

**connect 360**

**BIBLE STUDY GUIDE**

# **Kingdom Assignment**

## **THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF OBEDIENCE**

**A STUDY OF NEHEMIAH**

**K. Randel Everett**



**GC2  
PRESS**

Dallas, Texas

*Kingdom Assignment: The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience*  
*Connect 360 Bible Study Guide*

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# How to Make the Best Use of This Issue

Whether you're the teacher or a student—

1. Start early in the week before your class meets.
2. Overview the study. Review the table of contents and read the study introduction. Try to see how each lesson relates to the overall study.
3. Use your Bible to read and consider prayerfully the Scripture passages for the lesson. (You'll see that each writer has chosen a favorite translation for the lessons in this issue. You're free to use the Bible translation you prefer and compare it with the translation chosen for that unit, of course.)
4. After reading all the Scripture passages in your Bible, then read the writer's comments. The comments are intended to be an aid to your study of the Bible.
5. Read the small articles—"sidebars"—in each lesson. They are intended to provide additional, enrichment information and inspiration and to encourage thought and application.
6. Try to answer for yourself the questions included in each lesson. They're intended to encourage further thought and application, and they can also be used in the class session itself.

If you're the teacher—

Do all the things just mentioned, of course. As you begin the study with your class, be sure to find a way to help your class know the date on which each lesson will be studied. Here are some suggestions to guide your lesson preparation:

- A. In the first session of the study, briefly overview the study by identifying for your class the date on which each lesson will be studied. Lead your class to write the date in the table of contents on pages 13–14 and on the first page of each lesson.
- Make and post a chart that indicates the date each lesson will be studied.
  - If all your class has e-mail, send them an e-mail with the dates the lessons will be studied.
  - Provide a bookmark with the lesson dates. You may want to include information about your church and then use the bookmark as an outreach tool, too. A model for a bookmark can be downloaded from [www.gc2press.org](http://www.gc2press.org) under the “Teacher Helps” menu.
  - Develop a sticker with the lesson dates and place it on the table of contents or on the back cover.
- B. Get a copy of the *Teaching Guide*, a companion piece to this *Study Guide*. The *Teaching Guide* contains additional Bible comments plus two teaching plans. The teaching plans in the *Teaching Guide* are intended to provide practical, easy-to-use teaching suggestions that will work in your class.

- C. After you've studied the Bible passage, the lesson comments, and other material, use the teaching suggestions in the *Teaching Guide* to help you develop your plan for leading your class in studying each lesson.
- D. Premium Commentary is now available for \$30 at [www.gc2press.org](http://www.gc2press.org). This in-depth commentary is a great resource for teachers.
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# Writer for this *Study Guide*

**Randel Everett wrote lessons one through fourteen.** Dr. Everett is Senior Fellow for Religious Freedom at Dallas Baptist University. He spent four decades as pastor of churches in Florida, Virginia, Arkansas, and Texas before starting 21Wilberforce in 2014.

He was the Founding President of Leland Seminary in Virginia and also served as Executive Director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

He received a BA from Ouachita Baptist University and an M.Div. and D.Min. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Everett also has an honorary Doctor of Divinity from the University of Richmond and Doctor of Humanities from Dallas Baptist University.

Randel and his wife, Sheila, live in Waco, Texas and have two adult children and four grandchildren.

# Introducing

## Kingdom Assignment *The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience*

A Study of Nehemiah

### **Background**

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Reading the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, one might understand them as one book, as in the Hebrew manuscripts, not two separate books. The practice of viewing them as individual books began after Origen in the third century AD. Many scholars believe Ezra and Nehemiah serve as a continuation of the Chronicles. The sequence of events is not always in historical order, as this was not the intent of the writers, but rather, on the things relevant to the purpose of the books.

According to the Talmud, Ezra is the author of these two books. However, the books themselves do not name their author. One may assume that someone living in post-exilic Judea wrote these books with the help of certain source documents between 410 and 370 BC. As to the historical setting, most of the dispersed Jews throughout the Near East continued to live in Babylon. After a couple of generations there, they felt comfortable with their living conditions. Some lived in Judea (*Yehud*). Some exiles had returned from Babylon, but many had never left their

original homes for exile. Still others lived in Egypt and Assyria. All but those in Egypt lived under the rule of the Persian Empire.

Ezra and Nehemiah open with the Temple in ruin and most of the Jewish people in exile due to their unfaithfulness to God. Ezra/Nehemiah is composed of four sections: Ezra 1–6 (Judeans returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple); Ezra 7–10 (Ezra came from Baylon to Jerusalem to ensure the people understood God’s Law and lived by it); Nehemiah 1–7 (Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall); and Nehemiah 8–13 (an account of the Judean community’s commitment to obey God’s Law and worship at the Temple).

Many biblical scholars continue to debate what to call the inhabitants of the land; in some places, the Bible refers to them as “returned exiles,” “Israel,” and “Jews.” However, “Judeans” might be a more accurate label.

Nehemiah 1 opens thirteen years after Ezra 10. Many of the inhabitants of Judea had not forsaken their pagan practices, including their marriages to foreign wives. The condition of the city walls and Jerusalem’s restoration were significant concerns.

—Dr. Michael Davis

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## Kingdom Assignment

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In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, seventy years after the prophecy of Jeremiah, he sent out a decree throughout the land allowing Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Zerubbabel led a group of 42,360, almost eight hundred miles back to Jerusalem for this task.

Decades later, Ezra, the priest, led a remnant back to Jerusalem to call for a reconciliation with God. Thirteen years later, Ne-



hemiah led a third team to rebuild the walls. Jerusalem was still desolate; the walls and the gates of the city remained as they were when the armies of Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city.

Nehemiah was an unlikely choice. He was cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, living in the Persian capitol of Susa. He had a prestigious place of influence serving the king. Why would he jeopardize the security of his position for a risky and dangerous task? Yet, Nehemiah never forgot Jerusalem, nor the God of Israel.

Nehemiah is a historical book including lessons on leadership and dependence on prayer. He was the one who relentlessly pursued the will of God. His unlikely journey included cupbearer, re-builder of walls, and finally governor of the people.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12)." In *Kingdom Assignment*, we are reminded that just as God had a plan for Nehemiah's life, He also has a plan for us. May our lives be devoted to *The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience*.

—Dr. Randel Everett

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## **Suggested Resources for the Study of Nehemiah**

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## NOTE

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<sup>1</sup> Listing a book does not imply full agreement by the writer or GC2 Press with all its comments.

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# Kingdom Assignment

## *The Relentless Pursuit of Obedience*

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# lesson 1



## Discovering Our Kingdom Assignment

### MAIN IDEA

God has a kingdom plan for all of us just as He did for Ezra and Nehemiah.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How was Nehemiah prepared to lead when God gave him the opportunity?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that God promised Judah He would restore them from captivity at the proper time and raised up Nehemiah to lead them to rebuild the wall. How do we discern God's plan for our lives?

### QUICK READ

God was leading His people to come out of one of the darkest moments in their history using Ezra and Nehemiah to lead them.

## INTRODUCTION

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In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, seventy years after the prophecy of Jeremiah, the king sent out a decree throughout the land allowing Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the Lord. In 536 BC, Zerubbabel led a group of 42,360, consisting of priests, Levites and others almost eight hundred miles back to Jerusalem for this task. However, the work was suspended because of opposition from enemies surrounding Jerusalem.

Decades afterward, in 457 BC, Ezra, the priest, led a remnant back to Jerusalem to restore the vessels of the Temple and call for a reconciliation with God. Thirteen years later, Nehemiah led a third group to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. Jerusalem was still desolate; the walls and the gates of the city remained as they were when the armies of Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city and led captives away to Babylon.

When the Hebrew people first entered the Promise Land, God instructed His people to pronounce blessings and curses on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. God promised to bless them when they obeyed and punish them when they didn't. The Hebrew people turned away from God and He did as He had promised. Israel was destroyed in 722, Judah was taken captive, and the Temple and walls of Jerusalem burned down in 586 BC. However, God promised after 70 years they would be restored. God kept His word and used Cyrus, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to fulfill His promise.

Nehemiah was an unlikely choice to lead a movement rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He was living in the Persian capital,



Susa, and cupbearer for King Artaxerxes. With a prestigious place of influence serving the king, why would he jeopardize the security of his position for a risky and dangerous task? Nehemiah obeyed because he never forgot about Jerusalem, nor the promises of the God of Israel.

## **Nehemiah 1:1–3, 11**

<sup>1</sup>The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, <sup>2</sup>that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”

<sup>11</sup>O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.”

Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

### **Nehemiah’s Character**

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Nehemiah earned the confidence of King Artaxerxes and became a trusted cupbearer. He was a man of prayer and one who never forgot God’s purposes for the city of Jerusalem. He knew God’s Word and had confidence in God’s promises as he prayed. God put a burden on Nehemiah’s heart, and he responded with obedience.

“The Book of Nehemiah perhaps more than any other book of the Old Testament reflects the vibrant personality of its author. G. Campbell Morgan comments, ‘The book thrills and throbs and pulsates with the tremendous force of this man’s will.’”<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah demonstrated a relentless pursuit to know and to follow God’s plan for his life.

Even as an exile living in a foreign land, Nehemiah remained rigorously faithful to the God of Israel and His laws and promises. Rather than isolating Nehemiah from the people of Persia, his strength of character brought him favor with the king. Like Joseph and Daniel, Nehemiah rose to a position of influence. Being the king’s cupbearer reflected his trustworthiness and unquestioned responsibility. Nehemiah was a man of prayer. Prayer continued to be a theme for his life throughout this book. When he learned of the condition of Jerusalem, he spent four months praying before he approached the king with his burden. The actual building of the wall took less than two months. Nehemiah spent twice the amount of time praying than he did actually rebuilding the walls.

Nehemiah was a man of vision. He must have believed with God’s blessing, anything is possible; if not, he would have never served in the king’s court. When confronted with the deplorable condition of Jerusalem, as he prayed, he began to imagine Jerusalem as a city restored to its earlier prominence.

## **Nehemiah’s Passion**

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Nehemiah introduced the problem immediately. “They said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who survived the captiv-

ity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.’ When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:3–4).

## **Cupbearer**

In the last sentence of verse 11, Nehemiah declares he is the cupbearer to the king. In the ancient Eastern court this position was more than one who tasted the king’s wine and food for his protection, it was a position of influence regarded as important and influential. At times it was mentioned as second only to the king. The cupbearer was constantly in the king’s presence and must have been someone the king trusted. Others also, seeking the king’s favor, might have tried to win the approval of the cupbearer as a means to gaining access to the king. The fact that Nehemiah was cupbearer indicates how many of the Jews had risen to prominent roles even while in captivity.

Nehemiah served well in the office God provided for him as cupbearer to the king; however, he never forgot his heritage. When his brother Hanani came from Jerusalem, Nehemiah wanted to know the condition of his homeland. His brothers and sisters were complacent and content while living in deplorable conditions. They had grown to accept the broken walls and burned gates without even making an effort to do something about it. This was a far cry from the days of David and Solomon when nations surrounding Israel feared the God of Israel. When

the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon she declared, “It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. Nevertheless, I did not believe the reports, until I came and my eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. You exceed in wisdom and prosperity the report which I heard” (1 Kings 10:6–7). Yet years later, at the time of Hanani’s visit, Jerusalem had become a mockery among the nations. Other nations neither respected nor feared their God.

Powerful neighbors intimidated them into believing there was nothing they could do about their situation. Yet eight hundred miles away, Nehemiah prayed for restoration.

“The effect of this news on Nehemiah is so overwhelming that it can only be described as a sudden realization that God was calling him to a radically new sphere of service, for which, all unknowing, his position and training had uniquely equipped him. Only thus can we explain the determined purpose which now overtakes him, the strong sense of identity with his people, evident in his prayer, and durability which he will later show in the face of stiff opposition. These are the marks of a true divine vocation.”<sup>2</sup>

God’s plan for Nehemiah’s life included shifts in opportunities and responsibilities. He rose from cupbearer to the king, living among the powerful yet still a slave in an apparent life of security; to becoming the builder of the wall in Jerusalem among reluctant and often defiant people who had grown accustomed to a life of squalor. God was just getting started with Nehemiah’s trajectory. A governorship was in the offing!

God’s plans for our lives are seldom static; never having room for contentment and complacency yet always challenging us to

step out into an arena of faith and adventure. From a broken heart over the news of life in a “broken Jerusalem,” Nehemiah heard God’s call to restoration, to rebuilding, to fulfillment of prophetic promises. Such vision came from Nehemiah’s life of prayer. When God calls, He enables.

## **Wall**

“There is a wall to be built around the city of your soul. There is a wall to be built, a testimony to be erected around your church. There is a wall of witness and testimony to be built around the whole Kingdom of God in all the world. Whether you be concerned primarily with building the wall in your own soul, or with building the wall of your church, or with building the wall of the Kingdom of God throughout the whole world, you will discover that there is no winning without warfare; there is no opportunity without opposition; there is no victory without vigilance. For whenever the people of God say, ‘Let us arise and build,’ Satan says, ‘Let me arise and oppose.’”<sup>3</sup>—Alan Redpath

Our kingdom assignment includes vocational doors God opens to us, but also involves our daily lives and relationships. Recently the newspaper where I live had a front-page story about a group of retired men from our Sunday school class who are involved in a ministry of repairing bicycles and distributing them to individuals in need, including international students from our local university and the poor. Working in a shop in the basement of our church, these men have served for years in a unique ministry because they saw an opportunity and responded to it.

God called Nehemiah to serve a pagan king and later to lead a complacent people in a bold and courageous task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. What is the burden God has placed on our heart? Perhaps He is calling us to be foster parents, schoolteachers, youth baseball coaches, or Sunday School teachers. The task may be a prominent leadership assignment or a humble behind-the-scenes task serving the marginalized. We must be ready to serve when God places a burden on our hearts.

## Implications and Actions

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Nehemiah is a historical book including lessons on leadership, responding to opposition and dependence on prayer. We also see the example of a person who relentlessly pursued the will of God. His unlikely journey included a position as cupbearer, rebuilders of walls, and finally governor of the people.

The apostle Paul wrote, “I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). In *Kingdom Assignment*, we are reminded that just as God had a plan for Nehemiah’s life, He also has a plan for us. May our lives be devoted to seeking the assignments God has already prepared for us.

## Questions

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1. What was Nehemiah’s burning issue? Why was it important to him?

2. What was Nehemiah willing to do about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What is your passion?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What burden has God placed on your heart?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Can you articulate your kingdom assignment for this time in your life?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 4, Ezra, Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 591.

<sup>2</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary, Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1985), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming Revell, a division of Baker Book, 1994), 18.

# lesson 2



## The Humble Prayer of a Leader

### MAIN IDEA

God's plans for us are dynamic, not static. Nehemiah constantly reinvented himself as God led him from being a cup-bearer to the king, then builder of the wall and finally, as governor of the land.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What does Nehemiah's prayer teach us about the kind of person God uses to lead His people?

### STUDY AIM

To understand how to follow Nehemiah's example in prayer including his God-given burden, adoration, petition for his people and perseverance

### QUICK READ

When Nehemiah heard about the condition of Jerusalem, his burden and deep sorrow led him to brokenness and prayer.



## **INTRODUCTION**

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As we study the life of Nehemiah, we are reminded of Daniel who was one of the young men taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Even though he may have believed his life and ambitions were over, God still had a plan for his life. Daniel rose to prominence and a place of leadership because of his integrity and wisdom. Daniel never forgot that his primary allegiance was to the God of Israel and set an example of one who stays in constant fellowship with God through prayer.

Years later, when Darius was king of the land, now in the hands of the Chaldeans, Daniel was reminded of the promise God made to Jeremiah that His people were going to be returned to their land after seventy years. Daniel turned to the Lord with fasting, sackcloth and ashes, and prayed, “Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Daniel 9:4). Daniel poured out his heart to the Lord, confessing the sins of God’s people and imploring Him. “O my God, incline your ear and hear! Open Your eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Your name; for we are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For our own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (Daniel 9:18–19).

