

Rebuilding What Was Lost
The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah



Rebuilding What Was Lost

- *A Little Bit of Background*
- *The Return*
- *Laying the Foundation*
- *Letters to Kings*
- *The Return of the Heroes*
- *After “The End”*
- *The Cupbearer to the King*



The Cupbearer to the King



Funky little teaching moment...

- Okay, before we start in with Nehemiah 1:1, let's remind ourselves of something—
 - Nehemiah 1:1 is actually Ezra-Nehemiah 11:1, right?
 - It was originally one book, designed and intended to be read as one coherent story (both parts being compiled later by the scribe and quintessential documenter, Ezra, though the book of Nehemiah is presented as a first-hand account)
 - So please remind me what we've learned in the first ten chapters of that story...



Ezra-Nehemiah



The Cupbearer to the King

- So now Nehemiah finally joins our story...
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1
 - So where was Susa again?
 - If you'll remember, the Persian King Cyrus the Great conquered the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 540 BC and that left the growing Persian Empire with several big, important (former capital) cities
 - So Cyrus and his heirs were smart enough to make use of the cities while simultaneously undermining their former political importance—and started using centralized cities like Susa to become the new hotspots of political power (NOTE: Susa is where Daniel had lived with Darius, where Esther had lived with Xerxes, etc.)



The Cupbearer to the King

- So now Nehemiah finally joins our story...
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1
 - So where was Susa again?
 - And this is in the twentieth year of... *what...?*
 - Well... we dunno...
 - Some people suggest “the twentieth year after the end of the book of Ezra” (i.e.; twenty years after Ezra went back to Jerusalem)
 - But the text doesn't say that, and that would be a weird way for them to date things back then without some explicit comment



The Cupbearer to the King

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 - So where was Susa again?
 - And this is in the twentieth year of... *what...?*
 - Well... we dunno...
 - Some people suggest “the twentieth year after the end of the book of Ezra”
 - A more logical and consistent suggestion is “the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes”
 - Remember that this verse should actually be read as Ezra-Nehemiah 11:1, and that means that the last explicit date was given in Ezra 7:8 (so please read Ezra 7:8)
 - So it makes sense within the narrative itself that Ezra came back to Jerusalem in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes and now we’re picking the story up 13 years later in the twentieth year of that same reign
(note also the *next* time that a month is specifically mentioned in Nehemiah 2:1)



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 - Some people suggest “the twentieth year after the end of the book of Ezra”
 - A more logical and consistent suggestion is “the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes”
 - Thus, our story is picking up in November or December of 445 BC



The Cupbearer to the King

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 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1
 - So where was Susa again?
 - And this is in the twentieth year of... *what...?*
 - And why was Nehemiah in the *citadel* of Susa?
 - **STOP!** Don't answer that!
 - I know that we've already talked about who Nehemiah was in this course, but from a purely *narrative* standpoint, the reader doesn't know who this guy is, other than that he's apparently Jewish, still living in exile, and important enough to be *specifically* living in essentially the palace itself, where the political movers and shakers are



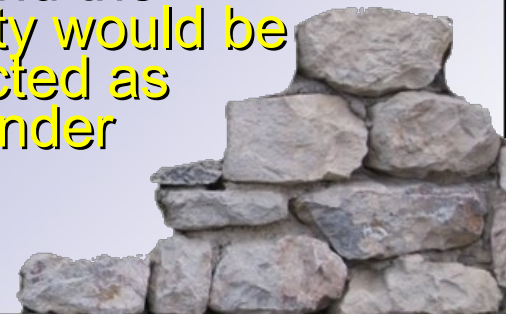
The Cupbearer to the King

- So now Nehemiah finally joins our story...
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1-3
 - What on earth was going on over in Jerusalem?
 - Remember, the Persian king Nebuchadnezzar II had destroyed the walls over 150 years earlier
 - But then, the walls had been abandoned and then re-destroyed back in Ezra 4, when the neighbors had complained to the *new* king
 - So the broken walls of Jerusalem were a daily, tangible symbol of *two* defeats



