

WHO WAS NEHEMIAH?

The Bible is filled with stories about ordinary men and women who did extraordinary things.

One such individual was this man Nehemiah who spearheaded the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. A devout and zealous follower of God, Nehemiah started religious reforms that rekindled and strengthened the spiritual fervor of his Jewish countrymen.

Nehemiah, whose name means "God is our comforter," was born and raised in Babylon during the rule of the Persian kings.

He was a cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, a position of prestige and great trust in the Persian palace.

The cupbearer or butler tasted the food and the wine before the king ate or drank any of it.

Thus the cupbearer, to whom the king entrusted his life, had considerable influence with the king.

Nehemiah was the son of Hacaliah; and, although not specifically mentioned, he must have been of the tribe of Judah.

Since Nehemiah held such a high position in the palace, Hanani and others of Judah approached him and sought his assistance. They informed him of the hardship of the Jews and the dilapidated condition of Jerusalem.

Upon learning of the sad and desperate plight of his countrymen in Jerusalem, Nehemiah was moved to much sorrow.

And the first thing Nehemiah did was to turn to God in prayer and with fasting.

The dangerous nature of his job may have encouraged that close and intimate relationship he had with God; for he could very easily have drank or eaten of the poison the king's enemies may have planted.

He could've turned down Hanani's request and remained comfortably in the palace.

But he didn't.

Although he was the king's trusted cupbearer, Nehemiah had to comply with the proper protocols in approaching the king. Otherwise he could end up being put to death (Esther 4:11).

So when Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah was uncharacteristically sad, he wanted to know what was troubling his cupbearer.

Emboldened, Nehemiah asked Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Jerusalem and send him there so he can rebuild the city.

After a 750 mile-long journey, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, takes 3 days to get rested and then starts out by inspecting the condition of the city.

He discovered that the condition of the city was even worse than he expected.

Next, he told everyone involved, "You know what your responsibilities are so let's get to work and finish the job."

Nehemiah was a man of action. He was at the front line of the work.

He was the governor, but he didn't regard himself as above lifting or plastering stones or hauling away the rubbish. And when the people saw this, they were encouraged.

But, it didn't take long for the opposition to recognize the Jews were making progress.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem conspired to harass, intimidate and threaten Nehemiah and the Jews. They began spreading rumors of their plans to attack the city. When their tactics failed, they conspired to kill Nehemiah (6:10-13). And when the workers started to waver and weaken, Nehemiah calmed them down and reassured them.

"Don't be afraid of our enemies. Remain here in Jerusalem. Take a stand and be steadfast for the sake of your families and your people. Remember our God

is greater than our enemies. Keep looking to Him for His protection and intervention." (Nehemiah 4:14).

At the same time, Nehemiah realized he had to do his part. So, he implemented a rotation schedule so the work could continue uninterrupted in case there was some disruption from the enemy.

Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem pressed on; and the walls were finally completed after 52 days (6:15).

Having completed the job, Nehemiah thought he could return to the palace.

But he discovered there were more serious spiritual problems.

Together with Ezra the priest, Nehemiah presided over a great spiritual and religious reformation among the people of Jerusalem (9:38).

After 12 years in Jerusalem, Nehemiah headed back to Babylon.

He appointed Hanani and Hananiah, the chamberlain of the governor's palace, to take charge over the city (7:2).

However, while he was in the palace resuming his duties, Nehemiah learned that problems had resurfaced in Jerusalem.

So later that same year, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. He discovered that Eliashib the high priest had allied with Tobiah the Ammonite. Eliashib had appointed Tobiah to a position in the temple (13:7) which violated God's explicit command prohibiting Ammonites from entering into the temple (Deuteronomy 23:3).

So, Nehemiah threw out Tobiah's belongings from that room, purified it completely and restored order in the temple (Nehemiah 13:8-9).

Seeing that certain Jews were working on the Sabbath, Nehemiah sternly rebuked them (13:15).

Then he noticed that merchants from Tyre were doing business with the Jews on the Sabbath day (13:16).

And he reminded the leaders of Judah, “If we continue breaking God’s Sabbath, we’re going to receive a much stronger correction from Him” (13:18). We’re going to be in worse shape than we were before!

This has got to stop!”

So Nehemiah warned the merchants of Tyre he was going to remove them by force if he found any of them encamped against the city walls (13:21).

Moreover, Nehemiah also noticed that the Jews had gone back to marrying the women of the Ammonites and the Moabites.

“What have you done?” Nehemiah tells them.

“Didn’t we all make a covenant with God that we would obey His law and not give our daughters to the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons” (10:28-30)?

“The situation in Jerusalem is much improved and everybody appears to be doing much better now. The walls of the city are raised up and fortified. You’re respected and feared by your neighbors because they know you are the people of God. Why are you again bringing misery and suffering to yourselves by sinning against God Who has given you all these fine things?

YOU’D BETTER STOP THIS RIGHT NOW!”

Nehemiah felt very strongly about how the Jews had offended God and displeased Him.

He was strongly convicted in God’s ways so he firmly chastened those Jews for allowing their sons and daughters to marry those of the pagan nations.

His exceptional qualities of tenacity, dedication and zeal; his integrity, unflinching fidelity to God are powerful examples to us of what God can do through those who humbly and completely yield to Him.