PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

NEHEMIAH

RENEW x REBUILD

SUNDAY SCHOOL

14 WEEKS | SPRING 2018

IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH
The End.

Nehemiah tells us the end of the Old Testament story. The significance of the events is huge. Think about it. God made a promise to Abraham that his family would have a land and would multiply, and that he would be a blessing to the nation. This was partially fulfilled. The promised was renewed through Moses, and then finally with David. David saw the land, he saw the multiplication, but the eternal blessing to the nations was hard to see.

The kingdom was divided, conquered and the people were taken as prisoners...exiles in a foreign land. Just before the curtain closes on the Old Testament, the people return to the land and rebuild. This sets up the events of the New Testament where Jesus comes into a disrupted Jerusalem, and finds a Judaism that has drifted far from God’s original covenant design.

The key characters in this story are Nehemiah the great leader, and Ezra the prophet/scribe. The story is filled with great leadership savvy and plot twists. However, mainly it is a story of hope. God keeps His promises. And when He does, how will we respond? That is the end of the story.

Looking forward to studying God’s Word together.

Blessings,

Steven Smith, Senior Pastor
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**SUNDAY SCHOOL LEADERS GUIDE**

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READ THE TEXT
Begin by reading the text which corresponds to the week’s lesson.

REVIEW THE TEXT
Take time to unpack the text.

  CONTEXT- **Historical background** is provided to help understand the passage.
  CONTENT- **Concise observations and expert commentary** are provided in order to help students understand the meaning of the passage.
  CONCLUSION- **Summary statements** explain the main ideas of each passage.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT
Questions for reflection and in-class discussion.

RESPOND TO THE TEXT
A place for students to respond in class to various activities aimed at personalizing the text’s meaning.
INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

- During the renewing and rebuilding that happened under both Ezra (Temple and people) and Nehemiah (walls), the Persian empire was the dominant world power.
- The Persians had a much more generous foreign policy than both the Assyrians and Babylonians who preceded them. Like any dominant nation, they wanted as little resistance as possible. Often their means of achieving this was to let the people they conquered return to their home land, offering them a significant amount of autonomy.
- While the Israelites were allowed to return and work on repairing Jerusalem, they still faced great opposition from surrounding powers.
- Remember that the main line of defense for any ancient city was its walls. A city without walls was completely vulnerable. Therefore their task in Nehemiah was vital and urgent.

LITERARY CONTEXT

TRACING THE MESSAGE

I. PREVAILING THEMES:

- The Lord hears prayer.
- The Lord works providentially.
- The Lord protects his people.
- The Lord is merciful and faithful to His promises.
- Worship is at the center of the life of God’s people and it includes the willing, joyful giving of their resources.
- God’s people need to be on guard against their own moral weakness. [1]

II. AREAS OF EMPHASIS:

Old Testament
- The Temple
- The Law
- The City Walls

New Testament Applications
- Worship
- Word
- The Church

III. THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

God is so good that He keeps his promise to Abraham in that while the whole nation is dispersed and only exiles remain, He raises up Nehemiah to respond to His sovereignty with determination. The story of Nehemiah provides believers a model of passionate, determined discipleship. Nehemiah, a man who shares God’s passion for his glory, is used of God to bring about a unity among God’s people, a renewed focus on His Law, and a people repositioned to worship God in his presence. The message of Nehemiah contains clear implications for the church, its leaders, and the enduring mission of God in the world.
After the reigns of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, though warned by many prophets, the people’s hearts were hardened toward God and the northern Kingdom (722BC) and the Southern Kingdom (597 & 586 BC) were taken into exile, leaving Jerusalem in ruin. But in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), God orchestrated the return of his people to the land through the work of Zerubbabel (538BC), Ezra (458BC), and Nehemiah (433BC).

From a theological perspective, the return of the Israelites from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem showed the Jews that God is faithful. They were the continuation of the pre-exilic Jewish community, and God was not done with them. Both Ezra and Nehemiah emphasize God’s continuing providential care and redemptive plan.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT MAPS
LESSON 1

INTRODUCTION

CH 1:1-4

READ THE TEXT

Today's Text: Nehemiah 1:1-4

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

Nehemiah’s Prayer

4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.
REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nehemiah, meaning “the Lord has comforted” was a common name in Jewish history. Nehemiah evidently held the role as cupbearer to the King. This role was designated to someone who would protect the King against poisoning by pre-tasting his food and drink, especially his wine.

The Month of Chislev runs from mid-November to mid-December on our calendars.¹

For more information on the overall historical context for Nehemiah, see Context Guide. (p.5-7)

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Old Testament storyline is read chronologically from Genesis through Esther, the first 17 books of the Bible. These are known as the historical books of the OT. Nehemiah (just before Esther in our Bibles), technically ends the OT storyline since Esther doesn’t further the story. Though the wisdom literature and prophetic books follow Nehemiah in our Bibles, they were written at various points during the OT storyline, not after.

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT

The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

NEHEMIAH & JESUS

Nehemiah cares about the wall because the wall will protect the people. Nehemiah cares about the people because God loves them, because God redeemed them, covenanted with them, and promised to raise up the one who would crush the oppressor for them. If there's no wall, the people will be oppressed, which could lead to them being dispersed, either because they all flee or because they get carried off captive. But if there is a wall, they have protection from enemies without and can enforce the law within. And if they can stand against enemies and live in accordance with Torah, they can preserve the line of descent that flows down from David to Jesus.²
Lesson 1

CONTENT

(1) Nehemiah is a God-fearing Israelite and a cupbearer to the Persian King.

V1 Nehemiah, meaning “the Lord has comforted,” was a common name in Jewish history.

V1 By way of introduction, what do we know about this book? Nehemiah is the central figure in the book. While it contains some of his own records, he is not the author of the book. The same author probably wrote Nehemiah and portions of Ezra. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C., 13 years after Ezra arrived. He returned for another visit sometime between 433 and 423 B.C. He may have made several journeys between Persian capitals and Jerusalem in this period of 20 years.3

Think of all the reasons Nehemiah must have had to NOT get involved. What are some of them? (comfort, security, selfishness, apathy, busyness)

V1 What do we know about this character, Nehemiah? Nehemiah was a “layman” (non-priest) who served as cupbearer to the King Artaxerxes Longimanus, who ruled from 464 to 423 BC. It is likely this position gave Nehemiah a measure of influence others did not possess.