The Cupbearer to the King

- So now Nehemiah finally joins our story...
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1-3
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:4
 - What was Nehemiah's personal reaction to all this?
 - Why?
 - I mean, he'd *never even been* to Jerusalem before
 - Jerusalem was supposed to be God's city, a "city on a hill" that drew everyone to itself—God's shining gemstone here on earth
 - But its people—though they'd rebuilt their *own* houses, and had ultimately rebuilt the Temple under Ezra and Zerubbabel—had left the city *itself* in ruins for over a century
 - How would the *rest* of the world have viewed Jerusalem?
 - In the ancient world, a city with no walls was considered a *backwater* city with nothing of value to anyone *worth* protecting—and the inhabitants of the city would be completely unprotected as well, always living under constant stress and threat of disaster



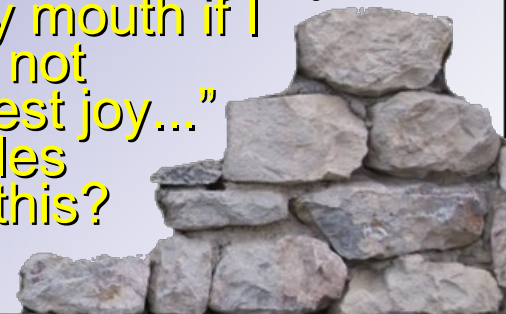
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 - But its people—though they'd rebuilt their *own* houses, and had ultimately rebuilt the Temple under Ezra and Zerubbabel—had left the city *itself* in ruins for over a century
 - How would the *rest* of the world view Jerusalem?
 - How would they view the God whose precious city it was *supposed to be*?
 - How can we apply all of that to our *own* situations today?



The Cupbearer to the King

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 - What was Nehemiah's personal reaction to all this?
 - Why?
 - I mean, he'd *never even been* to Jerusalem before
 - Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, but he was still a Jew, and that made Jerusalem *his* city because he was part of the people of God, and Jerusalem was the *city* of God—so even if he would never set foot inside of the city, he still cared deeply for the people and the place and the God whom the place represented
 - Also remember Psalm 137...
 - The Psalm—written during this time of exile—begins with, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.”
 - But it also says, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy...”
 - So how were *most* of the exiles probably feeling about all of this?



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 - Also remember Psalm 137...
 - But I think it's important to note here that Nehemiah wasn't just sad—he was *anguished* but *in his anguish*, he fasted and prayed and sought out God
 - What sorts of things does all of that tell us about Nehemiah?
 - So let's look at his prayer...



The Cupbearer to the King

- So now Nehemiah finally joins our story...
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1-3
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:4
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:5
 - Okay, when someone starts a prayer like that, they're generally doing one of two things—
 - 1) Sincerely praising God's essential attributes
 - 2) Buttering God up for their upcoming request
 - So which is Nehemiah trying to do here?



The Cupbearer to the King

- So now Nehemiah finally joins our story...
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:1-3
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:4
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:5-6a (*i.e.*; to the first period)
 - “You’re so good at taking care of your people and generously answering the prayers of people who keep your commandments so well. And, y’know, I’m one of those people of yours and here I am *praying* to you... so...”

(NOTE: An amazing number of people who speak about God owning the cattle on a thousand hills are doing so because they’re about to ask for some steak...)

- Then again, what details are we given at the end of verse 4 and the very end of this sentence in verse 6 that might suggest that Nehemiah’s prayer isn’t really *like* that?



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 - Please read Nehemiah 1:4
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:5-6a (*i.e.*; to the first period)
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:6b-7
 - Is Nehemiah claiming that—*being* people who keep God's commandments so *well*—that they *deserve* God's generous support?
 - In what significant ways is his prayer reminiscent of Ezra's prayer from back in Ezra 9:3-13?
 - Do you see why these two guys would totally connect with one another, once they meet?
 - What sorts of things does all of *that* tell us about Nehemiah?



