

Title: A priest and a construction foreman walk into . . .  
Date: August 26, 2018  
Subject: Insights on serving the Lord in the face of opposition  
Scripture: Ezra and Nehemiah

If you're following along in your chronological scorecards, we're up to the moment where the southern kingdom of Judah is about to be decimated. The Babylonians chew them up in horrifyingly graphic fashion as described in the historical books and Jeremiah. We're going to skip that part of the road except for one note from the weeping prophet. In both of his books, Jeremiah and Lamentations, he cries out to the Lord about the horrors he's forced to witness and endure. It seems like the Lord is doing the harm. A particularly poignant passage from Lamentations: "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long...I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-25).

This brings us to the exile in Babylon where we find Daniel and his three friends – the stories of the lion's den and the fiery furnace. We're not going there either because of this.

\*\*\*\*\*Video trailer for Thriving in Babylon.

This study will take place in Sunday School beginning September 9 for 5 weeks. All are welcome.

The first group of exiles returns to Jerusalem (538 BC) and Daniel is alive to see them leave Babylon as they take the first steps of the 900 mile desert trek. They are the beginning of the promise that the Lord would restore the land. We'll let them go and do their thing. Time, 60 – 70 years, passes. Esther comes into view. She helps persevere the remnant of Jews in the entire kingdom. Move past her and her compelling story.

We come to the migrations led by a priest and a construction foreman. The second man was much more. He was cup-bearer to the king, would lead in the reconstruction of the city and serve as governor of the province. The two men are Ezra and Nehemiah. The books named for them were originally one book. There's lots of meaty material in the books. We'll focus on insights from the parallels in their lives as they serve the Lord. They emerge 80 years after the first return. Ezra makes it to Jerusalem 13 years before Nehemiah.

I. Identifying and resolving problems Ezra 9; Nehemiah 1

A. Identifying problems is good. The priest Ezra doesn't personally figure in his book until chapter 7. The ungodly king Artaxerxes gives his blessing for Ezra to return and charges him to ascertain the condition

of Judah and Jerusalem (E 7:14). The main problem the priest encounters is the spiritual condition of the people. READ E 9:1, 2. The Jews, the people of God, had again turned their backs on the Lord and served other gods. This is confounding as their purpose in returning to Jerusalem was to worship and serve the Lord. They had started enthusiastically enough but their intent soon wavered. The departure from God's ways was aided by intermarrying people from the godless tribes in the land, the same people groups who'd inhabited the land before the Jews got there after leaving Egypt. Ezra recognized the problem.

Nehemiah. READ N 1:1-3. Nehemiah had a cushy position. As cupbearer he had to test all food and drink before it touched the king's lips. He'd be the first to know if there was poison. In this position of trust he became a confidant and adviser, privy to the innermost matters of state.

Nehemiah got bad news from Jerusalem, a place he hadn't been. The walls were in disrepair. They'd been that way for almost 150 years. This meant it was basically defenseless and not regarded as a city.

Two men with two problems. End of story. Obviously not as there are more chapters in each book. Ezra and Nehemiah didn't just see the problems and go, "Oh, well. Them's the breaks." Or "This is horrible. These things shouldn't happen. Who's to blame? These people have been there for almost 100 years, why aren't they doing something? You're getting what you deserve for merging the worship of the Lord with false gods. What did you expect for watering down your faith?"

They weren't just critics who can see every problem at work, in relationships, in society, in the church. "Look at those people and what they're doing. It's pathetic. It's not right. How dare they? They call themselves Christ-followers." It's not enough to see a problem. That's only a part, a very small part of the whole. Both men went beyond merely recognizing the problem.

#### B. Trying to resolve problems is better

1. Depend on the Lord (Ezra 8:21-23; 9:1-5; Nehemiah 1). Ezra was a student and teacher of God's Word (E 7:6, 10, 12). Though he'd found favor in the king's eyes he was reluctant to ask the king for the normal protective detail for the 4 month trip. READ E 8:22. He told the king God's gracious hand would be with them. He felt good about voicing his confidence. Later, as the people are preparing to leave, he feels he was up a creek without a paddle, ashamed to ask for help. "What did I say? Do I really believe that promise?" The verses that bookend this verse show that he used his statement as further motivation to seek the Lord.

