

Welcome to BNEXT

I am excited to share this journey through God's Word with you. As we study Scripture, we see an unfolding revelation of who God is, the nature of Jesus, and how we can become stronger in our walk with Christ. It is important that we study Scripture for ourselves — allowing the Holy Spirit to enlighten us (Acts 17:11).

The Scripture covered by each lesson is listed on the top-right side of the masthead of the page. Read the Scripture passages and then begin working your way through the lesson. Each lesson in this series contains three pages of commentary, followed by three pages of questions that will assist you to dig deeper and reflect on God's Word.

We have also included a Leader's Guide that will enable anyone to facilitate a small group. Once you have completed this BNEXT study, I hope you will consider leading others through this material — whether it is a group of friends, your church, or as a ministry outreach. (See the Leader's Guide at the end of this study for more information.)

Again, thank you for allowing me to share this amazing journey with you.

Your brother in Christ Jesus,

Handwritten signature of William P. Campbell in blue ink.

William P. Campbell

Founder & President | Scripture Awakening

BNEXT Participant's Guide

Thank you for choosing BNEXT Bible study curriculum. To help you get the most out of your study, please take a few minutes to read this information before you begin. Studying the Bible is much like going on a journey — it takes us to new places in our understanding and our walk with God. The Word of God is transformative — it's living and active, can build up our faith, and call us to move beyond where we are.

Using this curriculum, you may journey alone, or travel with others in a small group, or even engage as an entire congregation (with small groups as part of the program). Groups gather once a week to review what was read, to share answers to discussion questions, and to deepen their understanding.

About This Study

This electronic version of the Participant's Guide contains the same material as the printed version. It allows you to electronically record your answers to the questions which are part of each lesson. Following each question, you will find a blue text box. Click or touch the box and the field within it will turn white allowing you to type in your answer. Your answer will automatically be saved when you exit the text box. Should you need more space for your answer, the text box will automatically expand and insert a scroll bar on the right-hand side.

Things to Know

These studies are designed to be used in many different settings— individuals, congregations (separating into small groups), Sunday school classes, prison ministries, military, business groups— virtually anywhere a small group can be formed. Experience has shown that participants find the small group experience to be greatly beneficial. The input and interaction with others will broaden your perspective and stimulate your thinking about Scripture.

The lessons are designed to be done throughout the week. Each lesson contains a few pages of commentary, followed by study questions. There are three types of questions: Devotion (Personal Questions), Discussion (Small Group), and Digging Deeper (Further Study). While participants may use any Bible translation they prefer, all of the Biblical quotations in BNEXT studies are from the New International Version (NIV).

Plan your daily reading. The Scripture readings are located on the right side of the masthead of each lesson. Some lessons may cover a few chapters of a book (such as Genesis 1-11 in the series, *In the Beginning*). Longer readings may be broken down into more manageable daily readings, which may take some thoughtful planning. Some readings are as short as a few verses and will not present any difficulties. Some topical studies do not have assigned Scripture readings.

If you are meeting in a small group, be sure to first read and complete the lesson before the gathering. Once a week, your group will meet to spend time (about an hour) discussing the lesson and sharing personal insights.

More of our resources and study aids can be found at ScriptureAwakening.com. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or comments at info@scriptureawakening.com.



One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray...”

Luke 11:1

Introduction

A mother was putting her seven year old son to bed. As they were getting ready to pray, he asked, “Mom, does God forget things?” She smiled and said, “No, son. God has a great memory. Why?” “Oh, I just wondered,” he said. “Then why do we keep praying the same prayers every night?”

We smile at this child-like response, but don't we sometimes ask the same question...just phrased a little differently... “If God already knows, why pray?” As we begin our study of Nehemiah, we discover in the first few verses that Nehemiah is a man of prayer. Let's take a look.

Background

We need to back up just a little before we explore the book of Nehemiah and see what had happened to the Jewish nation. The Jews had left Egypt under the mighty leadership of Moses. Because of disobedience, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. After being governed by judges, they asked for a king. Saul was their choice, but David was God's choice. David wanted to build the Temple. God, however, said, “No.” Instead God allowed David's son, Solomon, to build the Temple. The Jews couldn't get along so the nation divided into the Southern and Northern Kingdoms. Later these kingdoms were conquered and taken into captivity. 2 Chronicles 36:19a records, “They (the Babylonians) set fire to God's Temple and broke down the wall (of Jerusalem).” This briefly...very briefly, brings us up to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, about 425-444 BC.

Ezra led the Jewish people back to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon. They rebuilt the Temple, but there was no wall around the city. Walls around cities don't mean very much to us today, but at that time, they were essential for protection. Jerusalem remained without a wall for more than 60 years after the completion of the temple and almost 90 years after the return of the first exiles.

Finally, despite the fact that Jerusalem was surrounded by enemies, the people began to construct the city's walls. After the glory days of Joshua and Zerubbabel, however, the work slowed down and almost came to a stop. The nation was impoverished, and the people became burdened by a heavy tax load. Rebuilding a broken-down wall was not exactly on the top of their list of things to do. This is when Nehemiah came on the scene.

At this time, the Persian Empire was experiencing difficulties. The Greeks had been able to halt Persian expansion, and the chief goal of Artaxerxes, the king of the Persian Empire, was to hold on to the territory his predecessors had previously conquered. Judah, although tiny and destitute, once again became important, if only as a buffer state between Persia and Egypt. (Sounds familiar today, doesn't it?)

Through Ezra and Nehemiah, we encounter men of God who served under a pagan king—a king who discovered that he could best trust men whose first loyalty belonged to God.

Lord, the God of heaven,
the great and awesome
God, Who keeps His cov-
enant of love with those
who love Him and keep
His commandments, let
Your ear be attentive and
open Your eyes to hear
the prayer Your servant is
praying...

Nehemiah 1:5,6

Nehemiah's Position

Unlike Ezra, Nehemiah was among those who did not return from exile. He was still held captive but with the distinction as a high official in the Persian Empire, serving as the cupbearer to the king. Cupbearer sounds rather subservient, doesn't it? Perhaps on the level with a butler or waiter? However, that was not the case. The king's cupbearer was one of his most trusted and loyal confidants. He had the responsibility of tasting the king's wine and food daily to insure that it was pure and safe for the king to eat or drink. If the wine was poisoned by an enemy of the king, then the cupbearer "got it first" and "long live the king." This important position gave Nehemiah direct access to the king. His loyalty and integrity to the throne was paramount.

Nehemiah was a man of courage, an able administrator, and a skilled motivator of people. But more importantly, he was a man of prayer. He was a man of spontaneous prayer. There are ten prayers in this book (Nehemiah 1:4ff.; 2:4; 4:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Nehemiah knew that prayer is God's mighty force for solving problems. He knew that God guides us through prayer to do His will.

The book opens (Nehemiah 1:1-3) as he receives a brief report from a group visiting from Jerusalem. He was probably already generally aware of what the situation was but this first-hand account grieves him tremendously. He weeps! He is told that: "The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Nehemiah 1:3). The walls were a pile of rubble.

Remember April 19, 1995 in Oklahoma City when a Federal Building became a pile of rubble? Or how about the horrific events of September 11, 2001? Remember the grief and sorrow as Americans mourned and wept and yes...prayed for those whose lives were lost or changed forever by acts of terror? Perhaps remembering these events helps us to relate to Nehemiah's grief over a pile of rubble.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Nehemiah's first prayer is a desperate plea based on daring faith. He is a man with a burden on his heart and a cry on his lips to the Creator of the universe.

A modern equivalent might be George Mueller, founder of Christian orphanages in England in the seventeenth century. The following is an excerpt from the captain of the ship bound for Canada with George Mueller aboard.

"The last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, something happened which revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. We had George Mueller of Bristol on board. I had been on the bridge 24 hours and never left. George Mueller came to me and said, 'Captain, I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec Saturday afternoon.' 'It is impossible,' I said. 'Very well, if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement for 57 years. Let us go down into the chart-room and pray.' 'Mr. Mueller, do you know how dense this fog is?' 'No,' he replied. 'My eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.'

He knelt down and prayed one of the simplest prayers, and when he had finished I was going to

i call on you, o God, for you
will answer me; give ear
to me and hear my prayer
Psalm 17:6

pray; but he put his hand on my shoulder, and told me not to pray. 'First, you do not believe He will answer; and second I believe He has, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.'

I looked at him, and he said 'Captain, I have known my Lord for 57 years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get audience with the King. Get up, Captain and open the door and you will find the fog gone.' I got up, and the fog was indeed gone. On Saturday afternoon, George Mueller was in Quebec for his engagement."

Nehemiah begins by calling on the glory of God. The character of God is the grounds of Nehemiah's confidence. Nehemiah acknowledges Yahweh as the true Lord of all. He identifies himself with his brethren and confesses their sins as well as his own and those of his father's household. Nehemiah knows that he must come acknowledging and confessing sin before a holy God. One short prayer. Seven verses. Two hundred and thirteen words.

Notice the great humility of this man of God. He holds a very important position and deals daily with a great king. But the King of Kings is far greater than any earthly king, and Nehemiah knows it. Nehemiah is a true example of a man who is "in the world but not of it." He is aware that he is a sinner approaching a holy and righteous God. His prayer is for his brethren. He saves his only personal request for last (Nehemiah 1:11).

Nehemiah's Preparation

It appears that Nehemiah had already decided upon a course of action, though he says nothing about it. He does not really need to mention it; God is aware of his thoughts. What he requests is that he find favor in the eyes of "this man." He does not mention the king's name or his title. This was not a show of disrespect for the great earthly monarch, Artaxerxes, but rather a show of Nehemiah's greater respect for God, the King Over All. "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD as rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will." (Proverbs 21:1 KJV).

Summary

The Temple had been rebuilt years earlier and sacrifices were again taking place. But, for many, they were meaningless ceremonies. "We have brought our required sacrifices" they thought, "now we are free to live as we choose." However, God tells us that "to obey is better than sacrifice." Jesus came as an obedient Servant. In the weeks to come, we'll discover the building of our faith, the building of our prayer life, and the building of our relationship with the Builder of our Faith—Jesus Christ.