When Nehemiah heard of the desolation of Jerusalem, he did just as Daniel had done. He was broken hearted, returned to God’s Word, mourned, fasted, and prayed for God’s intervention.

Nehemiah prayed persistently for four months before bringing the matter before the king. He actually prayed longer, four months, than the time it took them to rebuild the walls, less than two months. Throughout the book of Nehemiah we are reminded that he was a man of prayer, relentlessly pursuing the will of God for his life, the lives of his people, and especially for the glory of the Lord.

## **Nehemiah 1:4–11**

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, <sup>6</sup> let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. <sup>7</sup> We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup> Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; <sup>9</sup> but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' <sup>10</sup> They are

Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. <sup>11</sup> O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

## **An Attitude of Prayer**

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The book of Nehemiah opens and ends with prayer. One of the consistent characteristics of Nehemiah's life was a dependence upon prayer. Throughout Nehemiah, we find examples of the leader praying. When he learned about the condition of Jerusalem after his brother's report, he was deeply burdened. For months he fasted and prayed, and when he sought wisdom for approaching the king, he prayed to the God of heaven (1:4). Nehemiah prayed seeking approval from God and not man (5:19). His enemies threatened him, and he asked God to give him strength (6:9). Sanballat and Tobiah were persistent critics of Nehemiah and rather than capitulating to their threats, Nehemiah asked God to remember him (6:14). He let God fight his battles, yet he never flinched when God called him to stand up against opposition.

The people followed his prayerful example and assembled together with prayer and fasting. After reading from God's Word, they confessed their sins and repented; then God brought revival (chapter 9). God's Word to Solomon (2 Chronicles 7:14), was also true for the Hebrew captives and remains right for us today: "And My people who are called by My name humble themselves and

pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

The report from Hanani caused Nehemiah deep sorrow for the remnant in Jerusalem. He could have easily convinced himself that even though he was concerned, there was nothing he might do. He may have rationalized that this was someone else’s problem and even asked God to raise up another to intercede for them. Yet Nehemiah was a man of action. Perhaps he was tempted to burst into the presence of the king and demand relief for his people. Yet Nehemiah was also a man of prayer. He took his burden before the Lord with humility, prayer and fasting. He waited for months for the Lord to answer while continuing with persistence to intercede, allowing God to prepare his own heart as He also prepared the heart of the king. In the fulness of God’s time, Nehemiah responded to the questioning of the king about his apparent sadness.

**Alan Redpath wrote:**

“Let us learn this lesson from Nehemiah: you never lighten the load unless first you have felt the pressure in your own soul. You are never used of God to bring blessing until God has opened your eyes and made you see things as they are.”<sup>1</sup>

## **An Example of Prayer**

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“It was said of the late Charles Spurgeon that he glided from laughter to prayer with the naturalness of one who lived in both elements. With him, the habit of prayer was free and unfettered. His life was not divided into compartments, the one shut off from the other with a rigid exclusiveness that barred all intercommunication. He lived in constant fellowship with his Father in heaven. He was ever in touch with God, and thus it was as natural for him to pray as it was for him to breathe.”<sup>2</sup>

Nehemiah’s prayer switches between first person singular and plural speech. His prayer included praise, petitions, confession, God’s promises, and repentance for himself and for the people. All prayers do not necessarily contain each of these elements nor are these all the components included in prayer. A couple of pastors were debating the proper attitude, position, and disposition for authentic prayer. A bystander said, “Last year I fell in my neighbor’s well headfirst, with both my heels a-sticking’ up and my head a-pointing down. I made a prayer right then and there, the best prayer I ever said, the prayingest prayer I ever prayed, a-standing on my head.”<sup>3</sup> A genuine prayer may be an urgent cry, “God have mercy.” Others may pray for months as Nehemiah did, or years as a mother praying for a rebellious child. However there is much to learn from Nehemiah’s prayer in verses 1:4–11.

He began his prayer in verse 5 with **praise**. “I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments.” In Isaiah 6:1, Isaiah began by saying, “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with

the train of His robe filling the temple.” The seraphim cried out, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” (6:3). Jesus taught His followers to begin our prayer with an acknowledgement of God. “Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name” (Matthew 6:9). We must reflect on the presence of God, His goodness and righteousness, recognizing we are coming before the King of kings and Lord of lords.

I was in college when I was introduced to conversational prayer. At times we were asked to sit in a small group and imagine Jesus was one of us. Although these experiences opened my eyes to the accessibility of God, I was also convicted we must be careful to realize that God is not just another member of the conversation. He is the Lord. We must approach Him with humility, brokenness, and awe.

Once Nehemiah knew he was in the presence of God through praise, he offered up his **petition** asking God to hear his prayer on behalf of the distraught situation in Jerusalem.

As Isaiah fell down before the glory of the Lord, when Nehemiah recognized God’s holiness, he was moved to **confession** in verses 6–7, acknowledged he and his people were corrupt, having neglected the commandments, statutes, and ordinances.

In verse 8, Nehemiah was reminded of the **promise** of God and in the following verses he recognized God’s blessings are realized after His people have **repented**. Nehemiah concluded this part of his prayer, making a personal appeal to God to give him wisdom to know how to approach the king.

## **Nehemiah's Prayer**

Nehemiah's prayer is comprised of an expanded address (1:5; Daniel 9:4), an appeal for a hearing (1:6a, 1 Kings 8:28–29; 2 Chronicles 6:40; 7:15; Psalm 130:2; Isaiah 37:17), a confession (1:6b–7), and an appeal to God's covenant promises (1:8–9), followed by supplication for the people (1:10) and for Nehemiah's personal situation (1:11).<sup>4</sup>

## **Our Need for Prayer**

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The church in the West must acknowledge our need for God's intervention. Paul's description of the last days in 2 Timothy 3, is a reflection not only of the world today but too often a picture of the church. "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these" (2 Timothy 3:2–5).

The wall of the garden has broken down and the wilderness has encroached. God looks for leaders like Nehemiah, who will be burdened by the desolation of the people, cry and pray faithfully before the Lord, and intercede for God's church.

## Implications and Actions

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Nehemiah's passion was to know and do God's will. Central to his life of obedience was a faithful and disciplined life of prayer. His constant communion with God brought a burden for holiness, a reminder of God's promises, a boldness for intercession and a willingness to say "Yes" to God's plans for his life.

Saint Augustine observed, "We are but travelers on a journey without as yet a fixed abode; we are on our way, not yet in our native land; we are in a state of longing, not yet of enjoyment. But let us continue on our way, and continue without sloth or respite, so that we may ultimately arrive at our destination."<sup>5</sup>

## Questions

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1. Why did it take so long for God to answer Nehemiah's prayer?
2. What was the situation in Jerusalem that broke Nehemiah's heart?



3. What gave Nehemiah the courage to be bold and persistent in prayer?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. When have you prayed persistently for God's intervention?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What do we learn from Nehemiah's prayer that encourages us to continue interceding while waiting for God's response?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, a division of Baker Book, 1994), 19.

<sup>2</sup> E. M. Bounds, *E. M. Bounds on Prayer* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1920), 26.

<sup>3</sup> K. Randel Everett, *Through the Bible* (Pensacola, FL: Ardara House, 1995), 139, modified from the "Prayer of Cyrus Brown" by Sam Walter Foss).

<sup>4</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 167.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Denison, quote from *Denison Forum*, July 29, 2024.

# lesson 3

## Arise and Build!

### MAIN IDEA

When God called Nehemiah to rebuild the wall, He also provided resources to accomplish this task. Nehemiah developed a plan and called on the people to stand with him and rebuild the wall.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What do we learn from the leadership of Nehemiah as he confronted the king and his adversaries while he investigated the need and challenged the people?

### STUDY AIM

To understand how we can respond obediently to the burden God has placed on our hearts

### QUICK READ

Nehemiah was prepared when he stood before the king, addressed his critics, investigated the problem, and challenged the people.

## **Introduction**

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Our kingdom assignment comes from a burden that God places on our hearts. When Nehemiah was confronted with the desolation of the city of Jerusalem, He may have not known initially that God's plan for the city of his fathers included a risky sacrifice for himself. Yet God put Nehemiah in a trusted place of leadership with the king for such a time as this. In each role, cupbearer and leader of rebuilding the walls, Nehemiah provides an example for us as we seek to follow God's kingdom plan for our lives. He may be calling us at this stage in our life to be a diligent student, a godly parent, a nurse, teacher, or a caregiver for a disabled person. Some like Nehemiah have public roles. Other assignments may be known only by God and the person to whom you are ministering. Our desire must always be to "press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12).

## **Nehemiah 2:11–20**

<sup>11</sup> So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. <sup>12</sup> And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. <sup>13</sup> So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. <sup>14</sup> Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. <sup>15</sup> So I went up at night by

the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. <sup>16</sup> The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.

<sup>17</sup> Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate, and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." <sup>18</sup> I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work. <sup>19</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" <sup>20</sup> So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

## **Investigation (2:1–10)**

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Alan Redpath wrote, "I want you to observe that there are three essentials to Christian service that are clearly defined in these verses: investigation, cooperation and determination."<sup>1</sup> When Nehemiah heard of the condition of Jerusalem, he went directly to God. Instead of confiding in a group of friends or building a coalition of powerful influencers who may join with him before the king, he sought God. What was God's plan for His people? Was this the time and was he the person to stand before the king?

As Nehemiah prayed, he saw all of the obstacles and challenges he faced in such an endeavor as this. Kings protected themselves from the burdens of others. Just being sad in the presence of King Artaxerxes could cost Nehemiah his position or even his life. If the king did agree, where were the resources such as letters for the governors of the provinces or timber for the gates? How would Nehemiah awaken contented people to “arise and build?”

Nehemiah wanted to know the brutal truth about the challenge. He studied the promises of God and came face to face with his own sins and the transgressions of the people. When the time was right for Nehemiah to go public, God opened the door. The king recognized his sorrow and asked about his sadness. Nehemiah was not only ready to answer; he was also ready to share his plan. He received the king’s favor, and Artaxerxes provided the resources necessary, including letters to the governors instructing them to allow the rebuilding of the wall, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, requesting timber to make beams for the gates.

Nehemiah moved with confidence throughout this situation. First this is seen in his assurance to wait on the Lord’s answer through prayer. Next while he prayed and waited, he planned out exactly what was needed and was prepared to share the kind of resources required and a timetable to accomplish the task. He accepted the king’s provisions as well as his offer for protection because Nehemiah had the assurance that this was God’s plan.

## Cooperation (2:11–18)

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Upon arriving in Jerusalem, much investigation was still needed before Nehemiah confronted the people. Without disclosing his plan, Nehemiah took a few men with him and went at night to inspect the walls. He passed through the city, gate by gate, some places piled with such rubble that he had to get off his horse and walk. The situation was just as his brother Hanani described. Nehemiah saw for himself, the appalling condition of Jerusalem.

### **Tour of Inspection**

"Nehemiah took a tour of inspection on horseback at nighttime; he went around the city going out the valley gate, taking a tour around the walls and returning at the same entrance. In places so great was the ruin and devastation that he had to dismount from his horse and stumble over the wreckage himself. But in the course of that night, while others slept, Nehemiah—wide-awake, burdened, conscious of desperate need and shame and ruin all around him—diagnosed the situation, surveyed the ruined walls, and contemplated the magnitude of the task to which God had called him."<sup>2</sup>

The inhabitants of the city obviously had grown complacent living in those shameful conditions. Their hearts had become hardened to the fact that Jerusalem was a disgrace not only to themselves but also a testimony against the glory of God. The city needed a bold strategic leader who would arouse them out of complacency and show them the way.

Nehemiah called together the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest and said, “You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach” (2:17). Actually Nehemiah was not part of the problem. He was living in Susa and not even aware of the conditions of the city until he was told by his brother. He was justified in blaming the people for their failure to respond. Yet, like any good leader, he used the plural pronouns, “we” and “us,” instead of “you.” Throughout the book of Nehemiah, he led by identification and example as one who was the first to step up, to make the commitment and do the work. A task this daunting required the cooperation of all the people.

Nehemiah told how God had been favorable to him and also how he had the support of the king. The people responded, “let us arise and build,” and they put their hands to the good work.

### **Determination (2:19–20)**

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Just as Nehemiah anticipated, he was met by opposition. Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official and later Geshem the Arab resisted when they heard the plan. Whenever injustice is called out, typically the benefactors of the injustice will fight against any kind of reform. Yet Nehemiah was unafraid because he was doing God’s business. He was reinforced with the letters from the king and the horsemen and the officers of the army.

## **Adversaries**

Sanballat appeared to be the primary adversary against Nehemiah. His name is Babylonian meaning, "Sin (the moon god), gives life." Even though Nehemiah never referred to him as governor, some research indicates he was governor of Samaria. Tobiah the Ammonite may have been governor of Ammon. Others view him as a junior colleague of Sanballat. His name means "Yahweh is good." "He may have been a Judaizing Ammonite, but more probably he was a Yahwist Jew as indicated by the name of his son, Jehohanan (Nehemiah 6:18). Some scholars speculate that Tobiah descended from an aristocratic family that owned estates in Gilead and was influential in Transjordan and in Jerusalem even as early as the eight century BC."<sup>3</sup> In verse 19, Geshem the Arab joins as a critic of Nehemiah. "Biblical and extrabiblical documents indicate that Arabs became dominant in the Transjordan area from the Assyrian to the Persian periods. Classical sources reveal that the Arabs enjoyed a favored status under the Persians." "Geshem may have been opposed to Nehemiah's development of an independent kingdom because he feared it might interfere with his lucrative trade in myrrh and frankincense."<sup>4</sup>

We may be tempted to jump into action when we are confronted by an injustice. In this day of social media, we are enticed to quickly speak out against a situation that may or may not be true. AI and false narratives fill our inboxes each day with controversies designed to create angry responses. Algorithms are calculated by marketers to prey on our interests and previous responses.



Perhaps the goal is to sell a product or an idea, produce a political response or even to get an angry, sexist or malicious reaction. Our egocentric desire may be to bring about change or something as vain as reaching a certain number of viewers.

The moral outrage of the church is too often against the sins of others rather than an acknowledgment of our own. Nehemiah offers an example that we must first take our burden to God with prayer, fasting, waiting, acknowledging the holiness of God, and the sins of our own life and of the church. Discover God's truth and promises to relate to the situation causing concern, and then begin planning an effective way to "do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8).

Occasionally, we must respond quickly, as the Hebrew men Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did when they were challenged by the king to bow down and worship the image (Daniel 3). Yet they had already settled the matter that they would worship no one other than the Lord. However, other situations call us to labor in prayer, verify the circumstances, be ready with a plan God puts on our heart, and wait on His timing.

Nehemiah's example "is a model of the balance that needs to be maintained between the total sovereignty of God, with prayer and its proper response, and human responsibility with its counterpoint in wise and thoughtful activity. In the practicalities of the situation, Nehemiah appears unaware of any clash between these two, for he needed to know the truth of both if he was to make any substantial progress."<sup>5</sup>

## Implications and Actions

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Thousands of children in Northern Nigeria have been kidnapped by barbaric, radical religious groups who abuse them, hold them for ransom, sell them into slavery or offer them as wives to fellow kidnappers.

Afghans are being tortured and killed in their own country, or the fortunate few who do escape with little more than the clothes on their backs are forced to begin new lives often while leaving loved ones at home.

Inner-city children in the United States live in crowded dangerous communities where their lives are constantly threatened, while others are forced to live alone on the streets.

Is there any injustice that keeps you awake at night? Nehemiah's burden led him to prayer, fasting, and a willingness to risk his own life.

We can't answer every cry, yet the story of Nehemiah is a reminder that when God puts a burden on our lives, He invites us to participate in a plan to bless others.

## Questions

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1. What leadership traits do you find in this part of Nehemiah's journey that offer guidance for our leadership roles?

2. What gave Nehemiah the boldness to tackle this task?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What gave Nehemiah the courage to stand up to his enemies?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Can you identify an injustice that God has placed on your heart?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Are you willing to join the ministries of your church, or other Christian ministries who are working on this issue?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, a division of Baker Book, 1994), 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 4 Ezra, Nehemiah*, Frank Gaebelin, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House), 687.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 691.

