

# Nehemiah



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Nehemiah 1, 2, Deut. 7:9, Ps. 23:1–6, Num. 23:19.*

**Memory Text:** “So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said: ‘I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments’ ” (*Nehemiah 1:4, 5, NKJV*).

To date, two groups of captives have returned to Judah in at least partial fulfillment of God's promises to the Hebrew nation.

But there is one more company of exiles that God is preparing. The last group of captives is commissioned to fix a problem. Although the first two groups returned to rebuild Jerusalem and to complete part of that project by finishing the temple, the rest of the construction was abandoned as opposition from the surrounding nations arose. The people from the surrounding area didn't want the Israelites to build the city and its walls because they were afraid that the Israelites might become a mighty nation as they had once been (*Ezra 4:6–24*). Thus, the return of the Israelites appeared to be a threat, one that they were determined to stop. But God didn't call His people in order to abandon them in the process of doing what He had called them to do.

Thus, He was preparing another man to carry out His will and to accomplish His purposes. His name was Nehemiah, and to him and his work for the Lord we turn.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 12.

## Nehemiah Receives Bad News

The book of Nehemiah opens somewhat in the same way the book of Daniel did (*read Dan. 1:1, 2*), and that was with bad news. Yes, many had returned to their ancestral homeland, but things weren't going too well for them there.

**Read** Nehemiah 1:1–4. Why was Nehemiah so distressed? What was his response to the bad news he received?

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Some Jews taken captive years earlier were brought to Shushan, one of the four administrative centers of the Persian Empire, where Nehemiah served in the royal palace as a cupbearer. The term used for “Hanani one of my brothers” most likely refers to a blood brother, because there is a similar but more familial-sounding reference to Hanani in Nehemiah 7:2, although it could be a reference to just a fellow Israelite. The conversation with Hanani most likely happened between mid-November and mid-December of 445 B.C., some 13 years after Ezra's return to Jerusalem. Hanani reports that the situation in Jerusalem is dire. The people have not been able to rebuild Jerusalem, and the enemy had destroyed the walls of the city, leaving it defenseless and desolate.

It bears mention that King Artaxerxes crushed the hope of the returnees by stopping the progress of the construction after the people beyond the river complained (*Ezra 4*). This allowed the enemies to destroy the walls of the city (*Ezra 4:23*). Nehemiah would have heard rumors of such disaster, but he didn't have definite answers until this time.

Even though the temple was rebuilt, it wasn't fully functioning because the people needed for the temple service were unable to live in Jerusalem. The situation saddened Nehemiah as the implications of the news penetrated his soul: the Jews had not glorified God even though they had returned for that purpose. Instead, they had neglected the house of God and the Holy City, because of their fear of the enemy and oppression.

Thus, Nehemiah automatically turns to God. He doesn't complain that the people of Judah lack faith or put them down as cowards, nor does he just accept the situation as the status quo. Nehemiah just gets down on his knees and starts praying and fasting.

**At this bad news, Nehemiah wept, fasted, and prayed. What should this say to us about how we, especially in times of trial, need to appeal to the Lord?**

## Nehemiah's Prayer

**Read** Nehemiah's prayer found in Nehemiah 1:5–11. What are the different components of the prayer? Why does he include himself in the prayer as those who are guilty?

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1. God, You are great and have mercy (*Neh. 1:5*).
  2. Hear me (*Neh. 1:6*).
  3. Confession of sins (*Neh. 1:6, 7*).
  4. Remember Your promises (*Neh. 1:8, 9*).
  3. You have redeemed us (*Neh. 1:10*).
  2. Hear me (*Neh. 1:11*).
  1. God, grant prosperity and mercy (*Neh. 1:11*).

