
Building Blocks for Biblical Success

DAVE BAST

We all know what it is like when people oppose our good intentions, or try to wreck our rebuilding plans. Sometimes it is well-meaning: Go ahead; have a piece of dessert; I made it just for you. There goes the diet! Sometimes, the opposition is sinister: Go ahead; have a drink. Just one won't hurt you. There goes sobriety. Well, how can we deal with opposition when we are trying to rebuild after our life has fallen apart in some way? We will dig into that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, now this is the third program in a series that we are calling: *Now what? Rebuilding when life falls apart*; which could refer to any number of disasters or incidents or setbacks, or even just life changes; and we are doing this, Scott, by looking at the books and the story of Ezra and Nehemiah; and those two characters in particular.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A lot of time has actually passed. The first exiles started heading back to Israel around the year 538 BC; and we are now quite a few years after that. We are getting down toward 459 BC. The work, as we saw in the last program, Dave...it was an answer to prayer, that the people were able to return to Israel at all; but despite that answered prayer, not all the other prayers were answered as quickly. Things didn't go smoothly; there was opposition; there were setbacks. Eventually, that same Artaxerxes who sends Ezra and Nehemiah turns against Israel and tries to stop the work altogether; so, it's tough.

DAVE BAST

Very tough; and you know, here is another interesting perspective, I think, on this whole story. The events that we are talking about, especially the ones we are focusing on in this program, happened in the 5th Century before Christ; that is to say, the 400s...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And on the stage of world history, huge things were happening...secular history, that is. So, the Persian Empire is kind of at its height; and we have talked about people like Xerxes and Artaxerxes, and they had armies a million strong, and invaded Greece; and incidentally, speaking of Greece, this is the century of the flowering of ancient Greece...the rise of the great philosophers, and the height of Greek power and influence; and meanwhile, the Bible ignores almost all of that and focuses on things that are happening in a little, broken-down city called Jerusalem, in a tiny corner of the Persian Empire that nobody else cared about; but God's history...God's story...isn't great in worldly terms. It is achieving what he wants to happen in the course of human events.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds you of Luke 2, Dave, in the classic Christmas story, where Luke tells us, you know, about all the Roman higher-ups, and there is Augustus and there is Quirinius; and you've got all these big officials of the Roman Empire; and then Luke says: Meanwhile, in this little tiny town named Bethlehem, a baby gets born, and guess what? He is pretty important.

DAVE BAST

Guess what, yes. So, we want to pick up Nehemiah's story. We saw in the very first program, where we at least introduced him and his background in Chapter 1. He gets this message that things aren't so great in Jerusalem. The walls are still broken down. He weeps; he confesses sin and the sins of the people of Israel, which is interesting; and then he goes to the king, and on his way in he throws up this quick prayer: Lord, give me success; because he is going to ask for a leave of absence; and Nehemiah is a very important official. You think of the story of Esther, you know, trembling as she approaches, because if the king doesn't extend his scepter, she is done for. So, this is no small thing; and Nehemiah goes in and the king is gracious: Yes, you go ahead; and gives him everything he needs. So, then we pick up the story of Nehemiah returning to Jerusalem in Nehemiah Chapter 2.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹¹I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, ¹³I 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. ¹³By night, I went through the Valley Gate, toward the Jackal Well, and the Dung Gate; examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down; and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there wasn't enough room for my mount (my horse) to get through; ¹⁵so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.

DAVE BAST

And then he says to the leaders of the city: ¹⁷“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.”