So why pray? Because the Creator of the universe has given us a tremendous privilege through His blessed Son to reveal His power. That's prayer.

Spending Time With God

This eight-week series is entitled "Nehemiah: Building Together." The devotion questions are written for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group



study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Before beginning PRAY and ask God for understanding as you earnestly seek to know Him better.

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. After reading this commentary, entitled "Nehemiah's Prayer," what portion seemed to speak to you the most and why?

Ezra and Nehemiah go together like peanut butter and jelly. They were originally joined as one book; therefore, we need to do a quick overview of Ezra.

2. Read Ezra 1:1-4. Compare with Jeremiah 25:11. What does this say to you about God?

3. Note in Ezra 2 the attention to detail in listing those who came out of exile. Why do you think such detail is important?

4. Read Ezra 3. Notice the mixed emotional reactions at the end of the chapter. What does this tell you about the people's love for the Temple?

5. In Ezra 4-6, what encouragement can you find in your life as you see God's people overcoming their opposition? (Ezra 6:21,22). What did the people celebrate?

6. What one insight from your readings and reflections on the book of Ezra do you wish to apply to your life today?

Discussion (Group Study)

7. Read again the first chapter of Nehemiah. Read again Nehemiah 1:4. Have you ever had such passion and self-emptying in your prayers? When and how?



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 1

Nehemiah's Prayer | Nehemiah 1

8. Read James 5:17 and surrounding verses. What can you learn from this verse about prayer? How can you apply this to your prayer life?

11. Imagine you are hearing about God for the first time. What facts in this verse would give you confidence in prayer? Why?

9. Read Micah 6:6-8. What can we learn from these verses about the danger of false humility?

12. See in Nehemiah 1:6 that Nehemiah is praying to God “day and night.” Read 1 Thessalonians 5:17. What do you think it means to “pray continually?”

About coming to God with an outward appearance of repentance and contrition that is not truly a reflection of the heart?

13. Notice Nehemiah's confession in Nehemiah 1:6b-7. Compare with Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9 and 1 John 1:9. Why is confession important? To whom are we to confess our sins?

10. How does Nehemiah describe God as he begins his prayer in Nehemiah 1:5?

14. What does the fact that men of such stature in the world and such position before God prayed like this say to you personally?



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NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 1

Nehemiah's Prayer | Nehemiah 1

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

15. In Nehemiah 1:8-9, notice how the cupbearer pleads his case before God based on God's already stated promises. What are those promises?

16. Read 2 Peter 1:3-4. How might we better make use of God's Word and His promises in our prayer lives?

17. How specific is Nehemiah in his petition in Nehemiah 1:10-11? Can you remember a specific prayer that God answered for you?

Who got the glory? How?

18. Read Philippians 1:8-11. What is special to you about this prayer?

Did other people's needs or his own motivate Paul? Explain.

19. Can you think of someone who, like Nehemiah, prayed continually in the midst of their occupational challenges to see God work even in difficult circumstances? Describe that person and situation.

Scripture for Meditation

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Philippians 1:6



I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We His servants will start rebuilding..."

Nehemiah 2:20

Introduction

How hard is it for you to wait? Have you noticed what an impatient society we've become? Nobody likes to wait anymore. We want instant everything, don't we? And for the most part, we've got it. Think about it. We have instant coffee, instant potatoes, instant puddings, and instant microwave dinners. You name it. And the quicker we get it, the better. We have one-hour photos, one-hour dry cleaning, drive-through banks, drive-through fast food, drive-through pharmacies, and recently a newspaper described a drive-through confessional!

What is it about waiting that drives us to distraction? Let me ask you, how patient are you? Nehemiah was a man of patience and a man who planned. We can learn from him. Let's take a look.

Nehemiah's Patience

Nehemiah had learned about the devastating situation in Jerusalem during the month of Chislev—which is our December. At that time, he began to pray and fast for his beloved Israel. Did he immediately jump up and run to the king and demand that he be allowed to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall? Did he rush before Artaxerxes and say, "Time's awastin' King, I gotta go...NOW." No. Nehemiah prayed. And he also WAITED. He waited from December until April—four months!

Warren Wiersbe states, "The ability to calm your soul and wait before God is one of the most difficult things in the Christian life. Our old nature is restless...the world around us is frantically in a hurry. But a restless heart usually leads to a reckless life."

Nehemiah's Prayer

Was Nehemiah distraught? Was he concerned? Yes, he was. Scripture says that Nehemiah had a "sad face" when he went before the king. The Hebrew word for *sad* means "exceeding grief." Nehemiah knew that to go before the king with a long face, a sad face, could have meant his job or even his life. But Nehemiah's devotion to God and His purposes took precedence over his own personal welfare. Despite his fear, Nehemiah realized that God had provided the opportunity for which he had prayed. He stated the reason for his sad face (Nehemiah 2:3). The king asked, "What do you want?" The reply to that question could have cost Nehemiah his life, so he "prayed to the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 2:4). Nehemiah told the king he desired to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. The king responded, "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" Wow! The king said, "Yes", just like that! Aren't we amazed when God answers our prayers sometimes...and so quickly? Nehemiah had waited upon God for four months and when the opportunity came, he prayed once more and "let his request be made known."

G. Campbell Morgan says, "Waiting for God is not laziness. Waiting for God is not going to sleep. Waiting for God is not the abandonment of effort. Waiting for God means, first, activity under command; second, readiness for any new command that may come; and third, the ability to do nothing until the command is given." Nehemiah was ready, willing, and able because he had brought his petition before the Lord. He completely trusted in the Lord's timing and moved

Commit to the Lord whatever you do and He will establish your plans.

Proverbs 16:1

when God prompted him to do so.

Nehemiah's Plan

British sculptor, Sir Jacob Epstein, was once visited in his studio by the eminent author and fellow Briton, George Bernard Shaw. The visitor noticed a huge block of stone standing in one corner and asked what it was for. Epstein replied, "I don't know yet. I'm still making plans." Shaw was astounded. "You mean you plan your work? Why, I change my mind several times a day!" "That's all very well with a four-ounce manuscript," replied the sculptor, "but not with a four-ton block!"

Nehemiah had obviously planned well and was prepared when the king granted approval for his mission. Unlike Ezra's mission, this was political in nature. He was traveling as a representative of the king and would serve as governor in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's organizational abilities are immediately apparent. He anticipated opposition from officials en route so he planned ahead and requested letters of safe passage. He also requested a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, in order to obtain the timber needed for the building projects.

In Luke 14:28-30, Jesus says, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

Nehemiah had waited patiently, prayed fervently, and planned accordingly. He counted the cost: the cost of leaving a safe, secure job with good benefits; the cost of ridicule if this project of his failed; the cost of his people rejecting him; the cost of receiving displeasure from the king. He counted the cost and stood firm in his leading and devotion to the God of Israel.

He remembered the faithfulness of God—the covenant of Yahweh. The earthly cost was nothing in comparison to the rewards for obedience in following God's plan.

Nehemiah's Problems

Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem caused immediate problems. In Nehemiah 2:10, we are introduced to Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and his ally, Tobiah the Ammonite. The Samaritans were long-time enemies of the Jews and considered the rebuilding of the wall a great threat. This may have been why Nehemiah did not reveal the purpose of his mission to his countrymen (Nehemiah 2:2) and undertook to survey the area at night. At this point, he did not know who could be trusted.

After he made his inspection of the area, Nehemiah called an assembly of the leaders and announced his plans. Notice that he spoke in the first person plural—the royal *we*. He had only been there a few days, yet he identified himself with his people. He pointed out that *we* were in great trouble. A city without walls was defenseless.

Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace. I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start to rebuild."

Nehemiah 2:17,18

To make matters worse, Jerusalem was surrounded by enemies. For the Jews to have their principal city, their religious center—the very city that God had called His own—without defenses, was a disgrace. Nehemiah demonstrated his powers of persuasion as he poured his heart out to the people. His message was not, "Get to work," but "Come and let us rebuild..."

Immediately, preparations to start the work of rebuilding began. A third enemy, Geshem the Arab is introduced. As we will see throughout the book, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were always well informed about what was taking place in Jerusalem. They were constantly plotting to thwart any plans for rebuilding the wall. Their primary on-going tactics to oppose the Jews were derision and psychological warfare. The derision began with two scornful questions: "What is this you are doing?" and, "Are you rebelling against the king?" (Nehemiah 2:19).

Nehemiah's reply did not even refer to Artaxerxes' authorization (they already knew the king had authorized this project). Their questions were mere scare tactics. But Nehemiah declared that they were doing the work of God, and that He would see that it would be completed. Nehemiah concluded with a legal argument: Jerusalem was the city of the Jews; therefore, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had no legal authority over the area.

In so many words, Nehemiah said, "What we are doing is none of your business." God's business is God's business and what He purposes will be accomplished. Before long the wall was rebuilt and archeology confirms that it was quite substantial.

Final thought

Nehemiah's mission was not just political, it was spiritual. The true worship of Yahweh had been diluted through intermarriages between the Jews, Samaritans, and Ammonites. God's precepts had been compromised and questioned. Isn't Satan crafty? But Nehemiah knew and trusted God in every circumstance.

Nehemiah's example gives us courage to wait patiently, pray fervently, plan accordingly, and move forward under the guidance of Almighty God. God's plans will not be thwarted. We can rest assured that the gates of hell will not prevail against the plans or purposes of God. Satan is a defeated foe; but unfortunately, he's still very much alive and active. Never lose heart, dear one. Let us follow Nehemiah's leadership under the direction of the King of Kings.

Spending Time With God

This eight-week series is entitled "Nehemiah: Building Together." The devotion questions are written for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Before beginning PRAY and ask God for understanding as you earnestly seek to know Him better.



Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study guide. What particular portion of “Nehemiah's Patience and Plan” spoke to you personally?

b. Luke 18:1-8

2. Read Nehemiah 2:1-20. How would you describe Nehemiah's personality? His relationship with God?

c. James 5:7-8

3. Nehemiah's ability to do something about the devastated walls in Jerusalem was delayed by four months (Nehemiah 2:1; see commentary). How do you feel when you find yourself waiting for an answer to prayer?

d. 2 Peter 3:8-9

4. What do the following Scriptures tell you about prayer and waiting on God?

5. Read Nehemiah 2:2-3. Why was Nehemiah so deeply distressed and saddened?

a. Isaiah 55:7-9

6. What presently causes you grief and distress? Read Psalm 42. What is David's response to his overwhelming grief? What practical steps does this Psalm suggest one might take in response to great difficulty or grief?



