

CORNERSTONECONNECTIONS
NOVEMBER23 2024

risky witness

Scripture Story: Nehemiah 2–4.
Commentary: *Prophets and Kings*, chapter 53.
Key Text: Nehemiah 2:20.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

The book of Nehemiah is a compilation of the memoirs of Nehemiah. The historic journey of Nehemiah to the construction site in Jerusalem begins with a simple but profound statement: "I was the cupbearer to the king." His role at court (more thoroughly described in the background context section) is what put Nehemiah in place to make a difference for his people. If kings are anything, they are unpredictable, which is why Nehemiah nervously made his way about his business in court, for he feared his manufactured smile would not hide his true sadness. The king saw through, and instead of being insulted by his servant's preoccupation with other matters, he inquired of Nehemiah, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." Nehemiah was afraid because you don't look sad in front of the king. But the goodwill and trust between them gave way to a conversation about the broken walls and gates of his homeland.

Nehemiah stepped even further onto dangerous ground by asking for letters of passage in order to arrange the supplies and resources to rebuild the walls. When the Bible says "It pleased the king to send me," the words are a testimony to how powerful an influence anyone can be in the world. While there are many themes in this lesson, none is more than that illustrated by the way Nehemiah leads—in cooperation with God. When the king asks, "What is it you want?" the next words in the text are "Then I prayed to the God of heaven." Nehemiah's leadership is a cooperative venture between God and man, the same kind of cooperation that is still available today.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- Discover God's guidance is always available. *(Know)*
- Feel confident in the ability to influence others. *(Feel)*
- Commit to a cooperative walk with God. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

Unity in the Body of Christ, Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs, no. 14: "The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children." (Psalm 133:1; Matthew 28:19, 20; John 17:20-23; Acts 17:26, 27; Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians

12:12-14; 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17; Galatians 3:27-29; Ephesians 2:13-16; 4:3-6, 11-16; Colossians 3:10-15.)

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? *section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.*

This week's activity explores the leadership style of visionaries and doers. As the students report on their tendencies, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both. Perhaps the students can think of biblical or historical examples of leaders who act first or pray first. Maybe there are such examples of leaders around us.

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

There is a story told about a boy who flew a kite so high that it was lost in the clouds. Standing out on the grass with the wind blowing, the boy held on to the string that threaded its way up into the heavens. A man walked by who had been watching the boy and asked, "Why are you holding on to that string?" The boy explained that at the end of the string there was a kite swaying back and forth in the heavens. The man replied, "I don't see a kite swaying back and forth in the heavens." The boy smiled and said, "Neither do I!" The man, clearly getting impatient with the boy, inquired, "Well, if you can't see the kite, how do you know there is one up there?" The boy answered, "I don't see it, but I know it's there because I feel the tug on the string."

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Share the following in your own words:

Great people who do great things are usually holding on to an unseen hand or hearing the still small voice of God in their ears. In this week's lesson Nehemiah takes some necessary, but risky, leaps of faith to do what needs to be done for God's glory. Nehemiah was aware that God's help and counsel were immediately available. As you read the story, note the way Nehemiah moves and reacts to challenges. Observe the way he holds tightly to a string that is tugging at him all the time.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story *section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them.*

- Read the story, *underline* the key words and phrases in the passage, and share why you think they are important.
- *Circle* the people mentioned in this passage and try to identify who they are and their contribution to the story.
- Read the text again carefully and notice the personality and character qualities about Nehemiah that emerge in this story.
- How does the interaction between the king and Nehemiah portray the relationship between kings and servants? To what do you attribute the goodwill or support of the king?
- What enduring truth or example does this story convey?
- What passages indicate how passionate Nehemiah is about this rebuilding project?
- Why is this so important to Nehemiah? Why does it seem like he begins this journey alone?
- Why do you think this passage is in the Bible? What other stories in Scripture depict tentative interactions between servants and rulers? What lessons are similar?
- What is the message God has for you in this story?

Extra Teacher's Questions

- What leadership qualities do you see in Nehemiah?
- What wise steps does Nehemiah follow as he undertakes this project?

Use the following as more teachable passages that relate to today's story: John 14–16; 1 Samuel 16; 1 Peter 5:7; Daniel 1; Philippians 4:6, 7; Acts 8:26.

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

Nehemiah shares virtually the same historical background as Ezra. The book of Nehemiah records

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

RABBI 101

Making Timeless Truths Timely

If truth is to be transferred from one generation to the next it needs to be contextualized in order for it to be valued. One way to do this is by asking what this story would look like if it were played out today. The students must then wrestle with the key elements that make up the salient parts of the message. Another way to make timeless truths timely is to package them in the most relational form possible—a person. Asking "Who does this story remind you of in your life?" or "Whom do you know that reminds you of Esther?" invites the students to keep the heroes of history real, and in so doing makes their example reachable.

the third return of the exiles to Jerusalem. Almost 20 years are covered in the book of Nehemiah from the time of his first visit to the time of the actual rebuilding of the walls. Nehemiah, named the governor, led the Jews in rebuilding the walls of the city and in reorganizing the people.