V1-2 The Hebrew month of Chislev (mid-Nov to mid-Dec). The text gives us the date by mentioning “the twentieth year” (of the reign of Artaxerxes) which would’ve been 444 BC. Shushan (Susa in the text) was the capitol city of Persian empire and the site of the King’s Winter Palace.6

V2 Hanani, meaning “The Lord has been gracious” is evidently one of Nehemiah’s biological brothers.

(2) Nehemiah receives a report regarding the devastation of Jerusalem.

V3 Apparently things are in dire shape as the city has no walls. Two waves of exiles had returned, one with Zerubbabel (~539 BC) and one with Ezra (~458 BC). It seems that an earlier attempt at rebuilding the walls was made (Ezra 4:12) but either wasn’t finished or was destroyed (Ezra 4:23). In any case, it’s clear that the walls are currently broken down.

V4 Though fasting was only required once per year for Jews during the Day of Atonement, Nehemiah prays, fasts, and mourns over the state of Jerusalem, deeply burdened for His people.

At this point in the story, what do you think Nehemiah will do next after hearing this news? Fight? Curse? Take the first available flight to Jerusalem?
CONCLUSION

The Author’s Main Point: Nehemiah, the exiled Jew and cupbearer to the King, received news of the great trouble and shame among his people, their city, and its walls, and turned to God with weeping, fasting, and prayer.

Our Main Point: As disciples of Christ, being conformed to His image, we ought to begin to absorb God’s heart for his people and mission. When Christ’s name is blasphemed, when His church refuses to pursue holiness, when His Great Commission remains unfulfilled, it should break our hearts and drive us to prayer.

FROM THE PASTOR:
Nehemiah’s life might be best described in Psalm 5:8
“Lead me Oh Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make my way straight before me.”
-Dr. Steven W. Smith

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Isn’t it amazing that God had Nehemiah in this position next to the King for such a time as this? Let’s recount some of the other characters God placed in key positions to carry out his plans. Can anyone think of one?

Why do you think Nehemiah “asked them concerning the Jews?” He was an established cupbearer to the King! Why would he care what’s going on there? Wouldn’t ignorance be bliss here?

Nehemiah wept at the news. What do we know about the state of someone’s heart when they weep? Would you be willing to share a time when you experienced or witnessed this type of anguish?
RESPOND TO THE TEXT

STEP 1 Make a List

“So what are some things happening in our world today that break God’s heart? Let’s list some of them. As we write them on the board, jot them down in your notes.”

STEP 2 Personalize It

“Now, I want you to choose one thing from this list and we’re going to pray silently for one minute. During this time, I want you to ask God to give you His heart for this matter. Ask him to help you see this from His perspective.”

STEP 3 Model It

Teacher, close in prayer by mentioning the listed things, asking God to intervene according to His faithfulness. And ask Him to help us by His Holy Spirit to take on his heart for his world, his people and his mission.

HOME 22:6

SING | Amidst your normal family worship songs, check out “The Word of God” (Seeds Worship)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVrR5Y2Wzh4&index=6&list=PLDmN4vH6jdksLSuIJ182m9JTaidJrHEVA

READ | The Jesus Storybook Bible contains a fantastic chapter on Ezra and Nehemiah.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_G94Esw8nkl

PRAY | Try using Operation World to help your children develop a heart for others.
www.operationworld.org

SOURCES
1 Wiersbe, Be Determined, p.20
2 https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ezra-nehemiah-your-place
3 ESV Study Bible
READ THE TEXT

Today's Text: Nehemiah 1:4-5

4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 5 And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments..."

REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

• For more information on the overall historical context for Nehemiah, see Context Guide. (p.5-7)
LITERARY CONTEXT

- The Old Testament storyline is read chronologically from Genesis through Esther, the first 17 books of the Bible. These are known as the historical books of the OT. Nehemiah (just before Esther in our Bibles), technically ends the OT storyline since Esther doesn’t further the story. Though the wisdom, literature and prophetic books follow Nehemiah in our Bibles, they were written at various points during the OT storyline, not after.

- Within the book of Nehemiah, 1:1-3 contains introductory material, 1:4-11 contains Nehemiah’s prayer, and the chapters that follow continue the story. Here, our focus is verse 5, which is the beginning of Nehemiah’s prayer.

- This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.
  i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)
  ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT

- Remember that the the story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history in that the return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls displayed God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel and set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT

(1) Nehemiah’s brokenness leads him to prayer.

V5 This is the first of twelve moments of prayer depicted throughout the book.

Let’s take a moment to look at two important elements in this week’s passage.

Brokenness and prayer. Brokenness leads to prayer. We often think of brokenness as a negative idea. Our culture, after all, values put-together-ness, not brokenness, right? As much as we see the opposite in Scripture, we seem intent on esteeming those who seem to have everything figured out and heading in the right direction. And yet, in Jesus’ most famous sermon he was the one to declare “blessed are the poor in spirit” and “blessed are those who mourn.” His point, of course, was not a sad and hopeless existence, but a warm, feeling soul that recognizes the brokenness of our world, and mourns.

The prophetic books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Lamentations were written to God’s people during their exile, before they returned to the land. Ezekiel proclaimed that God wanted to give his people “a new heart, a new spirit.” He said he would remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)

Do you ever wonder if your heart has grown cold over the years? You no longer feel deeply as you once did?
Lesson 2

“There is no safe investment in love. To love at all is to be vulnerable. If you avoid all entanglements & lock your heart in a coffin of your selfishness, it won’t be broken but it’ll become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”
-C.S. Lewis

The fact that Nehemiah is broken over the state of the city, what does this tell us about him?

Often times the commercialism and entertainment culture of our country serve to distract us from kingdom perspective. How would you compare the way you react when your favorite sports team loses to when you hear about the persecution of brothers and sisters sharing the Gospel amidst unreached people groups?

“The most important reformation of all is the reformation of the church. When the people of God return to Him and submit themselves anew to the Word, then the Lord moves in powerful ways among them. Submission to the Word is achieved each day through repentance and our renewal of our vows to serve Him, and we also help foster reformation when we do what we can to ensure the Word is preached faithfully in our churches.”
-Devotional, Ligonier Ministries

What would it look like for a reformation of sorts to break out among us as a church in the coming months as we study Nehemiah? If God were to bring about the brokenness, restoration, prayer, unity, and cooperation in our church, what types of things would need to happen?

(2) Nehemiah’s prayer begins with praise.

V5 Notice how the book opens and closes in prayer.

V5 This is a lengthy prayer, but do you see how Nehemiah begins? With praise.

V5 “O Lord God of heaven.” This is a term Nehemiah uses four times in the book to address God.