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 2

Nehemiah's Patience & Plan | Nehemiah 2

Discussion (Group Study)

7. In Nehemiah 2:4, notice the spontaneity of Nehemiah's prayer. How would you explain spontaneous prayer to someone? What is the key to having a heart that spontaneously turns to God in prayer throughout the day?

8. Contrast spontaneous prayer with time that is set apart for God in extended prayer, as in Nehemiah 1:4. Why are both important? Which is easier for you? Why?

9. Describe specific examples of how prayer has helped you survive a past or present crisis.

10. Reading Nehemiah 2:5-10, notice how smoothly everything seemed to go until Nehemiah 2:10. Sanballat and friends will be resistors and persecutors of Nehemiah throughout the story. Who is the greatest enemy of the Church today (Ephesians 6:10-12)? How might spiritual warfare play a part in tragedies we currently face?

11. What weapons do we have to fight against spiritual powers of darkness (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:10-18)? Are these sufficient?

12. Note that the Babylonians, who initially destroyed Jerusalem, were judged by God through the Persians (Isaiah 48:14). Read Romans 13:1-4. Do you think it is a good thing to pray for God to avenge wrongdoers through governments and weaponry – even warfare? Why or why not?



Digging Deeper (Further Study)

13. Read Romans 12:17-21. Do you wish to take revenge on those who have hurt you? What is the appropriate response to those who oppose us? How can we deal with anger in a Christ-like way, when we have been injured not only personally but nationally?

14. Read Nehemiah 2:11-12. Did Nehemiah march into the city with a big fanfare, announcing triumphantly that the king had sent him on a rebuilding mission? What attributes did Nehemiah exhibit?

15. From Nehemiah's example and from James 1:2-6, how are patience and wisdom inseparably linked?

16. Fill in the blank: I need wisdom particularly to help me to be patient when...

17. How confident was Nehemiah in Nehemiah 2:20?

18. In reviewing Nehemiah 1 and 2, what was the basis of Nehemiah's confidence? What is the basis of your confidence in dealing with impossible situations or crises?

Scripture for Meditation

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We His servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Nehemiah 2:20



Forever and ever; wisdom and power are His. He changes times and seasons; He despises kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.

Daniel 2:20-21

Introduction

Can you imagine fielding a soccer team with 10 players rather than 11, or a basketball game with only four players instead of five, or the World Series with eight men instead of nine? Of course not. Why? Because it takes a specific number to make the team complete, and each person is vitally important to move the team toward the goal of winning. Most people would like to skip over this third chapter of Nehemiah, mainly because of the lists of difficult names to pronounce. But these names are important because they represent people. And these people represent talents. And these talents represent opportunities to serve God and complete the wall. Completion of the wall represents Nehemiah's plan. And Nehemiah's plan, when fulfilled, would glorify God. Let's look at it.

Teamwork

Some 41 parties are named as participating in the rebuilding of 42 sections of the wall and the 10 city gates around the wall. The names of these gates are fairly indicative of their use. For instance the Sheep Gate would be where the sheep would enter for sacrifices in the temple; the Dung Gate was used for discarding their waste and garbage (comparable to our landfills). The 10 gates were: the Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Old Gate, the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate, the Horse Gate, the East Gate, and the Inspection Gate.

Nehemiah first appointed a team of priests, led by Eliashib, the high priest. These priests worked on the section of the wall nearest the temple. They consecrated it and dedicated the work to the Lord. What an encouragement this must have been to the workers to have the man-in-charge, the high priest, roll up his sleeves and pitch in to help! What an example for us to see that the high priest was willing to dig in and get his hands dirty. That is teamwork.

It was not just the residents of Jerusalem who worked on the wall. Laborers came from all over. There was a team comprised of men from Jericho. Jews from other towns became involved, including—Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Beth Haccerem, Beth Zur, and Keilah. This was an endeavor that involved the whole nation. That's teamwork.

However, not everyone participated. “The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors” (Nehemiah 3:5). These leaders or nobles weren't about to lower themselves by participating in manual labor. The term *nobles* literally means, “exalted ones,” “majestic ones.” These men felt the work was far beneath their status.

Remember the childhood story of *The Little Red Hen*? The little red hen tried to get her friends to help her buy seed, to plant the seed, to take care of the seed, to harvest the seed, to grind the seed, and then to cook the seed into a delicious loaf of bread. But all of her friends made excuses as to why they couldn't help in the process. However when the loaf of bread was baked, they all came forward in hopes of eating the bread. The little red hen politely refused. We wonder what the Lord's response might be to these nobles who refused to help in building the wall but later wanted to enjoy the security of a fortified city?

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Philippians 1:4-5

Yet, despite the fact that some did not participate, many did, including several professional groups. Three are mentioned: the goldsmiths, the perfumers, and businessmen. These, along with other professional groups made up the middle class. The whole of Jewish society was involved: the priests, the nobility, the middle class craftsmen, laborers, women (Nehemiah 3:12), farmers and shepherds from outlying districts. Two groups of craftsmen are noticeably absent: the potters and the bakers. The work was extensive and time consuming and these two groups were needed to provide food and cooking utensils for the rest.

The work progressed rapidly and was substantially finished within 52 days. Some scholars have questioned this, saying this massive undertaking could not have been accomplished so quickly. Archaeologists, however, have found evidence from the remains of Nehemiah's wall, confirming that the wall was both hastily built and sturdy...although not as elaborate as some of the better-known walls such as those which surrounded Babylon. But this was not merely a feat of engineering or simply an example of community cooperation—this was a work ordained by God and accomplished through His divine providence.

Talents

While Nehemiah may not have fully comprehended the full importance of what was taking place, he refused to remain idle. He was led by God. He trusted God. He obeyed God. Nehemiah knew that God had a plan and had chosen him to motivate and encourage the people. Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher of England once said, “When you can't trace His hand, trust His heart.”

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells the parable of three servants who were given talents by their master. Two of the servants used their talents wisely, and one did not. Jesus states that the master rewarded the two who put their talents to use but admonished the third servant severely. Whatever gift you have received is from the Lord. Use it for His glory, regardless of how insignificant you may think it is. Remember that every ability you have is from God. Paul wrote, “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24).

The builders were not just moved by patriotism—they knew they were working on sacred ground. Thus Eliashib and his team of priests not only contributed their labor but also consecrated the work. Elsewhere other Levites were hard at work (Nehemiah 3:17), as were other priests (Nehemiah 3:20). The Recabites also labored enthusiastically (Nehemiah 3:14). The Rechabites were a Kenite tribe that was forbidden to live in houses but dwelt in tents because of a command from their chief Jonadab, son of Recab centuries before (Jeremiah 35:1-19). If they couldn't build houses of their own, they would enthusiastically help complete Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. They were team players and made use of their talents—even though the work did not enhance their territory. Their labor was for the Lord.

We are told that Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs opposite their house. After them, Azariah the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs by his house (Nehemiah 3:23). Some, after completing work on their original section, moved on and worked on other sections of the wall (Nehemiah 3:27). There are some important lessons for us here. Each person who is called



Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.

Colossians 3:23-24

by God is a builder. Jesus is building His Church, and He has called Christians to help strengthen what He is building.

Summary

You may not possess Nehemiah's unique motivational abilities. You may not be a gifted architect, or an accomplished musician, or a brilliant speaker. But in God's realm, you are unique—specifically designed for His purpose. God distributes His talents according to His needs and for His purpose. Nehemiah was a man of prayer and persistence. He was a team player. He lived for the glory of God. Not everyone can be the goalie on a soccer team, the quarterback on the football team, or the center on the basketball team. On God's team, however, we are all placed in crucial places of service.

Motivational speakers sometimes make shocking amounts of money by firing up their audiences for a temporal cause. The enthusiasm engendered by such techniques rarely lasts long. Such was not the case with the rebuilding of the wall. Nehemiah would make an excellent motivational speaker today, but that does not explain what took place when he returned to lead his people. He did not promote himself but stressed the potential of each person and the importance of working together as a team—for the glory of God.

Spending Time With God

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SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 3

Teamwork & Talents | Nehemiah 3

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study guide. Write down one insight that was meaningful for you.

2. Read Nehemiah 3:1-32. Based on your first impression, what is significant about this chapter? Does it seem like a needless list of names and activities?

3. Note that the people were not merely building—they were rebuilding. They were bringing the walls back to their proper state. Read Revelation 2:4, Galatians 1:6, Psalm 51:12, and list spiritual qualities that you might need to re-establish before God.

4. Complete this thought: “The spiritual quality or aspect of my spiritual life that I would most like to have re-established or strengthened before God is...”

Discussion (Group Study)

5. Read 1 Timothy 2:1-8. Why do you think prayer for our leaders is important? What specific steps will you take to make such prayer a greater part of your life

6. Review Nehemiah 3:1-32. What were some of the specific tasks accomplished by the people?



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 3

Teamwork & Talents | Nehemiah 3

7. Read Romans 12:1-8. How does this relate to Nehemiah 3?

10. "I could more fully use my spiritual gifts for God's glory by..."

8. From Romans 12:6-8, do you find any spiritual gifts or abilities that relate to your personal sense of gifting from God? Explain.

11. Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-31. What truths from this New Testament text relate to the Old Testament story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem?

12. Does everyone have the same gift? Why do you think there are so many different gifts?

9. What is the proper motivation for using our spiritual gifts (Romans 12:1-3)?

13. Why is each gift important? Honestly, do you feel that your gift or ministry is important? Why or why not?



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 3

Teamwork & Talents | Nehemiah 3

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

14. Notice in Nehemiah 3:1-32 how the people worked side-by-side, cooperating in the task of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Does the Church work this way today?

16. Read the verse for meditation below, Colossians 3:23-24. If you followed this exhortation seriously, what specific areas of your life would be changed?

Why or why not?

Now watch and pray to see where God will use your talents this week for His glory!

