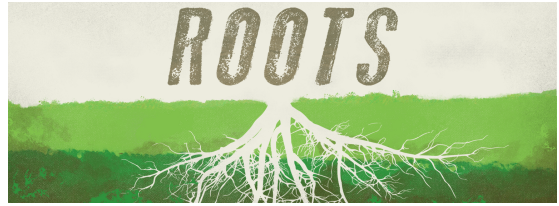


DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 3

ROOTS
WHEN ADVERSITY COMES
NEHEMIAH 2; 4
11/05/2017



MAIN POINT

When adversity comes, we must depend on God through prayer and unity.

INTRODUCTION

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

When is a time you have done something as a member of a team? What did you like most about it? What would you say are a few of the keys to good teamwork?

How does working together sometimes help us accomplish what we could never do apart from each other?

We are designed to be in relationships with other people. From the garden of Eden, God declared that it was “not good” for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Just as the first relationship between man and God and man and woman reflected the image of God, our relationships with other Christians should reflect the gospel of God. Followers of Christ are pulled together from every imaginable social, racial, familial, ethnic, and economic background to live together in the church. The gospel has changed us from individuals into the family of God. One key role this family relates to one another is through adversity. The roots of our faith will remain deeply rooted in God through adversity if together we depend on God through prayer and unity.

UNDERSTANDING

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

HAVE A FEW VOLUNTEERS READ NEHEMIAH 1:1–2:5.

Nehemiah 1 begins with the news that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and in need of much repair, a sign that the city was weak and a symbol of the spiritual brokenness of the remnant of God’s people who had returned from the exile. When Nehemiah learned this news, he was deeply moved.

What does Nehemiah’s response in verses 5-11 about his character and his relationship with God?

Nehemiah prayed to the Lord to let him return to Jerusalem to rebuild its wall. The Book of Nehemiah records at least nine prayers of this great man of God. The formula of fasting and praying indicates the depth and sincerity of his prayer life. In his prayer, Nehemiah acknowledged God’s character, pleaded for God to turn His attention to His people, confessed his and the people’s sins, reminded God of His covenant with Moses, and asked God to hear his prayer. Nehemiah mourned, wept, and fasted for days over Jerusalem’s situation. As he did, God was preparing him for a wonderful service and leadership opportunity.

When you think about the similarities between our world and Nehemiah's world, what stands out to you?

Think about the physical and spiritual tasks that lay ahead of Nehemiah. Why was it important that he first took the time to pray and seek God's guidance before he got to work? Why should unceasing prayer always be our first response when we come face to face with adversity?

The true problem wasn't a broken-down city filled with broken-down people. The true problem was a broken-down relationship with God. Nehemiah was called to rebuild a city and a community of people in shambles. Because of the exile, Jerusalem was in need of both physical and spiritual renewal. One can hardly deny that our world needs the same.

Share about a time when adversity pushed you to your knees (literally or figuratively!) in prayer. What was the impact on the roots of your faith?

HAVE A FEW VOLUNTEERS READ NEHEMIAH 2:17-18.

Nehemiah enlisted the necessary support by use of the term we. By doing so, he identified with and made himself part of those he wished to enlist in the project. The work required a team effort—something that would honor God and bring blessing to all the Israelites in the city, not merely to Nehemiah.

Describe a time when unity with other believers helped you stand strong in the face of adversity. How might things have gone differently without those relationships?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 4:1-9.

What was Nehemiah's reaction to the taunts he faced in response to his rebuilding efforts? How did the people react to the news that an attack was planned? What kept the enemy from attacking?

What is the lesson for us from Nehemiah's response to the adversity he faced in the midst of his rebuilding efforts?

If we want to do anything worthwhile for the Lord, we are going to face opposition from the world. Sanballat was an enemy of the people of Israel because he did not love the God of Israel. For that reason, he was angry to see the people rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's reaction to Sanballat's taunts was to pray to the Lord. Nehemiah did not seek revenge for the insults himself, he left it to the Lord. The people reacted as Nehemiah did. When they felt that attack was imminent, they prayed to God and "stationed a guard...day and night." They prayed, but they also took action to complete the plan that they started. When we unify with other Christ-followers, we are strengthened by them, and our unity in Christ makes the impossible possible.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 4:14,20.

How did Nehemiah encourage his people to persist, despite the adversity they faced? What did he want them to remember (v. 14)?

What kinds of things must Nehemiah have known to be true about God in order to continue moving forward despite the opposition?

What about you? When adversity comes in, are you someone you pushes away or presses in, as Nehemiah did?

Nehemiah took seriously the threat posed by Sanballat and his associates and exercised common sense and safety. He made an inspection to ensure the people were ready and urged them not to be afraid. He called them to remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord, borrowing an expression from the Law of Moses (Deut. 7:21 “great and awesome”). Families were standing with God and with one another through this important task of finishing Jerusalem’s wall.