V5 “The great and awesome God.” Nehemiah describes God as the one who is in heaven, the one who is great, and the one who is awesome.

V5 But Nehemiah also praises God for what he does. He keeps his Word. (“keeps his covenant”) How does he keep his Word? Well, God had made it clear to Israel that if they would obey his commands, he would bless them richly, but if they did not, he would chasten them.
Why were God’s people in misery and their city in shambles?

CONCLUSION

The Author’s Main Point: In his brokenness over the state of his city and people, Nehemiah begins a moving prayer by ascribing worship to God.

Our Main Point: In times of brokenness and need, we should remind ourselves to turn to God first with worship, then petition.

- It reminds us that our need is not greater than God’s power.
- It reminds us of our position before him: children in the hands of a just and loving Father.
- It reminds us to call to mind an eternal (not earthly) perspective of our troubles.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Tragedy and suffering give us a rare, pure look into our hearts. We are either moved by something or we are not. We are burdened and broken or we are not. Can a person will themselves to being heart-broken over something? What’s something that breaks God’s heart and yours as well?

Tragedy and suffering give us a rare, pure look into our hearts. We are either moved by something or we are not. We are burdened and broken or we are not. Can a person will themselves to being heart-broken over something? What’s something that breaks God’s heart and yours as well?

Nehemiah was broken, sad, and concerned. If he had failed to begin his prayer with worship, it could’ve spiraled quickly into a pity party. What would that have revealed about his heart? When we respond to God in our brokenness, does it matter how we approach him? What does it tell us about our hearts?

“If we love God and the advance of His glory, we will feel deep sorrow when the advance of the gospel is halted, and we will be disciplined and diligent to fast and pray.”

-Jim Hamilton
Nehemiah rightly declares that God keeps His Word. Can you think of a time of trouble when remembering God’s promises in His Word sustained you or comforted you? Would you be willing to share?

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

DEVELOPING A NEW PRAYER HABIT

I would like for you to take about 5 minutes and write in your Bible, journal, or even into your phone. Here is what I want you to think about and write. If you were to begin a prayer right now by giving praise to God in your own words, how would you start it? I want you to write it out.

Nehemiah has an opening few lines here of worship. What would be your 2-3 lines of worship to God? As a way of getting you started, think of (1) WHO God is and (2) WHAT He has done. I’m not going to make you read these or anything. Take a couple of minutes and write out the beginning of a prayer... but a prayer that begins with worship.

HOME 22:6

SING | Amidst your normal family worship songs, sing the classic “How Great Is Our God”
READ  | Read Nehemiah 1:5 and then Operation World’s page on the USA.
       | http://www.operationworld.org/country/usa/owtext.html
PRAY  | As you pray, try asking the kids to chime in one at a time “God we praise you because

SOURCES

1  https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/weeping-gods-people/
Today's Text: Nehemiah 1:4-11

4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 5 And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ 10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”
REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Nehemiah 1:4-11 contains a prayer of Nehemiah. Fortunately, this prayer is one of the most straight-forward, understandable passages in the book. As you read and study this week, keep in mind Nehemiah is approaching God in a certain time and context. He appeals to God’s promises. Remember that God’s promises to Israel included the Abrahamic Covenant, a land, a people, and a blessing to the world. While New Testament Christians won’t interact with God in the exact same way (as Nehemiah lived under the old covenant), there is much to learn here about how the church (his new people) is to cry out to God.

LITERARY CONTEXT
This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)
ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT
The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT
As we have previously noted, Nehemiah’s brokenness moves him to prayer. Last week, we looked specifically at verses 4-5 and saw Nehemiah’s pure heart for God. Nehemiah does not have a small view of God. Nehemiah does not see God as a sort of magic genie who may or may not come through on his behalf. He’s not wishing upon a star. He appeals to God on the grounds of who he knows God to be. “Great and awesome God who keeps his covenant.” This week, let’s examine the prayer in its entirety to see how Nehemiah addresses God on behalf of his people.

Nehemiah’s prayer contains four major parts.

(1) Praise (v5)

V5- And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments

Quickly flip to the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6.
9 Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,[a]
10 Your kingdom come, your will be done,[b] on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread,[c] 12 and forgive us our debts,
   as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation,
   but deliver us from evil.[d]
How does Jesus’ model of prayer parallel Nehemiah’s?

“One of the reasons Nehemiah is able to pray like he is able to pray is he has some really staunch beliefs about who God is. Some of the things we see in this prayer is he believes God is a covenant-keeping God. He believes God keeps his promises. That’s what he believes about God. If you ask Nehemiah, “What do you believe about God?” he says, “I believe God keeps his promises.”” –Matt Chandler

(2) Confession (v6-7)
Nehemiah takes the opportunity to confess sin. In this passage, he confesses personally and on behalf of Israel corporately.

Is confession a normal part of your prayer life? Is it something you have to be reminded to do or have you created a habit of confession?

Is there a particular sin you find yourself confessing again and again? Have you identified some of the most enduring sin struggles in your life? Or does it feel like something different every day?

In his book “Abba’s Child,” Brennan Manning asks, “Is there anyone I can level with? Anyone I dare tell that I am benevolent and malevolent, chaste and randy, compassionate and vindictive; selfless and selfish, that beneath my brave words lives a frightened child, that I dabble in religion and pornography, that I have blackened a friend’s character, betrayed a trust, violated a confidence, that I am tolerant and thoughtful, a bigot and a blowhard, that I hate hard rock music?”

Is there someone in your life who know the “real you” struggles and all?

Have you ever sat in a Sunday School class or Small Group and thought to yourself, “if these people only knew how sinful and rotten I have been, they would never allow me to be here“?
Confession seems to be a bit of a lost discipline in the Christian life. We prefer to convince ourselves of our maturity, our graduation from sin. And yet, where there is no confession of sin one of three things must be true: (a) we have convinced ourselves we are no longer sinful or (b) we have deemed our sin trivial enough to not be confessed or (c) we have convinced ourselves we can hide our sin from God.

Which is more difficult, to confess when we’ve wronged a spouse, a friend or family member, or to confess to God that we have disobeyed his Word or dishonored His name? How so?

(3) Covenant (v8-10)

To what is Nehemiah appealing? Nehemiah knows that God has promised:

(a) Leviticus 26: 27-28, 33  27 “But if in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me, 28 then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins… 33 And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.

(b) Deuteronomy 28:64  64 “And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.