15. Read Ephesians 4:11-16. What are some of the blessings that come when God's people work together?

Scripture for Meditation

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Colossians 3:23-24



Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us.”

Nehemiah 4:19-20

Introduction

How many times have you heard the expression, “That’s impossible! There’s no way you can accomplish that!”? We can’t help but wonder how many lives have been shaped and perfected under the pressure of “impossible tasks.” Did you know that Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor for lack of ideas? Albert Einstein’s teacher described him as mentally slow, unsociable, and adrift forever in his foolish dreams. The sculptor Rodin’s father said, “I have an idiot for a son.” Louisa May Alcott, the author of “Little Women,” was encouraged to find work as a servant or seamstress by her family! Walt Disney, Albert Einstein, Rodin, and Louisa May Alcott overcame seemingly impossible odds and tackled the tasks before them.

And now we have the prophet, Nehemiah, being chided by Sanballat with chanting remarks on the impossible mission of rebuilding the wall. Let’s see how Nehemiah responded to his “mission impossible.”

An Impossible Mission

The events of chapter four took place as the work of rebuilding and restoring the wall was beginning. When Sanballat, the chief troublemaker against the Jews, heard about their mission to rebuild the wall, he became angry. This was not a simple little annoyance on Sanballat’s part. The Hebrew literally means “very enraged.” In other words, Sanballat was ticked—big time! And why? Because as governor of Samaria, he likely considered Nehemiah’s presence as a threat to Samaria’s control of Judea. So what did he do? He utilized three scare tactics that are commonly used in war: degradation, intimidation, and trepidation. Let’s look at each one.

Degradation: Sanballat’s tactic was ridicule, mockery, and put-downs. In his own words, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish it in a day? Can they bring these stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are” (Nehemiah 4:2)? Rather sarcastic, wouldn’t you say? His was the impotent rage of one who could do nothing, since Nehemiah had been given permission to rebuild the wall by the Persian king. The Samaritans were powerless to stop the rebuilding. Still, Sanballat strutted pompously before the Samaritan army. Tobiah, his cohort, slavishly echoed the ridicule and scorn. Nehemiah’s trust, however, was in the Lord. This is demonstrated by his prayer in Nehemiah 4:4-5.

Henry Ford said, “Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal.” Nehemiah kept the greatness of God, not the chiding remarks of Sanballat, before his eyes.

Intimidation: The enemies of Judah continued to threaten military action. They were engaged in what amounted to a propaganda campaign. They knew they could not actually attack or they would suffer the wrath of Artaxerxes. The Jews were forced to post watchmen around the clock. They armed themselves, prayed, and continued to work. Still, the volume of work and the constant threat of attack had its effect, and the work began to slow down. Intimidation was sapping their strength.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's scheme.

Ephesians 6:10,11

Trepidation: Those who lived in the outlying districts were especially fearful of a sneak attack. Fear can have a paralyzing effect upon a mission. Fear of failure (Nehemiah 4:10), fear for life itself (Nehemiah 4:11), and fear of the unknown (Nehemiah 4:12) can have a crippling effect on attitude. Have you ever experienced this entrapment?

Never underestimate the spiritual warfare that constantly rages against God's people. Even today Satan seeks to degrade, intimidate, and strike fear into the hearts of God's servants. But the Scripture reminds us that God "has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). Nehemiah considered the threats of his enemy. Then he posted armed guards and told the people to "remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes" (Nehemiah 4:14).

Nehemiah combined spiritual encouragement with sound wisdom. He placed the men near their own homes with weapons to protect those dearest to their hearts.

An Omnipotent God

The cold war had just begun between Sanballat and Nehemiah. Nehemiah had acted swiftly and wisely, yet he knew that it was God who had frustrated the plans of the enemy (Nehemiah 4:15). Nehemiah was forced to undertake extraordinary measures to maintain the security of the city as the work of rebuilding the wall continued.

Nehemiah stationed half of the men to work on the wall while those not engaged in the building stood by, armed and ready for action. Even the workers held a weapon in one hand and worked with the other. Swords were strapped to their waists that they might spring into action if necessary. Nehemiah's personal assistants pitched in to help with the labor. In fact, Nehemiah himself was in constant motion, going from one place to another, supervising the work. A trumpeter stayed by Nehemiah's side so that he could immediately rally the people in case of an attack. The Jews were not strong enough to withstand a sustained attack, but Nehemiah reminded the people, "Our God will fight for us!" (Nehemiah 4:20).

Those who commuted from other towns each day to work on the wall were most vulnerable (Nehemiah 3). These men could have been ambushed on their way to or from Jerusalem. Thus, Nehemiah encouraged them to sleep in the city, rather than return to their homes at night. They would sleep in their clothes, with their weapons always at hand, and Nehemiah a true servant-leader at their side.

The ability of God to help us face seemingly impossible tasks is well illustrated by the story of Eric Liddell as he ran in the 1924 Olympics. Liddell, the Flying Scotsman, as they called him, was undoubtedly the favorite in the 100 meter race. Liddell was scheduled to run on a Sunday, but because of his Christian commitment to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," he refused. Great pressure was put upon him, not only from the media, but also from the King of England. But Liddell's eyes were on the King of Kings, and he would not violate his convictions.

When the authorities realized that Liddell could not be persuaded to run on Sunday, they of-

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12

ferred him an alternative—he could run the 400-meter race on Thursday. They undoubtedly recognized there was no way a 100-meter runner could compete with those who had trained for the 400-meter race.

A tense silence fell over the crowd as the runners approached the starting line. From the beginning Liddell leapt into a three-meter lead. Everyone knew he couldn't keep up his pace. His training was for sprinting, not distance. He would fade quickly. The crowd was hypnotized. Two Americans were fast approaching Liddell. But as they got closer, Liddell ran faster. As he drew closer and closer to the tape his head was back and his eyes were looking towards heaven. Eric Liddell reached the tape a full five meters ahead of the second runner. Not only did Eric Liddell win, but he also set a new world record of 47.6 seconds. As he was leaving the Olympics, it has been said that Eric Liddell was handed a piece of paper by the masseur of the hotel, which read, "In the old book it says, 'He that honors me I will honor.' Wishing you the best of success always." Was it impossible for a 100-meter runner to run a 400-meter race—AND WIN? Not when his focus is on the omnipotent God!

Summary

An omnipotent God loves to tackle impossible missions! Do you have an impossible mission that you are trying to accomplish in your own strength? Join Nehemiah in saying, "Our God will fight for us!"

Nehemiah's trust was not in...

people, armies, personal abilities, or opportunities.

But Nehemiah's trust was in ...

our omnipotent God and because of this...God's mission was accomplished.

Spending Time With God

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Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study guide. Write down one insight that was challenging or meaningful for you.

2. How did Sanballat, Nehemiah's chief opposition, react when he learned that the wall was being rebuilt (Nehemiah 4:1-3)?

3. Think of a time you were severely ridiculed. How did you respond? How did Nehemiah respond (Nehemiah 4:4-5)?

4a. How did Jesus handle ridicule (1 Peter 2:23)?

b. What challenge does Jesus' example leave for you and for me (1 Peter 2:21)?

Take a moment to pray for the grace to live like Christ.

5a. From Nehemiah 4:6, how did the people work?

b. How should we approach our work (Colossians 3:23)?

c. "I meet the challenge of Colossians 3:23 when..."

d. What, according to Colossians 3:24, ought to motivate us to work as did the people in Nehemiah's day?

Take a moment to pray for grace to do all things for God, with all your heart.



Discussion (Group Study)

6a. Once Nehemiah's enemies realized that ridicule would not stop the work, what were their tactics (Nehemiah 4: 7 - 8) ?

10. What did Nehemiah say to encourage the people (Nehemiah 4:14)?

b. How did the people respond (Nehemiah 4:9)?

11. It has been said that "fear is the polio of the soul and keeps us from walking by faith." What do you fear?

7. It has been said, "Pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you." In what specific way(s) might your life change if you decided to live by that motto?

12. Meditate on Nehemiah 4:14 again. Specifically how do Nehemiah's words encourage you?

8. Why did the people's fear intensify (Nehemiah 4:10-12)?

13. Describe the steps and procedures the people followed to protect themselves as they built (Nehemiah 4:16-23).

9. What actions did Nehemiah take (Nehemiah 4:13)?



14a. In a spiritual sense, how do we need to be always on guard (Ephesians 6:10-18)? What does it mean to “put on the full armor of God”?

17. Where is your commitment to Christ's cause sometimes lacking? Explain.

b. What piece of the armor in Ephesians 6 do you tend to neglect or forget to wear? Why?

18. How do you think Jesus would respond to someone who said, “I’m a Christian and I believe I’m going to heaven...but I’m not willing to endure trials or persecution for my faith” (Luke 14:26-33)?

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

15a. One of the keys to Nehemiah's success as a leader was his dedication. What verses in Nehemiah 4 show his commitment to the people and to God most clearly? How?

16. What does Christ tell us about commitment in Luke 9:57-62?

Scripture for Meditation

Have I not commanded you to Be strong and courageous.
Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD
your God will be with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9



But out of reverence for God I did not act like that... Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.

Nehemiah 5:15c,19

Introduction

Some time ago the following note was actually sent to the IRS.

“Gentlemen:

Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping I will send you the rest.

Sincerely, _____.”

We may smile at this but—let’s be honest, haven’t we all perhaps wanted to cut a few corners on our taxes and pocket more than is rightfully ours?

Building a wall is like doing taxes—it is easy to cut the corners. Those who cheat will soon face weakened walls and compromised character. The results are disastrous.

Nehemiah’s Conflict

Nehemiah was desperately trying to motivate ALL Jews to work together for rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Despite the rapid progress in rebuilding, the province of Judah had serious problems.

The city was cut off. Because of the hostility between Judah and her neighbors, normal trade was next to impossible;

People had moved into the city for protection and were unable to farm their land;

High taxes had caused some to borrow money to make payments; and worst of all...

God’s people were taking advantage of their own brethren to enrich themselves. They charged interest, and if the poor could not pay their debts on loans for tax payments, they were forced into slavery.

Nehemiah was outraged. The Jews had forgotten the Mosaic Law. He faced the conflict head-on saying, “When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!’” (Nehemiah 5:6-7a,b).

