

# life groups

NorthStar Church

Build It Pt 1

Nehemiah

Pastor Scott Cagle

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Main Point

Before we can be successful in helping our city, we must first care enough to pray for our city. We must have a God Given Vision that moves us to action.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Have you ever taken on a daunting project? What did you do to prepare for it?

Why is good preparation important for the success of a big project? How does team work benefit a large project?

What kinds of things discourage you in the midst of a big task? Can you recall specific things that made you want to—or did make you—quit? How big a factor is the encouragement and discouragement that others give?

When we take on a large project, one of the things that we must not overlook is prayer. The Bible says that “many plans are in a man’s heart, but the LORD’s decree will prevail” (Prov. 19:21). We can plan, but we need the Lord’s blessing to succeed in whatever we plan to do. The church is tasked by God to reach the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and there is no better place to start than our own cities. Nehemiah serves as a great example for that task. He cared for his city and the people of his city, but before he ever made a decision to help them, he took the time to pray to the Lord for His aid.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 1:2-11.

What were Nehemiah’s reactions to the news about Jerusalem?

What is the purpose of fasting? Why do you think it is so often combined with prayer in the Bible?

What are some elements of Nehemiah’s prayer that stand out to you?

When Nehemiah heard about the condition of Jerusalem and his people, he mourned. Fasting is a sign of mourning and brokenness. We can naturally lose our appetites in the face of tragedy, and Nehemiah certainly did when he heard about his homeland. He wept and fasted and prayed on behalf of his people. Nehemiah also confessed that he and his people had been sinful before God by not keeping His commands. Nehemiah completely humbled himself before the Lord. His humility and prayer preceded taking action. We would do well to heed his example for our city as well. Nehemiah appeals to God's faithfulness and prays for success in helping the people of God.

HAVE VOLUNTEERS READ NEHEMIAH 2:1-4 AND 2:11-18.

How long do you suppose Nehemiah had to pray in verse 4? Why do you think the Holy Spirit might have included this prayer in the book?

Nehemiah had prayed that the Lord would give him success, but it was probably a great surprise to him how that opportunity to make a difference came about. Nehemiah most likely only had a moment to ask the Lord's blessing before he made his great request to the King. We should never underestimate the value of prayer, no matter how short.

What do you think Nehemiah was afraid of?

Why do you think Nehemiah kept his plans to himself in the beginning? Why did he go out and observe the entire city by himself by night?

The Lord answered Nehemiah's prayer, and so the king granted Nehemiah's request. Nehemiah was wise in accessing the situation before he began to make plans to remedy it. He needed to know exactly what needed to be done and what it would require to make it happen. Jesus once said, "For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn't first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, after he has laid the foundation and cannot finish it, all the onlookers will begin to make fun of him, saying, 'This man started to build and wasn't able to finish'" (Luke 14:28-30). Before we begin any ministry project, we need to first take it to the Lord in prayer, and second, we ought to make certain we plan for the scope of what we need to do.

Pastor Scott described a God-Given Vision this way:

- 1) It will always start with something that is dear to your heart!
- 2) It will always be about HIS glory, not yours! 1:8-9
- 3) It will always be dependent on the Favor of God! 1:11
- 4) It will often lead you to arrow prayers! 2:1-4
- 5) It will almost always raise up opposition. 2:10

Which point jumps out to you as an "aha" moment of truth? What is happening in your faith journey that one of these points brings clarity, conviction, or encouragement?

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What do you sense is the burden, calling, vision that God is placing on your heart in this season of your life?  
What are next steps you need to take?  
How does this reality (that God is assigning) make you feel? Fearful/Anxious/Encouraged?

What is an area of your city where you can help? Are there areas of your city where you might labor to see others come to Christ?

How could your church do a better job of reaching your city? Have you begun by prayer? Have you asked the Lord to humble you over the condition of your city and for the faith to help it?

Pray  
Offer a time for group members to pray aloud. Thank the Lord for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Pray that God will help us to reach our city for Christ. Ask the Lord to open our eyes to the needs of the community that we might be able to meet. Pray that the church will work together as one to advance the kingdom in our community.

## Commentary

### NEHEMIAH 1:1-11

1:1-2. In both the Hebrew and the Greek Old Testament, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single book. Yet the connection between them is rather abrupt and without any real transition. Nehemiah, whose name means “Yahweh has comforted,” is identified as son of Hachabiah, to distinguish him from other people named Nehemiah (Neh. 3:16; 7:7; Ezra 2:2) in the same era. Hanani is described by Nehemiah as one of my brothers. While this could be used loosely to refer to his Jewish companions, it probably means his literal brother due to the mention of Hanani in 7:2.