Jump ahead to Ezra 9:3-6. READ. There follows a lengthy prayer in which he first inserts himself into the problem as being a fellow sinner. This is interesting as Ezra had not drifted from the Lord. He had not married a pagan woman. Yet he included himself in the ranks of guilty sinners. He expresses shame, grief and repentance as well as a reliance on God's grace and righteousness.

Nehemiah also prays to God and also identifies with the people by confessing the sins of "we Israelites, including myself and my father's house" as well as a refusal to obey (N 1:6, 7). He asks the Lord for help with the immediate problem – going to the king to get permission to go to Jerusalem. We're more able to see a pattern of dependence in Nehemiah's prayers as we're only in chapter 1 and there's much more material (N

4:4, 9, 14; 6:9). He expresses his dependence on the Lord when he states, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding” (N 2:20).

2. Act (Ezra 10; Nehemiah 1). Both men took action as led by the Lord. Ezra and the people leave Babylon and journey across the wilderness. After his prayer of confession when he is aware of the problem, he continues to pray and weep and mourn over the condition of the people and his soul. Then he instructs the people who they were to act in the unprecedented matter of getting rid of their foreign wives and the influence of those who were idol worshippers (E 10:11).

Nehemiah went to the king to ask the humongous favor of letting him go so he can rebuild the city of Jerusalem. The king graciously concedes to the request. This is only the first hurdle. His problems are only beginning.

When he gets to Jerusalem he takes a moonlight stroll to see the condition for himself. It’s deplorable, worse than he had imagined. The destruction is so bad there’s no room for his horse to go through the rubble.

It’s another opportunity for him to lash out at those who’d let this happen. “It’s not my fault. I didn’t knock down these walls. I haven’t been here twiddling my thumbs for 85 years since the first exiles returned. I’ve been faithfully serving the king.” Instead he issues the challenge to rebuild.

The people respond to Ezra’s teaching and prayers by repenting. They also start rebuilding the walls.

II. Opposition is present when serving the Lord Ezra 4; Nehemiah 2, 4, 6

The opposition is more prevalent in Nehemiah’s story. It begins as soon as word gets out about his intentions. Some of the governmental officials don’t like it that “someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites” (N 2:10). These same guys mocked and ridiculed the project making false accusations about it (N 2:19).

It’s often the case where there’s initial opposition to the Lord’s work. When the church first started some folks in town thought we were a cult or some group that was only seeking people’s money. A couple years later, when looking for places to rent we couldn’t get in the school because it was felt it was mixing church and state. People wondered why the village needed another church, that the others were good enough. We stressed that we sought to be a Bible believing and practicing church.

Nehemiah’s opponents continued as the ringleaders talk smack. “Do they think they can finish in a day? If a fox climbs on it he’ll break down their wall” (N 4:1-3). They insinuate it’s a waste of time and energy. They even plan to attack and kill the workers. They personally attack the leader by claiming Nehemiah is trying to make himself king (Nehemiah 2:19). They attempt to waylay the whole project by trying to trap Nehemiah into leaving the city so they can imprison him (Nehemiah 6:1ff). And they sneakily get people on the inside to speak favorably about them. It’s all a form of intimidation to get the work to stop.

Some of the opposition has an effect as the threats cause some of the workers to question their task (N 4:11). And the work was hard and took a while which caused some to grow weary (N 4:10).

Any attempt in the work of the Lord will be opposed. Some comes from the obvious sources – the devil, the world system opposed to God. “Why do you want to follow Jesus? Is it really worth it with all you’ve had to face, that he’s allowed to happen to you? Do you really think he cares that much about you?”

Jean’s mom told her of a recent sermon by her pastor. He was talking about the culture and how he didn’t see how it ever was going to return to be all that favorable to true Biblical Christianity.

I read this week of the Cubs adding a player they hope will make them a better team in the playoff race. The story was of how he should have been expecting to be asked about his stance on homosexuality. The player, a follower of Jesus Christ, is on record as disagreeing with that lifestyle. The writer bemoaned how the player is trying to use his public position to influence opinion. But isn’t that what celebrities, etc. do all the time in the opposite direction?

Some of the other causes aren’t as expected or maybe we should say as easily noticed. Sometimes it comes from within, from other believers. They’re discouragers instead of encouragers.

In spite of where the opposition originates, we can be like the first returnees who start rebuilding the temple. They act despite their fear of the peoples around them who are opposed to them (E 3:3). They do what is right, fulfill their responsibility, and let the consequences and results fall where they may. The Lord can turn opposition, hindrances and obstacles into stepping stones. The school changed their mind and allowed us to meet there and then dropped the requirement to pay janitors overtime while we were there.

