

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE FOR EMBRACE TOMORROW

CHURCH PARTICIPATION NEHEMIAH 2:11-20 AND 3:1-32

MAIN POINT

God has designed the church to be dependent upon one another. When accomplishing anything great, it will be done together.

INTRODUCTION

What goals or aspirations have you set for you or your family for this year?

What steps are you taking to meet those goals? What challenges do you expect to face?

It's one thing to have dreams or aspirations of great things; it's another thing to have and implement a plan for meeting those goals. Often, when we set out to achieve new things, we come across many obstacles: some of which we anticipated, others we did not.

UNDERSTANDING

READ NEHEMIAH 2:11-16.

What did Nehemiah gain from his undercover mission to inspect the walls of Jerusalem? Why do you think Nehemiah said nothing to those who would be doing the work until he had inspected the walls himself?

How would this endeavor have benefited Nehemiah's vision casting? What is the takeaway for us if we as individuals or a church have a vision to communicate to others?

Nehemiah came in and inspected what reality was. Given Nehemiah's commitment to prayer, we can imagine him talking with God as he surveyed the situation. He wanted to see with his eyes and hear with his ears exactly what God was calling him to do. Once he knew what reality was, he cast a vision for what the future could look like. Nehemiah probably believed that those who would be doing the work would want to know he had thought through everything carefully. Nehemiah had done so, but his final inspection of the walls provided him further important information to finalize his plans. He was about to face the biggest leadership challenge of his life.

READ NEHEMIAH 2:17-18.

How did Nehemiah find his purpose and calling to rebuild Jerusalem (vv. 17-18)?

What points did Nehemiah make publicly to rally the people to rebuild? Which one do you find most convincing?

What are the key points of Nehemiah's message (both his words and the way he lived) that stand out to you? What would a similar message to our world sound and look like?

Nehemiah enlisted the necessary support by use of the term "we". By doing so, he identified with and made himself part of those he wished to enlist in the project. The work required a team effort—something that would honor God and bring blessing to all the Israelites in the city, not merely to Nehemiah. God's leader mentioned the trouble in which the people found themselves. Without adequate protection and security, they were highly vulnerable to enemy attack. Nehemiah painted the vivid picture of Jerusalem in ruins along with its burned gates, thus appealing to the people's senses of loyalty and obligation toward the city of their ancestors. He encouraged them to help rebuild Jerusalem's wall. Only then would Jerusalem's citizens no longer be a disgrace.

What can we learn from Nehemiah about the importance of building teamwork as we approach God's work?

Because he heard from God, Nehemiah could speak for God. Because he heard from God, his vision was clear, compelling, and included everyone. His vision was right on, and so was his method for reaching his vision. He wasn't trusting his own leadership or the skills of the people. He was trusting God alone. However, any vision of God is going to come with some opposition. It's not always as easy as it seems to live the vision God has given to you. Even Nehemiah experienced opposition to his God-centered vision.

READ NEHEMIAH 2:19-20.

Nehemiah completed an inspection of Jerusalem's broken-down walls and encouraged the city's leadership and other workers to follow him in rebuilding them (see 2:11-18). However, Nehemiah's enemies did not share his enthusiasm. Sanballat, whom an extra-biblical inscription says was the governor of Samaria, did not appreciate the Jews' plans. He likely feared Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem would interfere with his own power and economic interests.

What charge did Nehemiah's detractors bring against him? Was this charge valid? Why, or why not?

How did Nehemiah respond to his opposition (v. 20)? What fact did he leave out, even though it would have likely swayed the opinion of his accusers?

The opposition accused Nehemiah of rebelling against the king, but Nehemiah surprisingly didn't mention the king's approval of his work when he responded to them. Instead, his reply voiced his confidence in the God of heaven. The Lord had laid Jerusalem on Nehemiah's heart. When he had prayed earlier (see 1:5-11), God in His timing had given Nehemiah an opportunity to speak to the king (see 2:1-8). In light of God's clear guidance so far, Nehemiah was confident God would grant him and the Judeans success.

What is a contemporary example of those who would attempt to intimidate or criticize us with false accusations in our service to God? How can our confidence in God help us to stand firm against these false accusations?

READ NEHEMIAH 3:1-32.

The walls served as a visual reminder to God's people that they had been restored back to Him. As a Christian today, where do you look for the reminder of your restoration and your security? Read Romans 5:5-11 for insight.

What was the people's response to Nehemiah's challenge? What does this reveal about the vision he cast?

How many professional groups or classes of the Jewish community participated in Nehemiah's work? What is the lesson for us as a church?

This chapter also contains important teachings for Christians today. One reason the work progressed was that everyone took part, from rulers and temple personnel to merchants and citizens with their families. Even the people from the villages who lived a distance from Jerusalem also helped. They felt part of the community, even though they personally received fewer direct benefits. Even their enemies were amazed at the results. In order not only to survive but also to be effective in the midst of opposition from a hostile secular culture, the church must exhibit a cooperative spirit.

APPLICATION

Identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to your life. What do the people of our community need from our church?

How might God use me to help meet the needs of people in our community? How might God use us as a group?

What needs does our church have? How might God use me to meet those needs?

PRAY

Thank God for your church family. Ask Him to continue to bless our church and make its members more like Jesus. Ask God to give us a heart to love and serve the community around us and one another.