<sup>5</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary, Ezra and Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1985), 184.

# lesson 4

# Mobilizing the People

## MAIN IDEA

Nehemiah couldn't rebuild the wall by himself. He called the entire population to join in the task.

## QUESTION TO EXPLORE

As you explore your own kingdom assignment, who are others who may share your same burden?

## STUDY AIM

To understand that God's purposes are accomplished when His people work together toward a common goal

## QUICK READ

No one was exempt from the work: high priest, goldsmiths, perfumers, officials, priests, and merchants. They also built sections near their own homes where they had a personal interest in seeing the wall must be secure.

## Introduction

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After months of prayer, visualizing a plan, consultation with the king, gathering materials, leading a caravan, assessing the condition of the city, confronting the inhabitants, Nehemiah was ready to put the people to work. “Nehemiah didn’t promise material incentives when he addressed the Jerusalem officials. He didn’t offer prizes to the fastest-working families or a week at the Dead Sea for the group doing the most attractive work. Nehemiah simply said, ‘See the ruins? We’re in a terrible strait. Let’s rebuild this wall.’ And the people said, ‘Let’s do it.’”<sup>1</sup>

### Nehemiah 3:1–5

<sup>1</sup> Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel. <sup>2</sup> Next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.

<sup>3</sup> Now the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars. <sup>4</sup> Next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah the son of Hakkoz made repairs. And next to him Meshullam the son of Berechiah the son of Meshezabel made repairs. And next to him Zadok the son of Baana *also* made repairs. <sup>5</sup> Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters.

## **Face Up to the Problem**

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Years earlier, after Solomon completed the building of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, God made a promise. “I have heard your prayer and your supplication, which you have made before Me, I have consecrated this house which you have built by putting My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually” (1 Kings 9:3). Yet God continued by saying, “But if you or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples (1 Kings 9:6–7).” Tragically, Solomon married women who brought pagan gods with them to Israel and in spite of God’s warning, some of the people began serving false gods.

True to God’s Word, the nation was ultimately destroyed and became a byword among the people. Nehemiah made a courageous decision to ask a favor of the king. Earlier Zerubbabel led the people to rebuild the Temple. Yet when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard the exiles were building a Temple to the Lord God of Israel, they warned King Artaxerxes to stop this work. In Ezra 4:21, Artaxerxes commanded the work in Jerusalem to stop. Yet even though the work on the Temple would begin again and finally be completed, Nehemiah knew the risk he took asking permission from the king to send him to rebuild the walls. He knew the king was already concerned about the loyalty of Jerusalem

when Artaxerxes made his first decision in Ezra 4 and would not take his previous position lightly.

Nehemiah's task was not an easy one. The situation was dire. His position before the king and even his life was at stake. Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem was overwhelming. Awakenings a complacent people was challenging. Yet Nehemiah did not make light of the situation. He was not the kind of leader that tried to please the people or pretend problems didn't exist. He faced up to the problem and challenged the people.

Yet one hundred and forty years after Babylon carried many of the people into captivity and destroyed Jerusalem, Nehemiah stood in the rubble of what had once been the mighty Jerusalem, among the remnant of the people and proclaimed, "It's time to rebuild!"

North America has many of the traits of the people of Jerusalem. We live in a nihilistic culture where more and more are rejecting any form of religion and moral principles; opting to define truth as it appears to each individual. Every statistic indicates youth are more depressed than before and too many are trying to get away from their pain with addictive drugs, alcohol, and even suicide. The increase in social media and artificial intelligence exacerbates loneliness and isolation. Anger and hostility are expressed online and in person. The gap between those who have wealth and those living in a cycle of poverty is growing. Malaise and indifference permeate the culture.

So where is the church? Some are vibrant and being used of God for transformational change. Yet too often the church reflects the culture rather than offering a redemptive alternative. The prophet Micah said, "And what does the Lord require of you



but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Like the people of Jerusalem, we live among the rubble with complacency. Rather than a call to holiness, we too define truth as relative. Why will the lost world look to the church for answers when too often the church looks like the world?

The prophet Micah spoke truth to power. “Now hear this, heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and twist everything that is straight, who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with violent injustice. Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, her priests instruct for a price and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the LORD saying, ‘Is not the LORD in our midst? Calamity will not come on us.’ Therefore on account of you Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the temple *will become* high places of a forest” (Micah 3:9–12).

If the world will take the message of the church seriously, we must repent of our own sins first. As God’s church, we must take the log out of our own eye so we can see clearly enough to offer mercy to others. The time is growing short. Contemporary leaders must follow the example of Micah and Nehemiah confront the problems, wake up the church and say, “Arise and build!”

## Form a Plan

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Chapter 3 of Nehemiah interrupts the dynamic drama of the story with a long list of wall-builders. The chapter sits between the commitment to build in (2:18), and the building of the wall in chapter 4.

When the people said, “Let us arise and build,” Nehemiah was ready to present a plan. His goal was simple, rebuild the gates and the wall. He had permission from the king, provisions from Asaph, the keeper of the king’s garden, and accurate research of the problem. He divided the work among forty plus groups. Some of the gates such as the Valley Gate, Refuse Gate, and Fountain Gate were more damaged than others and required more workers. Nehemiah’s plan moved in full circle counterclockwise beginning and ending with the Sheep Gate (3:1, 32).

The first person mentioned was the high priest with his brothers the priests. No one was exempt from the work: including the high priest (3:1), goldsmiths (3:8, 31), perfumers (3:8), officials (3:9–21), priests (3:22–23), and merchants (3:31–32). They also built sections near where they lived. This is obviously a strategic plan. Of course, they desired the walls to be most secure near their own houses.

## **There Was a Plan**

“Nehemiah himself must have drawn up such a list as this when planning the operation, and on completion of the work may well have made a fair copy by way of record... Whatever the precise literary origin of the list, all recognize that it is our most valuable source for the topography of ancient Jerusalem. In this chapter the rebuilding of the north and west walls is represented as largely a repair of walls and gates still recognizable (vv. 1–14), while on the eastern side the gangs worked not from gate to gate but from landmark to landmark or from house to house.”<sup>2</sup>

## Find Your Place

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The rebuilding of the wall required more than rhetoric of a charismatic leader and enthusiasm of the crowd. A team effort was needed with everyone, regardless of class, privilege, or title, taking his or her place among the ruins of the city, faithfully completing the task assigned to them until the job was completed.

“The very length and detail of the list demonstrates the evident willingness unselfishly to cooperate which each individual and group displayed. Without a determination to submit personal pride and ambition to the larger task, the work could never have been accomplished so swiftly and successfully.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Fearfully and Wonderfully Made**

In the book by Philip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brand, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, they describe the miracle of the human body. Over one hundred million cells have developed from one fertilized ovum. The eye alone consists of one hundred and seven million cells. One gram, about the weight of a paper clip, of DNA contains 215 million gigabytes of data, one million times more than the information stored on the hard drive of an average computer. One thousand books, averaging six hundred pages each, would be required to store the information in our DNA.<sup>4</sup> The Psalmist cries out, “I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well” (Psalm 139:14).

In 1 Corinthians 12:12, the Apostle Paul compares the church to the human body. What an apt comparison. Our bodies are composed of many parts. How absurd to think the parts of the body begin to compete with each other for prominence. Paul continues, “For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. And if the ear says, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body just as he desired” (1 Corinthians 12:14–18).

The work of rebuilding the walls required the whole community rather than a few select leaders. Likewise, God’s plan for the church is not accomplished by a few individuals cheered on by others as they try to fulfill the Great Commission. Each of us is given unique spiritual gifts, life experiences, personalities, talents, and opportunities for the benefit of the Body. Our individuality is set aside as we stand shoulder to shoulder with others seeking to fulfill a common task, as the people of Jerusalem did in rebuilding the walls. Yet at other times our tasks and calling may be unique, contributing to the whole proper working of the church.

## **Implications and Actions**

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I have seen Texans on Mission, formerly Texas Baptist Men, respond to calamities not only throughout the State of Texas but

also worldwide. Teams of trained workers show up quickly to disaster locations offering compassion, care, and practical assistance. Some set up food tents feeding as many as thousands of folks affected by a storm or calamity. Others come with chain saws, or medical personnel and supplies, even large trucks providing private showers or laundry facilities. Even carpenters are trained to help rebuild churches or houses affected by the calamity.

Their work could not happen without thousands of volunteers, prayer partners, financial support from Texas Baptists, individuals and churches. They provide a visible reminder of how the church looks when individuals come together sharing the love of Christ in situations of need.

May leaders unite, calling the Church from nations around the world, consisting of thousands of tribes and tongues, each with unique gifts and assignments to arise and build!

## **QUESTIONS**

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1. What leadership characteristics did Nehemiah demonstrate that led to the success of the task?
2. What strategy did Nehemiah use that brought about quick and efficient success?

3. What are the unique gifts and opportunities God has given you for kingdom service?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What contemporary task are you participating in that contributes to God's work in your community?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What are global needs that are being addressed by you and your church?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 58.

<sup>2</sup> D. J. Clines, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Basingstoke, Hants, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 149.

<sup>3</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1985), 213.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1980), information gathered randomly throughout the book.

# lesson 5

## Overcoming the Enemy

### MAIN IDEA

All leaders face opposition when they challenge the status quo.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What do we learn from Nehemiah about responding to criticism?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that Nehemiah's response to opposition provides a model for leaders when they deal with criticism

### QUICK READ

Nehemiah was not dissuaded when he faced furious opposition.

## Introduction

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No leader is exempt from criticism. “At times courageous leadership may necessitate standing up to the bully who reminds the leader that we have always done it this way before; or it may be a life and death decision like Martin Luther who stood before Emperor Charles V to defend what he had taught and written and was reported to have responded, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me. Amen.’”<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who wishes to make a kingdom impact, whether it is as a godly parent at home, sharing Christ verbally at work, taking a Christian stand in the community or blazing new trails as a missionary, he or she will face opposition. Leaders become acquainted with criticism and discouragement.

Charles Swindoll wrote, “Anyone who steps in the arena of leadership must be prepared to pay a price. True leadership exacts a heavy toll on the whole person—and the more effective the leadership, the higher the price. The leader must soon face the fact that he will be the target of critical darts. Unpleasant though it may sound, you haven’t really led until you have become familiar with the stinging barbs of the critics. Good leaders must have thick skin.”<sup>2</sup>

Nehemiah’s humility is seen in the way he handled opposition.

## Nehemiah 4:1–8

<sup>1</sup> Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry



and mocked the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?” <sup>3</sup>Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, “Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on *it*, he would break their stone wall down!”

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity.<sup>5</sup> Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

<sup>6</sup>So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work.

<sup>7</sup>Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, *and* that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. <sup>8</sup>All of them conspired together to come *and* fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

### **War of Words (4:1–3)**

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While the people of Jerusalem were living with contentment, their enemies left them alone. However as soon as Nehemiah stirred them up and challenged them to build the walls and restore the glory to the city, the enemy struck.

Sanballat and Tobiah were not just a couple of negative individuals who were thorns in the side of Nehemiah, they were for-

midable enemies who were fighting for their own authority now threatened by the possibility of a revitalized Jerusalem.

Opposition often begins with a war of words. Sanballat was furious and began mocking the Jews. He spoke to the wealthy men of Samaria attempting to secure their support because their shortened wealth and positions of influence were also in the balance. When the status quo is threatened, often the first to oppose are those who feel their positions are threatened. The fact that Sanballat attempted to undermine the rebuilding of the wall was in itself an act of fear that Nehemiah might succeed. Tobiah appeared to always stand with Sanballat joining in the ridicule. He said, “Even what they are building, if a fox should jump on *it*, he would break their stone wall down!” (4:3).

### **Imprecatory Prayer (4:4–5)**

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Nehemiah did not respond to the threats of Sanballat and Tobiah by joining in their war of words, heaping ridicule on them. Instead, he delivered them over to the Lord. His prayer is harsh asking God not to forgive them but to deliver them into captivity.

This is not the only imprecatory prayer in the Bible. A sample of others is found in Psalm 79:12, Psalm 109:6–20, and Jeremiah 18:21ff. Jeremiah prayed, “Therefore, give their children over to famine and deliver them up to the power of the sword; and let their wives become childless and widowed. Let their men also be smitten to death, their young men struck down by the sword in battle” (Jeremiah 18:21).

Nehemiah was justified in delivering the enemies over to God; because they were attempting to stop what God had already af-

firmed as His will for the Jews. Yet praying for the destruction of our enemies is tricky. We become so easily deceived thinking that our will is the will of God. When we declare, “God told me!” I trust our reference is to Scripture. Hopefully our primary model for praying for our enemies will be patterned after the prayer of Stephen who even while his enemies were stoning him to death, prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60).

### **Conspiracy of the Enemy (4:6–8)**

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The people had said, “Let us arise and build,” and they did. They had a mind to work; and the entire wall was completed to half its height. Even while contending with the threats of their enemy, the walls were being rebuilt and the breaches were being closed. Their enemies intensified their efforts to stop the work and threatened to fight against Jerusalem and start a distracting disturbance among them. The city was surrounded by adversaries: Sanballat and the Samaritans of the north, Geshem and the Arabs to the south, the Ammonites to the east, and the Ashdodites to the west.

### **Faith and Vigilance (4:10–14)**

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Faced with enemies from all sides they prayed to the Lord and set up a guard day and night. Faith and action work together. They trusted in God but kept their swords in a ready position. There is a story about the great preacher D. L. Moody who was on a journey crossing the Atlantic when a fire broke out on the ship. He

was in the bucket line with the others passing the buckets filled with water to pour on the fire. A fellow passenger saw the great preacher and urged him to go to the other side of the ship and pray. Moody said, “I am praying. Pass me the bucket.”

Nehemiah consistently prayed. Each time he was confronted by a problem, he first took the situation to God. Yet he also knew the work had to be done by the people.

Soon discouragement began to be expressed among the Jews. Their strength was failing; they were distracted by the rubble; they heard the threats of the enemy; they said, “We ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.” The mid-way point is often the most difficult time. The excitement of the vision has faded, and attention becomes focused on the rubbish, the undoable task still lying ahead. Nehemiah faced what may have been his greatest challenge: discouragement from within. Outside opposition is expected, but when God’s people begin to complain and rebel, their discouragement is contagious.

As I write this lesson, college students are beginning to start school. I remember how this was such an exciting time. Anything is possible. The sky is the limit. New friendships are being forged. Professors are welcoming and new possibilities are endless. Yet halfway through the first semester students are tempted to think, “Why in the world am I taking college calculus? I’ll never need it! And of all the students on this campus why did I get stuck with this roommate!” Homesickness may sneak in, debts pile up, and lessons are due. Others face even more daunting tasks including cancer patients faced with another round of chemo, military serving in dangerous places, Christians in prison for their beliefs, homeless, jobless, and the lonely. We cry out with the Jews of

Jerusalem, “There is too much rubbish, and the enemy surrounds us. We cannot do it.”

Those living in areas near the enemies came to Nehemiah with fear and complaints ten times (Nehemiah 4:12). Sanballat’s plan of causing a disturbance among the people appeared to be working. Courageous leadership was needed urgently, and Nehemiah didn’t disappoint. His faith did not waver, and he responded with a plan. “We will fortify the low places and have families with their swords, spears, and bows.”

When Nehemiah saw their fear, he “rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, ‘Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses’” (4:14).

### **Hebrews 12:1–3**

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.”

Consider the words of Theodore Roosevelt: “It is not the critic who counts; nor the man who points out how the strong man

stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails at least fails while daring greatly.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Diligence of the People (4:15–23)**

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The plans of the enemy were frustrated. Half of the people carried out the work and the others held the spears, shields, bows, and breastplates. Nehemiah continued to lead by example. “So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each *took* his weapon *even to the water*” (4:23).