(c) Deuteronomy 30:1-5  “And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, 2 and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, 3 then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. 4 If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you.5 And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.

Revisit for a moment our discussion about confession. Must we confess our sins to God with hopelessness and paralyzing guilt? Nehemiah humbly confesses and hopefully clings to God simultaneously. This is the same attitude we ought to have in prayer. Of course, we do not appeal to God using an Old Testament promise to Israel. We appeal to God based on his promises to us in Christ.

God, we confess we have not acted lovingly to our neighbors. Remember your promise, O God. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9

God I confess I am anxious about the future. I struggle to trust your plan. Remember your promise, O God. “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose, which is to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” Romans 8:28-29
God, I confess I am plagued by guilt, falling to some of the same perpetual sin struggles in my life. Remember your promise, O God. “God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” Ephesians 3:20 “He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Philippians 1:6

(4) Petition (v11)

Finally, Nehemiah beckons God to intervene. What is it that Nehemiah wants?

V11—“and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

After all the praise, confession, and appealing to God’s promises, we might expect for Nehemiah to ask for (a) expanded influence with the King or (b) a large year-end bonus or (c) good health in the coming years. What does Nehemiah want? He wants what God wants. He has aligned his affections with the heart of God. Should we be surprised that God blesses this and places his hand of favor on Nehemiah and his work?

What does it say about our faith when we only come to God with petition?

How can we teach the next generation (our own children, or those in our children and youth ministries) how to pray with depth?

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: Nehemiah’s prayer of brokenness reveals his heart. He loves and fears God, he is sorrowful over the sins of Israel, he has aligned his heart with the will of God, and he asks God to act according to his promises.

Our Main Point: Our prayers reveal our hearts. As true followers of Christ, our lives should demonstrate our high view of God, our daily need for his mercy and grace, our trust in his promises, and our commitment to carrying out his will.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Matt Chandler once polled his congregation about the richness of their personal prayer lives. He found that most feel quite deficient in this area. Would you be willing to rate your personal prayer life? Are you satisfied with it? I wish it were more ______________.
Let’s ask a personal question. It is quite alright to not share your deepest of struggles with everyone in class. But if you are comfortable, would someone be willing to share one thing, anything which they have confessed to God this week?

When someone reports of a confessed sin, ask them how it felt to confess it.

Often we pray for things that are personal preferences. We ask God to help us receive a promotion at work. We ask God to allow the seller of a home to accept our offer. Of course, we rightfully recognize that these things may or may not be within God’s will, so we humbly tell God that whatever the outcome, we will trust his will. However, there are many things that we know for certain are God’s will. What are some of these?

“God typically answers prayer that is offered by the person who is totally committed to him. Answered prayer is the natural overflow of a committed life. Nehemiah’s prayer did not move the hand of God because he said the right words the right way. God accepted Nehemiah’s prayer because God accepted Nehemiah. It was not what was being said as much as it was who was talking.”
–H.B Charles, Jr.

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | The classic hymn “Be Thou My Vision” is a tremendous hymn to memorize and sing as a family. In fact, it features the type of adoration, brokenness and appeal to God that we have discussed in this lesson.

Here’s a fun modern remake:  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGbNDf32RCs

Here are the original hymn lyrics:  https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/ns/345

READ | Take time to read through this list of God’s New Testament promises to his people. Ask family members if there is a favorite verse/promise in this list. https://bible.org/article/selected-promises-god-each-book-bible

PRAY | What would it look like to cry out to God on the grounds of these very promises? Ask family members to pray as they normally do, but try to mention these promises. In this way, we are appealing to God by his own Word.

SOURCES
1 https://resources.jackgraham.org/resource-library/devotionals/whats-the-focus-of-your-prayers
2 https://www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/sermons/rebuilding-with-prayer
3 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.86
4 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.103
Today’s Text: Nehemiah 2:1-8

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.” And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.
CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- The Month of Nisan- March-April on our calendars
- King Artaxerxes- ARTAXERXES I LONGIMANUS, the King of Persia, 464–424 B.C. Rehum wrote to him advising that the Jews were rebuilding the wall and would no longer pay taxes. He responded by ordering the work to stop. However, he was later more supportive of Ezra and gave him a letter allowing all who wished to return to Jerusalem with him to do so. He ordered Ezra to take to Jerusalem all the articles of worship for the Temple, and empowered him to appoint magistrates and judges for all of Trans-Euphrates. This is recorded in Ezra 4:7–8, 11, 23; 6:14; 7:1, 7, 11–12, 21; 8:1. During his reign, Nehemiah came to Artaxerxes to ask his permission to rebuild Jerusalem. He agreed and appointed Nehemiah governor of Judah during the 20th year of his reign. Nehemiah returned to the king in the 32nd year of his reign (Neh. 2:1; 5:14; 13:6).

- Beyond the River- When Nehemiah asks for letters to governors “beyond the river” he was likely referring to those provinces on his route to Jerusalem, west of the Euphrates River.

- Asaph- “A Hebrew name; Nehemiah may have known him.” Nehemiah asked the King for a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the King’s forest. The wood given by Asaph would be “necessary for strengthening the walls, which would need the longer beams provided by the tall cedars of Lebanon rather than shorter beams available from the shorter trees around Jerusalem.”

LITERARY CONTEXT

This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)
ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT

The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT

(1) Brokenness in prayer leads Nehemiah to action.

V1 The phrase “the month of Nisan” (March-April on our calendars) alerts us that about 4 months have passed from the time he had heard the news about Jerusalem (“in the month of Chislev” 1:1). The question that looms at this point of the narrative is “what will Nehemiah
do in response to his brokenness?“ He has turned to God in prayer. He has confessed the sins of his people. Will Nehemiah remain in a state of prayer and brokenness?

V2 Nehemiah wore his emotions on his sleeve in this instance and the King could tell something was bothering him. Nehemiah took the opportunity to act.

Nehemiah was risking a lot in this situation. During this time period, servants were not to appear downcast in the presence of the King, so as not to make the King sense that there was any dissatisfaction with him or his kingship. But this was time to act.

Think of all that is at stake for Nehemiah. What do you think drives Nehemiah to be willing to act, putting all the comforts of his current circumstances in jeopardy?

V3- Nehemiah answers the King. He’s sad because Jerusalem is in ruins.
V4- The King asks Nehemiah what it is Nehemiah wanted to do in response to this sorrow.

Can you believe that the King responded in this way? Why do you think his initial response was favorable and not defensive?