1:3-4. The people in the province of Judah (v. 2), which the Persians called Yehud, were suffering because their city was in such terrible condition. Many scholars maintain that Nehemiah’s response (v. 4) suggests this was a recent development, possibly referring to Rehum’s opposition (Ezra 4:9-16). The translation of the verbs here, has been broken down... have been burned, reinforces this understanding of the passage. Nehemiah’s response was like that of his predecessor, Ezra (Ezra 9:3-5), who humbled himself before God.

1:5-6. Addressing God as Yahweh, the God of heaven is not common in the Old Testament, but it does occur several other times (Gen. 24:7; 2 Chron. 36:23; Jonah 1:9). This description of God is similar to the opening verse of Daniel’s prayer: “the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps His gracious covenant with those who love Him and keep His commands” (Dan. 9:4). Like Ezra (Ezra 9:6), Nehemiah also identified with the sin of his people, confessing that both I and my father’s house have sinned.

1:8-9. Nehemiah alluded to Moses’ warning (Deut. 4:27; 28:64) that God would scatter Israel among the peoples if they were unfaithful to the covenant, and then he summarized God’s promise through Moses (Deut. 30:1-5) that repentance would bring restoration (Neh. 1:9). Repentance is described as return to Me, using the primary Old Testament term for repentance that depicts a turning from sin toward God.

1:10. Just as Moses had interceded for his sinful people, reminding God that Israel was His people whom He had brought out of Egypt (Ex. 32:11), so too Nehemiah reminded God that they were His servants and His people whom He had redeemed.

1:11. The reference to this man has led some scholars to suggest impropriety on Nehemiah’s part for referring to King Artaxerxes in such a way. But the context here is a private prayer addressed to God who knew very well who “this man” was and that Nehemiah would need divine help in dealing with him. The Persian rulers

were famous for the irrevocability of their laws, as Daniel discovered when the “law of the Medes and Persians” (Dan. 6:8,12,15) was brought against him. Nehemiah faced the daunting task of asking Artaxerxes to reverse his previous proclamation (Ezra 4:23) stopping all construction in Jerusalem. Only at the end of the prayer does it become clear why a Jewish man like Nehemiah thought he would ever get to address the Persian king. The cupbearer was not only responsible for choosing appropriate wines for the king, but he tasted them himself to assure they were not poisoned.

Nehemiah 2:1-18

2:1-3. It is not clear why Nehemiah waited nearly four months to bring his request to King Artaxerxes. It is possible that the king spent the winter in Babylon rather than in Susa. Ancient records attest to this happening occasionally. Nehemiah’s explanation for his sadness was carefully expressed. He did not mention Jerusalem by name, since it may have carried negative connotations from the past (Ezra 4:12), but he referred to it as the city where my ancestors are buried. The Persian rulers went to great expense building tombs for their ancestors. Nehemiah’s concern for the condition of his ancestors’ tombs would certainly strike a sympathetic chord with the Persian king.

2:5-8. Nehemiah’s request to rebuild Jerusalem was bold in light of the king’s earlier decision (Ezra 4:12-16) to stop all construction on the project. Nehemiah needed not only time away from Artaxerxes’ court, but also official royal documents for the governors who were opposed to any building in Jerusalem (v. 10). His request for timber for the gates of the temple’s fortress probably refers to a military structure north of the temple that provided protection for the temple and its worshipers, and probably included the two towers mentioned in 3:1.

2:12-15. Nehemiah probably limited the number of men and animals during his night-time reconnaissance of Jerusalem to avoid detection by those who were sympathetic to Sanballat and Tobiah. Nehemiah’s description of his inspection of the city in this passage, along with the more detailed account of rebuilding in chapter 3, provide the best written information for reconstructing the dimensions of Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C. Nehemiah’s inspection tour began on the western side of Jerusalem and proceeded counter-clockwise around the city. Nehemiah and his men headed south from the Valley Gate toward the Serpent’s Well. Nehemiah continued south to the Dung Gate at the lower tip of the city. This gate led to the Valley of Hinnom where garbage was dumped and burned. Nehemiah followed the ruins of the wall north to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool (probably the same place as the “Pool of Shelah” mentioned in 3:15). With the ruined walls on his left and the steep Kidron Valley on his right, his way was blocked and he dismounted.

2:16-17. While some assume the officials here were Persian officials, it probably refers to the various leaders mentioned among the Jews, priests, nobles, and officials. The word disgrace, often translated “shame” or “reproach,” is the same word used to describe the state of the people in Jerusalem when Nehemiah’s brother and his friends gave their report (1:3). The present sad state of the city was a “disgrace” to the city, its people, and above all, its God.