“The late Dr. Alan Redpath explained why the Jews succeeded in getting their work done and keeping the enemy at bay: The people had a mind to work (v. 6), a heart to pray (v. 9), an eye to watch (v. 9), and an ear to hear (v. 20) and this gave them the victory.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Implications and Actions**

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When we are confronted by opposition, discouragement, or life crises, we must remember the words of the apostle Paul:

We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated. We are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone. We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out” (paraphrase, 2 Corinthians 4:8–9).

### **Seven Lessons for Dealing With Opposition**

1. Expect opposition to any great endeavor
2. Be discerning when faced with criticism
3. Critics run with critics
4. Opposition comes from outside and inside
5. The mid-way point is one of the most difficult times
6. Discouragement comes when we take our eyes off the Lord
7. Respond to opposition with faith and vigilance

### **Questions**

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1. What tactics did Sanballat and Tobiah use to discourage the people of Jerusalem?
2. What leadership characteristics are seen in Nehemiah as he sought to lead the people while facing opposition?

3. What kind of opposition do Christians face today in the United States?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Where are some of the countries of concern where religious persecution is most fierce?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. When have you faced opposition? How did you respond?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> K. Randel Everett, *Speak Freedom: Developing Emergent Leaders in the Struggle for Justice* (Dallas, Texas: BaptistWay Press, 2021), 128.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 76. Quoted from Theodore Roosevelt, “The Man in the Arena (Citizenship in a Republic), in Theodore Roosevelt: *Letters and Speeches* (New York, NY: Library of America, 2004), 781–782.

<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1992), 68. Quoting from Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service*, Revell, 1958: 76–79).



# lesson 6

## Confronting Injustice

### MAIN IDEA

When Nehemiah was made aware of injustice among the people, he was furious toward the perpetrators.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What contemporary injustice makes us angry?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that leaders must not ignore injustice but should defend the victims

### QUICK READ

Nehemiah confronted the extortion of some of the Jewish leaders and demanded restoration be made.

## Introduction

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God had a plan for Nehemiah. Being the cupbearer to the king was no accident. God opened that door of opportunity for him so he would earn the trust of the king and be in a position to intercede with the king concerning the condition of Jerusalem. The king granted Nehemiah's request leading him into a totally different role as builder of the wall. Nehemiah developed a plan, led a convoy, gathered materials, and faithfully led the people to accomplish an almost impossible task of restoring the walls of Jerusalem that had been in ruins for a century and a half. In chapter 5, Nehemiah is referred to as governor, a position requiring new responsibilities.

Nehemiah served King Artaxerxes but never forgot his greatest loyalty was to God. In the gospel of John, we read about the conversation between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate asked Jesus if He was King of the Jews. Jesus responded that His kingdom was not of this world. Pilate answered, "So you are a king." Jesus said, "You have answered correctly that I am a king. For this reason I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth" (Excerpts from John 18:33–37, paraphrased). Later Pilate returned and asked Jesus, "Do you not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin" (John 19:10–11).

There are two kinds of authority, earthly and heavenly. The exchange between Jesus and Pilate reminds us that earthly authority is granted from above. God allows nations to rise and to fall.

Nehemiah knew of God's sovereignty over the nations and His covenant faithfulness with Israel. He waited for God to move in the heart of the king and then confronted him with his request. Later Nehemiah stood without fear before the hostile neighbors surrounding Jerusalem because he never forgot his greatest loyalty. The seduction of political power is formidable. He could have embraced his position before the king and refused to do anything to threaten it. He might have been tempted to appease Sanballat and his friends or overlook the injustice of the nobles and rulers; yet Nehemiah knew his primary allegiance was to God and his task was to speak truth to power.

## Nehemiah 5:6–13

<sup>6</sup>Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup>I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. <sup>8</sup>I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say. <sup>9</sup>Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" <sup>10</sup>And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. <sup>11</sup>Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine and

the oil that you are exacting from them.”<sup>12</sup> Then they said, “We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.” So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.<sup>13</sup> I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!” And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.

## **Nehemiah Listened to the Cry of the People**

Too often the oppressed who gain power become the oppressors. In chapter 5 the troubles of the people are not brought on by foreign enemies but by their own rulers and nobles. Famine and overpopulation brought widespread hunger. In addition they were forced to pay high taxes on their fields and vineyards. These conditions caused them to mortgage their property and even were forced to sell their children into slavery.

Greedy officials oppressing the poor is not unique to one period of time or one culture. Millions of families are displaced and scattered throughout the world today because of famine, war, and ideology (especially religious beliefs). The gap between the rich and the poor is ubiquitous. Even churches too often favor the wealthy and powerful rather than the impoverished. However, many churches do support assistance to the needy and some political leaders are advocates for the neglected. While some wealthy people create personal empires for self-indulgence, oth-

ers produce meaningful jobs and foundations providing food, health care, scholarships, and shelter.

The people of Jerusalem were desperate. Their dire situation was literally a matter of life and death. They needed an advocate and Nehemiah stepped up.

## **Internal Dissension**

"But here we find Nehemiah resisting something that was not really an attack at all, and this was one of the most difficult problems he had to face in all his work, for this was the thing that nearly wrecked the whole project. It was internal dissension among the people; this had nothing to do with external enemies."<sup>1</sup>

## **Nehemiah Was Angry at the Injustice**

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Nehemiah was furious when he heard the outcry of the people. God did not allow Nehemiah to hold the position of governor for his own recognition and fulfillment but to be an advocate on behalf of the people he governed. He stood in the tradition of prophets who called out against injustice. The prophet Amos cried out, "Thus says the LORD, 'For three transgressions of Judah and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because they rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept His statutes; their lies also have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked'" (Amos 2:4). God was especially angry at the shepherds (religious leaders) who fed themselves while not feeding the flock. "As I live,' declares the Lord God, 'surely because My flock has become

a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but *rather* the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock” (Ezekiel 34:8). Jesus rebuked the religious leaders, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23).

Having worked in and around Washington, D.C. for a number of years it was striking to see how some members of Congress surround themselves only with those who affirm and protect them. Lobbyists and donors flood their calendars fighting for their personal interest to be on the agenda of the congressman. N. T. Wright wrote, “There are lobbyists who buy politicians like someone collecting antique spoons.”<sup>2</sup> The same is true for leaders in the Administration, State Department, and other institutions of significance. Why should we be surprised there is growing frustration with the system? Yet is this not also true for corporations, companies, and nonprofits? Not even pastors are exempt from the temptation to build systems bringing leaders around them who only share their vision. Even many faith leaders want to be treated like celebrities and desire to be surrounded by “Yes men!”

Where are those with the courage of the prophet Nathan who stood before King David and said, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7)?

Yet Nehemiah was outraged at this injustice. He was able to see the corruption of nations around them also taking root

among God's covenant nation. **The city wall had been repaired but the wall of justice and righteousness was in trouble.**

Our nation spends billions of dollars on military defense protecting us from outward destruction. Perhaps even more important is the need to have watchmen on the wall, such as religious leaders, politicians, professors, social influencers, and others who sound the alarm about oppressive injustice domestically.

## **Nehemiah Confronted the Leaders**

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Nehemiah didn't rush to action. First, he consulted with himself. He paused and thought through the situation and the consequences before pronouncing a correction. Afterward, he contended with the nobles and rulers and called out their sins. "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" (5:7). He then called a great assembly against these leaders. The leaders responded with silence. He continued, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" (5:9). The governor then proposed a plan for reconciliation.

Nehemiah served not as an attempt for personal wealth and recognition, nor did he seek to create a legacy to be remembered. His desire was to receive the approval from the One who trusted him with this kingdom assignment. "Remember me, O my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people" (5:19).

## **Nehemiah Led by Example**

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Nehemiah was not only an example to the people of Jerusalem but also provides guidelines for all leaders to follow.

### **A Guide for Leaders**

- Leaders are not to be isolated from the people they lead.
- Leaders must hate injustice.
- Leaders uphold a standard of excellence.
- Leaders keep their position in perspective.

## **Implications and Actions**

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None of Nehemiah's actions indicate that he was impressed by being cupbearer of the king, leader of the exiles, successful trail blazer rebuilding the walls in record time, or even by serving as governor of the people. He had every right to utilize the food allowance, the bread and the wine, and the forty shekels of silver. He may have used his success and position to acquire land for himself. Yet he did not do so because of his fear of God (5:15).

Jesus didn't allow Peter to distract Him at Caesarea Philippi, the Jewish leaders to intimidate Him, or the powerful Romans to frighten Him. When the crowds wished to kill Him or to declare Him to be their king, Jesus was not sidetracked from His purpose. Satan enticed Jesus to turn stones to bread when He was hungry, to make a dramatic display of His powers by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple and forcing the angels to rescue Him,



and even was not distracted by Satan's offer to give Him all the kingdoms of this world. Jesus never forgot His purpose. "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

Our kingdom assignment may not appear substantial as Nehemiah's serving in the highest levels of power or leading a dramatic national rescue. Yet God has a purpose for each of us. Our task may be emptying bedpans at a nursing home, building highways during the heat of the summer, or teaching seventh grade children in an inner-city school. Regardless, we are "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

### **Matthew 22:37–39**

And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND." This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

## **Questions**

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1. What caused Nehemiah's outrage against the rulers?

2. Why was this crisis in some ways even more difficult than those caused by external threats?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Is there an injustice that is a particular concern for you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How can you respond to this injustice?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Is your primary desire personal recognition, affirmation of others, or approval from God?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1958), 110.

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Powers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 4.

# lesson

## Don't Be Fooled!

### MAIN IDEA

The wicked will always try to disrupt the work of a person seeking to do God's will.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How can we discern when a person is deceitful yet pretends to be an ally?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that living by faith does not mean being naive. Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15).

### QUICK READ

Nehemiah's enemies were cunning, using devious methods to try to stop his work on the wall.

## Introduction

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Have you noticed we are often most vulnerable following a victorious experience? The apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Perhaps we let down our guard, or begin to believe we have arrived spiritually, when temptation strikes.

Elijah experienced one of the most dramatic days recorded in Scripture with the victory on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Obadi-ah, who was over the household of King Ahab and one who feared God, told Elijah there was no nation or kingdom where the king had not searched for him. Elijah was number one on the most wanted list because the drought he prophesied exceeded three years. The king was more concerned with his cattle that needed water than he was the catastrophe facing his people. However, Elijah was so brave he confronted the king and demanded a showdown with the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah.

The king and his entourage arrived on the mountain along with the false prophets and all the people. Elijah first challenged the people, “How long *will* you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). He then confronted the false prophets, “Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God” (1 Kings 18:24).

Although the false prophets cried, yelled, danced upon the altar all day, calling out to Baal, he never answered. Yet when Elijah prayed, God responded with fire from heaven. “When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces, and they said, ‘The LORD, He

is God; the LORD, He is God" (1 Kings 18:39). That evening, God brought rain.

No one could stop Elijah, not the 950 false prophets, not the complacent people, and not even the king ... except Jezebel, the queen. After the dramatic day on Carmel, Jezebel threatened Elijah, and he ran for his life.

Nehemiah was also tempted when the task of rebuilding the walls neared completion. The end was in sight. No breach remained in the wall, only the doors needed to be set on the gates; and then the enemy struck again. How would Nehemiah respond?

## Nehemiah 6:10–14

<sup>10</sup>When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night." <sup>11</sup>But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." <sup>12</sup>Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered *his* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. <sup>13</sup>He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me. <sup>14</sup>Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were *trying* to frighten me.

## **The Deceitful Invitation (6:1–4)**

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“Nehemiah took on a project that had all the appearance of being harmless, innocent, and rather simple. After all, what could be so difficult about building a wall around a city? It seemed that Nehemiah could have that wall completed in just a few weeks; then he would go back to Persia and take up where he left off. But not so!”<sup>1</sup>

All leaders face opposition; and how we respond is an indication of our courage and humility. Nehemiah was not exempt. He dealt with persistent resistance throughout the entire project, ranging from criticism to personal threats.

Too often it appears the forces of evil have more resources and energy than do the righteous. Even though the wall was nearing completion, Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and the rest of the enemies of Nehemiah were not ready to stop. They plotted devious schemes to disrespect, discredit, or destroy Nehemiah.

Their first attempt almost appeared as concession on their part. They sent him a message inviting him to meet with them in one of the villages of Ono.

“The plain of Ono was located about twenty miles north of Jerusalem, and it was a beautiful, verdant valley. Sanballat and Geshem were saying in effect, ‘You need to get away for a while. You’ve been laying bricks too long, Nehemiah. We’ve had our spats, a few disagreements, but let’s get together. Come on up to Ono.’ Nehemiah said, ‘Oh, no!’ to Ono. Somehow, he knew their motives were not what they seemed. He writes, “They were planning to harm me” (Nehemiah 6:2).<sup>2</sup>

Nehemiah was not fooled. After a long battle calling the people to “arise and build;” he set the example by working alongside of them, while simultaneously fighting the enemy. Nehemiah’s successes may have made him vulnerable. The victory was near. How nice it would have been if the enemies had been won over and ready to be colleagues. Yet Sanballat and his partners schemed together to seduce Nehemiah.

The apostle Peter, who denied Christ only moments after he had promised to die for him, later wrote, “Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus warned, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15–16).

How did Nehemiah see through their scheme? Perhaps he saw their true colors by observing their previous actions. He may have also received wise counsel from friends. While not dismissing critical evaluation and wise decision making, we also observe that Nehemiah was a man of prayer; and it is God who gave him a spirit of discernment.

### **The Malicious Rumors (6:5–9)**

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“It is reported...(6:6).” How many rumors begin with a statement similar to this? When Nehemiah’s enemies couldn’t trap him with false condolences they turned to vicious verbal attacks. They wrote accusations saying they had information that Nehemiah and the people were going to rebel and make him the king. Supposedly, prophets in Jerusalem were then to proclaim through-

out the city that Nehemiah is their new king bringing the wrath of King Artaxerxes against his subjects. Leaders who are undeserving of their positions live in fear that other unscrupulous persons will undermine their authority.

Malicious lies have led to the destruction of many good people. In our western society, we have come to expect them. Marketers make promises we know are untrue. Social media is a platform used by teenagers to bully others. Now with AI, pictures are doctored creating false images that appear to be authentic. After hearing a recent politician give a campaign speech, I thought fact-checkers will have fun with this.

We may call some of the exaggerations white lies, including personal photographs that look like folks hoped they looked or pastors' wishful thinking when estimating the size of a congregation. But Jesus said, "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil" (Matthew 5:37).

Passing along undocumented information is wrong. Nehemiah's enemies knew what they reported was false. Nehemiah confronted them directly and said, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind" (6:8).

In the book of James we find a description of the power of the tongue for doing evil. "And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison" (James 3:6–8).



## **Ephesians 4:29**

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a *word* as is good for edification according to the need of *the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

### **The Terrifying Threat (6:10–14)**

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Neither deceit nor slander stopped Nehemiah, therefore his enemies resorted to threats. Since Shemaiah had access to the Temple, he may have been a priest, possibly a friend of Tobiah. “He may have shut himself up as a symbolic action to indicate that his own life was in danger and to suggest that both must flee to the temple.”<sup>3</sup> Shemaiah warned Nehemiah that his life was at risk and that others were coming to kill him. Nehemiah perceived that God had not sent Shemaiah, but he had been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat. Their attempt was to frighten Nehemiah and stop the work from being completed.

Unfortunately, although Nehemiah was spared martyrdom, thousands throughout history have been killed for their faith. Even today thousands of children are being kidnapped and later sold into slavery or given away as brides. Some die while forced to live in tragic conditions in jungles and other unsafe situations. Millions of families have been driven from their homes because of their faith and forced to live in refugee camps, mountains, and even holes in the ground. Others, like Nehemiah, face insults, in-

timidation, loss of position or even employment, bullied by insecure individuals who fight to maintain power over others.

Nehemiah stood up to his enemies, even confronted them. But he didn't compromise his own integrity by stooping to their level. Instead, he took the situation to God and left them in God's hands (6:14).