V5-6 Nehemiah makes his first big request. He asks to return and rebuild the city. And the King agrees.
V7- But Nehemiah doesn’t stop there. He makes another request. He asks that the King send letters along with him, allowing for safe passage on his journey to Jerusalem.
V8- The King granted Nehemiah’s request.

“Because Nehemiah left his royal standing to protect the Jewish people, some Bible commentators believe Nehemiah is an Old Testament type (a foreshadowing or picture) of Jesus. Likewise, Jesus left his royal position in heaven to come to Earth (see Philippians 2:5–11) to bring salvation and security to all people. Nehemiah’s mission released the nation from its fear of the enemies surrounding them and allowed them to focus on worshiping God and living lives pleasing to him. Jesus’ mission also freed people from fear—fear of Satan and his power over death and fear of God’s judgment due to sin—and gave them the freedom to worship God (see 2 Corinthians 3:7–18; Hebrews 2:14–15; 1 John 4:17–18).”

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: Since God’s good hand was on him, Nehemiah’s courageous request to restore Jerusalem was granted by King Artaxerxes.

Our Main Point: Since God is faithful and sovereign, we can prayerfully obey his Word and do his will, trusting him with the results.
REFLECT ON THE TEXT

In Nehemiah’s case, there was something that needed to be done. It was right and necessary. Can you think of a time when there was something that needed to be done and it was right and necessary and yet it caused some fear and anxiety?

What propels you to do the right thing even when it may cost you greatly?

God is using Nehemiah to conduct a massive, global work. For most of us, God is not calling us to rebuild fortresses in a struggling nation. What is the mission God has called all of us to as Christians?

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | Teach your kids the old hymn, “Trust and Obey”
A Free Sing A Long: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDTleprCDtU
Lyrics: https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/582

READ | Read Nehemiah 2:1-8 during a family time and ask some of the same questions that were asked during Sunday School. For those with smaller kids, try pulling up a picture on your phone, tablet or laptop as you read the story.
http://bibleencyclopedia.com/picturesjpeg/nehemiah_before_the_king_and_queen.jpg

PRAY | Even when it is hard to obey and honor Jesus, we can trust Him. Let’s pray that God would give us a heart that breaks for the things that break God’s heart. And let’s ask him to give us the courage to obey his will.

FROM THE PASTOR:

“What God wants from us is a heart of responsive obedience.”
-Dr. Steven W. Smith

SOURCES

1 New International Encyclopedia of Bible Characters, 2001. ARTAXERXES I LONGIMANUS
2 Zondervan NIV Study Bible, Nehemiah 2:8
Today's Text: Nehemiah 2:9-20

9 Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. 10 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

11 So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. 12 Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. 13 I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. 14 Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. 15 Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.
17 Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.” 18 And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work. 19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” 20 Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”

**REVIEW THE TEXT**

**CONTEXT**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Sanballat the Horonite- SANBALLAT was governor of Samaria, under the Persian empire, when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from Exile. He was also Nehemiah’s main opponent during the rebuilding of the wall (Neh. 4).

Tobiah the Amonite- Heb., ‘the LORD is good.’ 2. "Tobiah the Ammonite official’ was probably a representative in Judah of the Persian overlords. Together with Sanballat the Horonite and others, right from the start, he was steadfastly opposed to Nehemiah’s work of rebuilding Jerusalem (Neh. 2:10). This was probably generated by the fact that Tobiah and his associates had real power in Jerusalem and saw Nehemiah as a direct threat. Although Tobiah had married an Israelite woman (Neh. 6:18), he was not of Israelite origin and he could see that only those with a true tribal pedigree would be allowed leadership roles in the rebuilt Jerusalem and Judah. Nehemiah knew his work was God’s work and made it clear that Tobiah had ‘no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it’ (Neh. 2:20).

Geshem the Arab- 2:19 Geshem. Inscriptions from Dedan in northwest Arabia and from Tell el-Maskhutah near Ismailia in Egypt bear the name Geshem, who may have been in charge of a north Arabian confederacy that controlled vast areas from northeast Egypt to northern Arabia, including the southern part of the Holy Land. Geshem may have been opposed to Nehemiah’s development of an independent kingdom because he feared that it might interfere with his lucrative spice trade.

Valley Gate- 2:13 Valley Gate. See 3:13. According to 2 Chronicles 26:9 Uzziah fortified towers in the west wall, which overlooked the central valley between the Hinnom and Kidron Valleys. Excavations in 1927–1928 uncovered the remains of a gate from the Persian period that has been identified as the Valley Gate.

Dragon Spring- 2:13 Jackal Well. The Hebrew (en hattannin) is “spring of the dragon,” using the same Hebrew word as Genesis 1:21, referring to the chaos creatures of the water (see note on Genesis 1:21). The NIV and RSV emend the word to read tannim (“jackals”). It is possible that this may be the major spring of Jerusalem, the Gihon, and that the name “Tannin” is derived from the serpentine course of the waters of the spring to the Pool of Siloam.
Dung Gate- "The Dung Gate" (ša’ar hā’ašpōt; cf. Neh. 3:13 – 14; 12:31; 2 Kings 23:10) led to the rubbish dump in the Hinnom Valley. It was situated about five hundred yards from the Valley Gate (3:13).  

Fountain Gate- 2:14 Fountain Gate. Possibly in the southeast wall facing toward En Rogel. According to 2 Kings 20:20 (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:30), Hezekiah diverted the overflow from his Siloam tunnel to irrigate the royal gardens (2 Kings 25:4; see the article "Hezekiah's Tunnel") located at the junction of the Kidron and Tyropoeon Valleys.  

King's Pool- 2:14 King's Pool. Hezekiah may have diverted the overflow from his Siloam tunnel (compare 2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:30) to irrigate the royal gardens (see 2 Kings 25:4) located outside the city walls at the junction of the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys. The King's Pool was probably therefore the Pool of Siloam (see 3:15) or the adjacent Birket el-Hamra.  

LITERARY CONTEXT  
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REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT  
The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God's people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God's enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).  

CONTENT  
(1) Nehemiah tactfully and carefully inspects the state of the city. (v9-16)  
“There was more than protection to be gained from the military escort. It meant an arrival in style, impressively reinforcing the presentation of credentials to the neighboring governors, and making very plain the change of royal policy (see on 1:3; 2:2). It may help to explain why Nehemiah's enemies resorted to bluff instead of force in their campaign against him.”  
V9-10- The text says that Nehemiah had come to “seek the welfare of the people of Israel.” That's what worries Nehemiah's opposition.  

