

Savoring God's Word

A Meditation on Nehemiah 1-2

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MOVING BEYOND MEDIOCRITY:
When You Want to Discern God's Purpose for your Life

This meditation exercise on Nehemiah 1-2 is especially for those wishing to find purpose in life. If you wish to have a group meditate on the passage together, the instructions for the group leader are in italics. If you wish to use it alone, ignore those instructions. This meditation roughly follows the pattern of *lectio divina*, but also includes elements from the Ignatian style of Scripture meditation. For more information about how to meditate on Scripture, see *Savoring God's Word* or CD *Meditating on Scripture* (scroll to the bottom).

WARMING UP (5-10 minutes)

Center yourself by breathing in and out several times. Relax your neck and then take time to let your muscles relax. Take time to set aside your distractions, turning them over to God one by one. Then read the prayer below and ask yourself, **What image in this prayer resonates most with you?**

God the Artist

by Dag Hammarskjöld

You take the pen
and the lines dance.
You take the flute,
and the notes shimmer.
You take the brush,
and the colours sing.

So all things have meaning and beauty
in that space beyond time where you are.

How, then, can I hold back anything from you.¹

Group leader: After group members have had a chance to greet each other, read the centering instructions above. Then present the above "quiet question," read the prayer and let group members reflect quietly for a few minutes. Repeat the question and ask them to name the image that resonates with them.

¹Dag Hammarskjöld as quoted in Zundel, p. 95.

READING the PASSAGE (15-20 minutes)

As you read the passage below aloud, enter into an ancient world of exiles who believed in God even though they had been defeated and lived in a pagan nation. Read silently the passage printed below, noting the explanations in the right column.

Group leader: Ask a group member to read the passage below aloud. Suggest that other group members might want to close their eyes and listen.

NEHEMIAH 1-2

(1:2-4, 11; 2:2-5, 8b, 11-12, 15a, 17-18)

(Nehemiah speaking)

WEEPING for the HOMELAND

1:2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the *Jewish remnant that survived the exile*, and also about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are *back in the province* are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been *burned with fire*." 4 When I heard these things, *I sat down and wept*. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. . . . 11 I was *cupbearer to the king*.

INTERACTING with the KING

2:2 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*, 3 but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" 4 The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I *prayed to the God of heaven*, 5 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 fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it." 8b And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.

INSPECTING the WALLS

2:11 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days 12a I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem 15a so I went up the

ITALICIZED WORDS & PHRASES

JEWISH REMNANT THAT SURVIVED THE EXILE Throughout Israel's history, God warned that they would be taken captive by another nation if they continued to live wickedly and worship idols. Judah, the southern kingdom, was taken into exile by Babylonia (586 B.C.). A few Israelites (remnant) were left behind.

BACK IN THE PROVINCE After 70 years, two waves of exiles returned, led by Zerubbabel and Ezra.

BURNED WITH FIRE The Babylonians had besieged and burned the city. A small group had tried to rebuild the walls, but the neighboring Samaritans stopped them.

I SAT DOWN AND WEPT Nehemiah lived far from his Jewish homeland in exile. He cared about Jerusalem's welfare because he was afraid that Judah would stray from God again without walls for defense and a stronger commitment to God.

CUPBEARER This position was something like the US Secret Service, which protects the President. Nehemiah taste-tested the king's food and drink to foil assassination plots. He had to be completely trustworthy, above taking a bribe.

THE KING King Darius of Persia. After

valley by night, examining the wall.

IMPARTING the VISION

2:17 Then I said to them [the officials], "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding."

RESULT: The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15).

the Jews were taken captive, the Persians captured the Babylonians and so Jews like Nehemiah could be found serving the Persian king.

MUCH AFRAID Servants, no matter how trusted, did not bother the king with their problems. Nor did they make bold requests for permission and provisions for a cause their master had already outlawed (Ezra 4:17-22).

PRAYED TO THE GOD OF HEAVEN Throughout this narrative, Nehemiah can be found praying in all kinds of situations.

If you haven't read the notes in the right column, read them silently now. Take a minute to consider the following questions.

Group leader: After the passage is read, ask group members to read silently the explanations in the right column and then to jot down answers to the questions below. After a few minutes, have them choose one question and share their answer to that question in a sentence or two. Or they may pass, if they wish. Remind them that this is not a time for discussion, but for reporting responses to the questions.

NEHEMIAH, the POLITICIAN from a FOREIGN LAND

1. Nehemiah had probably lived his entire life in Babylon or Susa, the capital of Persia. He had an important job and probably a lot of respect. It's difficult to understand why his homeland meant so much to him, except that God put it in his heart. What people or group of people are experiencing brokenness and, when you ponder it, it breaks your heart too -- even though it may be remote?
2. In what place in your life do you feel like an exile, estranged from who you are and the purposes God has for you?