It is helpful to remember that Nehemiah is a child of the Babylonian exile. He was born to parents who had been taken into captivity, and his concept and value of freedom is new and very real. While he is serving Artaxerxes at his court, it is a position of a servant, but not a slave. Nehemiah's skill and trustworthiness earned him the esteemed job as cupbearer to the king. "As cupbearer he occupied a position of immense influence within the empire because of his closeness to the king, a closeness which could actually make the cupbearer second only to the king himself" (J. G. McConville, *Daily Study Bible*, p. 74). It has been said of the cupbearer, "If someone tries to poison the king, long live the king, say goodbye to the cupbearer!" The position is clearly a matter of trust.

Even though Nehemiah was born in captivity, he never failed to "remember" his heritage. The word "remember" is mentioned 10 times throughout his memoirs.

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary observes: "It may seem strange that Nehemiah waited three or four months after receiving the report from Jerusalem before approaching the king with his request" (vol. 3, p. 394). One reason might be that the king lived in several residences throughout the course of a year and simply may not have been present to notice the sadness of Nehemiah. Another reason may be that Ezra 4 reveals that the king might have been moody and easily prone to be swayed from one position to another. Hence, the unpredictability of a king might have prompted Nehemiah to caution.

But the king's reaction to the countenance of Nehemiah speaks of his affection and value of

Teaching From . . .

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite the students to share the key text with the class if they have committed it to memory.
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* Prophets and Kings. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that speaks most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quotes in Further Insight *convey the point of the story in this lesson.*

his cupbearer. "Few Persian monarchs would have been sufficiently interested in their personal attendants to notice whether or not they were sad" (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 395). Clearly, the tremendous support of the king speaks to the kind of leader Nehemiah was and the influence he had as a humble servant of God.

III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

Nehemiah begins the journey of taking this nightmare of information about Jerusalem and making it his dream in life to make it right. More important than the wills are the hearts and minds of his people. Often the process of doing the right thing together will foster an unmistakable transformation in the character of the people who participate. Much in the same way the short-term mission trips have the power to truly change the way you think and live and believe, so did the work of rebuilding the walls for the people of God. Is there a good cause you can get involved in, or perhaps start? Please don't wait until you feel ready or that you have a close relationship with God. It is in cooperation with God that your connection with Him increases. Are there broken walls and busted gates in your sphere of influence today?

Summary

Share the following thoughts in your own words:

It is difficult to face the truth when you are wrong. The people of God had wandered so far from Him that the only way to bring them back again was to send them into captivity in Babylon. God's plan wasn't to punish them, but to prepare them to become the kind of people they were destined to be to the world. The path to become God's true ambassadors to the world is not an easy road, and the journey often includes moments in which your weaknesses, faults, and even sinful behaviors are exposed. But God's grace and mercy are always there to reach you and teach you about the abundant life. Remember the promise God spoke in Jeremiah 29:11: " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' " (NIV). If your desire is to embrace this plan for your life, then be willing to receive the instruction and adversity God brings your way to grow you as a child of God.



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *Prophets and Kings* (or *Royalty and Ruin*),* chapter 53.

*A special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings* has been created by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press® Publishing Association. Get more info about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net.

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STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Nehemiah 2–4.
Commentary: *Prophets and Kings*, chapter 53.

risky witness



COLLEEN CAHILL

key text

"The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build."

(Nehemiah 2:20, NKJV)

flashlight

"Nehemiah's whole soul was in the enterprise he had undertaken. His hope, his energy, his enthusiasm, his determination, were contagious, inspiring others with the same high courage and lofty purpose. Each man became a Nehemiah in his turn and helped to make stronger the heart and hand of his neighbor" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 638).

what do you think?

Some leaders are "visionaries" and some leaders are "doers" but a rare few have to some degree the capacity to do both. Choose the approach to which you tend to ascribe and why you think it might be good. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both.

- "Work hard at what you know is right and God will accompany your efforts."

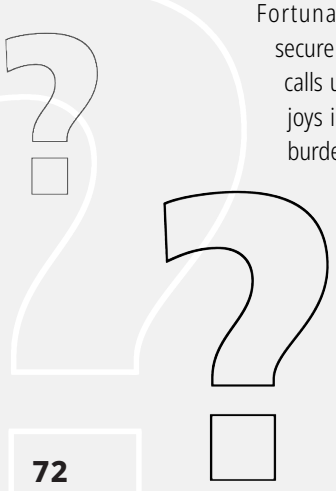
OR

- "Pray first and wait for God to guide you in what you should do."

did you know?