Are we known as this as a church? Are we working for the welfare of God's people (the church)? Are we known as those who seek the welfare of others outside the church? Sanballat and Tobiah are right. This is exactly what Nehemiah is up to.
V11-16 Nehemiah wanted to survey the destruction.

Look at the graphic below to see the route Nehemiah took that night.

**JERUSALEM REBUILT UNDER EZRA & NEHEMIAH**

Take special note of the temple. While much of Nehemiah’s focus is on the walls, the true mission is to restore the rightful worship of God. The walls will serve as protection for a vibrant, worshipping people of God once more. Many on the rebuilding team would do their work in view of the temple mount.

While Nehemiah is not primarily written as a book of leadership principles, we see a tremendous number of examples of strong, effective leadership. Make note that Nehemiah is patient. Remember how he was broken and prayerful before approaching the King boldly? Here, he is reflective and methodical before he boldly declares, “it’s time to act.”

*What might the people have thought if Nehemiah came to town and immediately began rebuilding and telling others to join him?*

“God called Nehemiah to the task and then empowered him to do it. We can trust in God to help us accomplish His will.” — Max Lucado
Lesson 5

When a piece of “news” is reported via social media, what is your personal process for deciding whether or not you will share it, affirm it or express your disapproval of it publicly? Have you ever spoken too soon, too impulsively, only to wish you had gathered more facts? Nehemiah wants to know the true state of things before he calls others to join.

(2) Nehemiah casts bold, unwavering vision for the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

v17- Nehemiah reports on the problem. Notice he doesn’t begin his speech about what they will do. He reminds everyone of an unacceptable reality: the city is destroyed.

Sometimes we are so accustomed to dysfunction in the Church and in the world that we become numb. The people, of course, can see that the city is in disarray, but Nehemiah arrives on the scene to say, “Wake up. Look at this place. This does not honor God.” Can you think of something in our world, a wrong that needs to be righted, and yet we seem to have accidentally accepted it as normal?

In the same way that Nehemiah walked around the city to assess things, we ought to keep our eyes and ears open to injustices and dysfunctions in our world and in the church.

Have you ever been on a mission trip or been a part of something in which a certain injustice of the world was clearly revealed to you? What was it like? Did it change your heart? How did you respond? What about after it was over?

v17-18- Nehemiah says, “Come let us rebuild.” The people respond, “Let us rise up and build.” Nehemiah makes note of the fact that God’s hand is on him, and that the king has allowed for this. These two things provide evidence that God is working.

V19 Here is the first sign of opposition. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem oppose them, suggesting that they are rebelling against the King.

The way in which we, as Christians, passionately pursue obedience and holiness along with our zealous participation in God’s work ought to appear foreign to the world. When our adversaries say, “What are you doing?” we can boldly respond:

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. - Matt. 16:25

“Do they know we’re Christians by our love? Do they see the gospel in our marriages? Do they marvel at the behavior of our children? Do they see in us the love than which there is none greater, our being willing to lay down our lives for our friends? Brothers and sisters in Christ, “Come, let’s rebuild Jerusalem’s wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace!””

–Jim Hamilton

“A healthy church will inform believers that the results of holy living will not necessarily be financial gain but rather godliness that honors our Lord.”

–D. A. Horton
But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. – Eph 5:3

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. – Matt 5:10-12

V20- Nehemiah declares forcefully that God is in control here and that the opposition has no claim on the land.

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: Nehemiah surveys the destruction of Jerusalem and in the face of opposition, boldly declares God’s plan to restore the city.

Our Main Point: In full view of the injustice and impurity around us in the Church and in the city, we must boldly proclaim and protect truth, even amidst opposition.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Which type of person are you? The type of person who impulsively “speaks her mind” without fear of ramifications? When this type of person is filled with the Holy Spirit, how can this be helpful in God’s Church? When this person is operating within their flesh, how can this harm others? Or are you the type who tends to shrink back in the face of conflict, finding reasons why it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to speak? When this type of person is filled with the Holy Spirit, how can this be helpful in God’s Church? When this person is operating within their flesh, how can this harm others?

When we become disturbed about something, how do we know if this is something that God has given us a burden for or if it is simply a personal preference? How do we know when to take a stand for truth or when to spend more time deliberating?

Is there something even today God has given you a heart for? Has God given you a heart like Nehemiah’s toward an injustice in our world? Toward an impurity in the Church? What role will we play in being Christ’s hands and feet?
RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | Check out Seeds Family Worship Song “Trust in the Lord”
It is available through your IBCLR login on RightNow Media: https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/KidsSeries/198852#10

READ | Read the story of Paul preaching boldly in Acts 17:16-34. Like Nehemiah, he saw things that dishonored God (idols), and was prepared to respond.

PRAY | This week, pray that God would give us eyes to see the world and the Church the way he sees it. Ask him to break our hearts for the things that break his. Ask him to lure our hearts to His Scriptures each day, that we might be rooted in His Word. And ask Him for the courage we need to stand up for truth.

SOURCES
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2 New International Encyclopedia of Bible Characters TOBIAH
3 NIV 1st Century Study Bible, 2014. 2:19
4 NIV 1st Century Study Bible, 2014. 2:13
5 NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 2016. 2:13
7 NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 2016. 2:14
8 NIV 1st Century Study Bible, 2014. 2:14
9 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.88
10 Lucado Life Lessons Study Bible Nehemiah 2:11-3:32
Today’s Text: Nehemiah 3:1-4:14, for the sake of time we will only read 4:1-14

4 Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 2 And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves?[b] Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” 3 Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” 4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. 5 Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

6 So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

7 [c] But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. 8 And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.
10 In Judah it was said, [d] “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” 11 And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” 12 At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” [e] 13 So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14 And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to 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 homes.”

**REVIEW THE TEXT**

**CONTEXT**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the people responsible for rebuilding various sections of the wall. See the graphic below to see where the various workers were stationed for Nehemiah’s building program.

**LITERARY CONTEXT**

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**CONTENT**

(1) Restoring the people of God takes cooperation from the whole people of God.

Chapter 3 is quite technical. It provides the detailed account of the people and projects involved in the rebuild. Although many will be intrigued to learn more about each of the people and groups involved in the rebuild, it is best to summarize this section.

Nehemiah provides a foreshadowing of the church. Here, we see people from every background and skill set working together toward this restoration. By way of application, we thwart the work of God when we remain on the sidelines and delegate it to full-time ministers. We thwart the work of God when we choose to neutralize our spiritual gifts by refusing to participate.
We are not working on the rebuilding of physical walls, but what are things we’ve been tasked with as a church? Are you participating?