Nehemiah's prayer is a beautiful composition recounting God's greatness, their own sinfulness, and concluding with a cry for help. The prayer resembles the prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9, and it is possible that Nehemiah was familiar with that prayer. It is noteworthy that Nehemiah doesn't begin with a cry for help, but rather first states the truth about who God is, great and awesome. He also points out that God keeps His covenant and has mercy on those who love Him, as if to remind God that He has always been faithful and cannot now be any other way.

The prayer is in a special structure (depicted above) that centers on verse 8, where Nehemiah articulates God's promises. Nehemiah says: "Remember!" In other words: *Remember, God, that You promised that You will scatter us when we are unfaithful but that You also promised to bring us back and restore everything. Since the first one has happened, now it is time to fulfill the other because we are returning to You.* Nehemiah is not afraid to claim God's promises and to remind God of them. Of course, it is not that God doesn't know or remember His promises. Instead, God takes pleasure in our willingness to claim His promises. He wants us to believe in them and thus speak them out loud to Him. By verbalizing what God has promised us, we can be strengthened in our own resolve to trust in those promises, especially when everything seems hopeless.

**What are some of God's promises that you can claim for yourself right now? Why is it important never to give up claiming those promises? (After all, if you do give up, what's left?)**

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## Nehemiah Speaks Out

Nehemiah 1:11 says that Nehemiah is the king's cupbearer. To us this may seem like an unimportant job, but cupbearers could be men of powerful influence, since they had constant and close access to the king. Cupbearers tasted beverages for the king in order to prevent illness or death of the king. Herodotus points out that the Persians held cupbearers in high honor, as they were regarded as high officials. For instance, the cupbearer of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon also was the chief minister of the kingdom. Thus, Nehemiah holds a high position in the kingdom, and because of his access to the king, he pleads with God to use him in speaking to the king about the situation in Judah.

**Read** Nehemiah 2:1–8. What happened as a result of Nehemiah's prayers and fasting?

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The prayer is answered in the month of Nisan, which is roughly the month of April of 444 B.C. Four months have passed since Hanani and the Jews brought the disturbing news about Jerusalem to Nehemiah. For four months, Nehemiah prayed and fasted, and every day it might have seemed to him as if God were not answering. But God's timing is always perfect. God prepared the king to hear Nehemiah and to respond favorably.

It was not an everyday occurrence to have the cupbearer relieved of his duties for a time to be a governor in a different land. God spoke through Nehemiah and impressed the Persian king Artaxerxes I to make Nehemiah a governor over the territory of Judah. The mention of the queen suggests that this was possibly a private occasion, as it was not customary for the queen always to be present for formal banquets. Nehemiah does not immediately mention Jerusalem, in order to keep the king from having preconceived ideas, but rather he makes an emotional appeal to the king about something personal to him. By the time the specific place is mentioned, the king has been won.

**In what ways can we see a parallel between Nehemiah's position in this court and Daniel's in Babylon? What does it say about Nehemiah's character that the king seems so positively disposed toward him?**

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## Nehemiah Sent

The king sent letters with Nehemiah to Sanballat the Horonite and to Tobiah the Ammonite, the high officials of the region beyond the river, in order to pave the way for what Nehemiah was to accomplish. Additionally, the king commanded Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, to provide Nehemiah with all the timber necessary to rebuild the city, walls, and gates of the temple.

**Read Nehemiah 2:9, 10. What do these verses tell us about the opposition Nehemiah and the Jews in general were going to face?**

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Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem sometime in the second part of the year 444 B.C. Opposition appears to spring up even before Nehemiah attempts any action, as the request delivered to the governors stirs up problems. Although Tobiah is a Jewish name, which meant “the Lord is good” (his son Jehohanan also carried a Jewish name, “the Lord is gracious”), he served as a governor of Ammon. Thus, Jerusalem was surrounded by enemies: Sanballat, the governor of Samaria to the north; Tobiah, the governor of Ammon to the east; and Geshem, the Arab (*Neh. 2:18, 19*) to the south, who took hold of Edom and Moab. It is unfortunate that the leadership in that region shunned Nehemiah for being concerned about the “well-being” of the oppressed. Bullies don’t rejoice over the good fortune of those they intimidate.