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 - Please read Nehemiah 1:4
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:5-6a (*i.e.; to the first period*)
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:6b-7
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:8-11b (*i.e.; to the prayer's end*)
 - So what is Nehemiah's rationale for believing that God might help Jerusalem?
 - God's people can sometimes be faithful and can sometimes be faithless—but *God is always faithful*
 - Nehemiah trusts that God might help them not because the people deserve the help, but because God has already *redeemed* them for Himself and wants them to dwell *with* Him the way He had *always* intended them to
 - God's responses are based on His plans and His character, not on our faithfulness
 - How does thinking about prayer that way affect *how we pray*—and what we do and don't *expect* from God?



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 - Please read Nehemiah 1:6b-7
 - **Please read Nehemiah 1:8-11b** (*i.e.; to the prayer's end*)
 - So what *is* Nehemiah's rationale for believing that God might help Jerusalem?
 - Who does Nehemiah mean by “this man” at the end, and what “success” is he hoping for?



The Cupbearer to the King

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 - Please read Nehemiah 1:4
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:5-6a (*i.e.; to the first period*)
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:6b-7
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:8-11b (*i.e.; to the prayer's end*)
 - Please read Nehemiah 1:11-2:1a (*i.e.; to the first period*)
 - Remember that there were no chapter or verse divisions when this was originally written
 - But what's a “cupbearer” here?



The Cupbearer to the King



Funky little teaching moment...

- We've talked about this before, but the “cupbearer” is the one who brings the king his food and usually tastes it in the king's presence beforehand
 - Thus, the “cupbearer” is one of most—if not *the* most—intimate and trusted of the king's servants
(And what does that say about God's sovereign provision for His people that at this moment when they were struggling so much, *little did they know* but the kinsman whose heart was breaking for them just *happened* to be *insanely influential*...)



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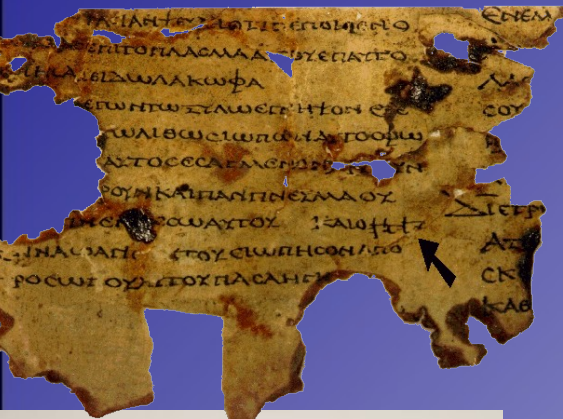
(NOTE: The word in Hebrew used here is “מִשְׁקֵה” —“*mašqêh*,” meaning essentially “butler,” or the intimately-involved servant who runs the master's whole household staff)

(NOTE²: You guy remember the Septuagint, right? That's the later *Greek* translation of the Old Testament commissioned by Emperor Ptolemy II in the third century BC from the 72 most prominent Hebrew leaders and scholars of the day for use in the Library of Alexandria)

(NOTE³: One of the three best versions of the Greek Septuagint translated that Hebrew word as “οἰνοχόος” —“*oinokhóos*” or “wine-pourer”)

(NOTE⁴: The other two, *older* good versions translated that Hebrew word as “εὐνοῦχος” —“*eunouchos*” or “eunuch”)

(That didn't directly translate what “מִשְׁקֵה” was, but perhaps it accurately translated what *Nehemiah* was)



The Cupbearer to the King



Crazy deep dive into this eunuch thing...

- Here's the thing—a *lot* of the cupbearers in the ancient world were eunuchs
 - Why might that be?
 - It's not a bad idea to make sure that the guy in charge of keeping the king and his family alive has *no* chance of taking over the kingdom for his *own* dynasty some day
 - These guys could wield phenomenal amounts of political power within the royal households, and as we learned about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, they could even serve, raise, and train the next queens—in fact, in many ancient kingdoms (such as Persia) the only non-family members allowed to even be in the presence of the queen were eunuchs
 - Cheat with me for a moment and skip ahead to read Nehemiah 2:6



The Cupbearer to the King



Crazy deep dive into this eunuch thing...