In other words, “What’s wrong with you guys? Here we are in the middle of a HUGE building project and you’re hindering instead of helping. These are your own people and you’re charging them exorbitant interest rates! Some of them are so poor that they have to sell themselves or their own children into slavery! Don’t you realize that this is wrong?”

Perhaps Nehemiah quoted Deuteronomy 23:19-20 to them: “Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.” Someone has said, “God wants to bless us—but He has one requirement—He wants to be in charge.”

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

Ephesians 5:8-10

Nehemiah called an assembly of all the people and confronted the accused, saying, “Let the exacting of usury stop” (Nehemiah 5:10b). The response was immediate. “We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say” (Nehemiah 5:12). Wow! That’s immediate repentance.

To ensure that the people adhered to their promise, the governor demanded that the priests take an oath before God and the congregation. Then, Nehemiah shook out the fold of his robe, dramatically symbolizing a request for God to curse those who refused to obey. Nehemiah did not deem it necessary to form a committee to discuss the various shades of right or wrong connected with each issue. He did not establish a sub-committee to further study what effect this might have on future building projects.

My friend, when God points out sin in our lives, the time to deal with it is NOW!

Chuck Swindoll states, “Making long-range plans to correct a problem allows the sands of time to hone off the raw edges of God’s reproof in our lives. We end up tolerating that sin and perhaps even protecting it. A prompt and thorough dealing with wrong in our lives is essential. As in finances, it is best to keep all accounts current.”

Nehemiah's Character

Nehemiah was an exemplary leader. He carried huge financial responsibilities. He had staff to pay and entertainment expenses—he hosted dignitaries from other parts of the empire. He provided food for 150 people. His kitchens prepared at least one ox, six sheep, and an abundance of poultry every day. Wine, too, had to be always available—probably the best of wine, considering his position. For all of this, he was entitled to a food allowance as well as a collection of silver (cash).

Nehemiah’s predecessors had been heavy-handed in tax collection. They even allowed their staff (who likely pocketed a goodly portion) to collect tax. Neither Nehemiah nor his associates availed themselves to the right to tax the people, nor did they choose to capitalize on the opportunity to buy land. Instead, Nehemiah chose to shoulder the heavy costs of governorship himself.

Nehemiah lived and worked with the people and did not take advantage of his position as governor. He even refused the extra food allotment that was normally due a governor (Nehemiah 5:18).

What was Nehemiah’s primary motivation? He knew he would eventually answer to God. It was God, not Artaxerxes, who appointed him governor. It was God, not the king and not the people, whom he served. He feared and loved God (Nehemiah 5:15).

Nehemiah's Confidence

The chapter concludes with another of Nehemiah’s brief prayers. “Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people” (Nehemiah 5:19). Nehemiah faced conflict in a godly way because he had a godly character and was confident that rewards await those who

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1-2

serve God faithfully. It was his great desire to be welcomed home with the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21a).

Summary

Is your heart fully for God as was Nehemiah's? The pressure for us to compromise character is no less.

Patricia Fripp relates a modern-day situation that calls a dad to demonstrate personal integrity.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon in Oklahoma City. My friend and proud father, Bobby Lewis, was taking his two little boys to play miniature golf. He walked up to the fellow at the ticket counter and said, “How much is it to get in?”

The young man replied, “\$3.00 for you and \$3.00 for any kid who is older than six. We let them in free if they are six or younger. How old are they?”

Bobby replied, “One is three and the other one is seven, so I guess I owe you \$6.00.”

The man at the ticket counter said, “Hey Mister, did you just win the lottery or something? You could have saved yourself three bucks. You could have told me that the older one was six; I wouldn't have known the difference. “

Bobby replied, “Yes, that may be true, but the kids would have known the difference. “

In these challenging days of moral and ethical relativism, let us be sure to set good examples for all who watch our lives. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you're saying.”

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SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 5

Building Character — Not Just Walls | Nehemiah 5

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of Nehemiah 5. Write down one insight that God revealed to you.

2. In your opinion, which conflict caused Nehemiah the greatest concern and why?

3. What are some of the conflicts in your life that tempt you to compromise your character?

4. Read Nehemiah 5:1-15. What was the “great outcry” of the poorer Jews?

5. What was Nehemiah's emotional response to their plea (Nehemiah 5:6)?

Do you have a similar passion about injustice, oppression, and poverty? Explain.

6. Nehemiah's concern for the poor is a clue to his character. What does God tell us about the poor?

Deuteronomy 15:7

1 Timothy 6:18

Discussion (Group Study)

7. What steps did Nehemiah take to help alleviate poverty? (Nehemiah 5:7-11)



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 5

Building Character — Not Just Walls | Nehemiah 5

8. Read James 2:15-17. What should be our response to those in need?

12. For what degrees or specific types of compromise do you think these measures should be used?

9. Who are the “poor among you?” What steps might you take to help improve their condition?

13. When you see compromise and sin among Christians today, do you care enough to confront? Give specific examples if possible.

10. There is a book titled, *Caring Enough to Confront*. Do you think Nehemiah was caring when he confronted the leaders? Explain.

14. With whom was Nehemiah angry?

11. Read Matthew 18:15-17. What are the steps prescribed for confronting sin and compromise within the church?

15. Read Ephesians 4:26-27. How does God instruct us to handle our anger?



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 5

Building Character — Not Just Walls | Nehemiah 5

16. Read Mark 11:15-18. How did Jesus handle His anger and with whom was He angry?

20. As one in authority Nehemiah could have taken advantage of this position—but he didn't. What does this reveal about his character?

17. What situation(s) or person(s) makes you angry today? Do you handle your anger properly?

21. If you suddenly stepped into a position of prestige, power and accessible wealth (like Nehemiah), how might this change affect your relationship with those around you? (Be honest!)

"It is easy to fly into a passion—anybody can do that—but to be angry with the right person to the right extent and at the right time and with the right object and in the right way—that is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it." — Aristotle

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

18. Read Nehemiah 5:14. What was Nehemiah's status?

19. How long had he held this position?

Scripture for Meditation

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Philippians 1:27a



They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.”

Nehemiah 6:9

Introduction

Charles Schulz, the creator of the cartoon, “Peanuts,” speaks with subtle wisdom through his unforgettable characters, Charlie Brown and Lucy. In one cartoon, Charlie Brown pleads with Lucy to be tolerant and understanding. He says, “Lucy, you must be loving. This world really needs love. You have to let yourself love to make this world a better place in which to live!” Lucy glares at Charlie Brown and screams (as Charlie does his famous back flip), “Look, blockhead—the world I love. It’s people I can’t stand!”

Poor Nehemiah. All he wanted to do was serve God and oversee the building of the wall. Simple, huh? Well it might have been if he didn’t have to deal with people—difficult people, complaining people, scheming people, dishonest people, selfish people and prideful people—PEOPLE!

Last week we saw how Nehemiah handled dishonest people. Now we consider how he deals with deceptive people.

Sanballat’s Deception

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were not happy. They had received word that the wall was just about finished—only the doors needed to be hung. So the scheming trio began plotting a strategy. They sent Nehemiah a letter (probably embossed and ornately decorated—after all, Sanballat was the governor of Samaria). Surely Nehemiah would be impressed! It read: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono”(Nehemiah 6:2b). Under the guise of diplomatic negotiations, Sanballat and the others attempted to lure Nehemiah out of his safety.

Nehemiah’s Discernment

Nehemiah saw through their ruse and refused to go. His reply was direct and to the point. He said: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” (Nehemiah 6:3).

These scoundrels sent the same request four times—and four times Nehemiah refused! This was a sneaky plot, but Nehemiah saw right through it. The Valley of Ono was an isolated area near the border of Judah, an ideal place for an ambush. Nehemiah did not have to be a rocket scientist to see what his enemies were up to. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were trying a last-ditch attempt to do away with Nehemiah, and it might have worked had Nehemiah not kept his eyes on Jehovah.

How many times does the enemy try to entice us to take our eyes off God? Satan’s strategy hasn’t changed. In Luke 4:6-8, we read, “And he (Satan) said to him (Jesus), ‘I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

Jesus would not be distracted from worshipping the one true God. Nehemiah, too, held his ground. What forces tempt you to distraction from true worship?

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Ephesians 4:29

Sanballat's Determination

Having failed at previous attempts, Sanballat sent a fifth letter to dissuade Nehemiah. This was an open letter (i.e., visible for ALL to see and hear). We might call this the *Jerusalem Enquirer* or the *Sanballat Tabloid*. It was packed with rumors—ugly, unfounded, hurtful rumors, alleging Nehemiah's quest for the throne. If Artaxerxes heard and believed these vicious morsels, it could have meant the end for Nehemiah. Rumor, gossip, scandal, defamation—seemingly small stones of criticism—can avalanche overwhelming and unfair public sentiment against another.

Billy Graham relates the following story: A woman in England came to her vicar with a troubled conscience. The vicar knew her to be a habitual gossip. She maligned nearly everyone in the village. “How can I make amends?” she pleaded.

The vicar said, “If you want to make peace with your conscience, take a bag of goose feathers and shake out the feathers on the porch of each one you have slandered.”

When she had done so, she came back to the vicar and said, “Is that all?”

“No.” said the wise old minister, “Now, you must go and gather up every feather and bring them all back to me.”

After a long time the woman returned without a single feather “The wind has blown them all away,” she said.

“My good woman,” said the vicar, “so it is with gossip. Unkind words are easily dropped, but we can never take them back again.”

Nehemiah's Declaration

Nehemiah saw through the vicious rumors, and his reply was brief and direct: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head” (Nehemiah 6:8). Nehemiah was clearly a man of great courage. His tenacity and boldness came from God, as seen in another of his brief prayers. “Now strengthen my hands” (Nehemiah 6:9b).

Shemaiah's Duplicity

Another plot conjured up by Sanballat and Tobiah was to hire a false prophet named Shemaiah. Shemaiah attempted to send the governor running to the Temple for shelter by uttering a haunting poetic prophecy about the men who were coming to kill him. Under the Old Testament law, the Temple could serve as a place of refuge for the accused.