Nehemiah’s “arrival in Jerusalem, however, with a military escort, showing that he had come on some important mission, excited the jealousy of the heathen tribes living near the city, who had so often indulged their enmity against the Jews by heaping upon them injury and insult. Foremost in this evil work were certain chiefs of these tribes, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. From the first these leaders watched with critical eyes the movements of Nehemiah and endeavored by every means in their power to thwart his plans and hinder his work.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 635.

**What other biblical stories can you find that showed how those called by God to do His will faced opposition? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.**

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## Nehemiah Prepares for His Task

No question, the Lord had called Nehemiah to this task and would provide all that he would need. Armed with the knowledge of God's promises and the certainty of the call by God, Nehemiah proceeded. But he moved ahead carefully and prayerfully. In other words, even though he knew God was with him, this knowledge didn't keep him, basically, from thinking through what he would do.

**Read** Nehemiah 2:11–20. What does Nehemiah do to prepare for the project of rebuilding the wall?

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Leadership Lessons: *Lesson 1*—Nehemiah does not tell anyone what the plans are that “God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem” (*Neh. 2:12*). Not only does he not tell the enemy, but he keeps it from the Jewish leaders, as well. He is on a scouting mission to figure out what needs to be done. *Lesson 2*—Before presenting anything, Nehemiah does his homework and plans out all the work that will be required. *Lesson 3*—When he does speak of the task, Nehemiah first outlines what God has done so far to lead this expedition, and then he adds the words of the king. He encourages before he asks for commitment. It is nothing short of a miracle that the Jews respond so favorably and decide to build, despite the resistance that will come. God had prepared not only the king through Nehemiah's prayers and fasting but also the Jewish people, so that they respond boldly and courageously.

**Read** Nehemiah 2:19, 20. What do these verses tell us about Nehemiah's faith? How might texts such as Deuteronomy 7:9, Psalm 23:1–6, and Numbers 23:19 have helped Nehemiah?

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Our conversations demonstrate who we are and what we truly believe. Nehemiah tends to speak uplifting words. He is not afraid to include God in all that he says and to glorify Him as well, even when people jeer and laugh at him. Even though Nehemiah knows the contempt the enemies feel toward them, he doesn't mince words or leave God out of the conversation. Like Joseph in Egypt many years earlier, Nehemiah is not afraid to promote his God among people who do not believe in Him.

**Further Thought:** Contemplate “A Man of Opportunity,” pp. 628–634, in *Prophets and Kings*.

Nehemiah was a man of prayer: “Nehemiah had often poured out his soul in behalf of his people. But now as he prayed a holy purpose formed in his mind. He resolved that if he could obtain the consent of the king, and the necessary aid in procuring implements and material, he would himself undertake the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring Israel’s national strength. And he asked the Lord to grant him favor in the sight of the king, that this plan might be carried out. ‘Prosper, I pray Thee, Thy servant this day,’ he entreated, ‘and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.’ Four months Nehemiah waited for a favorable opportunity to present his request to the king.” —Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 629, 630.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In answer to Wednesday’s question, what does it mean that all through the Bible—Old Testament, New Testament—those called by God faced tremendous opposition? In fact, what does it mean that in almost every case they did? Perhaps a better question could be: What examples can you find of someone called by God to do His will who *didn’t* face opposition? What does this tell us about how we shouldn’t get discouraged when, even while doing God’s will, we face strong obstacles in accomplishing what we believe the Lord has called us to do?
- 2 Read Nehemiah 2:18. What does this tell us about the power that a personal testimony can have? And how was it crucial in getting the positive response that Nehemiah got from his fellow Jews?
- 3 Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah could have accomplished anything without the help of the king. In other words, these men of God worked in cooperation with the political authorities, who were pagans, as well. What lesson can we draw from this about when and how we as a church can work with the political powers that be, whoever they are? At the same time, when doing so, why must the church be very careful?
- 4 Go over Nehemiah’s prayer (*Neh. 1:1–11*) in class. What can you take from it that can help deepen your relationship with God? What does it teach about surrender, confession, and claiming promises?

