

## Practicing Generosity

Today we hear the story of Nehemiah and how he practiced generosity. While not all of us have the considerable wealth and resources of Nehemiah, it is up to each of us to take stock of our own resources, be they material or otherwise, and consider how we can use what we do have to bring about God's kingdom of love and justice.

Prayer: *God of generosity and abundance, open our eyes to the resources that we already have right in front of us. Stir in us a spirit of generosity. Show us how we can use the resources we have for your purposes in our own lives and in this world. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand Nehemiah's story, we need to review some of the history of the children of Israel, now known as Jews.

- 1020 BCE – More than 1000 years before Jesus was born, the United Kingdom of Israel forms under King Saul.
- 922 BCE – About 100 years after that, The Kingdom of Israel divides into Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom).
- 875 BCE – As these two kingdoms struggle to establish themselves, the Assyrian Empire begins expanding.
- 722 BCE – In 722 BCE, Israel (northern kingdom) falls to Assyria. About 1/3 of Israel's citizens are deported and replaced with a similar number of foreigners. The two people groups intermarry producing children referred to as Samaritans.
- 612 BCE – More than 100 years later, the Babylonian Empire replaces the Assyrian Empire
- 587 BCE – Soon after that, Judah (southern kingdom) falls to Babylon. Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. Almost all of the Judean people (now called Jews) are exiled to Babylon.
- 539 BCE – Almost 50 years later, the Persian Empire replaces the Babylonian Empire.

It's at this time when Ezra and Nehemiah enter the story.<sup>2</sup> The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one volume. The two stories can be read together to provide a full account of God's restoration of Jerusalem.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount five milestones reached after the rise of the Persian Empire.

1. Return from Exile: Cyrus of Persia has radically different policies from the Babylonians about people from conquered territories. He abolishes forced labor and returns sacred images to various exiled peoples. Cyrus also allows the Jewish exiles to go home and provides money for them to rebuild their shrines. During the next 100 years, about 25% of the exiled Jews return to Jerusalem in four groups.
2. Temple Restored: In 538 BCE, while Cyrus is the Persian leader, Sheshbazzar leads a group that manages to lay the foundation for the temple.<sup>3</sup> In 520 BCE, when Darius is the Persian king, Zerubbabel leads a group who build the new temple despite local opposition. They officially celebrate Passover for the first time in 70 years.
3. Community Restored – Spiritual Renewal: In 458 BCE, when Artaxerxes I is the Persian king, the priest Ezra, assisted by Nehemiah, teaches the Torah to the new Jewish generation calling them to practice holiness.
4. Jerusalem's Walls Rebuilt: In 445 BCE Nehemiah, the Persian King's cupbearer, leads in rebuilding the Jerusalem city walls. His position in the Persian court gives him great personal influence on the king's decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> The prayer and parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 13 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

<sup>2</sup> This section is adapted from Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, Workplay Publishing, 2016, pp. 157-160 and <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah/>

<sup>3</sup> Ezra 5:14-16

5. Repentance and Re-covenant: After hearing the Torah, the Jewish people realize the sins they committed and address them. They repent, swearing an oath to follow God's laws.

The fourth milestone, the wall rebuilding project described in the first seven chapters of Nehemiah is our focus this morning.

Nehemiah is working for the Persian king when some men travel from Jerusalem to Susa to visit him. When Nehemiah asks them about the city of Jerusalem and the Jews who are living there, their response distresses him.

*“It’s a disaster,” they report. “The survivors of the exile who are in the Persian province of Jerusalem have been wronged and are hated. The wall of Jerusalem has been reduced to piles of rock, and its gates consumed by flame.”<sup>4</sup>*

Nehemiah is overwhelmed with grief. He sits and weeps. He fasts and prays. He confesses his sins, his family’s sins, and the children of Israel’s sins. He reminds God of God’s promise to Moses.

*“If you are unfaithful to Me and choose another, then I will send you away and you will live separate from Me—you will live as aliens in strange lands; but if you have a change of heart and return to Me and walk according to My commands, then no matter how far you have gone, even to the places beyond the horizon, I will gather you and bring you to the place of My choosing, where My very name dwells.”<sup>5</sup>*

Nehemiah asks God for the courage and opportunity to talk to the king. His job is to taste the king’s wine and food, checking for poison. Because of these duties, he is constantly needed, so he seeks God’s favor so that the king will allow him to travel to Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> He attempts to hide his sadness from the king, but after four months of watching Nehemiah mope around, the king asks why he is disturbed.