It should be understood that, as a layman, Nehemiah was not permitted to enter the Temple. In addition, as a servant of Artaxerxes, he was likely a eunuch—even further restricted (Deuteronomy 23:1). Only under certain circumstances could a person flee to the altar to seek asylum (Exodus 21:13-14; 1 Kings 1:50-53). Flight from a foreign enemy was not one of those circumstances.

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

2 Timothy 3:12-13

Shemaiah's deception had two purposes. He wanted to frighten Nehemiah, and he wanted to force him to violate God's ordinances. Nehemiah realized immediately that this was a false prophet, not from God, but hired by his enemies.

Oswald Chambers reminds us, "There is no need to fear; if we keep within the moral frontiers of God, we can say boldly, 'The Lord is my helper.'"

Tobiah's Diplomatic Negotiations

Faced with abject failure in all attempts to halt the work, Tobiah sought to negotiate a truce. He had close ties with many in Jerusalem and some of his friends tried to convince Nehemiah that Tobiah was not such a bad person. Tobiah was trying to "work both sides of the street." Nehemiah was willing to listen but remained firm. He had not yielded to threats and intimidation and was not about to make concessions under the guise of "a new business plan."

Summary

Finally, the wall was completed in the astoundingly short period of 52 days! The enemies of God's people were astonished. They who had boasted of their superiority over the Jews now stood in awe. Now those who had attempted to frighten Nehemiah were frightened.

Difficult people tried everything in their power to stop the work of rebuilding and to eliminate Nehemiah. It did not work. The King of Kings commissioned Nehemiah for a specific task and the enemy's puny plots were futile in the face of Almighty God. In the face of difficulty, remember the source of your strength.

A mighty fortress is our God,
 A bulwark never failing;
 Our helper He amid the flood
 Of mortal ills prevailing.
 For still our ancient foe
 Doth seek to work us woe;
 His craft and pow'r are great,
 And, armed with cruel hate,
 On earth is not his equal.

— Martin Luther

Who are the difficult people in your life? Your job is not to change them, but to trust God and to keep busy doing God's work in God's way. In this way, you will be blessed, and God will be glorified.



SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 6

Dealing With Difficult People | Nehemiah 6

Spending Time With God

This eight-week series is entitled “Nehemiah: Building Together.” The devotion questions are written for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Before beginning PRAY and ask God for understanding as you earnestly seek to know Him better.

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this lesson. Write down one insight that especially encouraged you.

2. Sanballat and his friends tried to lure Nehemiah into the Valley of Ono for a meeting. The consequences would be distraction at best and death at worst. In what ways do believers today become lured away from God and the Church (1 John 2:15-17)?

3. What things tend to distract you from God?

4. Was Nehemiah weakened in the face of Sanballat's four requests (Nehemiah 6:4)? What can we learn from Nehemiah's example that will help us to be more resolute?

5. Have you noticed that temptations often come in clusters? Write out 1 Corinthians 10:13. What hope does this give to you? Explain.

Discussion (Group Study)

6. In Nehemiah 6:5-9, what was Sanballat's tactic? How did Nehemiah respond?

7. Can you think of a time when someone spread ugly rumors about you? How did you respond? How should we respond (see Proverbs 12:18, Matthew 18:21-22)?



8. How do you respond when people gossip about others in your presence? How should you respond (1 Thessalonians 5:11)?

12. Why do you think Nehemiah was not afraid?

9. What was Shemaiah trying to persuade Nehemiah to do? (Nehemiah 6:10)?

13. How do you think the workers would have reacted if Nehemiah had given in to fear?

10. What character quality does Nehemiah exhibit by his answer (Nehemiah 6:12-14)?

14. When we are afraid, what can we as Christians do (Psalm 56:3-4)?

11. In what way has your character been tested recently? How might James 1:1-12 apply to your situation?

15. Read the following Scriptures and record God's promises in the face of fear:

John 14:1-3

1 John 4:17-18



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Psalms 27:1-3, 14

18. In Nehemiah 6:14, rather than plotting revenge on the enemies of God's work, Nehemiah asked God to remember them in judgment. What is your attitude toward those who oppose Christ's kingdom today?

Joshua 1:8-9

16. Describe a time when you have been in a fearful situation, called upon God, and received His help.

19. Describe the area in your life where you most want to stand firm for the Lord. Ask others to pray for and with you, that you might see God's victory!

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

17. Can you draw any parallels between Sanballat's scheme against God's people in Nehemiah's day and the way the devil seeks to overcome Christians and our leaders today?

Scripture for Meditation

When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

Nehemiah 6:16



Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the aliens living in your town—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.

Deuteronomy 31:12

Introduction

Susan and Eileen had just finished dinner when Eileen asked the waitress if she could please speak to the manager. The manager appeared at their table a few minutes later. “What can I do for you?” she asked, as if she were expecting yet another reprimand from an angry customer. “I just wanted you to know that our waitress tonight has really been exceptional,” said Eileen. The manager was obviously relieved—and delighted...so was the waitress. The four ladies laughed and chatted for a few minutes. Eileen’s words left an indelible impression upon two hard-working women and also upon Susan, her friend. Susan recorded this in a short story entitled, “Encouraging Words.”

Words have a tremendous impact upon our lives. No words have greater potential impact than God’s. In this eighth chapter of Nehemiah, as Ezra reads the Word of God to the Jewish people, we learn the tremendous influence the Word of God has for renewing and reviving the people.

Renewal

In Nehemiah 8, the wall may have been completed, but the work wasn’t finished. God knew that the hearts of the people were not following after Him. The follow-up was just as important as the project.

On the first of the month, the people gathered in an open square near the Water Gate. In Nehemiah 8:1, it is worth noting that the people (men and women) requested that God’s Word be read and that they were attentive during the reading. Ezra, a contemporary of Nehemiah, read the text. Ezra was a priest and scribe. In other words, he was the scholar and teacher; whereas, Nehemiah was the governor and political leader.

This was not a brief reading. It is possible that all five books of Moses were read—Genesis through Deuteronomy! A special platform was erected (a pulpit) for Ezra’s delivery. Thirteen men, possibly priests or Levites, flanked him. These 13 men were there to help with the translation and interpretation of the Word (Nehemiah 8:7).

The people stood for the reading of God’s Word. (This is still practiced in many churches today when the Gospel is read.) The reading took half a day! What hunger they had for God’s Word!

After Ezra had given thanks, the people shouted “Amen, Amen!” and bowed their faces to the ground and worshipped the Lord (Nehemiah 8:6). The Hebrew word for *worship* means “to prostrate oneself on the ground.” This was the spontaneous response of Moses (Exodus 34:8), Joshua (Joshua 5:14), Job (Job 1:20), Daniel (Daniel 8:18), and the Apostles (Matthew 17:6) to the presence of God’s glory.

Here in Nehemiah the people sensed the glory of God in the reading of His Word and were deeply moved. In Nehemiah 8:9c we learn, “all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.” God’s Word became real to them and made them aware of their sinfulness to the point of tears. Ah, but joy comes in the morning...

Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Nehemiah 8:10

Rejoicing

A broken and contrite heart the Lord will never despise (Psalm 51:17). As the people wept, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep...Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:9-10).

This was intended to be a time of joy! According to the Jewish calendar, the people were to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (also known as the Feast of Booths—Deuteronomy 16:13-15). This feast represented a whole week of joyous festivity!

After being quieted by the Levites, the people did as they were commanded. They feasted and shared their abundance with those who had little. They celebrated, shared, and rejoiced, “... because they now understood the words that had been made known to them” (Nehemiah 7:12).

Remembrance

- And what were those words? They were words of remembrance:
- Remembrance of their deliverance from the bonds of slavery in Egypt.
- Remembrance of Jehovah's provisions as He supplied their needs in the wilderness.
- Remembrance of Jehovah's protection as they wandered in the wilderness.
- Remembrance of Jehovah's power as he drove back the sea and allowed them to cross over on dry land.
- Remembrance of the greatness of Almighty God as He led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

It was through the public reading of God's Word that they discovered Moses' long-neglected and evidently forgotten command concerning the Feast of the Tabernacles. This festival was a reminder of their rescue from Egypt and God's protection and provision as they wandered in the wilderness. They sent messages throughout the nation, instructing people to prepare for the feast.

Fresh in their memories were the consequences of failure to obey God's commands. As the festival was to begin on the 15th day of the month, people had time to get ready. This preparation included gathering branches from different types of trees and shrubs to build the huts (booths). These were to be brought to the place God had chosen (Deuteronomy 31:11), in this case, Jerusalem.

Some residents of the city built huts on the roofs of their houses. Others built them in courtyards of houses, in the outer courts of the temple, and in the public squares near the Water Gate and the Gate of Ephraim.

...from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...

2 Timothy 3:15-16

Ezra adhered strictly to the precepts contained in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). Each day of the feast, he read from the Law. The feast was concluded by a solemn assembly on the eighth day (Numbers 29:35).

Although Scripture records several occasions in which the feast had been held, the hearts of the people were not always renewed. They went through the motions but their motives evidently were not pure. Not so in the Nehemiah 8 account:

“From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great” (Nehemiah 8:17b).

Imagine Ezra's and Nehemiah's excitement as they witnessed a renewed people. A revived people. A rejoicing people. God's people remembering all that He had done for them. They knew the joy of the Lord!

Summary

The people wept and mourned when they heard the words of the Law. God's Words are powerful. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

It is impossible to truly understand the commands of God and not see how far we are from keeping them. The Word, among other things, is a mirror in which we can see our own sinfulness. It causes us to understand the perfect righteousness of God and our unrighteousness—driving us to the cross of Christ

Yet the people were commanded to rejoice. Why? “Look around you!” they could say, “You have been redeemed from exile! The city has been restored! The temple has been built and the sacrifices are taking place! The walls have been rebuilt and you are again safe! Yes, you are sinners; yes you are rebellious. But God has saved you anyway!”

When we really understand and meditate on God's Word, we too will have a sense of the depth of our sins and of the deeper and greater grace of God. We too will find reason to celebrate as never before.

That is genuine “R and R”—Revival and Rejoicing in the Lord!

Spending Time With God

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SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 7

Time for a Little "R & R" | Nehemiah 8

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion pertaining to renewal and rejoicing. Write down an insight meaningful to you.