## Gift of 4,000 Euros

By VIRIATO FERREIRA

A serious dilemma unexpectedly emerged on a Friday morning. The architect of our VitaSalus Wellness Center announced that we urgently needed to put up railings around several buildings. “If someone falls, you’ll be in trouble,” he warned.

We knew that he was right. VitaSalus—an Ellen White-inspired “center of influence” that works in harmony with the ethical, professional, and spiritual values upheld by the Seventh-day Adventist Church—is located atop a mountain near the town of Penela, about 115 miles (185 kilometers) north of Portugal’s capital, Lisbon. The architect put the cost of the railings at 4,000 euros (US\$4,900).

I turned to our chief financial officer. “Do we have the money?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “There is no money.”

Worried thoughts filled my mind. Suddenly, a conviction struck me.

*Whose project is this?* I thought. *It’s not mine. It’s God’s project!*

I shared this conviction with the chief financial officer and other people present at the meeting. “God will supply the means for these railings,” I said. “Are you comfortable in going ahead and ordering the railings?”

They nodded their heads in agreement, and I prayed, “Lord, we are going to order these railings because they are really needed.”

We ordered the railings. Five days later, on a Wednesday, I received an email from someone whom I had never met. “Doctor,” he wrote, “I just want to tell you that I have deposited 4,000 euros into the VitaSalus bank account.”

“Praise the Lord!” I exclaimed out loud.

I wrote him an email describing the events of the previous Friday morning.

He replied immediately. “Doctor, this confirms that the money is for this project,” he wrote. “On Friday morning, I woke up with a desire to help VitaSalus. I have never been there, but I just had that feeling. Still, I wasn’t sure whether my wife would agree with me; so, I prayed a short prayer: ‘Lord, if this is Your will, put the same desire in my wife’s heart.’

“As soon as I finished praying, my wife came into my office and said, ‘Honey, you know that project in Penela? I think we should help them.’

“I couldn’t believe my ears, and I asked her, ‘How much do you think we should give?’

“‘I think 4,000 euros would be good,’ she said.”



What a lesson for me! Had we stopped our work at VitaSalus because we lacked the funds, we would have lost out on a big blessing brought about by trusting in God. It was not about the railings. It was about God showing us how His work can be fulfilled when we trust in Him.

DR. VIRIATO FERREIRA, left, is director of the VitaSalus Wellness Center in Penela, Portugal.



## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Key Text:** *Nehemiah 1:4, 5*

**Study Focus:** *Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah 2*

After the first two groups (the first led by Zerubbabel and the second by Ezra) return, God commissions Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes (*Neh. 1:11*), to take yet another group of exiles back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah is told that the “remnant” of Jews in Jerusalem are in “great affliction and reproach” (*Neh. 1:3*) because of the opposition they have encountered in rebuilding the city. Nehemiah is devastated to hear the news from Jerusalem and mourns for days. He fasts and prays to God.

King Artaxerxes notices that Nehemiah is troubled and inquires why his face looks sad. Prayerfully, Nehemiah answers the king that Jerusalem lies in waste. He requests that the king grant him time to rebuild it. Amazingly, the king grants his request because the monarch saw that “the good hand of my God was upon me” (*Neh. 2:8, ESV*). God’s providence and His grace were acknowledged by Nehemiah.

Yet, Nehemiah knows that he needs reinforcements because the leaders from “beyond the river” have made the Israelites afraid and caused them to stop their work. Because of these leaders’ complaint, King Artaxerxes ceased the reconstruction of Jerusalem. In order to reverse the king’s prior command, Nehemiah now skillfully asks the king to send a letter with him to the leaders of the region, informing them that Nehemiah is on official business and, therefore, not to be hindered.