## **Implications and Actions**

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I had a middle school track coach who told us to run through the tape. Races are lost when athletes get near the end, believing they have won and let up, only to be beaten at the last moment. Of course that was never an issue for me. By the time I reached the tape it was already covered with dirt after the others had trampled it under foot. Yet I still remember his advice. Run through the tape. Even when victory appears to be in hand, run hard, and keep to the race.

Perhaps you are dealing with unjustified criticism or even life-threatening opposition. A Christian missionary languishing in a Turkey prison received notes and prayers from other well-meaning Christians suggesting that he rejoice like Paul and Silas so others might see Christ in his life. Stuffed in an overcrowded cell with violent and angry prisoners, not knowing if he would be stuck there for the rest of his life or killed by the state or another prisoner; he said often his goal was to just breathe, take another breath.

Our kingdom assignment may not be easy. The evil one is always on the attack. Others may misunderstand or oppose you, however, fix your "eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of

faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

## Questions

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1. What was the motive of Nehemiah's opponents for opposing him?
2. What leadership lessons do we learn from Nehemiah's response?
3. When have you faced persistent opposition for doing what you believe to be the will of God?
4. How did God, your family, and the church encourage you?

5. What task have you begun that you must complete for the glory of God?

## ENDNOTES

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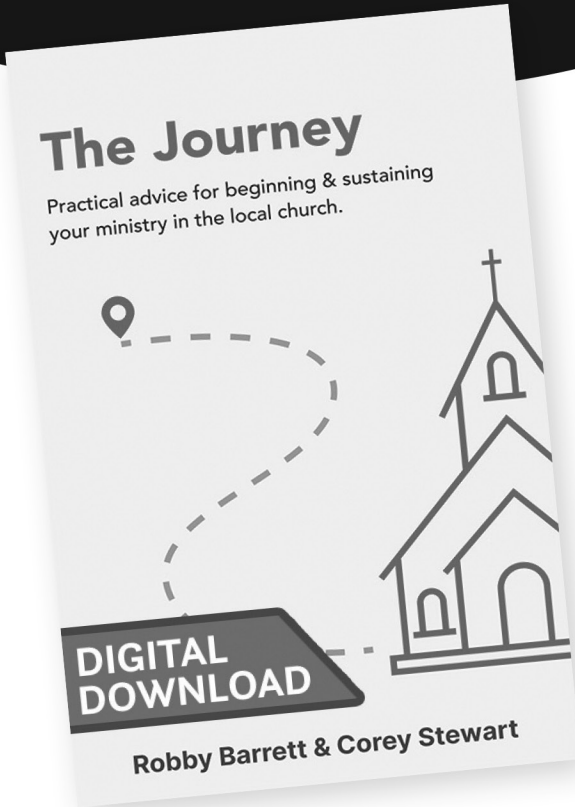
<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume IV, Ezra, Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 714.

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# lesson 8



## Finish the Task

### MAIN IDEA

After months of prayer, planning, and leading, Nehemiah never turned away from God's assignment until the wall was rebuilt.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How do we find the determination to continue the work until the task is completed?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that we must work diligently to complete the task God has set before us

### QUICK READ

When the task was completed, God received the glory.

## Introduction

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Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king of the Persian Empire when he learned about the deplorable conditions of the city of Jerusalem. He found favor with King Artaxerxes and led many Jewish exiles back to the city of their heritage and rebuilt the wall. Although he faced formidable opposition from both inside and outside the camp, he never wavered and once the work began, they completed the task in 52 days. Even their enemies recognized this happened only with the help of their God.

Although we are aware of very little of Nehemiah's life other than this brief encounter, many of the leadership traits we learn from him obviously were a result of a lifetime of faithfulness to God and His plan for Nehemiah's life. How can we benefit from Nehemiah that helps us face our challenges and opportunities? What life habits do we need to form that will enable us to stand strong in the face of opposition and succeed when God calls us to action?

## Nehemiah 6:15–19

<sup>15</sup> So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of *the month* Elul, in fifty-two days.<sup>16</sup> When all our enemies heard *of it*, and all the nations surrounding us saw *it*, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. <sup>17</sup> Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's *letters* came to them. <sup>18</sup> For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married

the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

## **The Task Is Complete (6:15)**

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*Nehemiah was a man of faith.* He became a trusted servant of the king although he was still an exile. He never forgot the promises of God; nor did he give up hope for the city of his heritage. Nehemiah could easily have been tempted to mourn his earthly situation and become filled with bitterness, hopelessness, and regret. There may have been occasions when he considered joining a futile insurrection against the king and attempt to fulfill the promises of God through his own plans and abilities. Yet Nehemiah resisted earthly temptations to chart his own path. He learned to wait upon the Lord, live in constant fellowship with God, faithfully serve where God placed him, and act when God opened a door.

*Nehemiah was a man of prayer.* In lesson two we were reminded of his dependence on prayer. The book of Nehemiah opens and ends with prayer. Throughout Nehemiah, we find examples of this leader praying. When he learned about the condition of Jerusalem after his brother's report, he was deeply burdened. For months he fasted and prayed, and when he sought wisdom for approaching the king, he prayed to the God of Heaven (2:4). Nehemiah prayed seeking approval from God and not man (5:19). His enemies threatened him, and he asked God to give him strength (6:9). Sanballat and Tobiah were persistent critics of Nehemiah

and rather than capitulating to their threats, Nehemiah asked God to remember him (6:14). He let God fight his battles, yet he never flinched when God called him to stand up against opposition.

*Nehemiah had confidence in God's Word.* While he was praying and fasting, he remembered God's word to Moses. "If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell" (1:8–9).

*Nehemiah sought God's forgiveness for himself and his people.* He prayed, "let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned" (1:6).

*Nehemiah was a man of action.* When the king asked Nehemiah why he was sad, he was very afraid realizing his position before the king and even his life could be forfeited for disturbing the king. Yet he prayed, respectfully addressed the king, and was ready with a description of the situation of Jerusalem and a plan of action. His request was bold and comprehensive, including a request for timber from Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, and a letter to the governors of the province. With the king's authority, Nehemiah led a convoy of officers of the army and horsemen on the eight-hundred-mile journey. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, after surveying the situation he challenged the complacent

people to arise and build. Surprisingly, they responded to the call and within fifty-two days, completed the task.

*Nehemiah was not deterred by opposition.* Every worthwhile endeavor will face opposition, and this was no exception. Intimidating opponents, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, used slander and threats to frighten the people and stop the work. Even the task of rebuilding walls destroyed a century and a half earlier as well as confrontations from complaints among the people failed to stop Nehemiah.

*Nehemiah never gave up.* No opposition proved too formidable; no resistance was too great to deter Nehemiah from completing his kingdom assignment. Such tenacities resulted in new opportunities for leadership.

## **Nehemiah's Response to His Opponents**

A leader's response to opposition reveals his inner strength (or insecurity). "Even in his dealings with his opponents, Nehemiah responds to their jibes not with rash retaliation but with a firm expression of God's ability to prosper his cause. Rather than being deflected from his primary task, he asserts positively that 'We, his servants, will start to rebuild' (2:20). At this early stage, he is content to leave God with the responsibility for the negative handling of opposition. This, too, is one of the hardest lessons for any church or individual to learn; Romans 12:19, 1 Peter 2:21–23; 4:19."<sup>1</sup>

## The Enemy Is Disheartened and God Is Glorified (6:16)

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Kingdom tasks cannot be accomplished by human wisdom and energy. Only God can move the hearts of kings and reluctant people. God is He who inspires human courage and provides resources thought to be unavailable. When the task of rebuilding the wall was complete, neither the people nor the enemy said, “Great is Nehemiah,” or “Great are the people of Jerusalem.” “They recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God” (6:16).

When God brought fire down on Mount Carmel, the people didn’t say, “Great is Elijah.” They fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, He is God; the Lord, He is God” (1 Kings 18:39). When the persecuted church was scattered, some of them came to Antioch and began preaching the Lord Jesus. “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). The church in Jerusalem heard about the work of God and sent Barnabas to see what was happening. When he arrived, he witnessed the grace of God (11:23).

I heard a story about Dr. M. E. Dodd, who retired as pastor of First Baptist Church of Shreveport, Louisiana in 1950 after serving there thirty-eight years. At his retirement celebration many stood to tell of the wonderful things that had happened during his tenure, including founding a college, serving as President of the Southern Baptist Convention, and serving on the Executive Board of the Baptist World Alliance. After all the accolades, the minister of music said with typical jest, “Let’s all stand and sing, ‘To **Dodd** be the Glory!’”

Perhaps we receive too much credit for the successes we experience because we fail to allow God to work in a way that only He can bring victory. When Hezekiah and Isaiah prayed for deliverance from Sennacherib king of Assyria who had already defeated the armies of all of Judah's neighbors, God answered sending the angel of the Lord who slew 185,000 of the enemy.

Nehemiah's task appeared doomed from the start. How would he ever receive favor from the king, or resources to build the gates and rebuild the walls? How was he supposed to awaken a complacent city that was accustomed to living in shame and defeat? How was Nehemiah to overcome the significant opposition of local leaders? Victory would come only by the grace of God who put the plan in his heart, provided the resources to complete the task; and then received the glory.

### **The Battle Continues (6:17–19; 13:4–9)**

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Verses 17–19 do not reflect the chronological development of the successful rebuilding project. Instead they record the intrigue surrounding the rebuilding efforts and continual attempts to undermine Nehemiah's personal influence.

Even though Tobiah was an official under Sanballat in Samaria, he must have been a resident in Jerusalem at some point. Through marriage and colleagues, Tobiah's tentacles of influence continued in Jerusalem long after the wall had been completed keeping alive the opposition against Nehemiah. Perhaps these individuals were the ones who continued to feed information to Nehemiah's critics about his plans and progress.

While Nehemiah was back in Susa, away from Jerusalem, Eliashib, a relative of Tobiah, prepared a room for Tobiah in the Temple. Perhaps Eliashib did not expect Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. In fury, Nehemiah took swift and stern action against the evil Eliashib did for Tobiah. Asserting unquestioned authority Nehemiah ousted Tobiah from his residence in the Temple, removing any question of undermining influence (13:4–9). Nehemiah was not naïve but wise knowing he could not allow the enemies of the Lord to remain in influential places.

### **1 Peter 2:21–23**

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.

## **Implications and Actions**

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We cannot wait until a crisis or opportunity arises before building a life of character. Nehemiah allowed God to begin preparing him years before the task of returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. Nehemiah's faithfulness to God, his confidence in God's commandments, and a lifetime committed to prayer, prepared Nehemiah to seize the opportunity to serve as cupbearer to the king, lead a movement to restore God's glory to Jerusalem, and serve as governor of God's people.



The needs and opportunities for kingdom work continues today. Our world is on fire with anger, hostility, immorality, fear, guilt, and loneliness. God is still calling His people to be faithful parents, leaders, and witnesses who serve Him with ministries to the least among us. God's work demands the kind of bold allegiance that leads us to attempt challenging tasks He places before us, so the world will see His glory.

## **Questions**

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1. What disciplines did Nehemiah practice that prepared him to answer God's call?
2. What were the challenges Nehemiah faced upon completion of the task?
3. How did Nehemiah find the courage to stand against the critics and to continue the work even in dangerous situations?

4. What are pressing issues facing the world today that only God can meet?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What role is God placing before you in addressing one of these situations?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary, Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 193.

# lesson 9



## The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength

### MAIN IDEA

When Ezra read from God's Word in the presence of all the people, they fell on their faces in repentance and worship.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

When did we participate in a genuine experience of brokenness and worship after being confronted by God's Word?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that when God's Word was proclaimed to His people, they were broken, repentant, and experienced the joy of the Lord

### QUICK READ

God's Word brings conviction, confession, and commitment to faithfulness.

## INTRODUCTION

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I am privileged to know Ben and Gloria Kwashi, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church and his wife who live in Jos, Nigeria. They live in one of the most dangerous places for Christians in the world. They have suffered personal threats and brutal physical attacks. Their house and church were burned as a result of violence against them. In addition to the unique situation of living where Christians are persecuted, they encounter criticism and opposition all leaders experience, as well as the care and concern for the churches and institutions under his responsibility. Ben survived cancer and both have faced other health issues. Both Ben and Gloria have a special burden for abandoned children and have legally adopted over seventy-five children. We visited them in their home and met these children.

Ben said to me, “We live knowing this may be our last day.”

If I had to describe Ben and Gloria with one word, without hesitation I would answer, “joy!” When I anticipated meeting him for the first time, I expected an austere bishop carrying the burdens of the world on his shoulders. Instead I saw a smile and warmth that filled the room.

How do we experience this kind of joy in the midst of a troubled world and personal difficulties? Nehemiah said, “The joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10). Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full” (John 15:11). When the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians while he was still in prison, he mentioned the word joy or rejoice sixteen times, including, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).

How do we experience this joy? In Nehemiah 8, we find some of the answers.

## **Nehemiah 8:9–12**

<sup>9</sup> Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. <sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." <sup>11</sup> So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." <sup>12</sup> All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

### **Joy Comes Through the Power of the Word**

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Even though Ezra doesn't appear in the book of Nehemiah until chapter 8, he already played a key role in the restoration of the exiles returning to Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were together in the earliest Hebrew manuscript. Origen (AD 185–253) was the first writer known to distinguish between the two. The book of Ezra tells of the return of the Jews in exile in Babylon, and the rebuilding of the Temple. In Ezra 7:6, Ezra is described as a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses, and again in

7:10; “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel” (10).

All the people, including men, women, and all who could understand, gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate. Chuck Swindoll entitles one chapter in his book, *Hand Me Another Brick*, “Revival at Water Gate?”<sup>1</sup> This is a throwback to those of us who remember the crimes committed in room 214, in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., in 1972, at the beginning of the unraveling of the Nixon presidency. The gathering with Ezra had the opposite effect on the folks in Jerusalem.

Ezra the priest read from the book of Moses from early morning until midday. He stood at a wooden podium that was designed for this occasion with leaders of the people standing beside him. When he opened the book, all the people stood, obviously out of reverence for the word of the Law.

“Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen!’ while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with *their* faces to the ground” (8:6).

Afterward the Levites explained the Law to the people while they remained in their places. “They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (8:8). In the margin of the NASB the word *translating* is also defined as *explaining*. What good is the reading of the Word without understanding?

In Jesus’ final words to the disciples before His ascension, He emphasized the command to teach His Word. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of

the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

We are surrounded by the sounds and sights of a broken world. We read of the wars and conflicts in the Middle East, throughout Africa, and the growing tensions in Asia. Children in Myanmar and Sudan have never known a time of peace. Millions of refugees have fled their homes in the hopes of a better life somewhere. In the United States we hear of crime and corruption every day. Natural disasters keep us on edge as we wonder when our community will be in the news. We can’t avoid the evil in the lives of others, yet at the same time, we are troubled at the sin in our own lives.

Where do we find hope? We find it in the Word of the Lord. God is Creator and Redeemer. He has a plan for our world as well as our lives personally. Standing in the square of the Water Gate, the people of Israel who had experienced decades of captivity and depravity, heard the Word of the Law, and fell on their faces and cried, “Amen, Amen!”

## **Template for Baptist Worship?**

The gathering of the people at the Water Gate had all of the appearance of a template for Baptist worship. Ezra stood behind a pulpit on an elevated platform, read from the Word, and the people stood out of reverence. He then preached for a long time. They even had a potluck meal afterward (8:10) and although it is not mentioned in Scripture or church tradition, could this have been the place where sweet tea and potato salad were introduced?

## **2 Timothy 3:16–17**

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

### **Joy Comes From a Clean Heart**

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The Psalmist reminds us of the many distractions that lead us away from God. However, the Word of God draws us back to Him. “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:1–2). David writes, “The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7). And again he reminds us, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer” (19:14).

The Israelites were content living without the glory of the Lord, evidenced by a broken wall around the city and a hardness of heart because of their neglect of God’s promises. Yet when the people heard the Word and were reminded of the holiness of God, they wept (8:9). God’s Word guides our steps. “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping *it* according to Your word” (Psalm 119:9). What protects our heart from temptations that surround us? “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I



may not sin against You” (119:11). In the same Psalm, God’s word strengthens us (119:28), revives us (119:50), teaches us discernment and knowledge (119:66). We can trust the word of the Lord. “Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness *continues* throughout all generations; You established the earth, and it stands” (119:89–90). “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (119:105).