So, interestingly, the very first thing he does, even before he turns in after a long, grueling journey...he goes out at night on his horse, and he kind of surveys the condition of the walls.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and if we think, Dave, how much longer this is after the first Israelites returned...about seventy years; and you know, the descriptions Nehemiah has here of Jerusalem remind you of what we saw at Ground Zero in New York City after 9/11...after the World Trade Center collapsed. They called it “the pile” because it was just piles and piles of debris. There was so much debris in some places in Jerusalem, he cannot get his horse to squeeze through.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so he has to get off and kind of lead the horse by hand; but, I think it is really significant that he stops to take stock of the situation before he jumps...you know, you might expect him to say: Whew; well, you know, I traveled a long way to [get] here; let's get going. No; first he very carefully does this personal reconnaissance. I was just reading a book, Scott, about the development of GPS, and all of us probably use it nowadays, in our phones or in our cars. It is the Global Positioning Satellites that enable us to find a route, you know, the wherever we want to go...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But actually, when they first invented it, it wasn't so much to find the way to where you wanted to go, it started out by identifying where you were; because you cannot figure out where you need to go unless you know where you are; and that is the kind of thing, I think, Nehemiah is doing here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and you know, you think that Nehemiah surveys the city and then he says to everybody: This place is a wreck! This is a mess! This is terrible. And you say: Well, yes; duh... I mean, the city was destroyed by fire in 586 BC; what did you expect to find? But I think, again Dave, this is seventy years after they started streaming back to Israel. Could it be that the people were getting used to the wreck? Could it be that they were just getting used to Jerusalem being a shambles? I mean, you can get used to anything. Were they getting complacent? Why had nobody started to clean up the pile?! Why was nobody picking up the rubble? So, maybe it took a Nehemiah to say: Hello. This isn't the way it is supposed to be. This is not God's blueprint for Israel. If I need to point out the obvious to you, to convince you we've got to get started, that is what I am going to do.

DAVE BAST

I think it is easy for us, really, to become accustomed, and to think: Well, nothing can be done, you know; it has always been like this; this is who I am; this is my circumstance now; I cannot really change. And, as you say, Scott, a Nehemiah needs to come along...or somebody needs to open our eyes and say: No; it doesn't have to be this way. There is something we can do. Come, let us rebuild. He invites them to join him. He doesn't say: No, you go do it. Nehemiah is the leader; he has the authority of the king; he is going to take over the government of the city, but he says: Let us...let's do this together; and then he does something else that is interesting. Right at the end, he encourages them by sharing his testimony. He says to them:

¹⁸I told them about the gracious hand of my God on me, and what the king had said to me.

He is saying to them: Look, God has already started here. He has given me favor with the king. So, let's get going and do this ourselves. But scarcely had they started, when more trouble arose; and we will turn to that next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nehemiah 2, Dave, ends with Nehemiah stating the obvious: This is a wreck. The city has been this way for seventy years, since we first started coming back. Why isn't anybody cleaning it up?

You know, as you were talking, Dave, near the end of that last segment, I thought, what Nehemiah does for the people is sort of what a good therapist or counselor or pastor sometimes can do for you. When they look you straight in the eye and say: You do realize that the way you have been living isn't normal. This isn't right; you've got to change. And sometimes it is a grace to be told the truth, that you need to change course here. Nehemiah says: You guys have been living with this complete train wreck of a city for the better part of a century. It is time to go; and so, Nehemiah 2 ends with: ^{18b}So they began this good work.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and it was a good work; and you can change; and things can be addressed. So, he encourages them by saying: Let's do this together—let's work on this together. Again, I like your application, Scott: A good counselor or therapist or pastor. They don't say: You go do this, necessarily all the time. They say: Let's work on this together.

So, that is how Nehemiah begins; and it was an important work. Incidentally, in the ancient world the difference between a city and a town wasn't just the size, it was whether one had a wall or not. A city was walled...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It wasn't decorative.

DAVE BAST

Right; it was very necessary for defense. It kind of defined a community; and in the case of Jerusalem, the walls had symbolic meaning, too. I mean, they reflected on the character and the glory of God. So, there is a wonderful verse in Isaiah that says:

60:18 You shall call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.

So, Jerusalem—the physical city—stood for God's work with his people, and it was a praise to him when the city was right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that image will endure in scripture, of course, Dave, because in the book of Revelation it is the new Jerusalem, which comes down...

DAVE BAST

And the walls are made of precious stones...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And the gates are pearls, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, the work begins, but if the people had been sitting around for seventy years not doing the work, maybe one of the reasons was because they had this sense that if they start to do this there are going to be some people who oppose them; and sure enough, we get to Nehemiah 3 and Nehemiah 4; the work begins; everybody is pitching in to clean up Jerusalem...maybe to get these walls back in shape and the gates rehung, and so forth; but, then we hear:

4:1 When Sanballat... (and this is a local official from a different nation) When Sanballat heard they were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ²and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring stones back to life from those heaps of rubble, burned as they are?" ³And Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building, even a fox climbing on it could break down their wall of stones." (And then we get the line) ⁴"Hear us, O God, for we are despised."

