

# Explore the Bible Series for December 31: Working together to accomplish God's will

December 22, 2006

Posted: 12/22/06

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## Working together to accomplish God's will

- Nehemiah 1.1-11; 2:1-20; 3.1-32

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The returning Jews showed spiritual lethargy and a coldhearted indifference toward God. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and successfully led a 52-day rebuilding of the wall. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the people were motivated to work cooperatively.

**Heartbreaking news (Nehemiah 1:1-11)**

Nehemiah, whose name means "the Lord comforts," was a highly placed statesman associated with Ezra in the work of reestablishing the people of Judah in the Promised Land. The month Chislev corresponds to our November-December (Ezra 10:9). "The 20th year" (444 B.C.) refers to the

20th year of the rule of Artaxerxes (464-424 B.C.). Artaxerxes was the same Persian king who had commissioned Ezra to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1). “Shushan the palace” was about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf, in present day Iran.



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Nehemiah’s brother, Hanani, had visited Jerusalem and returned to Shushan. This journey, which covered nearly a thousand miles one way, would probably have taken at least four months. Nehemiah was concerned about the Jewish people and Jerusalem.

Life was difficult for the people in Jerusalem. This difficulty was due in large part to the condition of “the wall in Jerusalem.” In the ancient Middle East, a city wall provided protection for the inhabitants. The condition of a city wall also was seen as an indication of the strength of the people’s gods. The ruined condition of the wall of Jerusalem reflected badly on God’s name.

Nehemiah was deeply disturbed. Without a wall, Jerusalem was vulnerable to attack. The riches of the temple treasury (Ezra 8:15-36) would have been quite a temptation for Israel’s enemies.

Nehemiah acknowledged God’s government of the world, including his sovereignty over the pagan king over Nehemiah, the Jewish people and the city of Jerusalem. By using “covenant and mercy” together, Nehemiah was holding God to his promises. The Lord had staked his character on his

loyalty to his covenant with his people.

“Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open.” Nehemiah asked God to look at him and listen to him as he prayed. These words were designed to encourage the one praying, for God does not turn his ears from or close his eyes to his people (Exodus 2:23-25), “the children of Israel.” Nehemiah indicated the continuity of the Jewish people of his day with the Israelites of the past. He then confessed the sins of his father’s house as well as his own.

Israel had sinned against the Lord and against his commandments. Nehemiah included himself among the sinful people by using the word “we.” Commandments, statutes, and ordinances describe the totality of God’s law (Nehemiah 9:13-14).

After confessing his sin and the sin of the people, Nehemiah reminded God of what he had said. “I will scatter you abroad among the nations” is an illusion to God’s covenant in Leviticus 26:27-45 and Deuteronomy 30:1-5. Nehemiah was born in Persia, a distant nation, because of God’s fulfillment of this promise.

The Lord had promised that if the nation of Israel would return to him in obedience, he would regather them to their land. Nehemiah addressed the Lord as a covenant-keeping God. He confessed his and the people’s sin because the law demanded confession (Leviticus 16:21). Then he held God to his covenant to return Israel to the land: “bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.” The ultimate intent of God’s covenant was not just to return the people, but also to return them to the place where God had established his name.

“Now these are thy servants and thy people.” Nehemiah was suggesting to the Lord the time was right, the people were right and the task was right to restore Jerusalem. “By thy strong hand” is one of the phrases associated

with God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 6:1; 13:14; 15:6).

### **Building plans (Nehemiah 2:1-20)**

Four months after hearing the report from his brother about Jerusalem, Nehemiah still was grieving over the conditions in Jerusalem. "The king" noticed Nehemiah's sad expression and concluded it was caused by "sorrow of heart" rather than physical illness. Persian monarchs believed just being in their presence would make any person happy. Yet, Nehemiah was about to request the emperor's permission to go to Jerusalem, suggesting he would rather be somewhere other than in the emperor's presence. On top of that, it was Artaxerxes who had ordered the work on the wall to be stopped (Ezra 4:21-23). Nehemiah had reason to be afraid.