APPLICATION

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

Today we highlighted the benefits of prayer and Christian community to help our roots remain steadfastly planted in Christ when adversity comes. How does this truth apply to your life today?

What prayer habits and practices can you put in place now so that your roots are already deep when adversity does come?

PRAY

Praise God for making the church a place where all are welcomed and taught the truth of His Word. Pray that you would hold on to His Word with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and live the truth of these verses out with your own community.

COMMENTARY

NEHEMIAH 1:5-2:5

1:5-11 Nehemiah’s prayer, while shorter than Ezra’s, is also written in late biblical Hebrew style found in other penitential prayers of that era (Neh 9:5-37; Dan 9:4-19). Like them it reflects the language of Deuteronomy, acknowledging that Israel’s adversities had resulted from the nation’s covenant unfaithfulness and that their present survival was due solely to God’s abundant mercy.

1:5-6 Addressing God as Yahweh, the God of heaven is not common in the OT, but it does occur several other times (Gen 24:7; 2Ch 36:23; Jnh 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 (Ezr 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 (Dt 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 (Dt 30:1-5) that repentance would bring restoration (Neh 1:9). Repentance is described as return to Me, using the primary OT term (Hb shuv) 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 (Ezr 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: I was the king’s cupbearer. The cupbearer was not only responsible for choosing appropriate wines for the king, but he tasted them himself to assure they were not poisoned.

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. It is also possible that Nehemiah waited for the (Hb) tukta, a Persian feast in which the king would often grant the requests of his supplicants. 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 (Ezr 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 Nehemiah's request to rebuild Jerusalem was bold in light of the king's earlier decision (Ezr 4:12-16) to stop all construction on the project.

NEHEMIAH 2:17-18

2:17 The word disgrace (Hb *cherpah*), 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.

NEHEMIAH 4:1-9

4:1-2 The Nehemiah Memoir (see "Structure" in the Introduction to Ezra) resumes again with the renewed opposition of Sanballat. He became furious and mocked the Jews. "Mocked" is a strong word (Hb *la'ag*) that means "to jeer, to deride." The first of his derisive rhetorical questions, Can they restore it by themselves? involves reading a rare (and debated) Hebrew verb. Another possibility is to accept a minor textual change (from Hb *lahem* "to them," to *le'lohim* "to God") and understand the question as, "Will they leave it all to God?" The meaning of the second question is also not certain: Will they offer sacrifices? Perhaps the sense was that the Jews would offer enough sacrifices to God to persuade Him to help them rebuild the city. The jest regarding bringing back to life the burnt stones was a recognition that the Jewish people had no time to quarry new stones but had to make do with the rubble left over from the destruction of 586 b.c.

4:4-5 The book of Nehemiah contains two lengthy prayers, one private (1:4-11) and one public (the prayer/confession of chap. 9). This is the first of seven brief prayers in which Nehemiah either petitions God's help or asks God to take note of his efforts to fulfill God's purposes for His people (5:19; 6:9,14; 13:14,22). The sentiment here is that of the imprecatory prayers of the Psalms that calls for God's judgments on the enemy (Pss 69; 83; 137; 139). While such a prayer seems out of place in light of Jesus' teaching (Mt 5:43-47), it must be remembered that Nehemiah was writing before the cross in the context of the old covenant. While we cannot pray a prayer like Nehemiah's, we can emulate his passion for God to bring justice to an unjust world.

4:7-9 After Sanballat and his allies failed to discourage Nehemiah and the people, they virtually surrounded Jerusalem. Sanballat led the force from Samaria, north of Jerusalem, while Tobiah and the Ammonites were east of Jerusalem. The Arabs, probably led by Geshem (2:19), were south/southeast of Jerusalem, with the Ashdodites, from the former region of Philistia, southwest of Jerusalem. The response of those in Jerusalem reflected their trust in God as well as their understanding that faith did not preclude action but demanded it (v. 9).

NEHEMIAH 4:14,20

4:13-14 Nehemiah's skill as a leader is exemplified in these verses. Although enemies surrounded him and the people were discouraged, he took action.

4:15-17 As the work resumed, Nehemiah took precautions against a surprise attack. He divided the group he called my men (Hb *ne'aray*; lit "my youths"), which may have been a militia that supported Nehemiah's role as governor. Half of them joined in the work while the other half were on guard duty.

4:18-22 Because the defenders were spread so thinly around the city, Nehemiah had the trumpeter beside him, so they could concentrate their forces quickly in case of attack. Having everyone spend the night inside Jerusalem not only bolstered the defenses of the city but also kept the discouraged or the fearful from deserting during the night.