- Here's the thing—a *lot* of the cupbearers in the ancient world were eunuchs
- And yet, there were drawbacks to being a eunuch (beyond the obvious)
 - Please read Deuteronomy 23:1
 - This isn't saying that guys mauled by a bear or injured in a threshing accident couldn't come into the Temple—this is specifically talking about men who have chosen to become eunuchs to serve foreign kings
 - Why might that be something that God would find so thoroughly repugnant that He would withhold the right to worship in His Temple from them?



The Cupbearer to the King



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- And yet, there were drawbacks to being a eunuch (beyond the obvious)
 - Please read Deuteronomy 23:1
 - Please cheat ahead and read Nehemiah 6:10-13
 - We'll discuss the context later on when we get to chapter 6, but how might Shemaiah's suggestion make total sense to a leader who's under duress?
 - And yet, how did Nehemiah respond?
 - If Nehemiah is a leader who loves and obeys the Law of God—and who has read Deuteronomy 23:1—does that help explain why he might reply, “Should *one like me* go into the Temple to save his life? I will not go... *I would commit a sin by doing this...*”
 - Nehemiah would literally rather die than to risk offending the Law of God by entering the Temple



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 - And yet, how did Nehemiah respond?
 - Think about all of the work that Nehemiah ultimately ends up doing to build up the city and defend the Temple—knowing full well that he himself would never be allowed to set foot inside of the Temple, he still cared deeply for the people and the place and the God whom the place represented
 - What does all of *that* tell us about Nehemiah?
 - And what does that tell us about *how* and *why* leaders of God's people should lead today?



The Cupbearer to the King



Crazy deep dive into this eunuch thing...

- Here's the thing—a *lot* of the cupbearers in the ancient world were eunuchs
- And yet, there were drawbacks to being a eunuch
- **And yet, there's more to that story from God's end**
 - What had God told His people in Isaiah 56:3-5?
 - Three centuries earlier, God had made provision for those who came back to the Lord—even those eunuchs who had pledged themselves and their manhood to pagan rulers
 - God said, “You may have had your *genitals* cut off, but I will give you something far better, far greater, that can *never* be cut off from you—and you *will* have a *family* because you will be part of *mine*...”



The Cupbearer to the King



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- And yet, there were drawbacks to being a eunuch
- **And yet, there's more to that story from God's end**
 - What had God told His people in Isaiah 56:3-5?
 - **In Nehemiah 8—two chapters *after* he had chosen his own death rather than dishonoring God by ever entering Lord's holy Temple—Nehemiah asked Ezra to read the Word of God aloud to all of the people *every day, for eight days straight***
 - What might Nehemiah's reaction have been when—possibly for the first time in his life—he may have finally heard the words of Isaiah 56:3-5?



The Cupbearer to the King



Crazy deep dive into this eunuch thing...

- Here's the thing—a *lot* of the cupbearers in the ancient world were eunuchs
- And yet, there were drawbacks to being a eunuch
- And yet, there's more to that story from *God's* end
- Which brings us back to Acts 8
 - The Ethiopian eunuch would not have been allowed to enter the Temple of God in Jerusalem
 - But nevertheless, he desired to follow God *so much* that he spent a small fortune to buy his *own* scrolls to read, since no priest in Jerusalem would have ever read them to a man—a “*former*” man—like him
 - When Philip took the time to walk through the book of Isaiah with him, starting with Isaiah 53 and moving forward (through Isaiah 56?) the eunuch then asked him,
 - “Is there any reason why I couldn't be allowed to be baptized to become a Christian as well?”
 - And Philip the Evangelist—*being* Philip—got down from the chariot and happily baptized a *eunuch* into God's family
 - What can we learn and apply from all of this today?