Nehemiah, who was now the governor, Ezra the priest, and the Levites who taught the people said, “This day is holy to the LORD your God, do not mourn or weep” (8:9).

Conviction of sin is not the last word. Even though we may feel unworthy of God’s grace, we are foolish to continue to live under guilt. What if Peter said no to preaching the Pentecostal sermon because he had denied Jesus? Paul had plenty of reasons to decline being a faithful witness throughout the world because he persecuted the church before his encounter with Jesus. James the brother of Jesus waited until Jesus was raised from the dead before he trusted Him, and he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. After a lifetime of service to Christ, the beloved disciple John wrote, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). If God is willing to forgive our sins, shouldn’t we accept His forgiveness and move forward with humility yet confidence as God continues to lead us.

Nehemiah said, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10).

## **Joy Comes Through a Celebration of the Traditions of Faith**

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My wife and I had an opportunity to join with a few others starting a church in an area near three major universities. We cried and prayed, “How can we share the hope of Christ with these young adults?” Of course we believed we needed to be relevant to them because of our age differences. I thought we needed a building that wouldn’t frighten them away with ancient rituals and symbols. I was shocked when we entered a church building over 100 years old with pews, stained glass windows, and worn carpet, and heard our very talented young contemporary music leader look around the room and say, “Sweet!” I continued to be surprised when the young leaders insisted that we light candles and have communion every week. Within weeks we had dozens of college students and more than a handful of homeless people sitting together singing, praying, and calling out to God.

What connected young brilliant individuals with symbols and practices of faith? I believe they wanted to connect with something and Someone who was timeless. Some of the most precious experiences of worship I have ever experienced came with this congregation, singing, praying, and even at times they were on their faces before God with arms uplifted to the Lord. They were also eager to study God’s Word.

During the seventh month, on the second day of the revival at Water Gate, the priests and Levites gathered around Ezra wanting to gain insights into the Law of the Lord. They found the people of Israel were to live in booths during the seventh month as a visual reminder of the exile from Egypt. “So they proclaimed

and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of *other* leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written” (8:15). The sons of Israel had not done this since the days of Joshua.

The repetition of festivals and holy days played a significant role in the nation of Israel. Should our congregations rediscover symbols and practices reminding us of God’s presence and provisions for the past, present, and future?

## **Implications and Actions**

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Reading and explaining the Word of the Lord brought conviction, confession, and commitment to the people of Israel. We must never forget our gatherings, celebrations, and activities are folly unless they are centered on a proper understanding and application of God’s Word.

## **Questions**

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1. Ezra and Nehemiah had different gifts and responsibilities. How did they respond to God’s calling?

2. Was the experience at the Water Gate a unique experience in the life of God's people or do we find relevant lessons applicable for the church today?
3. What was the role of the Levites in this situation?
4. Why were festivals and symbols important to the nation of Israel?
5. How does the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper encourage the church today? Are there other symbols or festivals that can also remind us of God's works of creation and redemption?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson 2006), 139.

# lesson 10



## True Confession

### MAIN IDEA

Because of God's righteousness, we must come before Him with humility and confession.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

When have we participated in a corporate experience of repentance and brokenness seeking mercy and forgiveness from our gracious God?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that God is compassionate and gracious and is willing to forgive and restore those who come before Him with genuine repentance

### QUICK READ

People need the Lord because of Who He is: the Creator, a covenant God, and compassionate (17, 31); and because of who we are: arrogant, foolish, idolatrous, and rebellious.

## Introduction

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Exiles returned to Jerusalem. The Temple was restored. The walls were rebuilt; and the people were living in security in their own homes. Yet more was needed. The people needed the Lord. We read in Nehemiah 8, the people gathered together in front of the Water Gate and listened to the Word of the Law of Moses. The Levites instructed them so they would understand the Word, and they responded with brokenness, humility, and repentance. Nehemiah called them to celebrate because of God's forgiveness and blessing and they were filled with joy.

In the ninth chapter of Nehemiah the people reassembled on the 24th day with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt on them. They separated themselves from foreigners and confessed their sins. "While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for *another* fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God" (9:3).

Israel responded to the mercy of God with ingratitude throughout its history. God chose them, blessed them, delivered them, restored them, and yet they never failed to turn back from God after a period of contentment. The Levites standing on the platform led them in a prayer of confession and praise summarizing the grace of God and their own rebellion.

The prayer of the Levites reminds us to begin with a focus on God, remembering He is our Creator and Redeemer. As we meditate on God's goodness, we are reminded of our own unfaithfulness and urgent need for His forgiveness and restoration.

## Nehemiah 9:1–3

<sup>1</sup> Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. <sup>2</sup> The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. <sup>3</sup> While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for *another* fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.

### The Composition of the Hymn

"The composition of the hymn is as follows: The praising of God as Creator (v. 6), the covenant with Abraham (vv. 7–8), the great and wonderful acts of God in Egypt (vv. 9–11), the care of God in the dessert (v. 12), Mount Sinai and the desert wandering (vv. 13–21), the conquering of the Holy Land (vv. 22–25), the unfaithfulness of Israel and God's patience in the Holy Land (vv. 26–31), and the confession of sin (vv. 32–37)."<sup>1</sup>

### Confessing the Goodness of God

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They began the prayer with praise and adoration to the One Who is above all with the recognition that **God is Creator**. "You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You" (9:6).

Paul writes of Jesus, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15–17).

God is also the Creator of the new heavens and earth. “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem *for* rejoicing and her people *for* gladness. I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; and there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying” (Isaiah 65:17–19).

Too often we jump into our prayers with a reminder to God of all of the problems surrounding us. We first need to focus on Him. *He is bigger than our problems.* He is before all things in both time and authority. He made all of the stars, the moon, and the sun. He made the earth with seas and dry land, animals of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea. God created us, in His own image and likeness. *God is greater than all of our needs.*

The Levites’ prayer reminds us that **God is a covenant God.** God is not one who created the world and then abandons it. He remains actively involved with creation. God chose Abram and brought him out from Ur and gave him the name Abraham. Because of Abraham’s faithfulness, God is righteous and made a covenant with him and gave the land of Canaan to him and his descendants. The Levites continued the prayer recounting the ways God led the Hebrews and fulfilled His promises. While the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, they cried out to the Lord, and



God brought plagues against the Egyptians until the Pharaoh set them free. They fled Egypt and became trapped by the sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them. God parted the sea, and they crossed over on dry ground. The Egyptian pursuers were hurled into the sea like a rock in raging waters.

God continued to provide for His people directing them with a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. He led them to Mount Sinai and gave them the Law and Commandments. God set apart the Sabbath day as a time of rest, worship, and restoration. He fed them with bread from Heaven and water from a rock.

Tragically, the exiles who had returned from captivity in Babylon had once again forgotten God's promises and neglected His commandments and ordinances. As the remnant gathered together for a time of fervent worship they were reminded of their heritage and the covenant God made promising to lead and protect them. Standing in the middle of the city where the Temple and walls had been restored, the Hebrews worshipped *Yahweh* God.

**God is compassionate.** Even though God's people were stubborn and disobedient, the Levites prayed, "You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; and You did not forsake them" (9:17). Our word compassion comes from a Latin word *compati* that means to suffer with. Compassion is not reaching down; it is reaching out. God didn't sit on His throne apathetically! He entered into the suffering of His people.

God's clearest expression of His compassion is the incarnation of Jesus. When Jesus began His public ministry, He announced to the synagogue where He had been brought up, "THE SPIRIT OF

THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD” (Luke 4:18–19). He identified with the sufferers and was often stern with the powerful. “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Jesus, while suffering on the cross, cried out, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

God’s empathy is a stumbling block to those who have difficulty believing in a God who is vulnerable to the sorrows of His creation.

As we pray, we are called to private and corporate occasions when we recount the marvelous works of a benevolent God. Worship is not a time to spotlight celebrities or practice self-help disciplines promising good health and prosperity. Rather private and public worship should focus on God’s holiness, majesty, glory and mercy.

## **Confessing the Desperate Need of the People**

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As the Levites praised God for His goodness, they interspersed their prayer with acknowledgement of the rebellion of God’s people. Prayer demands both praise and repentance.

In verse 16 the people are described as **arrogant and stubborn**. The prophet Isaiah also wrote, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD

has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (53:6). As the people of Jerusalem assembled with fasting and confession of their sins, the Levites read to them from the book of the Law, and they were reminded of their sinful past. They cried out for forgiveness from God as they recalled His faithfulness.

What was true of the Hebrews is also true for us. We too are stubborn and desire our own way. Paul refers to Psalm 14, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE” (Romans 3:10-12). “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

While condemning the Hebrews for continuing to turn away from a gracious God; dare we remember, we all urgently need the Lord? Even after God became flesh, dwelt among us, redeemed us on the cross, was raised from the dead, appeared to many witnesses, ascended back into Heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to live within us; we continue to desperately require God’s grace.

The Hebrew people were **foolish** and refused to listen regardless of all God had done for them (9:17). After God delivered them from Egypt with signs and miracles, they defiantly appointed a leader to lead them back to Egypt. They were ready to be slaves in Egypt rather than participate in God’s kingdom plan for His covenant people.

We too were once slaves to sin. Like the Hebrews, we continue to flirt with the urge to return to the old life. Paul writes, “For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to do, but I’m doing the very thing I hate” (Romans

7:15). “For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want” (Romans 7:19). “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24–25a).

After witnessing the great signs in Egypt they were **blasphemous** and worshiped a god they made from their gold jewelry (9:18). In Romans 1, we are reminded that all of us have rebelled against God. “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:21–22).

After living a life of slavery in Egypt, God gave them their own land, fortified cities, houses full of every good thing, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance (9:25). Yet they were **rebellious** and cast God’s Law behind their backs and killed the prophets.

## Implications and Actions

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In the prayer of Nehemiah 9, the Levites made it clear that they identified with the blessings and failures of those who went before them. They too were throwing themselves onto the mercy of God who made a covenant with His people. How much more should we celebrate God’s covenant with us? “I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS, AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE” (Hebrews 8:10).

### **Four Principles for Revival**

Alan Redpath cites four principles for revival in his book, *Victorious Christian Living*: return to broken heartedness, reflection on God's goodness, recognition of our sinfulness, and renewal of our obedience. "As we seek out the principles of such an outpouring...we need to ask ourselves quite frankly if we are willing to have these four principles applied to our own lives and to our own church."<sup>2</sup>

### **Questions**

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1. What are some of the ways God blessed Israel?
2. How did Israel fail God?
3. What do we learn about prayer from the prayer of the Levites?

4. How has God blessed you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How have you disobeyed God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Are you willing to turn to God in broken heartedness and receive His mercy?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> F. Charles Fensham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1958), 155.

# lesson 11



## Leading by Example

### MAIN IDEA

Nehemiah had consistently led the people, and again he was the first to sign the pledge committing to be faithful to God's expectations for His covenant people.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do our actions reflect our values as leaders in our family, church, and community?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that effective leaders must model the way. Nehemiah consistently followed the Lord, leading by example through his words and deeds.

### QUICK READ

The Levites, leaders, and priests signed an agreement in writing promising obedience to God for His faithfulness in using them to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

## Introduction

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Good intentions are not enough. After rebuilding the walls and gates of the city, coming before God with fasting, prayer, Bible study, and praise; Nehemiah and the other leaders asked the people to sign a statement indicating their commitment to a life of faithfulness as God's people. We shouldn't be surprised that Nehemiah, the governor, was the first to sign. Once again, he leads by example.

For the last twenty-five years, I continue to return to the leadership books written by James Kouzes and Barry Posner to learn practices for effective leadership. Since 1983, they have conducted global research for personal best leadership experiences. Their early discovery of five practices for successful leadership continues until today, transcending international challenges and changing cultures.

"When getting extraordinary things done in organizations, leaders engage in these Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart."<sup>1</sup>

Centuries before the discovery of these practices, Nehemiah embodied all of these characteristics. In these brief chapters, we find one of the best resources for learning practical leadership. "Leadership is not about personality; it's about behavior. Titles are granted, but it's your behavior that wins you respect."<sup>2</sup>

**Modeling the way** is the first practice mentioned in the *Leadership Challenge*. Leading by example requires a leader to know his or her own values and then act and lead in a way that demonstrates them. Nehemiah demonstrated this trait with his actions.



In chapter one of Nehemiah, rather than blaming the deplorable condition of Jerusalem on the faults of others, he acknowledged in his prayer his own sin as well as the sins of others (1:6). When the opportunity arose, Nehemiah challenged the people with an inspired vision of a renewed Jerusalem, then presented a plan and personally joined in the work on the wall (5:16). He continued to model the way by not being isolated from his people but remained close enough to hear their cries (chapter 5). He led by example standing up to opposition and overcoming the discouragement from the enormity of the task and the threats from enemies. Other governors may have abused the people for personal gain, yet Nehemiah didn't even consume the royal food allowance that was rightfully his (5:14–19).

Leadership is not just about leading an organization; it also includes being a parent or grandparent, using your spiritual gifts in your local church, and being involved in social issues locally and globally. Leaders make a difference for multiple generations. Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy to keep four generations in mind. “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

## **Nehemiah 10:28–30**

<sup>28</sup> Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, <sup>29</sup> are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on

themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes; <sup>30</sup> and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.

## **The Brokenness of God's People**

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Nehemiah challenged the people to "arise and build" in chapter 2. In 9:5, the Levites said, "Arise and bless." Before experiencing God's blessings we must come before the Lord with humility and brokenness. "And My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). Ezra and Nehemiah led the people to return to God's Word. They listened reverently to the Word and the teaching of the Levites and then humbled themselves before God with brokenness and repentance.

Biblical leadership is not about entitlement, hero worship, fanfare, and large crowds. Beginning with brokenness and humility, burdened by the needs of people and motivated by God's mercy, God's leaders are willing to accept the consequences inevitable from challenging disobedience.

No man except Jesus may have had a greater kingdom assignment than Moses, who was willing to return to a land he had fled for his life, confront the most powerful man on earth of his day and ask for the release of a multitude of slaves who provided the infrastructure for the Pharaoh's empire. Even after God's mirac-

ulous deliverance of the people, Moses then led a complaining, quarreling multitude of ungrateful freed slaves for forty years in the wilderness. His leadership was often challenged, even by his brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam. Yet the Bible described Moses, “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3).

A person who spends time in the presence of a holy and righteous God, cannot help but feel humbled, grateful, and blessed. After God’s people fell on their faces with humility and repentance, the Levites said, “Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever” (Nehemiah 9:5).

## **A Public Affirmation of Sincerity**

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Why did Nehemiah and the leaders challenge the Hebrews to sign an agreement in writing? First, I believe it showed their commitment to God. They separated themselves from foreigners and joined together “taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given through Moses, God’s servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes” (Nehemiah 10:29). The oath was made to be faithful to God. This verse has been misused by autocratic leaders and groups who take a curse and oath to be loyal to a leader or a group. Nehemiah didn’t ask for loyalty to himself. They were committing themselves to be loyal to the commandments and ordinances of God. Leaders must be careful not to manipulate people into following their own personal agendas.

Second, the document was a testimony to the nations. Opposition had come from neighboring people attempting to pre-

vent the reestablishment of Jerusalem. A strong Jerusalem was a threat to neighbors. Other people bring other gods. Many believed in a plurality of gods who reigned over local areas and people groups. Even the Hebrews wanted a god they could see although *Yahweh* God had just led them miraculously out of slavery; yet they built a golden calf.

Solomon asked God for wisdom. At the dedication of the Temple he prayed, “O LORD, the God of Israel, there is no god like You in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant and *showing* lovingkindness to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart” (2 Chronicles 6:14). Yet even after God’s blessings, he foolishly married many wives of other nations and gods, and idolatry spread throughout the land.