This is where Nehemiah and the New Testament collide. Nehemiah worked to rebuild a people that needed a place, a city, a temple, and a structure in which to properly honor God. Under the new covenant, we (the church) are God’s temple. We are the place in which God’s presence and glory dwell. And each of us is a priest, set apart for the work of God, regardless of our vocation.

1 Peter 2:9-10  
9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Ephesians 2:19-22  
19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,[d] but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by[e] the Spirit.

Have you ever met someone who said, “I love Jesus, but I hate the church”? How does understanding God’s people as a temple inform our response to that statement? If God has a collective purpose for us to accomplish together, what does it say of someone who insists they can follow Jesus without the Church?

(2) God’s people respond to intensified persecution with prayer and perseverance.

4:1-3 Sanballat and Tobiah mock the progress of God’s people.

4:4-5 Nehemiah prays that (a) God would hear his prayer. (b) God would give them over to be conquered. (c) God would not forgive them.

4:6 They continued with the building process.

4:7-8 The threats against the work intensify and Israel is effectively surrounded by adversaries.

4:10-12 As expected, when the threats increased, the people questioned.

4:13-14 “Nehemiah discourages an attack by mobilizing people to defend the weakest parts of the wall.” 1
READ • REVIEW • REFLECT • RESPOND

Lesson 6

Refer to the graphic below to locate some of the places addressed here as part of the rebuilding.

JERUSALEM REBUILT UNDER EZRA & NEHEMIAH

Think of the steep challenge the people of God face. First, they are asked to risk their livelihood to participate in the rebuilding of the walls. As we will learn in the coming chapters, evidently this was extremely challenging work done by a people already facing financial and physical hardship. But now, Israel’s adversaries have threatened to halt the work by taking their very lives.

All of a sudden, we see where we really fit in this story. To this point, we may have liked to identify ourselves with Nehemiah, the courageous adventurer insistent on restoring the city for God. If you compared this with your own life, are you usually the Nehemiah who courageously proceeds forward in faith? Or are you like the people, who said “There’s too much rubble. We won’t be able to do it.”?

Now the people will have to (1) continue the mission of rebuilding the walls and (2) be prepared for war.
As Christians, God calls us not only to obey his commands (John 14:15), but to resist the devil (James 4:7), reject false teaching (2 John 7-9), and contend for the faith (Jude 3). How does Israel’s position here remind us of the Christian life?

Last fall, during our series in the book of James, we discussed the idea of faith and works. Dr. Smith often reminded us that a “workless, worthless” faith is one that doesn’t save. An authentic faith, therefore, is one that produces new affections, new actions, good works. This moment for Israel is a similar moment of truth. Is their faith authentic? Or, like the seed that was sown on the rocky ground, will Israel be “the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt 13:20-21)?

Look at the way Nehemiah encourages the people at the end of this passage. He tells them:
(a) Not to be afraid.
(b) Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.
(c) Fight for your family.

Alan Redpath says that Nehemiah’s response to the opposition is to keep building, keep praying and keep watching. How will the people continue the fight? Well, they must remember the greatness and awe of God. This theme prevails throughout all of Scripture. God is good, faithful, and powerful. And yet, as we have seen so many times throughout Scripture, man’s tendency is to forget the mighty works of God.

There is such a stark contrast between Nehemiah (seeking the welfare of others) and Sanballat and Tobiah (seeking to halt the work of helping others). Are you a person who is sincerely concerned for others? Or do you use people for your own personal gain?

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: When opposition to the mission intensifies and the people’s spirits are downcast, Nehemiah redirects their attention to God and arms them for battle.

Our Main Point: Whether opposition be physical or spiritual, we must wholly cooperate and prayerfully persevere to fulfill our part of God’s mission.
REFLECT ON THE TEXT

When we step outside our own American context, we recognize that our brothers and sisters around the world face far greater physical persecution. In an honest heart-assessment, would you be willing to die for your faith?

Is it really that important? When we’re faced with the prospect of having to sacrifice something for God, we often think of any possible reason as to why it’s simply not that important. “Someone else will do it. I’ll do it later,” we say. So, what do you think? Is the work of honoring God in every crevice of our heart that important? Why or why not? What about the work of sharing the Gospel with your lost friends? Fortifying our children in the Word that they may stand against the lies of the world?

Today we learned that it takes the whole people of God to do the work of God. What do you believe to be your primary spiritual gifts? How are they being used within the Church to strengthen the family? Where are they being used outside the Church to share the truth and love of Christ with our neighbors?

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | Check out Seeds Family Worship Song “Refuge and Strength”

It is available through your IBCLR login on RightNow Media: https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/KidsSeries/136067#7

READ | Read Nehemiah 4:1-14 as a family

PRAY | This week, before praying, focus in on the part of the phrase in verse 14. “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.” As a family, everyone share a few ways in which you remember God being great and awesome. As you pray, thank God that because he is great and awesome, we can trust in him even when we face opposition.

SOURCES

1 NIV Zondervan Study Bible 4:12-14
Today’s Text: Nehemiah 4:15-23

15 When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. 16 From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. 18 And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. 19 And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. 20 In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

21 So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 22 I also said to the people at that time, “Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.” 23 So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.
REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
The passage this week does not contain any new references which need further cultural or historical explanation.

LITERARY CONTEXT
This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)
ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT
The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT

(1) WORKING HARD: The faithful work of God’s people is marked by intense, purposeful labor.

Take a moment to verbally recount the story of Nehemiah. Broken by the state of Jerusalem, he risked his life to petition the king to be able to return and restore God’s city. The physical task itself is monumental, as Jerusalem is in shambles. Not only did he have to rally the people for this task, but they would have to build with spears and shields in hand to protect the work from the many enemies resolved to terminate the mission.

The appearance of intense persecution transitioned the project from hard work to harder work.

V15 Although they knew the threat, they continued to build.

What form of mocking and threats do you experience as a Christian in Little Rock?

V16-18 As opposed to every builder being armed, they returned to a more sustainable approach. Some built and some guarded. And yet, in some sense, each builder still had to be prepared to fight and protect at a moment’s notice.
V19-20 Since the people were separated (and vulnerable in that way), the trumpet blast would alert the people to gather in order to fight more effectively.

