoffing of his enemies. Instead, he appealed to a higher court: *the God of heaven*. Since God had guided Nehemiah to this point, Nehemiah knew that God was not going to abandon him or the people who had committed themselves to *start rebuilding*.

20b. "but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

The Hebrew word translated *share* is used to refer to God's division of the promised land among the tribes of Israel (examples: Joshua 14:4; 18:5; 19:9). Any portion Sanballat had had as an Israelite was revoked when God sent the 10 northern tribes into exile for their faithlessness (2 Kings 17:6–23; compare Ezra 4:3; Acts 8:21).

Regarding the idea of *historic right*, the opponents did not have the historical ties to the city that Nehemiah and his coworkers did. They had no legal *claim* (compare 2 Samuel 19:28) to interfere with what Nehemiah was doing. With the king's complete support, Nehemiah boldly drew a clear line that would remain intact despite any continued resistance that his enemies directed his way (Nehemiah 4; 6, etc.).

Conclusion

A. Good Hands

Often when asking for help, we say, "Give me a hand with this." An often told tale illustrates the wisdom of asking for help when a task is too big for us.

As the story goes, a father watched through the kitchen window as his small son tried to move a large rock in the yard. The boy couldn't get quite enough leverage to tip the rock over.

At one point the father came outside and asked the boy, "Can't you lift the rock?"

"No, Dad, I just can't do it."

"Are you using all the strength you have?"

The boy responded, "Yes, but I just can't move it."

The father replied, "No, you're not using *all* the strength you have because you haven't asked me to help."

Nehemiah was going to have, not just one rock, but a whole pile of rocks and rubble to move in order to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. But heavenly and earthly hands would give him more than enough help.

Nehemiah could have sung, as a precursor to the old hymn, "He's got the whole wall in his hands." Like the little boy, our efforts matter, but they will not succeed all on their own. If we ask our Father for help, he has us and every task he gives us in his hands as well. Fervent prayer on the part of Nehemiah played a vital part (Nehemiah 1:4–6, 11; 2:4; 4:9; 6:14).

B. Prayer

God, give us your powerful hand! Without it we are weak; with it we have strength to overcome any obstacle. Let us rise up and build your church, confident in your promise to be with us. May our hands be strengthened for the work to which you have called us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Pray for God's powerful hand to be at work in your life daily.¹

¹ Redford, D., Boatman, C. R., Taylor, M. A., & Hee, S. (2021). [The Restoring Builder](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, & M. K. Williams (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2020–2021* (Vol. 27, pp. 281–287). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.