

AN INTERCEDING CUPBEARER

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God empowers His people to fulfill the mission He gives to them.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Nehemiah 1–7

+ **SETTING:**

The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all contain stories of God's people in exile. After generations neglected God and His instructions, the Lord did exactly what He said He would do, replace the blessings of His covenant with curses through exile in Babylon. But after the Persian Empire took control, the possibility of going home became a reality. Yet the heroes of the exile found themselves in a state of flux: Could they be forgiven of their sin? Was God still with them? In each of these books, God's answer is clear: yes. The Lord's covenant was as faithful as ever because God's faithful love endures forever.

DAY 1

READ:

Nehemiah 1:1-4

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 1:2-4

NOTES

Each generation has its own “Where were you when” questions: Where were you when you heard JFK had been shot? Where were you when you heard Elvis died? When you watched the Challenger fall from the sky? When you heard about the Columbine shooting? When you heard about the Twin Towers falling? These events froze us in time. Reality seemed to take a back seat as we considered, “What in the world is happening, and how will we ever move on from this?”

Beyond that, most families have their own similar collective memories—some good, some horrible. Remember when we took that extended-family camping trip? Remember when little Katie was born? Remember Grandma Liddle’s funeral? What about when we had to auction her house? Like the generational events, we walk through these events with our family and friends, clinging to one another for hope and support.

Nehemiah found himself at the next level when he was overwhelmed with news from home. Though the report—Jerusalem was in great trouble and disgrace with its walls broken down and gates burned—came from one he called a “brother,” it may have been a kinsman or simply another Jew. And he doesn’t appear to have stuck around or to have been part of Nehemiah’s mourning and praying. Nehemiah took this news hard, and he took it in solitude.

Maybe you can relate. There are some tragedies that are difficult to carry to our extended family. Unfaithfulness in marriage, drug abuse, deep-seated sin, bankruptcy, and other catastrophes leave us not only reeling but feeling alone.

But that’s never the case with God. In our weeping, our fasting, our mourning, and beyond, we have a God who always sees us, hears us, and provides comfort we can’t imagine. When we reach out in our prayers, He is ready to receive us in His loving arms.

In what situations do you feel all alone? How have you spent time with the Father for comfort?

DAY 2

READ:

Nehemiah 1:5-11

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 1:5-11

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #31: PRAYER AND PROVIDENCE

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to accomplish His divine purpose. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that “prayer changes things,” and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our hearts so that our will comes into conformity with His.

Any home chef knows the benefit of a good grocery list. As you go about your cooking for the week, you constantly add to it so that you don't find yourself without a staple item or an integral part for a meal you plan to prepare. As you walk in the store, you can find confidence in knowing you'll walk out with what you need for the days to come.

Many of us treat our prayer time with God much like a grocery list. As we go through our day, we mentally record the things that make us uncomfortable, unhappy, and unfulfilled. And when we approach the Lord in prayer, we recite those things, letting Him know exactly what it would take to fix each item and the time frame in which we'd like it done. Then we wonder why our prayer lives feel empty and hollow.

Nehemiah's prayer in these verses opens a window into what our prayers should look like, and a grocery list is the opposite of what we bring to God. First, we acknowledge Him. Nehemiah described the Lord as the God of the heavens, great, and One who keeps His covenant (v. 5). As we look clearly into His face through His true identity, the next words out of our mouth should be that of humility and confession. We don't barge into God's presence or make demands; we acknowledge Him and bow. Next, we call upon the promises He has already made and ask God to remember them (v. 8). Using the Bible and our own story with God allows us to reflect on who He has already proven Himself to be.

Once our hearts, minds, and souls are in the right place, we make our requests. God listens to that prayer and answers according to His will!

In what ways does your prayer time sound more like a grocery list, and how might you change that?

DAY 3

READ:

Nehemiah 2:1-10

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 2:1-2

NOTES

A few years ago on a Friday afternoon, I hurt my back. Badly. I thought that jumping on the trampoline with my kids at age 38 was no big deal; my back muscles vehemently disagreed. But I had many Sunday morning responsibilities at church, so as I hobbled (literally) around my house on Saturday, I was confident I'd be able to teach Sunday School and play in the worship band as I always did.

I struggled to get up the stairs to my Sunday School class, and I most certainly winced a few times during class when I coughed and shifted in my seat. And as I left for the sanctuary, I found myself taking the shortest path so that I could save myself a few agonizing steps. Sitting and playing during worship was torture, but I hit most of the notes and shuffled out, thinking I'd fooled everyone.

Walking down the hall, my good friend Pat saw me. She and I had worked together over the years in several ministry opportunities, and she wasn't fooled by my act. Incredulously, she put her hand gently on my shoulder and asked, "What in the world is the matter?" No one else had noticed. No one else had seen. It was such a relief when she called my bluff, and I felt myself crumble into her warm hug. I didn't need to stay tough any longer.

Nehemiah had a similar experience with the king. Though there were certainly separate layers of authority and servanthood between Artaxerxes and Nehemiah, we see also that there was a closeness. The king noticed that Nehemiah wasn't sick but had heart sadness (v. 2). God used this insight to open the lines of communication and allow Nehemiah to take the next step in His plan of restoring His city.

Who do you see clearly? How are you blessing their lives with your insight and care?