2. Read Nehemiah 8:1-8. How long did the people listen to the word being read?

3. How long do you think believers in America today would be willing to actually stand and listen to God's word? How about you?

Why?

How do you feel about that?

4. What is the average length of many current secular activities, such as movies or sporting events? What do sports fans do if a game goes into overtime? Do they get mad and walk out? Why or why not?

5. Read Psalm 84:1-4. What was David's attitude about being in God's house? Does his hunger for God challenge you? If so, how?

Discussion (Group Study)

6. Read Acts 20:7-12. Who is preaching? How long did he preach?

7. Read Matthew 15:29-39. Who is preaching? How long did he preach?



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LESSON 7

Time for a Little "R & R" | Nehemiah 8

8. Imagine yourself in both settings from questions 7 and 8 above. Do you think your hunger for God's Word would motivate you to remain with the rest of the people? Explain.

12. Read the selected verses that speak specifically about God's Word. Then write a brief summary of what each verse says to you personally.

Psalm 119:9

9. How did Nehemiah's assistants help the people understand the Word (Nehemiah 7:7-8)?

Psalm 119:16

10. Read Matthew 13:1-23. What is the danger inherent in hearing, but not understanding God's Word?

Psalm 119:27

Psalm 119:43

11. What suggestions or advice would you give to a person who says, "I go to church but don't understand the sermons. Maybe I should stop going—it's a waste of time."?

Psalm 119:49

13. Describe and record your favorite Bible verse. Why does it mean so much to you?



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NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 7

Time for a Little "R & R" | Nehemiah 8

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

14. Read Nehemiah 8:12 and 17. What were the people doing and why?

17. What place does praise have in a Church worship service? In your personal life? In either case, how might you benefit by praising God more fully and frequently (Nehemiah 8:10)? Explain.

15. What would be the possible benefits of such a prolonged season of praise and worship?

Celebrate the joy of the Lord! Great and mighty is the Lord our God!

16. Have you ever participated in a weekend retreat or conference that had an extended time of celebration in conjunction with the teaching? If so, record your experience.

Scripture for Meditation

This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Nehemiah 8:10



Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Joshua 1:8

Introduction

As we approach these last chapters of Nehemiah, there is good news and there is bad news. It would be nice if Nehemiah's story ended here—the wall rebuilt; the Temple arrayed in splendor; the people of God rejoicing and worshipping—but, as the late Paul Harvey traditionally said on his radio program, "...and now for the rest of the story." For you see friends, the Bible is an honest book and tells it like it is. Let's look at it.

Praise and Worship

In chapter 9, the people of God had returned to confess their sins (Nehemiah 9:1-2) and to listen to the word of God being read (Nehemiah 9:3). For three hours, they listened and then for an additional three hours, they confessed their sins and worshipped God. The Word of God cut to the core. The people wept over their unfaithfulness to God and confessed their sins. How could mere words stir their souls so effectively?

- Because God's word reminded them of His goodness and mercy—and their sinfulness.
- Because God's word was powerful and mighty and sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12).
- Because God said His word would not return void and would accomplish what He designed it to do (Isaiah 55:11).

Restored again by the mercy of the Lord, the people began to praise God. And what did they praise Him for? They praised God for:

His Creation (Nehemiah 8: 6)

His Covenant (Nehemiah 8: 7)

His Listening Ear (Nehemiah 8:9)

His Commandments (Nehemiah 8: 13)

His Provisions (Nehemiah 8:15)

His Forgiveness (Nehemiah 8:17)

His Deliverance (Nehemiah 8:27)

His Mercy (Nehemiah 8:31)

Promises Made

After praising God in chapter 9, the "transformed and repentant people" in chapter 10 made six solemn promises to God and agreed to follow His precepts. Their promises were:

1. Not to intermarry (Nehemiah 10:30)
2. Observe the Sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31)
3. Observe every seventh year as Sabbath year (Nehemiah 10:31)
4. Pay the Temple tax (Nehemiah 10:32)
5. Supply wood for burnt offerings for Temple (Nehemiah 10:34)

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord and on His law he meditates day and night.

Psalm 1:1-2

6. Give tithes to the Temple (Nehemiah 10:35-39)

The promises came as a result of repentant hearts. The people were sorry for their sins and determined inwardly and outwardly to obey God.

Pomp and Circumstance

The people cast lots to decide which families would initially move inside the New Jerusalem to help repopulate the city (Nehemiah 11:1-2). Although the casting of lots seems rather random, the Jews believed that God was guiding the process (Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 18:6,8). Then the celebration began. Exactly what were they celebrating?

The wall was rebuilt; the enemy was humiliated; and God was glorified! The dedication of the wall was the event of the year—the Grammy's and Oscar's combined!

Ezra and Nehemiah led the procession, and what a procession it was! Nehemiah, accompanied by the leaders and two large choirs, marched to the top of the wall. There were songs of thanksgiving and music with cymbals, lyres, and harps (Nehemiah 12:27-31).

After the celebration, Nehemiah returned to Babylon. (Nehemiah had been in Jerusalem for 12 years.) It is not clear why he returned. Perhaps he was recalled by Artaxerxes, or possibly there had been agreement that when the building was completed, he would resume his place in the palace as the king's cupbearer. Whatever the reason, Nehemiah went back to Babylon.

A Time of Purging

It is not known how long Nehemiah was away or exactly when he returned, however when he did, what he found “greatly displeased” him (Nehemiah 13:8). The walls were still there; the Temple was still intact; but the hearts of the people had backslidden and deteriorated. In Nehemiah's absence, the people reverted to their old ways apart from God. The very promises they had made, they had broken.

1. They mixed with the pagan nations around them (Nehemiah 13:1-8).
2. They did not provide for the Levites or the workers in the Temple (Nehemiah 13:10).
3. They neglected the Temple (Nehemiah 13:11).
4. They forgot their promise to remember the Sabbath day (Nehemiah 13:15).

Not only had the people promised not to intermarry, but they had also promised faithfulness to support the Temple and the ministers in the Temple.

Warren Wiersbe writes, “Decreased giving is often a sign of diminished spiritual vitality.” It has also been said that, “If you want to see where a man's heart lies, read his check book.”

In chapter 13, Nehemiah confronted the people and began the purging. “So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task” (Nehemiah 13:30).

Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to Your great love.

Nehemiah 13:22b

Nehemiah was a tremendous leader—honest, hardworking, faithful. More important, he was a man of prayer. Nehemiah began his book with prayer and ended it with prayer—a constant reminder of his dependence upon God.

Nehemiah closes with these prayers:

“Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services” (Nehemiah 13:14).

“Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love” (Nehemiah 13:22).

“Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites” (Nehemiah 13:29).

“Remember me with favor, O my God” (Nehemiah 13:30).

Ten times in this book, we find Nehemiah using the word *remember* in his prayers to God. Now, at the end of the book, we look back at the incredible feats accomplished through the persistent faith of one man, and we have proof-positive that our God does answer prayer.

God does remember to keep His promises. Even when our faith is weak our God remains faithful for He cannot deny His own unchanging nature (2 Timothy 2:13). “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” (Isaiah 49:15).

Nehemiah's intercessions remind us of the great benefits of living always in dependence on God through prayer and resting on His promise that He will never forget His own.

Summary

The good news was that the wall was rebuilt. The bad news was that the people had backslidden. So what's the rest of the story? The rest of the story is a reminder that God is faithful, and He has not left us in our sinful backslidden condition. We have a Redeemer and He lives—Jesus Christ. Nehemiah had a huge task before him, but he never forgot who ultimately was in charge. Whatever you face, remember to pray first, and then obediently follow our Sovereign God, doing all for His glory. There is no task too small or too big for the heart that is totally surrendered in serving Him. So long, Nehemiah! Thanks for being such a faithful example and an encourager for us to follow.

Spending Time With God

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SERIES

NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 8

The Rest of the Story | Nehemiah 9-11

Him better.

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this lesson. Write down one insight you received or question you now have.

2. What is the most important truth you have gleaned from Nehemiah's life thus far? Why?

3. How might you incorporate this truth into your life?

4. Read Nehemiah 9:1-3. What were the people doing?

5. What are the benefits of confessing our sins (Psalm 32:5; James 5:16)?

6. Note the praise that followed confession (Nehemiah 9:5-37). Have you ever been in a corporate gathering in which confession was sincere and spontaneous, followed by a sense of rejoicing and revival? Explain.

Discussion (Group Study)

7. Skim Nehemiah 10 and note how serious the people were about covenanting to obey God. Which part of their promise to God and each other do you think would have been especially difficult?

Why? (There is no "one right answer.")



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NEHEMIAH | BUILDING TOGETHER

LESSON 8

The Rest of the Story | Nehemiah 9-11

8. Look at chapter 11. Describe some of challenges a family would have to face in relocating. (You may think of a time you have had to change residences.)

11. In Nehemiah 13:6, we learn that Nehemiah went to Babylon for a time before returning to bring reforms in Jerusalem. From Nehemiah 13:7-28, list a few of the reforms that were enacted.

9. What is the biggest trial or challenge you have faced in the past few years?

12. Does Nehemiah seem overly emotional in his corrective actions (Nehemiah 13:23-27)? Why do you think he was so concerned about intermarriage?

Looking back, does James 1:1-8 somehow give Biblical perspective to your situation? Explain.

13. In John 2:13-20, we see Christ's strong emotion as He cleanses the temple. What sins today in our lives, our church, or our society would (or do) likely cause Him similar grief?

10. Read Nehemiah 12:27-43. Envision this celebration of worship. Why would the people be especially happy at this time?

14. About what sins do you become especially enraged?



Do you tend to discuss and/or confront such sins in a godly way (Ephesians 4:26-27)?

17. Note the four prayers in this last chapter of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:14, 22, 29, 31). How does Nehemiah's example as a person of prayer inspire or encourage you? Explain.

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

15. Nehemiah 12:27-43 describes one of the greatest worship celebrations described in the Old Testament. Describe one of the greatest worship celebrations you have experienced. What made it significant or powerful?