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are being made fun of...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are being poked fun of by these other people, who don't want to see Israel rise.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you call that a wall?! But, now we are given names to the people. If you listened to the last program, we introduced this opposition party, and they tended to be from Samaria—Samaritans they are called here, in fact; and now their leaders are named: Sanballat and Tobiah; but they are people who are kind of now vying as rivals with the returnees in Jerusalem; and they don't want to see Jerusalem become strong; and they don't want to see the Jewish nation prosper; and this is an enmity that will be carried out even into Jesus' time, when Jesus would address it, actually, by pointing out in various ways the value of the Samaritans, by engaging them. You think of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, or the parable of the Good Samaritan. So, Jesus is going to try to counteract this prejudice, which has its roots in the conflict we are seeing here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so they make fun of them: Ha, ha, ha, you know, if I sneezed hard I could knock down *your* wall. A little kitten...a fox...could climb on that wall. The problem is, though, the people didn't give up, and eventually the walls start to look like, well, real walls; and so, these people...Sanballat and Tobiah...they see the gaps are actually being repaired. It is starting to look like a wall again.

So then we read in Nehemiah:

⁸They plotted together to come fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. (Then Nehemiah writes): ⁹But we prayed to our God, and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

So they didn't just pray, Dave; they said: You know, *ora et labora*, that old phrase: Work and pray...pray and work. So let's pray for God to protect us, and then let's take some steps to be protected.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think that is a very significant detail in the story of Nehemiah. If there is one sort of lesson, if you want to call it a lesson, that emerges from the example of Nehemiah...what a great leader he was, and the steps that he took. You could probably write a leadership manual...in fact, probably somebody has written a leadership manual based on Nehemiah's actions...but here, there is no dichotomy between relying on God and taking very human measures.

So, as we read on in the chapter, and for the interest of time, we will skip some of the next verses, but what he does is actually arm the people; and he tells them: Okay, pick up your swords, pick up your spears... Eventually in the story, he is having half the people work on the wall, and the other half are standing guard, because they keep hearing: You are going to be attacked; and these enemies are going to come and roll over you, and they are going to kill you, frankly. That is how they will stop the wall.

And so, Nehemiah sees no conflict between faith and works; as you said, *ora et labora*—pray and work; the old Latin motto of the monks; and he takes these very real, practical steps so that the work will go on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a good reminder, Dave, that indeed, as you just said, we tend to like to think in polarities or make dichotomies in our life, right? We like to think: Well, God will take care of us...God will take care of us. It is the old story, right? The man who has a hurricane going on and the flood waters are rising, and he prays to God: Protect me. He has to move up to a second floor because it is flooding: Please, protect me. He ends up on the roof, and then a boat comes by to rescue him but he says: No; God is going to protect me. A helicopter comes by to rescue him: No, God is going to protect me; and then, of course, he dies and gets to heaven and says: Why didn't you protect me? And God says: I sent you a boat and a helicopter...

DAVE BAST

Right; what more do you want?!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jump on board. So, we don't want to draw that distinction between faith and work; it can be both. Nehemiah said in verse 20 of this chapter: Our God will fight for us; but that didn't keep him from saying: So, a few of

you, would you please pick up a sword? You know, kind of switch off with the trowel for the mortar...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or the bricks and the... So, trust in God and working in cooperating with God and God's Spirit...those are not opposite things, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive.

DAVE BAST

And human effort, right; and human precautions. I mean, common sense precautions. That is very practical wisdom we see here; but...and there are some more stories later on in Nehemiah about more attempts to kind of lure him away from the work, and he resists that. So, he kind of stays the course, and the people keep working, and they finish the walls, and there is a great outcry of joy, and they have this big celebration on the walls with all kinds of musicians and all that thing, which is great, you know...we need to do that, too...celebrate victories...but, there is one other serious problem, which will arise, and it is a problem within...a problem in the community...inside the city, and the people of Judea; and we will look at that before we wrap up this program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this third program in a four-part series on the story of rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple, as we read it in Ezra and Nehemiah; and Dave, in this program, we have been sticking with Nehemiah; and we have just seen that they persevered through some hard times; they took seriously a military threat from some people living up near Samaria, led by somebody named Sanballat and Tobiah; and they made actual progress on rebuilding Jerusalem; but as the famous cartoon of Pogo said years ago, Dave: We have met the enemy, and he is us...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because as we move on into Nehemiah Chapter 5 now, we find out that some of Israel's biggest problems are squabbles from within.