DAY 4

READ:

Nehemiah 2:11-20

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 2:18

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“O how good a conscience should he keep, that would never seek after transitory joy, nor ever entangle himself with the things of this world! O how great peace and quietness should he possess, that would cut off all anxiety, and think only upon divine things, and such as are profitable for his soul, and would place all his confidence in God.”¹

–Thomas a Kempis
(c. 1380-1471)

I grew up as a child of parents who were heavily active in church, and now I’m heavily active in church myself. There’s a saying that I’ve heard my whole church life, and I used to think it was funny: “Be careful what you pray for; you just might get it.” It was usually followed up with a story about praying for patience and getting a terrible boss or praying for a wayward child, only for him to end up back at home as an adult. Somehow we think we get to pray for what we want and that God’s answer will always be pleasant.

But Nehemiah’s story proves the opposite. Nehemiah lived a privileged life and had every benefit he could want as the cupbearer to the king. When he heard the news that Jerusalem was unprotected and disgraced, he likely thought, “Oh, Lord, someone needs to help them.” Obviously, that “somebody” was Nehemiah, and the task was immense.

But after Nehemiah had made the journey, rested three days, inspected the wall, and returned to present his plan to the Jews, he told them God’s gracious hand was on him (v. 18). Gracious. Would you use that word if your boss gave you an extra responsibility or your in-laws dropped by unannounced yet again? Do you see God’s hand in the sleepless nights or the long days?

God’s actions in our lives are for our good and His glory. Very few people in the Bible are commended for living safe, uneventful, predictable lives. Instead, we remember those who hear the call, see the risk, and still step out in faith. Yes, even those challenging times are the gracious hand of God in your life.

**When have you complained about a turn in your life?
Looking back, how can you see God’s gracious hand?**

DAY 5

READ:

Nehemiah 3

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 3:1-5

NOTES

There's a temptation to only glance at passages that don't seem to be of utmost importance, such as today's reading. Surely that wasn't meant for us to really consider, right? But if it weren't important to the Lord's overarching story, His Spirit would not have led the chronicler to include it in this biblical book. So we, as children of the Lord and seekers of His face, are wise to consider each passage as an integral part to God's narrative.

Nehemiah had rallied the Jews to begin rebuilding the wall, and this passage recounts who was working where. We first see that the high priest Eliashib and his fellow priests were rebuilding the Sheep Gate, while the nobles of the Tekoites didn't lift a finger to help the supervisors over the Fish Gate. On the surface, we see the comparison: some worked and some didn't.

But this isn't a passage about laziness; instead, it seems to point more to calling. When we feel that a particular job or task is given to us as busy work or simply to fill a need that no one else cares about, we're unmotivated. But if we see our job as a direct calling from God, for the fulfillment of His purposes, our work ethic and commitment level are changed.

This also isn't a passage about the comparison between a high priest and noblemen; either can be lazy and either can be a hard-worker. The same is true for our churches today. Recently, I watched a minister from my own church, down on his hands and knees, scraping bird poop off the sidewalk. And I've heard men and women, part of my church for decades, declare, "It's someone else's turn" to take a position of servanthood. We're all called to work with the understanding that we are called by God to do His work in our churches and communities.

**Are you a hard worker at work? At home? At church?
Where is God calling you to serve today?**

GROUP

NOTES

POINT 1: Success in the Lord's mission is based on His lasting promises (Neh. 1:8-11).

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #31: PRAYER AND PROVIDENCE

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the _____ God uses to accomplish His divine _____. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that “prayer changes things,” and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our _____ so that our will comes into _____ with His.

 **How might this doctrine change the way you view prayer?**

Knowing God's _____ and promises, we rely on Him to give us _____ in His _____, no matter the circumstances.

 **What parallels do you see between Nehemiah's situation and Esther's situation?**

POINT 2: Success in the Lord's mission is based on His abundant provision (Neh. 2:1-10).

Nehemiah understood the significant _____ of his task, but God provided the _____ opportunity to present it to the king.

 **How has God miraculously opened the door to a conversation or situation in your own life?**

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Let our prayer be that God may advance His work, not for our glory—not for our sake—but for the sake of His beloved Son whom He hath sent.”²

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)

God proved Himself _____ to Nehemiah by providing an abundance of _____ so that he could carry out his calling.

NOTES

POINT 3: Success in the Lord's mission is based on His unstoppable power (Neh. 2:15-20).

Nehemiah _____ obeyed the Lord's instructions. His _____ and story led others to rebuild the wall.



What are some tasks God may call us to for which we might feel incapable?

In the face of _____, we find our holy _____ in God alone.



What are some Scriptures that might help us when we find ourselves facing opposition?

MY RESPONSE

Because we are protected and secure in Christ, we join with others to complete the kingdom work God has given us.

- **HEAD:** What are you doing to build up the walls of your faith? Where do your walls need repair?
- **HEART:** What can you confess to God right now if you feel disconnected from God's plan for your life or if you are hesitant to follow even if you do know?
- **HANDS:** What story of God's faithfulness in your life will you share with someone this week?

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"To work well in service to God also means to work as His people—as valued individuals and as a unified body of believers . . . Once we have put our faith in [Jesus], this is our eternal identity: we become part of God's called-out people."³

—Kathleen Nielson