*“Why should my face look anything but sad?” Nehemiah laments. “My homeland is destroyed; my city is a heap of rubble; its once-mighty gates are nothing more than charred tinder. This is the place where my ancestors are supposed to be at rest, but the very ground where they lie is ruined!”<sup>7</sup>*

When the king asks Nehemiah wants, he gathers his courage and says, *“If I have won your favor, my king, and if it is your pleasure, send me to the city where my ancestors are buried. Let me rebuild the city in Judah.”<sup>8</sup>*

After some negotiating, the king sends Nehemiah on his way with letters of protection, an army escort, and orders for enough timber to build walls, gates, watchtowers, and a house to live in. Some of the people he encounters aren’t happy about his plan to help the Jews left in Jerusalem, but because of his connection to the Persian king they leave him alone.

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he waits until dark and then rides around the city of Jerusalem. This is Nehemiah’s report of the excursion: *“As we went, we examined the walls of Jerusalem: they were as bad as we had heard. No stones remained standing, and fire had consumed the gates. Amid the rubble I was unable to continue riding—there was simply no room—and so I dismounted and followed along the valley, still under the cover of night, examining the wall as I went. Finally, I had seen enough and turned back toward the valley gate, reentering the city the way I had left. Those who were in charge of Jerusalem did not know where I had gone, much less what I was up to. I had said nothing to anyone—even those who would shortly be doing the work of rebuilding. Everyone was in the dark: common Jews, priests, nobles, and leaders alike.”<sup>9</sup>*

After this fact-finding tour, Nehemiah lets all of the Jews in on his plan. *“Our trouble is obvious: The wall of Jerusalem has been reduced to piles of rock, and its gates consumed by flame. Let us begin by rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, and in doing so, we will demolish our disgrace because of defeat and exile.”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 1:3, *The Voice Bible*, © 2012 Thomas Nelson, Inc. *The Voice*™ translation © 2012 Ecclesia Bible Society.

<sup>5</sup> Nehemiah 1:8-9, *The Voice Bible*.

<sup>6</sup> *The Voice Bible*, Note on Nehemiah 1:11.

<sup>7</sup> Nehemiah 2:3, *The Voice Bible*.

<sup>8</sup> Nehemiah 2:5, *The Voice Bible*.

<sup>9</sup> Nehemiah 2:13-16, *The Voice Bible*.

<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah 2:17, *The Voice Bible*.

Everyone is immediately on board with the plan saying, “*Get up now! It is time to rebuild.*”<sup>11</sup> They commit themselves to the common good and begin to work hard. Nehemiah reminds them that they are likely to encounter trouble because they have no civic, legal, or religious claim on Jerusalem, but the True God of heaven will give them success.

The third chapter of Nehemiah lists the names of people who work on the rebuilding project and the portion of the wall each one helps to build. This catalogue of names and places reveals an extraordinary feat of organization and concerted action. There is shared enthusiasm among a wide variety of groups of people who set to work on their stretches of the wall. Some work as family units. Others as towns. There are groups organized by crafts or trades such as goldsmiths, perfumers, and merchants. Others organize by callings such as priests, Levites, temple servants, or district officers. One man even mobilizes his daughters.<sup>12</sup> All of these people from different stations and classes in life work together on the wall, each one making personal sacrifices to complete the job.

As is to be expected with any project – and as predicted by Nehemiah, the workers encounter obstacles and opposition along the way.<sup>13</sup> Nehemiah struggles with outsiders like Sanballat the Moabite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab who are violently opposed to the restoration of Jerusalem and the Jewish people. Sanballat and Tobiah see Nehemiah’s personal appointment by the king as a threat to their own political and economic status. To Geshem of Arabia, the fortification of the city could be seen as preparation for revolt. These ancient political, social, and religious enemies to the Jews will stop at nothing to halt the rebuilding efforts. They use mockery, intimidation, threats, distraction, and trickery to try to thwart the efforts of Nehemiah and his co-workers.

