



WEEK FOUR: NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

Read Nehemiah 1

Nehemiah, whose name means “*Yahweh Comforts*”, was called by God to do a specific task. One commentator says of Nehemiah, that he expressed the practical, everyday side of our faith in God. He was the James of the Old Testament, challenging the people to show their faith by their works. In this opening chapter, Nehemiah is living in Susa (or Shushan), a fortress and ancient winter capital of the kings of Persia. Its location is in the southwestern area of present-day Iran. The time is December 446 B.C. and the Jews had been in exile, in Babylon, for seventy years. However, they had not been forgotten or abandoned by God.

The book tells us that Hanani, brother of Nehemiah, came to Susa along with other men from Judah. They told how the survivors of the captivity in Jerusalem were distressed because the wall of Jerusalem had been torn down, and the gates burned.

- What was Nehemiah’s response to this news?
- What do verses 5-11 tell us about Nehemiah?
- Are there lessons here for us to learn?

Read Nehemiah 2:1-9

We learn two particularly important lessons in verses 1 and 2. Nehemiah was the king’s cupbearer, and it says he had never been sad in the king’s presence at any time. Yet this was a man who was an exile from his own land but didn’t allow his circumstances to get in the way of his service for the king. The other thing we learn from these verses is that God had put Nehemiah in the right job, at the right time for when he needed to make his request.

- Do we go about our work with the right attitude, or do we allow circumstances to dictate our behaviour?
- Do we trust God to work out our problems for us or do we try to work them out?

One thing we notice in comparison to Abraham and Noah, is that God didn’t call him directly, but used Nehemiah’s brother and companions from Judah to bring that call.

- When Nehemiah made his request to the King for timber for the beams of the Temple gates, the king also gave him letters of authority, and army officers and horsemen for protection.
- What reason did Nehemiah give for the king granting his requests in verse 8?
- Do we trust God to provide all we need to carry out the work he has called us to?

Read Nehemiah 2:11-18

The way in which Nehemiah approached the task God had called him to, was not to rush headlong to get people to start building straight away, but he took careful note of what needed to be done. Verse 18 shows that if we do things God's way, people will be happy to come alongside to fulfil the task.

Chapter 3 tells us how the people were organised into working groups, which included women as well as men whose normal work such as goldsmiths, merchants, Temple servants.

Chapter 4 gives us another insight into the success of this venture: “..for the people had worked very hard.” Or as the NKJ says, “.. for the people had a mind to work.” Having the right attitude is so important to success.



The timescale of this monumental work is incredible. First, Nehemiah and those accompanying him would have had a three-month trip to get to Jerusalem from Susa, as it was a distance of about 900 miles. Then, working together, all following the instructions they were given, the wall was completed in 52 days. It would have been at least 6.5 feet wide for a procession of people to triumphantly march along it to dedicate their work (chapter 12:31-43).

During Lent, the series I was reading had a prayer that was used many times: “*That we would be repairers of broken-down walls.*”

- What broken-down walls do you see that need to be repaired?
- Is God calling you to become involved in that work?

Read Esther 1:1-6 and 10-21

This is a wonderful story of how God enabled his people to survive when in exile, despite attempts to annihilate them. As with Nehemiah, it is set in the citadel of Shushan (Susa). The King is Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia.

During the feast he sent for his wife, Queen Vashti to come and join his celebrations, because he wanted to show everyone how beautiful she was. However, for whatever reason, the Queen refused, something that was unheard of in those days – women were supposed to be obedient! As a result, the king appointed officers to go throughout all the provinces to search out beautiful virgins and bring them into the care of Hegai, the king’s eunuch and custodian of the women.

One of those chosen was Esther (also known as Hadassah), a Jewish girl who had been brought up by her uncle Mordecai following the death of her parents. After a lengthy procedure when all the girls had to be treated to what we would call an expensive spa experience, having six months being anointed with myrrh, and six months with perfumes and all kinds of preparations in order to beautify the women. Eventually, Esther was chosen by the king and made queen in the place of Vashti.

During this period Mordecai remained close by. He had told Esther not to reveal her Jewish heritage and she was obedient. However, because he spent so much time inside the king’s gate, Mordecai overheard two of the eunuchs plotting against the king. He passed the information on to Esther and following an enquiry, both men were hanged. Royal Courts, like parliaments today, were full of people plotting to bring about the kind of change they wanted.

A man named Haman, was promoted and all the king’s servants were to bow down to Haman, but Mordecai refused. In retaliation, Haman decided to destroy the whole of the Jewish population within the provinces. You can read this in chapters 2 and 3 of Esther.

Read Esther 4

Mordecai persuades Esther to go to the king, without any invitation, and plead for her people. If that happened, in order to come out alive, the king would have to hold out his golden sceptre to that person. Esther says that she has not been called to come before the king for some time to which her uncle replied:



“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (verses 13-14).

- ***“Born for such a time as this”***: Do you think Mordecai was fair in asking such a thing of his niece?

- Do you ever consider yourself in that light? That you have a job to do for God that no one else can do? Do we have a tendency to downplay our importance in God's plans?
- Think of others in the Bible whom God called: David, a shepherd boy; Gideon, the least in his father's household, Joseph the somewhat arrogant youth, Jacob a twister. Do they sound like worthy candidates for a vital role?
- God is able to use everyone of us, each in diverse ways, but we have to be willing. He may well not ask us to put our lives on the line, but he will probably move us outside our comfort zone.

When we look at what is happening throughout the world today, we see many 'Hamans', people who will twist the truth to further their own ends. As we saw from last week's study, Ecclesiastes 1:9 says: *"History merely repeats itself. It has all be done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new."* (NLT)

Read through the remaining chapters of this book to see how God wonderfully delivers his people from extinction. It wasn't through a powerful army or a charismatic leader, but a young girl who decided to speak for her people even though it could mean her own death.

One writer has written: *"What you do for God may seem small and insignificant at the time, but God rejoices in what is right, not necessarily in what is big. **Be faithful in the small opportunities.** Begin where you are and do what you can and leave the results to God."*

- Each one of us is *born for such a time as this*. Pray that God will direct our thoughts and actions. He who has called us will also equip us for the task ahead.

Prayer:

Father may we be willing to trust you to equip us for that which you have called us to do for you. Help us to become repairers of the broken-down walls. Amen