COMMENTARY

NEHEMIAH 2:17-20

2:17 -18. Nehemiah was able to discern the proper time to present the building project, and he knew how to motivate the leaders and the people. He used four incentives: (1) He identified with the people; he spoke of “the trouble we are in.” (2) He stressed the seriousness of the situation. A leader must be realistic and honestly assess the facts. People will have confidence in such a leader. (3) Nehemiah was committed to taking definite action. (4) He used his personal testimony of God’s grace to assure them of God’s favor on the project (v. 18). A Christian leader must encourage trust in God by leading in faith as well as in action.

If we analyze the social processes in Nehemiah, we can see that chaps. 1–2 describe the “innovation process.” When Nehemiah was in Susa and heard of the situation in Jerusalem, his anguish over the deplorable condition of God’s people and his desire for God’s glory resulted in a spiritual experience that gave him a new vision of what God desired for His people in Judah. He set about to transform his vision into social reality. Part of that task was sharing his vision with the community and motivating the people to work together to change the situation.

As another sign of God’s “gracious hand” at work, the leaders and people responded to Nehemiah. He came to them with compassion, realism, conviction, and faith; thus God used him to communicate his own vision and motivate the people to begin the “good work.”

2:19-20. These enemies, especially Sanballat and Tobiah, knew that Nehemiah had credentials from the king. Thus they tried to stop the work by disheartening the people who were building. They used ridicule as their tool. The enemies even accused the Jews of rebellion, which would have brought back memories of the official action against Jerusalem noted in Ezra 4:12.

Nehemiah’s enemies were well informed of his activities, no doubt by friends within Jerusalem. Apparently both Sanballat and Tobiah considered themselves Yahwists, if we can judge by the names of their children; but they were syncretistic. Such a mixture of worship of Yahweh along with adherence to other gods and pagan customs really was paganism. Nehemiah would not accept their brand of syncretistic Yahwism but testified that God would prosper the Jews who served Him alone. Some of the Jewish families, however, did form relationships with those of mixed allegiance, and they faced the anger of Nehemiah. Later one of Sanballat’s daughters was married to a member of the Jewish high priest’s family (see Neh. 13:28).

2:19. “Geshem” was a powerful chieftain of Qedar in northwest Arabia. He was somewhat under the control of the Persians but had great freedom to govern over a confederation of Arab tribes that included Edom and the southern part of Judah.

2:20. For the sake of the workers, Nehemiah's response to this first oppositional strategy was important. His answer had three parts: (1) He did not speak of his authority or the king's but of his trust in "the God of heaven." (2) Nehemiah advised his people to ignore the ridicule and threats and simply work. (3) He refused to compromise. He denied his opponents a share in the work, the land, or the worship of the Jewish community.

NEHEMIAH 3:1-32

With the conclusion of chapter 2, the first-person narrative of Nehemiah ends and does not resume until 4:1. Chapter 3, possibly written by someone other than Nehemiah, is a third -person account of the completion of the construction and the installation of the doors. Yet 6:1 and 7:1 explicitly state that the doors in the gates had not yet been hung. This chapter may have been an official archive that was kept in the temple and was incorporated into the book of Nehemiah, at a later date and out of sequence, because of its detailed description of the reconstruction.

3:1. Only here in this chapter is the dedication of the gate or the walls mentioned, a significant event because Eliashib the high priest led it. This marked the beginning of the endeavor and emphasized the priests' dependence on God for the successful completion of the project.

3:4-5. In verses 1-3 the workers are described as "building" the wall and gates while in most of the chapter the builders made repairs. This may suggest that the wall in the northern section near the Sheep Gate was so devastated that they had to start from scratch.

3:12. The work crew of Shallum son of Hallohesh was unique. Possibly he had no sons, but his family still joined in the work through the labor of his daughters.

3:15. This verse details reconstruction of the southeast corner of the city. The Pool of Shelah is probably the same as the King's Pool (see 2:14).

3:16. The text continues to describe construction from south to north along the eastern side of the city. The fact that the descriptions are not of gates and prominent places along the wall but locations within the city may be indirect evidence that Nehemiah abandoned the eighth-century wall lower down the valley and established a new wall closer to the summit (2:14).

3:19. The Angle may refer to a prominent place where the wall changed direction. However, the term appears again (vv. 24 -25) in what would seem to be another location. Possibly the "Angle" was a natural feature such as a hillside or escarpment.

3:26-27. The term Ophel means "swelling" and is used here to describe a hill. It can refer to the entire southeastern hill of the ancient City of David or, as in this verse, to the area where the palace and the temple were situated. The Water Gate presumably provided access to the spring of Gihon. It was by the "Water Gate" that Nehemiah later gathered the people for a public reading of the Torah (8:1).

3:28. The prophet Jeremiah's reference to the Horse Gate (see Jer. 31:40) might suggest it was a gate on the eastern wall of the city, but the "Horses Gate" mentioned in 2 Chronicles 23:15 was the gate at the entrance to the palace/temple complex within the city.

3:29. The East Gate was not in the outer city wall but led into the temple complex (see Ezek. 40:6). Shemaiah repaired the section of the wall near where he served.

3:31. The Inspection Gate (or the "Muster Gate" or the "Parade Gate") was probably on the northeast corner of the city wall. It may be identical to the Benjamin Gate where the prophet Jeremiah was arrested (see Jer. 37:13).