Nehemiah 2 ends with Nehemiah scouting out the work that needs to be done and encouraging the people to build. Emphasize to your students that Nehemiah’s success in securing the king’s favor is a direct consequence of his seeking God in response to the tragic events in Jerusalem (*Neh. 1:3*). Nehemiah prays and fasts (*Neh. 1:4*); as a result, God prepares the king and the people to respond favorably.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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### **Nehemiah’s Prayer (*Nehemiah 1*)**

After Nehemiah receives visitors, who have just arrived from Judah, he is distressed. Because Nehemiah was an official in the king’s court, it is possible that he had prior knowledge of Artaxerxes’s judgment against

Judah. Hostile forces around Jerusalem complained to the king, who capitulated against the onslaught, convinced as they were of the potential political threat the Jews presented (*Ezra 4*). Either because of rumors or official government activity, Nehemiah asked about the situation in Judah. Unfortunately, the rumors were not only confirmed by Hanani and his associates, but the truth must have been worse than expected. Nehemiah collapses at the news and mourns for days. However, he goes straight to God with his dilemma.

Nehemiah's prayer is outlined in the lesson. When analyzing Nehemiah's prayer, one especially discovers that the main point (the center) of the prayer is entreating God to remember His promises. Thus, Nehemiah reminds the readers of the big picture—God fulfills His promises. The prayer begins with adoration and worship before Nehemiah asks God to hear his prayer. Offerings of adoration and worship, in turn, are followed by confession of sins and a petition to God to remember His promises to restore His people. Then Nehemiah's prayer circles back to remind God that these are His redeemed people. Once again, Nehemiah asks for God to hear and grant him mercy before the king. Nehemiah knows that the king has the power to reverse the situation in Judah and therefore asks for God to work on the king's heart.

Often, we expect answers to prayers right away, but Nehemiah perseveres and prays for more than four months before anything happens. The season of prayer served as a preparation time for Nehemiah as leader of the expedition. He had time to process the steps he would take once he arrived in Jerusalem, what he would do in order to maximize the results of the rebuilding process, and perhaps even what material he would need. All of these plans must have become solidified in his mind, because when the king finally asks him, "What do you request?" (*Neh. 2:4, NKJV*), Nehemiah had a well-thought-out answer.

### **Conversation With the King and Sending Nehemiah to Jerusalem (*Nehemiah 2:1–10*)**

Nehemiah begins his request to the king by speaking about his "fathers' sepulchers" (*Neh. 2:5*), or tombs. Respect for ancestors and their proper burial sites was of profound concern in antiquity because, in this manner, ancient people expressed their deep respect for their forefathers and a desire for peace. Nehemiah does not mention Jerusalem by name but simply refers to the importance of burial places and the city he loves. Whether all of the exchange between the king and Nehemiah occurred in one setting is not known; however, it is possible that the conversation was continued in a more private setting in which the queen was present (*Neh. 2:6*). Historians believe that King Artaxerxes was influenced by

women, and so the presence of his wife (according to Ctesias, a Greek physician and historian, her name was Damaspia, though her name is not mentioned in the biblical text) may have been to Nehemiah's advantage. We can only speculate.

Nehemiah needed (1) time, (2) credentials so Israel's enemy leaders would let him pass and cause him no harm, and (3) wood for construction. It is interesting to observe that the king's officer Asaph, keeper of the imperial forest, is a Jewish name, which suggests that this person was a Jew like Nehemiah who had risen to a high position. Nehemiah needed the wood for three projects: (1) beams for the gates of a citadel, which was constructed north of the temple for the purpose of protecting its sacred precincts; (2) the city wall; and (3) his residence. It is possible that he was just planning to repair a home that belonged to his family.