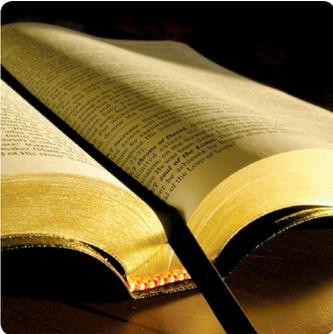
16. What does Jesus require of us in our personal and corporate worship (John 4:24)?

What does this mean to you?

Scripture for Meditation

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Philippians 1:27a



BNEXT Small Group Leader's Guide

This BNEXT Leader's Guide is for facilitator/leaders. Please read this information before you begin. As the facilitator of a small group, you will have the experience of not only sharing this journey through God's Word with others but of aiding them along the way. You do not need previous experience or special training to lead a group. (Your primary responsibility is to serve as facilitator, not to teach.)

MATERIALS NEEDED FOR A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE

- Either the electronic version or a printed copy for each participant. (The electronic version of this BNEXT Study can be printed. When printed, the blue boxes that were visible in the electronic version will print as blank spaces for participants to record their answers.)
- Bible for each participant, preferably the same version (these studies use the NIV)
- Pen or pencil for each participant
- Watch or clock to monitor time

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This BNEXT study series is versatile and may be used by individuals, small groups, or even entire congregations. The use of a small group as part of the program will enhance each one's experience. BNEXT studies have successfully been used in a variety of environments, including home groups, churches, prisons, and businesses.

These lessons are designed for the individual to read the Scripture passages, read the three pages of commentary, and answer the questions throughout the week. The participants then attend a weekly meeting with the small group to share insights and discuss the material. Total time for each weekly lesson should be about 1 to 1½ hours in length. Suggested lesson plans with timing guidelines are found at the end of this Guide.

If you use this study in a large group or an entire church, there are two possible approaches. One approach is for the entire group to first gather for a welcome and opening prayer, after which participants can meet in small groups for discussion using the BNEXT questions. After a specified amount of time, all would reconvene into a larger setting to present highlights from each group, and for closing words of encouragement and prayer. The other approach is to begin together as a larger group for a welcome and then split into smaller groups for the remainder of the time/lesson.

ABOUT SMALL GROUPS

Group Size: Experience has shown that a group size of 10–12 people works best. If your group is significantly larger, we suggest that you create additional small groups.

Group Leaders: Each group should have its own facilitator/leader. It is good to also have at least one back-up facilitator in case the primary facilitator is absent. If you have several groups meeting at one time, decide who will be responsible for facilitating the larger group gatherings for the welcome time and so forth.

ABOUT FACILITATOR/LEADERS

These lessons are designed to easily be used by a first-time leader as well as an experienced leader. The ideal small group facilitator/leader should have:

- a hunger for God's Word and a deep desire to see others grow in their knowledge of God and His Word,
- a commitment to the group, emphasizing seeing the program through to the end,
- the ability to facilitate and moderate discussion rather than teach, and
- a willingness to follow the "Discussion Group Rules of Engagement" (found in this Leader's Guide).

As facilitator, pray for your small group. Spend time preparing your own lesson (you should attempt to answer all of the questions before the class) and be thinking about how to present the questions to the group. Group members should be encouraged to at least answer the first two sets of questions — Devotion (Personal Study) and Discussion (Small Group Study) questions — before each class, to enhance their learning experience. Even better, encourage them to find time to complete Digging Deeper (Further Study) questions on their own. One of the goals of this approach is to encourage participants to develop the habit of delving into Scripture and studying on a regular basis.

You are not expected to be a Biblical expert. You are a facil-

itator, so resist the attempt to teach. You are there to guide the group, keep them on track, and avoid getting caught up in doctrinal debates. If you want to facilitate the group with a broadened background knowledge, see our "Background Study Option" below.

Recognize that not everyone is comfortable answering questions. Gently keep discussion going by asking questions like, "Does anyone else have something to add?" It can be helpful at times to have a volunteer read Scripture texts that are referred to in the questions.

Recognize and affirm all who contribute to the discussion. Do not dismiss someone's answer as wrong. If an answer is obviously off-base, thank them for their answer, then ask what others think. Remind the group to let Scripture interpret Scripture.

If you feel that a certain statement or question is inappropriate for your group, you may omit it or at least recognize that not everyone needs to answer it. However, do not be afraid of letting the group tackle tough topics.

BACKGROUND STUDY OPTIONS

Again, facilitators are not expected to be Biblical experts. If the group looks to you for an answer you do not have, it is perfectly fine to say, "I'm not sure. Perhaps we can all think about that one and bring it up again next week?" Or, "Let's bring this one up to the larger group when there is time allotted for such discussion." Or, "Let's see if this doesn't answer itself over the weeks as we continue our study. Remember, the Bible interprets itself."

For extra study, you may wish to approach your pastor or to read commentaries and use other resources. The internet contains a wealth of information ... and also disinformation. Some internet sites that provide reliable (and free) commentaries and articles include: biblegateway.com, biblestudytools.com, biblehub.com, and blueletterbible.org.

Another useful source of general Biblical knowledge is *The Essential Bible Companion*, by the same contributors of our *Bible*

in 90 Days study series: John Walton, Mark Strauss, and Ted Cooper Jr., Zondervan Publishing (also available as an e-book).

LEADING THE CLASS (Suggested Lesson Plans)

First Class

Decide where you want to meet weekly and decide on a time. Once this has been done, actively publicize the *BNEXT* study throughout all your circles — at your church, workplace, friends, family, etc. There are some free publicity aids on our website at ScriptureAwakening.com/bnext/freebies/. (If the study is being done by the entire congregation, recruit facilitators for each group and have one facilitator designated to lead the closing session when all come back together.)

Be sure that every participant has downloaded the electronic version or has a printed copy of the study at least one week prior to the first small group meeting. Have everyone complete the first lesson's reading and answer the questions in preparation for the first gathering of the group(s).

The first class is unique in that a little more time is spent on introductions and explanations of how the classes will function.

1. Opening prayer, welcome, and introduction of members (13 minutes)

(NOTE: Entire church groups meet together for opening prayer only and then break into their small groups.)

 - a. Think of something brief each participant could say about themselves such as: "Tell us something unique about yourself." Or perhaps, "What do you hope to get out of this BNEXT study?"
 - b. Remind them to keep their answers brief (one minute or less).
2. Give an overview of the class and expectations (7 minutes)
 - a. Inform the class of how many weeks it will take to cover the study and the date of the last class.
 - b. Discuss the format of the BNEXT study and ask if

there are any questions.

- c. Review the "Rules of Engagement" which are located at the end of this Leader's Guide.
3. Discuss lesson questions (35 minutes)
 - a. Ask if there are any Devotion questions that anyone would like to discuss with the group.
 - b. Give primary attention to the Discussion questions, which are provided to promote dialogue and conversation.
 - c. If time permits, you may wish to use one or more of the Digging Deeper questions.

(NOTE: For an entire church, allow an extra 10-15 minutes to allow for the groups to come back together at a specified time. Allow each group to share a highlight of their small group discussion.)
 4. Closing prayer (5 minutes)
 - a. If time is short, then as the leader, pray for the group.
 - b. If you have more time, you may ask if there are any prayer requests and either pray on behalf of the group or open it up for the group to pray.
 5. If you are providing printed copies of lessons to participants, distribute the lesson for next week
 6. Dismissal

Subsequent Classes

1. Opening prayer, welcome, and introduction of any new participants (10 minutes)

(NOTE: Entire church groups meet together for opening prayer only and then break into their small groups.)

- a. If there are new members, have them introduce themselves. Remind them to be brief (one minute or less).
- b. Think of a good ice-breaker that somehow relates to the study. For example, if you are studying "The Ten

Commandments – Exodus 20,” you may ask, “Why do you think Exodus or the Ten Commandments are important?” Or, “How do the Ten Commandments relate to the cross of Jesus Christ?” Remind them to keep their answers short. Set a time limit for this opening section; not everyone needs to answer.

- c. If you think it's necessary, remind the group of the “Rules of Engagement” at the end of this Guide.

2. Discuss lesson questions (45 minutes)

- a. Ask if there are any Devotion questions that people in the group would like to discuss.
- b. Give primary attention to the Discussion questions, which are designed to promote dialogue and conversation.
- c. If time permits, you may wish to use one or more of the Digging Deeper questions.

(NOTE: For an entire church, allow an extra 10-15 minutes for the groups to come back together at a specified time. Allow each group to share an insight of their small group discussion.)

3. Closing prayer (5 minutes)

- a. If time is short, then as the leader, pray for the group.
- b. If you have more time, you may ask if there are any prayer requests and either pray on behalf of the group or open it up for the group to pray.

5. Dismissal

SMALL GROUP RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

It is important to treat one another in Christian love. These “Rules of Engagement” will be helpful, so read them aloud during the first class; thereafter, refer to them as needed by the group.

1. Begin each reading/study session with prayer, expecting God to speak to you through His Word.

2. Come prepared for each week's session by completing the reading and the study questions.
3. Your small group will have a facilitator. Please be respectful of the facilitator's leadership.
4. The facilitator's responsibility is to guide or shepherd the discussions. Do not expect your facilitator to be an expert on Scripture — each group member should seek the answers from Scripture on his/her own.
5. Each group member is invited to join the discussion but should not feel required to do so. If called upon, it is okay to say, “Thank you, but I would prefer to pass on answering that question.”
6. Alternatively, do not dominate a discussion. Time is limited, so please be sensitive to everyone in the group to help ensure that each person has the opportunity to participate.
7. Respect everyone's answers and views on Scripture. However, let Scripture interpret Scripture and expect the Holy Spirit to speak/teach through His written Word.
8. In preparation for each lesson, you are not expected to do extra study or research. If you wish to dig deeper, then here are a few helpful resources:
 - Go to ScriptureAwakening.com/bnext/ for key tips and guidelines for best use of BNEXT study series in your small group or whole church.
 - The internet contains a wealth of information (and sometimes disinformation). Some useful Bible study sites include: biblegateway.com, biblestudytools.com, biblehub.com, and blueletterbible.org.
 - *The Essential Bible Study Companion* (hard copy), by John Walton, Mark Strauss, and Ted Cooper Jr., Zondervan Publishing (also available as an e-book).