NEHEMIAH, the LEADER

3. Nehemiah's goal came to pass, in part, because he allowed God to infuse in him a sense of purpose -- "what God put in my heart to do." This strong sense of purpose is evident by the following items:

- his weeping over the homeland
- his inspection of the walls by night
- his emphasis on the "gracious hand of my God" (2:8, 18)
- his powerful persuasion of the officials

How do the first two items differ from useless brooding?

4. Nehemiah's passion was exhibited by how he wept, prayed and followed through. Think about the things you're passionate about. Check any of the items below that you need to do more of concerning the causes God has put in your heart.

- experiencing others' brokenness and getting involved emotionally, weeping over it
- praying for God's wisdom and insight, confessing your lack of finesse
- doing something, even if it's insignificant, to work in the situation

PICTURING the PASSAGE (10-15 minutes)

Before reading the passage again, consider these cues.

CULTURAL CUE: NEHEMIAH AS A POLITICIAN

Review the "cupbearer" note above. Because Nehemiah held an important rank, he probably dressed well and had assistants waiting on him.

Consider how Nehemiah may have felt when he saw Jerusalem's crumbled walls. He worked and probably lived in the two palaces of King Darius the Great. Besides the summer palace in Susa, the winter palace in Persepolis had a flat terrace with 72 great columns, some of which were 65 feet high, topped by carvings of bulls and horned lions. The palace and city were surrounded by three separate walls carved with elaborate figures and protected by many watchtowers.²

Now read the passage again -- aloud, this time -- and close your eyes, picturing the events as if they were a movie playing in your mind. You may wish to choose one or more of these scenes to picture:

Weeping for the homeland: Imagine Nehemiah asking them specifically about the welfare of the people left in Jerusalem and what the city looked like.

Interacting with the king (four months later): Imagine his fear as he risked personal and political rejection.

Inspecting the walls: Imagine Nehemiah going at night with just a few men to survey the damage.

Imparting the vision to the officials: Imagine the pressure he felt. The king of Persia had championed this idea, which was a miracle. How did the officials of this outland province view Nehemiah, who may have behaved more like a Persian than a Jew? Did they resent him as a representative of an oppressive power, evidenced everywhere by military camps? Or, had these officials become used to the broken walls? With one attempt already defeated, did they wonder, *Who is this guy and why does he bother?*

Group leader: Ask group members to read the cue and information silently. Then have someone read the passage aloud while the others picture it.

SOAKING in the PASSAGE (5-15 minutes)

Ponder how your life is touched by this passage today. Read the passage aloud again and consider this question for several minutes: **What words or dramatic moments emerge from the passage and stays with you?**

After several minutes, write below about the words or scenes that resonate with you from the passage.

Words: _____

Moments: I hear . . . or, I see . . . _____

²Beers, pp. 179, 182-183.

Group leader: Have a different group member read the passage aloud and then state the question printed in bold. Have the group sit quietly for a while and then fill in the one of the blanks above. After a few minutes, ask group members to read what they've written. Remind them that they may pass if they wish.

PONDERING the INVITATION (5-15 minutes)

Perhaps God is offering you an invitation in this passage to do or be something in the next few days. What might that be? Sit in silence for a few minutes, pondering this question: **What do I sense this passage is calling me to do or be right now?**

Group leader: Read the above instructions aloud and after a few minutes, repeat the question printed in bold. Ask group members to respond by saying, I SENSE THIS PASSAGE CALLING ME TO: and then completing that statement with a short phrase. Anyone who wishes to pass may do so.

PRAYING (5-10 minutes)

Take a few minutes to respond to God about this meditation. **How do you feel about what you sensed (or didn't sense)? What is it you most want to say to God at this time?**

Group leader: After allowing a few minutes for private prayer, ask group members to pray for the person on their left. Anyone wishing to pray silently may do so, saying, "I'm praying silently." When they're finished, they can say, "Amen."

DAILY LECTIO:

If you wish, use the above format to meditate on God's word between group meetings. You may wish to focus on today's passage everyday this week or use the following passages:

- Nehemiah 1:5-11 (one of Nehemiah's prayers)
- Nehemiah 4:4-9 (Nehemiah prays in the midst of his troublemakers.)
- Nehemiah 6:9-15 (Nehemiah prays in the midst of his troublemakers.)
- 1 Chronicles 22:6-12 (David wanted to build the temple, but it wasn't to be.)
- Proverbs 19:20-21 (Differences between our plans and God's purpose)
- Colossians 2:2-3 (one of Paul's statements of purpose)

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