Addressing the king with proper respect, Nehemiah related the burden of his heart, "the place of my fathers' sepulchers." This phrase was designed to catch the king's attention. In many Asian cultures, a connection with the burial places of one's ancestors was a matter of great importance.

"So I prayed to the God of heaven." Even though Nehemiah had come into the presence of "the king," he had never left the presence of the true King of Kings. After his silent prayer (v. 4), Nehemiah spoke boldly, asking for permission to leave the king's palace to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall.

Nehemiah knew he needed safe passage for his journey to Judah, so he requested "letters" from the king to show to "the governors beyond the [Euphrates] River." His plans were detailed. He asked the king for permission to go to Jerusalem (v. 5), for letters to ensure safe passage (v. 7) and also for provisions. Nehemiah requested a letter addressed to "Asaph," (v. 8) the man in charge of "the king's forest," to enable him to obtain supplies of lumber for three projects: (1) gates of the palace, (2) the

wall of the city and (3) his personal house. Jerusalem had plenty of limestone for building projects. But timber, necessary for making roofs and others parts of large building projects, was scarce, “according to the good hand of my God.”

The king graciously granted Nehemiah all he had requested, but Nehemiah knew the ultimate source of his provisions was God.

The only people who knew Nehemiah’s building plans were the few men who had made the secret night ride with him (v. 12). Nehemiah encouraged all the people to assist in rebuilding the city’s walls. He emphasized it was not just his idea to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, but the idea had come to him from the Lord (vv. 8, 12). In response to Nehemiah’s challenge, the people replied: “Let us rise up and build.”

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem all were unhappy about Nehemiah’s coming. They accused Nehemiah of false motives and plotting rebellion against the king. He ignored their accusations. The same three opponents still are unhappy and trying to block the work of God in the 21st century. Nehemiah asserted that God was involved in what he was doing. Nehemiah’s motive was not rebellion against the king, but submission to God.

### **Reporting progress (Nehemiah 3:1-32)**

Eliashib the high priest and the other priests were the first people to start rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls. At this point in Israel’s history, the priests were the leaders. There were no kings or judges, so the people looked to the priests for leadership. It is significant that the high priest and the priests “built the Sheep Gate.” The Sheep Gate was on Jerusalem’s northeast side, just north of the temple and was used for bringing sheep to the temple for sacrifice. The priests dedicated the repaired gate, wall and tower to the Lord. They knew that unless God blessed the city with his

presence, no walls and gates would keep the people safe (Psalm 127:1).

The narrative moves around the perimeter of Jerusalem in a counterclockwise direction. “Tower of the Hundred ... Tower of Hananel,” a northern section of Jerusalem, opened up to the central Benjamin plateau where enemy forces could attack most easily from the north. The rest of the perimeter of the city was protected by the natural valley topography.

The Fish Gate was so named because merchants sold fish on the northern side of Jerusalem. Men of Tyre and other seacoast towns routinely brought fish to sell (Nehemiah 12:39; 13:16). The Old Gate was in the northwest corner. The Broad Wall and Tower of the Ovens were on the west side. The Valley Gate was on the west side and is where Nehemiah began and ended his inspection trip of the wall (Nehemiah 2:13-15). The Dung Gate, also known as the Refuse Gate, was at the southern tip of the city where a common sewer ran to the Kidron Brook into the Valley of Hinnom. The Fountain Gate was in the southeast and the Water Gate was near the Gihon Spring in the east. The Horse Gate was in the northeast sector. The East Gate was located to the east of the temple mount. The Miphkad Gate, also known as the Muster Gate, was located in the northeast sector.

The people worked together—not just in the same place, but also in cooperation. Goldsmiths, merchants and bricklayers labored on the wall.

### **Discussion questions**

- What has God asked you to undertake that the cooperation of others is needed to accomplish?
- How do we know if a task is of our own desires or if it comes from God?

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