Everyone put on your happy face!" Did you know that in ancient times you could be executed for appearing depressed in the presence of the king? Monarchs must appear to inspire joy and happiness in their subjects, no matter what! Or else!

Fortunately, our King is secure in Himself and, thus, calls us to bring not only our joys into His presence but our burdens and sorrows as well!



INTO THE STORY

"I was cupbearer to the king."

"In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, 'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.'

"I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?'

"The king said to me, 'What is it you want?'

"Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.'

"Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, 'How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?' It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

"I also said to him, 'If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?' And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

"When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

"I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on."

(Nehemiah 1:11; 2:1-12, NIV)

OUT OF THE STORY

Read the story and *underline* the key words and phrases in the passage, and share why you think they are important.

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Circle the people mentioned in this passage and try to identify who they are and their contribution to the story.

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Read the text again carefully and note the personality and character qualities about Nehemiah that emerge in this story.

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How does the interaction between the king and Nehemiah portray the relationship between kings and servants? To what do you attribute the goodwill or support of the king?

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What passages indicate how passionate Nehemiah is about this rebuilding project? Why is this so important to Nehemiah? Why does it seem like he begins this journey alone?

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What is the message God has for you in this story?

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What leadership qualities do you see in Nehemiah?

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What wise steps does Nehemiah follow as he undertakes this project?

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punch lines

"Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies—make your way straight before me" **(Psalm 5:8, NIV).**

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" **(James 1:22-24, NIV).**

"Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" **(Psalm 25:5, NIV).**

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you" **(Psalm 32:8, NIV).**

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" **(Proverbs 3:5, 6, NIV).**

further insight

"Amidst great discouragement, Nehemiah made God his trust, his sure defense. And He who was the support of His servant then has been the dependence of His people in every age."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 645

"In every crisis His people may confidently declare, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?'"—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 645

Sabbath

Read 1 Peter 1:13.

We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all" (Fundamental Belief 14, Unity in the Body of Christ).

As you respond to the *What Do You Think?* section of this week's lesson, consider what Peter says in his letter to the church: "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming" (1 Peter 1:13, NIV). How does this passage capture Nehemiah's ability to *see* what needs to be done and find the right way to *do* the work God has set before him?

Sunday

Read Nehemiah 1:2-6.

Read the passage in the *Into the Story* section of the student lesson and respond to the study questions provided. Take time to imagine the scenes and sounds of the king's courtroom. How important do you think Nehemiah was to the king and what characteristics did he have that the king might have valued? What do you think is the message God has for you in this story? Is there a particular area of your life in which you need to be like Nehemiah and take prayerful action?

Monday

Read Nehemiah 2:20.

Consider the message in the *Key Text* in this week's lesson. Where do you think Nehemiah found the courage and authority to declare these words to his opponents? Was it the letters from the king that gave him a sense of authority, or was it his relationship with God? Who we are is not always what we do or who we are related to, but there are times when our role has influence. In what sphere of influence do you have the power to make a difference today?

Tuesday

Read Nehemiah 2:11, 12.

In this week's *Flashlight* quote from *Prophets and Kings*, Ellen White draws attention to the single-minded passion of Nehemiah. Clearly, Nehemiah became committed to a cause that inspired others to embrace it with enthusiasm. This leadership skill is born out of a genuine conviction and goes well beyond just a good idea. Nehemiah was willing to risk his life for this cause. What cause do you believe in so much that you might be willing to risk your life for it?

Wednesday

Read Proverbs 3:5, 6.

Read the *Punch Lines* in this week's lesson and identify the one passage that is speaking to you today. Why do you think this Scripture pricks your heart now and how does it speak to your life? Is there a particular verse in the *Punch Lines* that you want to share with a friend?

Thursday

Read Colossians 1:3, 4.

Whom do you know that has seen a cause through to fruition? Take time to write a note of affirmation and encouragement to someone in your church or community who has worked hard to see an idea through to reality. Share with them how they are like Nehemiah and what a contribution this makes to others and say a prayer that the same spirit will grow in you.

Friday

Read Proverbs 11:14.

As you reflect on this part of Nehemiah's story, what fears or questions do you have about your own abilities that inhibit your willingness to take risks for God? How do the stories of all the believers who have gone before you that took risks for God's cause give you courage? What would a similar course in your own journey look like?

this week's reading*

Prophets and Kings, chapter 53.

**Royalty and Ruin* is a special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings*, created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press®. Get more information about it by going to www.cornerstoneconnections.net and clicking on "Conflict of the Ages series." By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages series each year.