Third, it was a resolution for themselves. The act of signing a document proved sincerity and intention. The New Testament act of baptism is a public confession of sin and recognition that we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in a new life. Vows are made at a wedding ceremony and usually rings are given to express sincerity and promise faithfulness. The signed document was a physical document promising faithfulness to the covenant. Good intentions are strengthened by public declarations providing a tangible visible memory during discouraging days.

## **The Conditions of the Commitment**

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They vowed to be a *separate people*, not giving their daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for their sons. After Joshua led the Israelites to conquer Canaan, he challenged

the people. “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

In the New Testament the church is called the *ekklesia*, “called out ones.” They were given the instruction, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). We typically use this verse as a command about marriage, yet doesn’t it also imply other relationships like business partnerships with those who disagree with your faith and practices?

They vowed to be an *obedient* people, “to walk in God’s law, which was given through Moses, God’s servant, and to keep and observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes” (10:29).

They also vowed to be a *worshiping* people. God calls us not only to be a committed follower, but to also be a faithful member of His community. Worship takes place privately but also publicly as a member of the body. They promised to keep the Sabbath day holy and to forgo the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. They would not neglect the tithes, offerings, support of the Temple, statutes, and commands. These were all reminders that all they had was entrusted to them by God and God’s work in the Temple must be supported.

“For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are minis-

tering, the gatekeepers and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God” (10:39).

## **Confession of Sin**

“There is no revival possible in any fellowship without a price being paid. Where sin has been open against the people of God, it has to be confessed openly. Where it has been against another, then it has to be confessed to that person. Where it has been against God, then it has to be confessed to Him, and all sin is against God.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Implications and Actions**

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Nehemiah and the other leaders challenged the Hebrews not to neglect the Law of God, the commandments of God nor the Temple of God. The New Testament teaches that our bodies are the temples of God. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Chuck Swindoll asks, “Is your temple clean? You’re not carrying the principles of leadership in a dirty container, are you?”<sup>4</sup>

## **Christian Vocation**

"A Christian vocation is one which renders a genuine service to humanity; one which meets a real need of society; a job over which one can pray; a job in harmony with love, justice, and human dignity; one which requires of the worker integrity, creativity, imagination, and social usefulness; and finally, it is one characterized by a sense of purpose."<sup>5</sup>

## **Questions**

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1. In what ways did Nehemiah model good practices of leadership?
2. How are our values reflected by our actions?
3. Why were the people of Israel asked to sign a written document?

4. Why were they asked to separate themselves from others?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Where do I consider myself to be a leader?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How can I lead by example?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge, Fourth Edition* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1958), 160.

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 190.

<sup>5</sup> Henlee Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 1998), 157.



# lesson 12

## Time to Celebrate

### MAIN IDEA

By God's grace, the people of Jerusalem completed what appeared to be an impossible task when they rebuilt the walls, and celebrated the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving, and with songs.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How can our times of congregational worship be opportunities of joy, thanksgiving, and praise?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that obedience to God's kingdom assignment led to opportunities of genuine worship, praise, and singing

### QUICK READ

"On that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar" (12:43).

## Introduction

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My wife and I and two friends of ours had the opportunity to worship with First Baptist Church Pena, near Sao Paulo, Brazil, on January 5, 2023. We were greeted warmly by their pastor, Eliezer Victor Ramos and his wife and family. Before the service even began, we knew this is a church where God is at work. While sitting with the pastor and family around a sumptuous breakfast they prepared for us, we experienced the joy of getting to know them and hear stories about the church.

We met with an Afghan family consisting of a father, mother and four children who were a part of a group of 700 plus who were sponsored by Brazilian Baptists after escaping Afghanistan. Even though they were of another faith, the church adopted them, provided housing, food, training, and school for their children.

I was shocked when we entered the worship center. Around 1500 worshipers packed the auditorium including about 100 in the choir and 40 in the orchestra. Hundreds of others filled an overflow room below the sanctuary and about 1700 joined through social media. The choir and orchestra were outstanding. Every person: men, women, and children sang enthusiastically during congregational singing. A man who led a time of prayer for the congregation, had been rescued from an inner-city slum called Crack-land, where tens of thousands of addicts barely survive. God freed him through a ministry of Brazilian Baptists called Christ-land.

When the Afghan family was introduced after being brought up on the platform, the church cheered, applauded, and gave

them a Brazilian welcome. The father and the family were overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude.

I have often preached with an interpreter, at times seamless and other times challenging. That morning I felt that Victor and I were preaching the same message. This experience was a celebration of the presence of the Lord.

Even though worship is often spontaneous like Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail (Acts 16), services like the one we experienced at FBCP require diligent preparation. Hours of training by the choir, orchestra, pastors, media, counselors, and others are required. Hundreds of prayer partners spent hours praying for God to accept and bless the service. Ministries were carried out throughout the week and decisions were anticipated. When Jesus announced His ministry to His home synagogue in Nazareth, He said, “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD” (Luke 4:18–19). When churches work where Jesus is working, they experience the blessings of the Lord.

## **Nehemiah 12:40–47**

<sup>40</sup> Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me; <sup>41</sup> and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah, with the trumpets; <sup>42</sup> and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah *their* leader, <sup>43</sup> and on that day

they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.

<sup>44</sup> On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. <sup>45</sup> For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David *and* of his son Solomon. <sup>46</sup> For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, *there were* leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God.<sup>47</sup> So all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated *portion* for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated *portion* for the sons of Aaron.

## Consecration of the Wall

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“The dedication of the newly built wall of Jerusalem is a climax to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It marks the last stage in the long process of restoration after the exile, a process which began with the return of the people and the building of the Temple, was continued with internal reform on the basis of the Book of the Law and now culminates in a celebration of the rebuilt and repopulated holy city.”<sup>1</sup>

The experience was punctuated with pure joy. They realized God was instrumental in the wall's completion and worthy of their praise and worship. The dedication included hymns of thanksgiving and songs accompanied by cymbals, harps, and lyres. The priests and the Levites purified themselves and then the people, and even the gates and the walls.

Two great choirs circled the city on the top of the wall leading from the Valley Gate, one counterclockwise and the other in the opposite direction both proceeding to the Temple. They began where Nehemiah started his inspection of the walls just months earlier. The two choirs took their places in the house of God and were joined by Nehemiah and half of the officials. Some of the priests celebrated with trumpets and others sang with Jezrahiah their leader.

“On that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar” (12:43). They performed worship to their God, services of purification and sang songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God. Then they read aloud from the book of Moses (13:1).

This day was quite a contrast from the complacency of the people and deplorable conditions of the city as described by Nehemiah's brother, Hanani in chapter one. God raised up an unlikely leader who was willing to obey; who resisted opposition from within and threats from outside; and who wouldn't stop until the task was completed. The project was so great, only God was praised.

## Considerations About Worship

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The celebration of the Hebrews in Nehemiah 12, for the dedication of the wall was planned, prepared, led by priests, Levites, two choirs, and was carefully implemented. Generous offerings were brought; and great joy was expressed among all the people including the women and children. God deserves our best. Are there lessons we can learn from the Jerusalem celebration that will guide us in preparation for public worship?

### **The Purpose of Worship**

"Biblical worship is rooted in an event which is to be lived, not proven. The purpose of worship is not to prove the Christ it celebrates, but to bring the worshiper so in tune with God's reconciliation through Christ that His death and resurrection become a lived experience."<sup>2</sup>

We, like the Anabaptists and others before us, want to draw our model for worship directly from the Bible. However, there are numerous examples of worship in Scripture and not just one model. The example we find in Nehemiah 12 was a time of celebration that was both national and specific. The dedication of the first Temple was similar (2 Chronicles 6–7). "Now when Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the house" (2 Chronicles 7:1). "All the sons of Israel, seeing the fire come down and the glory of the LORD upon the house, bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave praise to the LORD, saying 'Truly He is

good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting” (7:3). In Isaiah 6, Isaiah came to God during a time of grief and fell before the holiness and awesomeness of the Lord with humility and grief.

In Acts, following the arrest of Peter and John, they reported to their companions what happened. The people gathered around them, and they recounted all of the good things God had done, petitioning the Lord for His attention to their situation. “And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). When Paul and Silas were in a Roman prison they were praying and singing hymns of praise to God. The prisoners were listening to them and the jailer’s life was transformed (Acts 16:22ff.).

## Celebration

The first principle of worship is celebration. “In our national life, we celebrate such holidays as Thanksgiving, New Year’s Eve, Memorial Day, the fourth of July, and Labor Day. Traditionally, these are celebrations that include family, friends, picnics, feasts... In these celebrations we rehearse our national identity and meaning, and we find the story of our lives in the larger story of our nation and culture. For me, worship is in many ways like these festivals because it brings the past into the present by telling and acting out the work of Christ. It contains all the elements of festivity: coming together, story, symbol, memory, sharing, relationship, good will, giving, receiving.”<sup>3</sup>

Typically churches dedicate one time a week, possibly 60–90 minutes for the purpose of corporate worship. Often this time is shared by other celebrations such as Mothers’ Day, Fathers’ Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Independence Day, denominational emphases, recognitions, and promotional activities. I learned as a young pastor that you dare not miss some of these events. However, we must not miss the primary reason we gather, to celebrate Christ. We must prepare ourselves for worship through personal prayer and anticipation of entering the presence of God. Pastors, musicians, greeters, counselors, media (whether it is a single mic or multiple tools), must be ready to go. Not because it is showtime, but because we want to celebrate God: Who He is, what He has done, seeking His conviction, cleansing, and calling. We need to bring our best offerings as reminders that all we have comes from Him.

Preparation for high school football comes early in August, during the hottest days of the year. Athletes are pushed physically and mentally for one reason, Friday nights. Coaches must be ready to lead the team to give their best. Fans are expected and the facilities, bands, concession stands, parking, lighting, and sound system have to be ready to go. Friday night lights have become an important time for communities to come together and celebrate. Should we prepare less for our times of worship?

The celebration in Nehemiah 12 was the culmination of preparation and planning. The leaders purified themselves, others, and even the walls and the gates. Would we dare seek to lead others in the presence of God while harboring impurity in our own lives?



## **Implications and Actions**

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Worship both private and corporate deserves our best. Our desire must be to celebrate Christ. In our morning devotionals, we need to provide the time, place, and resources that equip us to experience the presence of Christ. When our focus is on Him our hearts will be both broken and thrilled. Our time of corporate worship should be the most precious time of the week, demanding the priority of our time, talents, and gifts. Like the people of Jerusalem, we come anticipating the corporate experience with our brothers and sisters, hungry to be moved by His presence and filled with the joy of His Spirit.

## **Questions**

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1. Why was it so important for the people of Jerusalem to come together for the dedication of the wall?
  
2. Are there other biblical events that parallel this celebration?

3. What were the main features of this time of dedication?
4. Who were some of the leaders and what were their tasks?
5. Even though this was an historic situation, do we find lessons helping us prepare for worship?
6. What is your primary role in corporate worship and how do you prepare?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 376.

<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship is a Verb* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

# lesson 13



## Remember the Sabbath

### MAIN IDEA

When God's people returned to the Law of Moses, their sins were exposed.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Why did God bless the Sabbath day and declare it holy?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that as we seek to understand God's kingdom assignment, we must not neglect His command for keeping the Sabbath holy, the longest and most descriptive of the commandments

### QUICK READ

When the Hebrew people read from God's Law, their sins were exposed for neglecting their tithes, the Sabbath day, and the sanctity of marriage.

## Introduction

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During this study, we have seen that Nehemiah was faithful to his kingdom assignment with a relentless pursuit of obedience. Even though he lived in exile, he remained obedient to the laws of God. Nehemiah was a man of prayer and when God opened the door of opportunity for him to be cupbearer to the king, he was obviously ready. Even the pagan king trusted him. Nehemiah never forgot his heritage nor the promises of God. When he learned of the condition of Jerusalem, he was burdened and spent months in prayer. God opened the door for Nehemiah to lead a team to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls and gates of the city, and he obeyed. Not even the enormous task, persistent opposition, nor the complaints of the people dissuaded him from God's assignment.

God's covenant with Abraham promised that through Abraham, "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Nehemiah never forgot they were a chosen people and God's calling demanded obedience.

### Final Reforms

"After the climax in chapter 12, the Book of Nehemiah seems to peter out in a series of reforms in areas that have all been the subject of attention earlier and none of which are applicable, as they stand, to the life of the Christian."<sup>1</sup>

We read in Nehemiah 13, Tobiah was kicked out of the house of God; tithes were restored; the Sabbath was reestablished; and mixed marriages were forbidden. Are these historical events just

to be observed in the context of the Old Testament, or do we find principles that pertain to today's followers of Christ? I believe we do.

In the concluding verses of Ezra and Nehemiah, Israel is reminded that the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants set them apart as distinguished from the rest of the world. In the New Testament, Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 9). In the new covenant, Jesus charges the Church to be set apart as the light of the world.

## Nehemiah 13:15–22

<sup>15</sup> In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading *them* on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought *them* into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished *them* on the day they sold food.<sup>16</sup> Also men of Tyre were living there *who* imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold *them* to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. <sup>17</sup> Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? <sup>18</sup> Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."

<sup>19</sup> It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so *that* no load would enter on the sabbath day. <sup>20</sup> Once

or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. <sup>21</sup> Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. <sup>22</sup> And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. *For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness.*

### **Servant Leadership**

"Should the Church ever become completely indistinguishable from the world, she would no longer be able to function as its servant."<sup>2</sup>

## **The Longest of the Commandments**

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The fourth of the Ten Commandments was the longest and one of the two positive commandments. The commandment dealt with rest and reverence. After working for six days, they were instructed to rest on the seventh. This was part of the very creation of life: after six days of working/creating, God rested on the seventh. Even before this commandment was given, while the Israelites were in the wilderness on the way from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, God showed them the day of rest was a basic principle of life. They ran out of food and God promised bread from Heaven. Each day they gathered enough manna for that day and on the sixth day God provided a double portion allowing them to rest from gathering on the seventh.

The Sabbath was not only a time of rest but also a day of worship. Worship was just as important to the commandment as rest. God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

## **The Neglect of the Hebrews**

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Yet even after the restoration of the Temple and the wall, they still were neglecting the Sabbath. The day of worship and rest was commercialized being exploited for personal gain. “In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading *them* on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought *them* into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished *them* on the day they sold food” (13:15). Nehemiah reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?” (13:17).

Nehemiah commanded that the gates of the city be locked at dark before the Sabbath and not opened until after the Sabbath. He commanded the Levites to purify themselves and come as keepers of the gates and sanctify the Sabbath day.

## **Jesus’ Relationship With the Sabbath**

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Violation of the Sabbath was used more than any of the other commandments accusing Jesus of heresy. The commandment to honor the Sabbath day was defined by hundreds of restrictions legislating acceptable behavior for the Hebrew people. The second chapter of Mark records that on a Sabbath day, Jesus and His

disciples were walking among the grain fields. Some of the disciples began breaking the heads of the stalks of grain, rub out the grain, and eat. Others who joined them were looking for reasons to accuse Jesus. When they saw what the disciples were doing, they thought they had proof to charge Him. Reaping and threshing on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden by the Law. Jesus reminded them of the story of David who entered the house of God with his army who were hungry and ate the consecrated bread. Jesus answered, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28).

Jesus riles them again in the next chapter when He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and healed a man with a withered hand. He said, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or kill?” (Mark 3:4).

If the fourth commandment is to be interpreted literally for today, we are grossly violating it. On the other hand, when we ignore it completely, we are missing a great opportunity to affirm the covenant God. The Sabbath of the Old Testament foreshadowed what was to come. In the early church, the Jews who were the first Christians, continued to celebrate the Sabbath. However, the first day of the week was important because it was the day of the most significant event of history, Jesus’ resurrection. Christ is the substance of what was to come. “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16–17).



There is a difference between our day of rest and that of the Israelites. They spent the seventh day looking back on what God did. We spend the first day of the week looking forward to what God is doing. It is on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week that we can—no, that we must—shut out business, personal goals, and animosities as we focus on the Lord and let our spirits be energized and our souls restored.