### III. Celebrate Nehemiah 8:12, 17; 12:27ff

Ezra and Nehemiah are finally brought together in the story line. 6 days after the wall is rebuilt the people gather on their New Year’s Day (N 8:1ff). They start the day just like celebrators do in America – listening to God’s Word from day break till noon. That’s 5 to 6 hours and they apparently stood the entire time. Ezra and other religious leaders read God’s Word and explain it so people understand. They’re demonstrably moved. Let’s just get it straight from the text.

READ N 8:9-12. They partied and rightly should have because apparently they hadn’t taken time for a long time to listen to or try to understand what God’s Word said. They heard God’s word and rejoiced. They came back the next day to hear Ezra read some more and the next day and the next – for 7 days in a row. They celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles with great joy (N 8:17).

This leads to a revival as 17 days later the people return to express repentance for their sins. They spend ¼ of the day listening to God’s Word and another quarter in repentance and worship (N 9:1-3).

There’s another celebration at the dedication of the wall (N 12:27ff). Ezra and Nehemiah are both present. It involves two massive choirs, first in procession then in singing. There are sacrifices. Women and children were allowed to join the celebration which isn’t typical. People bring their offerings. Their joy is so loud it can be heard far away (N 12:43).

For all the celebrating and the natural inclination to take credit for accomplishments, Ezra and Nehemiah give credit to the Lord. This is before things happen and after. They phrase it “the eye of their God

was watching over them” (E 5:5) and as God’s gracious hand being on them (E 7:6, 27, 28; 8:22; N2:8, 18; 9:17, 28, 31, 32). Summarize with N 9:18. READ.

#### IV. Desire for Lord to remember what have done Nehemiah 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31

Ezra and Nehemiah enjoyed the favor of the rulers. Ezra was helped by the king who sent a letter to whom it may be concerned. This granted him protection, provisions, the right to get help from government officials and the right to appoint judges, etc. as well as a kingly directive to teach the laws of Ezra’s God with the stipulation that those who don’t obey are to be killed, banished, have property confiscated or be imprisoned. (E 7:13ff). This was partly ordered out of fear of God’s wrath (E 7:23). Nehemiah was given permission to leave his position. He was also given the right to get supplies for rebuilding the city from the king’s property. He was also appointed as governor.

However, our two traveling companions weren’t all that interested in how kings or mere humans felt about them. Nehemiah wanted the Lord to remember him for his actions. Others might forget or not know or misjudge but he trusted the Lord is an accountant who accurately remembers and rewards those who serve him. He also wanted God to remember his enemies so they’d get what they deserve (N 6:14; 13:29).

Henry Morrison and his wife retired after 40 years of serving the Lord as missionaries in Africa. They’re on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt who’s returning from a big-game hunting expedition. The atmosphere is electric when the ship docks in New York. The mayor and other dignitaries are there to greet Roosevelt. There are reporters and photographers and well-wishers. A band plays, people cheer, flags wave. A huge banner proclaims, “Welcome Home Teddy!”

No one greets the missionary couple. Henry tries to put the incident behind him but fails. He becomes depressed. One evening he says to his wife, “This is all wrong. This man comes back from a hunting trip and everybody throws a big party. We give our lives in faithful service to God for all these many years, but no one seems to care.” His wife cautions he shouldn’t feel this way. “I know, but I just can't help it.” “Henry, you know God doesn't mind if we honestly question Him. You need to tell this to the Lord and get this settled now. You'll be useless in His ministry until you do.” Henry goes to his bedroom and unloads his heart. “Lord, you know our situation and what's troubling me. We gladly served you faithfully for years without complaining. But now...” About ten minutes later Henry returns with a peaceful look. His wife says, “Looks like you've resolved the matter.” Henry replied, “The Lord settled it for me. I told Him how bitter I was the President received a tremendous homecoming, but no one even met us as we returned home. When I finished, it seemed as if the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and simply said, 'But Henry, you aren't home yet!’”

We aren’t home yet. We shouldn’t expect the fanfare of the world. We shouldn’t look to receiving the accolades of politicians, entertainment personalities or even other followers of Christ. They are nice to have but they shouldn’t be our goal. The Lord delights in those who serve him. Our rewards are in heaven. When the time is right Jesus himself will greet his followers, “Welcome home, my child.”