### **In Jerusalem: Preparation for Rebuilding Walls (*Nehemiah 2:11–20*)**

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem with an envoy of captains of the army and horsemen. On the way, Nehemiah delivered the king's letter to each of the governors who had part in halting the work on the city walls. After resting for three days, which seems to be a traditional period of time to take after a long journey, Nehemiah took a small group out on a secret mission during the night. Perhaps the group consisted of his brother Hanani and close associates or relatives who either came with him to Jerusalem or had already settled there as residents (they informed Nehemiah of the condition of Israel [*see Neh. 1:2, 3*]). The group quietly surveyed the condition of the walls and gates so as not to attract attention to the project prematurely. Sanballat and Tobiah probably had allies in Jerusalem, and Nehemiah rightly suspected that he was being watched.

Nehemiah states: "I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem" (*Neh. 2:12, NKJV*). The word for "put" is *natan*, meaning "to give, put, or set." Nehemiah points out that the mission of rebuilding the fortifications is not his idea but God's. God placed this burden on his heart; God had given him the drive and the desire to complete the project. It was clear to Nehemiah that this was a divinely commissioned undertaking.

When the nightly expedition is completed and Nehemiah acquires the information needed to map out the work, he addresses the leaders of the Jews. After strategizing, it is time for action; he invites the Jews to "build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach [*Heb. cherpa*]." *Cherpa* means "derision, scorn, insult, and contempt."

Throughout the Old Testament *cherpa* is often translated as “disgrace” or “reproach” in the sense of shame. Ancient cultures were based on a shame-and-honor system. Honor was the most important value, and shame was to be avoided at all costs. Thus, Nehemiah plays on the sensitivities toward shame when he presents his argument. He convinces the people to act so that they would reverse the “shame” that they were experiencing at the moment. Having a destroyed defense system made them not only vulnerable but also ashamed. A sense of guilt was associated with their shame too. Nehemiah voices his people’s feelings of inadequacy and disgrace because they have had to endure oppression. The principal issue was honor and respect and heritage, which they would build once again through participating in this important work. The ruins of Jerusalem presented their faith in God in a bad light.

When, in Nehemiah 2:18, Nehemiah points out that the hand of God has been with him and shares what the king had said, the people are persuaded to exclaim: “Let us start rebuilding” (*NIV*). They do not have to fear the Persian government, and, most important, God is with them. In order to change their situation, they “rise up” and do something. Let this demonstration of faith be a lesson for us. Things do not change by wallowing in misery or finding excuses; they change only through action. Nehemiah encourages the people to do something, to act, and to change their predicament. He entreats them to hold on to God in faith, because He has been leading this expedition and will carry it to completion.

Consequently, when the enemy leaders come at Nehemiah, jeering and laughing at the people’s attempt to build the wall, Nehemiah is not discouraged. He answers, “The God of heaven Himself will prosper us” (*Neh. 2:20, NKJV*). Nehemiah does not let the enemies win by entertaining their insults. Instead, the courageous cupbearer claims God’s promises and holds on to His power.

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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Ask the following questions:

- 1. Look through Nehemiah’s prayer and choose which aspects of the prayer you can include in your own prayer life.**

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2. Ask each person to reflect on, and answer, the following: Nehemiah knew about the great opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls that existed before he arrived in the city. If there were a possibility of God sending you on a mission to a place that you knew in advance was beset with great difficulties and opposition, would you volunteer for the job? If so, why?

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3. God called Nehemiah to a specific work. He fasted and prayed before he spoke to the king, because he felt a burden for his city and people. Do you think of fasting and praying when a difficulty arises in your life? How do fasting and prayer make a difference in our lives? When was the last time you fasted, and for what cause did you pray and fast?

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4. Before approaching the people about why he was there, Nehemiah went through the city first to figure out what needed to be done.

a. Why is planning so important in life?

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b. Think of specific ministries that you are in charge of, or are a part of, in your church. What specifically can be done to “scout out” your mission before it is implemented?

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