DAVE BAST

Squabbles that arise out of injustice, economic inequality, very modern sounding problems. So, we will get right to the story and read this. ¹Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ²Some were saying, "We and our sons and our daughters are numerous. In order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." ³Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." ⁴Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards; ⁵and though we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews, and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have had to subject our sons and daughters to slavery."

Economic problems are causing disruption; and some of these families—of the poor families—are even having to lose their children...sell them into slavery...in order to pay their debts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And some of the debts are owed to fellow Jews...to people who ought to be all on the same team; whether they are rich or they are poor, or whatever, we are seeing a little bit of what has happened all through history, unfortunately; a little class warfare. We are also seeing something that led to problems for Israel before the Babylonian exile, when they were not taking care of the poor, as the book of Leviticus demanded; and so, you've got the prophets...people like Amos, who excoriated Israel for mistreating the poor and not following the Levitical laws for leaving, you know, grain in your fields for the poor to glean. There was rampant

injustice before the exile; and that is part of why they went into exile; now they are back, and some of the same issues, unfortunately, are coming up. It is significant. We won't be able to cover all of Nehemiah, either in this program or the final one coming up, but Nehemiah will do a lot to make reforms—to make sure the poor are cared for; but at this point, Israel is kind of tearing itself apart from within.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and it turns out what is happening is that the rich are charging interest on the money that the poor borrowed. There weren't any banks, so they had no recourse if they had to have food to survive, and they needed to borrow money, they turned to their neighbors who were better off, and those same people turned around and charged interest; which doesn't sound like a big deal to us; we do it all the time; but the Old Testament law forbade that. They said: If you lend to your fellow Jew in need, you must not charge him interest; and when Nehemiah hears this, he is upset; and so, we read, carrying on in Nehemiah 5:

⁹“What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our gentile enemies? ¹⁰I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain, but let us stop charging interest. ¹¹Give back to them their fields and vineyards.”

The people kind of respond: Okay; we will do that. You know, you kind of caught us and we confess. So, there is a real challenge here, and a response.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it reminds me of the story, Dave, of Millard Fuller. Millard Fuller was a millionaire; he was an extremely successful businessman; but got to a crossroads in his life where he felt empty, and he wanted to do something to help people; and so, as some of our listeners know, Millard Fuller founded what is now known as Habitat for Humanity; and he said he was going to follow more of a biblical economics. It is not that the people that they would build houses for wouldn't have any investment in it, there was what he called “sweat equity,” where they had to help rebuild it; but he said: You know, you can get a house...no money down...and you will be paying a mortgage, but there will be no interest on it...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So that those who...sort of the working poor...could actually afford a house; and that is sort of what God's design for Israel was as well; to sort of say: Let's help each other out. It is not like you cannot give loans; it is not like we want people not to be involved, but we want it to be fair. Anyway, what you see going on here is Nehemiah's attempt to make Israel just fair, as God's law demanded.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is not an indictment of capitalism; this is a very complicated issue, and modern capitalist societies and investing and all the rest...that is not what is at issue here. What it is, is really having concern for the poor, and people who are being crushed by burdens of debt, and not making it worse for them. So, it is a more personal relationship kind of issue that Nehemiah raises and challenges the people on; and I think the message for us is: We need to be concerned and to be willing to help and not always look for a profit, you know, in the way we deal with other people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and Nehemiah also knew that the people were getting discouraged by all this, so he had to find a way to encourage them; he had to find a way to keep people doing the work. They still faced many external challenges, so they couldn't afford to fall apart on the inside. So, he helps to kind of right the ship here a little bit, and keep the people unified; so, the work does get done. You know, it reminds me, Dave, of a quality in the New Testament that is often praised by, like, the Apostle Paul. That is endurance, right? Let's not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart, Paul says in Galatians 6; and thankfully, the people didn't lose heart; and that is the good news part of Nehemiah, that they stayed together and they got the walls rebuilt; thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our study of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the praise that the people give to the Lord for his continued hand in their lives. Connect with us on our website, groundworkonline.com, and share what *Groundwork* means to you, or what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on June 3, 2026