## **Implications and Actions**

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The story of redemption is at the center of God's Word. God demonstrated His redemption by entering into a covenant with Abraham. God chose him and his descendants to be a distinct people engaged in fellowship with Him as a blessing to the world. Jesus' death and resurrection offered a new covenant to the Church. He was God in the flesh who lived among His creation offering new life to those who follow Him. Just as the Hebrew people were to be distinctive from the other nations so they might know that Israel's God is the true God; the Church is the light of the world bringing hope and love to all people.

In Jesus' model prayer He prayed, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). At times God's kingdom assignment is His primary calling for us to be holy as He is holy. Jesus commanded us to love God, ourselves, and others, and He commissioned the Church to make disciples of all nations. He also calls us to special relationships as mothers, fathers, and children. In the Old Testament, He set apart some as priests, Levites, and prophets. In the Church, He has commis-

sioned pastors, missionaries, teachers, and others to special assignments.

God's plan for Nehemiah was to be a cupbearer to the king, leader of the people, builder of the wall, and governor. He was ready and willing to accept God's calling regardless of the task and whatever the cost. However, God's plan doesn't just involve a leader, but all of His people. The wall was built by priests, goldsmiths, perfumers, and merchants working together to accomplish a task that could never have been completed by a few.

God's call for the Hebrew people to rest on the seventh day was unheard of in other cultures. He rebuked mixed marriages because the descendants of Abraham were to be set apart as those whose only God was *Yahweh*. They were in a covenant relationship with Him.

The apostle Paul's plea was, "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12). Paul's greatest desire was to know God's plan for his life and serve Him with faithfulness. God has a special, unique plan for each of us, including our relationships, vocations, and unique assignments. All of us are given spiritual gifts, passions, talents, life experiences, challenges, and personalities to be used for His glory. The Holy Spirit works through the Church to accomplish His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

God called Nehemiah and he responded with obedience. Are we faithful to God's unique plan in our lives?

## Questions

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1. What was God's purpose for the Sabbath day?
2. How do we as Christians obey this commandment?
3. Why did God forbid mixed marriages?
4. How did Nehemiah respond to God's kingdom assignments for his life?
5. What is the great burden of your heart and how does God call you to address it?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 402.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

# lesson 14



Easter

## What if Christ Had Not Been Raised?

### MAIN IDEA

The foundational truth of the gospel is Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead just as the Scriptures prophesied.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

If Christ was not raised from the dead, do we have any hope of eternal life?

### STUDY AIM

To understand that our confidence in eternal life is in our belief that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead just as He said He would

### QUICK READ

If Jesus was not raised from the dead, faith is impossible; our preaching is irresponsible; death is irreversible; and God is inaccessible.

## Introduction

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If Jesus died, was raised from the dead, appeared to witnesses, ascended, and promised to return, we should stop whatever we are pursuing and follow Him. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, we should quit our preaching, our faith is futile, and our hope is only in this world. Don't fool around with patronizing nonsense that Jesus was a good man, great teacher, and a moral inspirational leader. Paul wrote, "If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

The resurrection of Christ is at the heart of our faith. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

After Paul cited the witnesses to the resurrection, including himself, he posed the hypothetical question, "What if Christ has not been raised?"

## 1 Corinthians 15:1–20

<sup>1</sup> Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, <sup>2</sup> by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the

third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; <sup>7</sup> then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; <sup>8</sup> and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. <sup>11</sup> Whether then *it was* I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

<sup>12</sup> Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; <sup>14</sup> and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. <sup>15</sup> Moreover we are even found to *be* false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; <sup>17</sup> and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

<sup>20</sup> But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

## **If Christ Has Not Been Raised, Then Our Preaching Is Irresponsible**

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Paul's message was always the same whether he spoke to Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, in Jerusalem or Athens. He reminded the Corinthians he preached the good news to them; they received it and were standing on it. This is the hope on which they were saved. Yet some among them began saying there is no resurrection of the dead. Paul responded, if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised. "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (15:14). Those who proclaim such things are actually false prophets.

Cancer is a horrible illness that appears in multiple ways. We all have known those who have or still are suffering with different manifestations of cancer and many who read this may be currently dealing with this disease. What if someone claims a cure for cancer that is costly, painful and inconvenient to receive. Hopeful patients and their families will probably do whatever it takes to receive the treatment. How criminal it will be if the promise is false.

Even more serious is one who declares hope for eternal life if there is no resurrection.

I have heard folks declare they would live the Christian life even if there was no Heaven or hell. These are typically individuals who have lived lives of freedom, security, and even a degree of prosperity. This is not the case for the 80% of people around the world who live under conditions where they are constantly threatened by persecution. The rollcall of the faithful in Hebrews 11 included those who endured the mouths of lions, power of fire, faced the edge of the sword, and others who suffered mock-



ing, scourging, chains, and imprisonment. Some were stoned, others were ill-treated, afflicted, destitute, and tortured.

Paul himself suffered imprisonments, beatings, lashings, once was stoned, and left for dead. He was shipwrecked three times including one time he was in the deep for a night and a day. He said, “*I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren*” (2 Corinthians 11:26). Paul knew the cost of following Christ.

## Persecution

Persecution continues today. Leah Sharibu, a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl was kidnapped in 2018 along with the other girls at her school in Dapchi town, Nigeria, by Boko Haram. When the girls were being released and sent back to their families, Leah bravely refused to renounce her Christian faith, and who as a result continues to remain in captivity.

“If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied” (15:19).

## If Christ Has Not Been Raised, Then Our Faith Is Impossible

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Paul stated if Christ has not been raised from the dead our faith is in vain (15:14). “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (15:17).

As the time of Jesus' crucifixion was approaching, when He was with the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, He asked, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (Matthew 16:13–16). And Jesus blessed him, acknowledged his answer was given to him by Jesus' Father, renamed him Peter, and promised to him the keys to the kingdom.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, "Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval" (Hebrews 11:1–2). Some of those included Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and even Rahab. "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not received what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:39–40).

Paul taught that without the resurrection, the faith, of Peter and of those of old, would have been in vain.

## **If Christ Has Not Been Raised, Then God Is Inaccessible**

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The Bible consistently teaches that God is holy; and we are sinful. In Exodus 3, Moses came to the burning bush and God said for him to take off his shoes because this was holy ground. When Moses asked to see God's glory, he was told "you cannot see my face ... and live" (Exodus 33:20). When God gave the Hebrews the tabernacle, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies;

and even then, he only had rare access and first was required to go through rituals of cleansing. When Moses struck the rock at Meribah instead of obeying God and speaking to the rock, the Lord said, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them” (Numbers 20:12).

When Saul offered sacrifices without waiting on Samuel, the kingdom was ripped away from him (1 Samuel 13). Uzzah touched the ark of the covenant when the oxen stumbled and was struck dead (2 Samuel 6:3–11). Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne and the seraphim called to one another, “‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole world is full of His glory.’ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then Isaiah said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts’” (Isaiah 6:3–5).

God is holy and we are not.

### **Our Sinfulness**

Five Greek words are used in the New Testament to describe our sinfulness. *Hamartia* means missing the mark. *Anomia* is lawless. *Adikia* is unrighteous. *Poneria* describes us as evil or vicious. *Parabasis* shows we have trespassed or transgressed. We are accused of lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. In Romans 3:10 and Psalm 14:1–3, “There is none righteous, not even one.” “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Without Jesus' atoning death on the cross, and His resurrection, there is no freedom from sin's terrible grip. "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men" (Romans 5:18).

## **If Christ Has Not Been Raised, Then Death Is Irreversible**

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Do you remember your first encounter with death? Perhaps it was the death of a pet, or tragically it may have been a family member or friend. Mine was the death of a dog when I was a young boy. My sister and I were at my grandparents with our mother just after Christmas. My dad came later. We knew something was wrong, and it was confirmed when he said our dog died. Later we suffered the death of my grandfather. His community had a tradition that the body lay in state at the home of the deceased. That night I kept looking at his body. Pap looked as big and healthy as ever. He looked as if he could rise up and speak. But he didn't sit up and didn't speak. I realized he never would again on this earth. One of the harshest realities of death is it is irreversible. There is no coming back.

On crucifixion Friday, the hopes of the disciples were dashed. They left everything to follow Jesus. He was certainly the Messiah. Was this the time God was restoring the glory to Israel? Yet they observed His arrest, humiliation, beating, and crucifixion; and Jesus was dead, buried, and the tomb was sealed. Obviously, none of the disciples remembered the teachings of Jesus earlier that He was to be raised from the dead. Even when the women

announced the resurrection of Jesus, it was too impossible to believe.

Paul wrote, “and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

## **Implications and Actions**

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“But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). This is the turning point of history. All that happened before, looked forward to it; and all that has transpired since reflects back on it. This is God’s plan. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Our preaching is not irresponsible. Our faith is not impossible. God is not inaccessible. Death is not irreversible. Christ is raised from the dead. Jesus is alive!

## **Questions**

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1. How is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the heart of the gospel?

2. Is our faith worthless if the story of Jesus' resurrection is not true and only inspirational?
3. When was your first encounter with death? What was your most profound emotion?
4. How can we be confident in the resurrection of Jesus?
5. How do we communicate this promise with a world desperate for hope?

## **God's Kingdom Plans**

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10, ESV).

Father,

You are high and lifted up and exalted above all things. You are Holy and perfect in goodness, love, and righteousness. You, Oh Lord, are the source of all power and authority and You hold all things together by Your mighty hand. You are sovereign over all things in Heaven and on earth and You alone control all things and accomplish Your good and perfect plans. I am thankful that You participate in my life. Your Holy Word says, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you” (Psalm 32:8, ESV).

Lord, I read in Your Word how You placed a deep burden in Nehemiah's heart when he heard about the condition of Jerusalem, the broken-down walls, burned gates, and the distress of the Israelite people living there. Lord, I read how Nehemiah fasted and prayed, acknowledging Your greatness, Your promises, Your covenants, Your goodness, and Your lovingkindness. Nehemiah prayed without ceasing, confessing his sins and the sins of the people. Nehemiah prayed for Your intervention in rebuilding the broken-down walls around Your Holy city, and for the restoration of the Hebrew people living in reproach and disgrace.

Lord, like Nehemiah I pray that You will intervene, disrupt my comfort zone, tenderize my heart, and place a heavy burden

on me concerning the needs of others. I pray that I will be prepared to do the work You call me to do, no matter how big or small the task. May I abide in You and You in me, so I have ears and a discerning spirit to hear Your call. Give me courage to never let fear, doubt, or the opinion of others deter me from doing what You have planned for me to do. Remind me, Oh Lord, to daily kneel before You in prayer with a humble and contrite heart, as I quiet myself in Your presence, seeking Your wisdom and wait for Your timing. Guide me to align my will to Your will.

I pray that You will strengthen my inner being to act in obedience to Your call, always seeking Your kingdom and righteousness. Lord, You called the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2 to repent and to remember their first love, to love You and others with a heart of humility. Help me to guard against falling into the trap of living a complacent life or having a heart not fully devoted to You and to others. Instill in me a passion and love for others and an eagerness that desperately desires to serve You and love my neighbor as myself.

Lord, Your Word is all powerful and when Ezra opened the book of Moses and read to the people, they fell before You confessing their sins and worshiping You, a great and mighty God. Your Word, Oh Lord, is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates deep into my heart judging my attitudes, revealing sin, my limited faith, and my deceitful intentions. May I fall before You in brokenness as I acknowledge and confess my sin before You and seek Your forgiveness. Thank You that You are compassionate, forgiving, slow to an-



ger, and abounding in love. I am grateful that Your forgiveness is complete, and You call me to move forward in freedom and joy. May I study to show myself approved, displaying a heart of integrity, always upholding Your Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). Illuminate Your Word in my heart and help me apply it to my daily walk.

Lord, I am grateful and humbled that You, the eternal creator of all the world, would allow me the privilege to participate in Your Kingdom purposes. Just like the Hebrew people came together, working, using their talents and gifts to repair the wall in Jerusalem, You have called me to do my part, to use my spiritual gifts to serve You and others and build up Your Church in unity and love (Ephesians 4:11–12).

Your Word says “Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:12–13, ESV). May I seek only You and Your approval and may my heart break for what breaks Your heart. Your Word says, “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me’” (Matthew 25:40, ESV). Lord, I can do nothing without You, so help me to persevere as a faithful servant to You as I minister, show love, kindness, generosity, and help to those in need.

In the strong name of Jesus,

Amen

*DLB*

# Our Next New Study

(Available to use beginning June 2025)

## ***DiscipleMaking*** ***Patterns of Discipleship and Evangelism***

### **A Study of Discipleship and Evangelism**

No topic is more mentioned, advanced, written about, and centric to the contemporary church than discipleship, yet few have a clear and compelling pathway. At the same time, evangelism is promoted by pastors and pushed by evangelists, but seldom practiced in many modern churches. When asked, many church members and attenders report they have never been disciplined but wish they were. The ratio of converts and baptisms to church attenders is in a steep decline and has been for decades. Pastors and staff decry an absence of true discipleship in their congregants, yet church calendars and budgets do not reflect an intentional discipleship strategy or approach. Evangelistic efforts are sidelined and subjugated by preferred programs and personal interest.

Are all Christians or converts disciples? What is the relationship between conversion and discipleship? What are characteristics of true disciples? Is discipleship only for the original disciples of the New Testament? What is evangelism? Is evangelism a gift, calling, or position within the church? How do discipleship and evangelism fit or work together?

Evangelism and discipleship are interconnected in a unique fashion. While each can be practiced independently, the relative

success of both is enhanced when seen as two parts of the same process which, for the sake of this study, will be labeled as “disciplemaking.”

The Gospels and the pastoral letters say much about evangelism and discipleship. Despite a church landscape marked by thousands of sermons, hundreds of books, scores of church conferences, and assemblies on the subjects, confusion and complacency abound. Pastors, staff, and lay leaders have questions, engage in controversies, and harbor misunderstandings and misconceptions about these two important subjects.

Examining the call and training of the twelve, the early followers of Jesus, the Jewish and Gentile converts during the church expansion and missionary journeys will provide insight and understanding into path of conversion, spiritual growth, and completeness in Christ.

Rooted in Scripture and history, the priority of evangelism and discipleship must be realized for the church to prosper. Disciplemaking is the primary mission of the church, the mandate for the individual believer, and the goal of spiritual leadership. Now, let us explore the meaning and consequence of DiscipleMaking.

Lesson 1	Go Make Disciples!	Matthew 28:16–20
Lesson 2	Who Is My Disciple?	Luke 14:25–35
Lesson 3	Converts, Believers, and Disciples	1 Corinthians 16:15–18; Acts 18:1–8; 11:22–26
Lesson 4	You Must Be Born Again	John 3:1–9
Lesson 5	Baptism: The Spiritual Catalyst	Mark 1:4–5, 9–11; Acts 8:9–13, 34–39

Lesson 6	Grow Up! Becoming Mature in Christ	2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18
Lesson 7	The Path to Spiritual Maturity	Colossians 1:9–11; 4:2–4, 28b–29; Ephesians 4:11–16
Lesson 8	Family First: The Context of Discipleship	Ephesians 5:21–6:4; Matthew 12:46–50; 19:27–30
Lesson 9	Get in the Habit! Spiritual Disciplines and Practices	John 15:6–10;; Hebrews 12:10; Acts 13:2–3
Lesson 10	Dynamic Doctrines	2 Thessalonians 2:13–17; Hebrews 5:11–13; Romans 16:17–18
Lesson 11	Discipleship and Ministry Leadership	Luke 6:12–16; 8:1; 9:1–6; 10:1–17
Lesson 12	Proclaim the Good News	Mark 1:1–4; Luke 4:42–44; Acts 5:42; 11:19–21
Lesson 13:	Fishing, Farming, and Families	Matthew 4:18–19; 1 Corinthians 3:6–9; Galatians 4:4–7
Lesson 14	Ambassadors for Christ: The Ministry of Reconciliation	2 Corinthians 5:11–21

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