Nehemiah again reminds the people of God’s promises and invites them to put their trust in God. He also makes a plan that involves the cooperation of all the people of Israel. If anyone is attacked by their enemies, the trumpeter will blow the trumpet to let everyone else know they should come to that part of the wall and help those who were being attacked.

Nehemiah also struggles with some within the Jewish community who have adopted religious and cultural behaviors that differ from what is laid forth for Israel in the law of Moses. The Jewish people, who worked together to rebuild the wall argue among themselves about food distribution, taxes, slavery, and exploitation. Some think too much money and time was spent on the rebuilding project. Because they spent so much time and energy on the wall, they weren’t able to tend their fields. Interest rates charged by their fellow Jews have put them into overwhelming debt. A shortage of food has led to large-scale debt slavery. After years of fighting against foreign rule and struggling to buy back their people out of slavery, the wealthy Israelites are now exploiting their own poor.

Nehemiah, serving as the governor of Judah, reminds the people of the laws of the Torah. He recognizes his own privilege and the privilege of other nobles. He promises not to collect any taxes from the people even though he has the right to do it. He chooses to give up all the funds that would have been provided for him by the people through his rights as governor.

He requires anyone who has exploited a fellow Jew to make restitution. He calls out their corruption, drawing their attention to something they care deeply about, public opinion. “*This thing you are doing is not good,*” he tells them. “*Is it not good to walk and live our lives in fear of the awesomeness of our True God? Your actions cause our enemies, those pagan nations, to mock us.*”<sup>14</sup> Nehemiah then states that he has responded to the situation with generosity. He implores others to do likewise. The people repent and renew their covenant with God.

We often refer to the book of Nehemiah as an example of cooperation, when a large group of people work together to complete a huge task. Today we read this story as an example of generosity. And Nehemiah is an admirable example. He is to be credited for declaring that accumulation of wealth at the expense of others is

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<sup>11</sup> Nehemiah 2:18, *The Voice Bible*.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, InterVarsity Press, 1979, pp. 85-86.

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from *The Voice Bible*, Note on Nehemiah 4.

<sup>14</sup> Nehemiah 5:9, *The Voice Bible*.

unacceptable. His example of abundant giving is admirable. However, Nehemiah was a person of considerable power and means. He chose to give up all the funds that would have been provided for him by the people through his rights as governor. This implies that Nehemiah had other sources of income. Perhaps he was independently wealthy. We could ask whether all leaders, political and otherwise, should forgo their incomes. How do privilege, position, and means play a role in generous living?

Out of his considerable wealth and resources, Nehemiah practiced generosity. Some of us can do the same. For some of us, giving generously of our money doesn't require much effort or sacrifice. We have a lot, so we can easily and painlessly give a lot. But we may not be as generous with other resources such as our time, attention, energy, compassion, and love.

Some of us are more like the majority of the people working on the wall rebuilding project. They didn't have much money, but they gave generously of their time and effort along with some of their money. A problem arose when their generosity coupled with the expectations of those around them caused them to set aside their own work and forced them into unjust economic situations.

Like so many things in life, generosity is an act that requires personal reflection. While not all have incredible means at our disposal, it is up to each person to take stock of our own resources, be they material or otherwise. Each of us has something to contribute to the greater good, be it money, time, knowledge, energy, compassion, or something else. Not all of us have the ability to give in the same way or in the same amount.

Consider what you have that you can use to bring about God's kingdom of love and justice. Challenge yourself and others to encourage gratitude and generosity over accumulation of wealth at the expense of the vulnerable. Let's work together to do our part in alleviating the suffering of those who are being treated unjustly and don't have what they need to live. The goal isn't for everyone in the entire world to have the same amount of resources, but that everyone would have enough of what they need to survive and thrive.

The story of Nehemiah challenges to practice generosity with the resources we have. With a mindset of gratitude, take an inventory of your gifts and resources. How might you use them to spread God's love and justice?

May the God of generosity and abundance open your eyes to the resources that you already have and stir in you a spirit of generosity. May you use the resources you have for God's purposes in your own life and in this world. Amen.