Let’s make an important observation about the work happening here:

There is no sacred/secular divide present here. As a Church, we have mistakenly decided that real work for God happens in the church or through missionary efforts accomplished by full-time clergy. This fallacy is quite harmful. It convinces believers that their marketplace work (where they spend the majority of their time) is somehow less important in God’s Kingdom. They compartmentalize by separating their money-making enterprise from their faith. Their work, therefore, is often stale and lacking in fulfillment. The church operates in its fullness when its mechanics, lawyers, stay-at-home parents, accountants, teachers work diligently to the glory of God every day in every sphere of society.

“The Reformation was, primarily, Scripture moving from the priest who could read and hold it to becoming something the laypeople could have in their hands. Even in the pews people could read the Bible, could interact with God, feel a freedom and a priesthood. This next transition, right now, is moving toward realizing that God has called us to be a priesthood of all believers, that there’s a parish that every priest lives in and has to think about. That’s what I think is happening right now as Christians are waking up to the question, what does the gospel look like applied to every specific area of the world? There’s a lot of work to be done in areas like fashion or business or advertising, places where you would never think the gospel has any relevance. It actually might have a lot to say about it.” 2  -Gabe Lyons

How does the work of God’s people here in Nehemiah encourage you in your vocation? Have you accidentally devalued your “day job” by labeling it secular and not sacred?

(2) WORKING LONG: The faithful work of God’s people is marked by sustained, unrelenting effort over long periods of time.

V21- The people usually worked from sun up to sun down. Here, they evidently worked past sun down, until the stars came out.

Many times, we are fond of the idea of hard work, if only for a season. When is the last time you worked on something from sun up to sun down and beyond? Why were you working this diligently?

V22-23 After a tiring day of work, they remained ever diligent, even through the night. Here is the second important observation here: Grace is not opposed to effort.
Another interesting phenomenon of our day is a subtle notion among some believers that to work at something, to put forth intense effort is dangerous because you might become a legalist. On one hand this is understandable because (especially in the South) there is a culture of works-based salvation. Ask a southerner on the street if they will go to heaven with they die, and there is a good chance you might hear something like, “I’m working on it.” He has wrongly convinced himself that if he works hard enough toward noble things, he will be saved. In order to combat this false gospel, some believers have suggested we counsel disciples to simply “let go and let God.” “He’s the one who saved you and He is the one who will grow you,” they declare. Of course, they are right in one sense. Our salvation is according to grace, and our hope of growing in Christ’s likeness is dependent on his grace. Where they have overstated it, however, is that they have supposed that growth and obedience require no effort on the part of the believer.

Nehemiah gives us a clear picture of God fulfilling his mission through the grit and grind of effort and obedience. This is not just work. This is not just hard work. This is grueling, life-threatening work. But we see time and time again in Nehemiah, they are not working so that God might call them great and awesome. They are working as a response to the fact that God IS great and awesome.

Dallas Willard so clearly explained this issue when he said, “Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning.” So, as Christians, we need not to be afraid of working hard. In fact, a Spirit-empowered, Gospel-motivated Christian, working at everything as if unto the Lord will most certainly outlast others in fortitude and toughness. For where we are weak, he is strong.

*When is a time when you recently worked doggedly on a task or mission? What motivated you?*

*What might you say to a ‘lazy Christian’ who seems to repeatedly choose comfort over exerting him or herself?*

Most extraordinary accomplishments in our culture require this kind of relentless, consistent resolve over an extended amount of time. Advanced degrees are not awarded following a 6-month challenge. Medical cures are not discovered after one day in the lab. Marriages are not saved overnight. Addictions are not defeated overnight. Reaching our neighbors for Christ, working for justice in our city, and spreading the Gospel to all nations similarly require sustained tenacity. Will the Church, who is increasingly satisfied only when gratification is instantaneous, rise up and work?

“Don’t forget that a new year doesn’t guarantee a new you. Growth won’t be any easier this year. We still need grace and grind!”

Trip Lee (@TripLee)
How would you rate your overall work ethic? How are you doing (or how did you do) with building work ethic into your children? Is there any way to develop work ethic later in life?

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: During the height of adversity, the people of God enduringly and prayerfully labored day and night.

Our Main Point: Regardless of the task God has called us to or the opposition to it, disciples must be willing to be propelled by God and His Word to work resolutely to the glory of God.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Place yourselves in the shoes of the people of Judah. Can you imagine these long days and nights? Can you imagine the physical ailments and emotional anguish? Who do you know in your life who has exemplified this type of fortitude for God? Let’s share a few stories of faithful people we know.

Is our church characterized by this type of fortitude?

Think again about the motivation behind the work of Nehemiah. He is resolved that the rightful worship of God by His people must be restored. Nehemiah says, “We are his people, we must rebuild.” Since we are not rebuilding walls for God, what goals motivate you? “We are his people. We must ____________________________.”

How are you personally arranging your life to pursue these noble endeavors?
RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | Check out Seeds Family Worship Song “Whatever You Do”
It is available through your IBCLR login on RightNow Media:
https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/KidsSeries/198852#13

READ | Read 1 Corinthians 10:31 as a family.

PRAY | Ask each family member to pray that they can bring glory to God through what they are called to do the following day or week.

SOURCES

1 https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/12-basic-principles-for-faith-and-work/
3 http://stevenwsmith.net/2014/05/good-news-about-the-bad-news/
Today we will be discussing Nehemiah chapter 5. Just as things were settling down a bit from the outside adversaries, there was a major dispute among the people. While the Israelite men continued rebuilding the wall, their families complained of unjust treatment. Before we unpack the text, let’s read once again Nehemiah’s response to the injustice.

**Today’s Text:** Nehemiah 5:6-12

6 I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. 7 I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them 8 and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say. 9 So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? 10 Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. 11 Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” 12 Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.”
CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
In order to understand the meaning of Nehemiah 5, we must have an understanding of the economic situation at this time.

The economic crisis faced by Nehemiah is described in Ch. 5, in the middle of his major effort to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Since this building project lasted only 52 days (6:15), some scholars have considered it unlikely that Nehemiah would have called a great assembly (5:7) in the midst of such a project. They suggest that the assembly was called only after the rebuilding of the wall, taking v. 14 as retrospective. Nevertheless, the economic pressure created by the rebuilding program may have brought to light problems long simmering that had to be solved before work could proceed. Among the classes affected by the economic crisis were the landless, who were short of food (v. 2), the landowners compelled to mortgage their properties (v. 3), those forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates because of oppressive taxation (v. 4), and those forced to sell their children into slavery (v. 5). ¹

LITERARY CONTEXT
In Nehemiah 1–2 we saw that Nehemiah was a man of prayer and Bible study who took action to be used of God in answer to his own prayers. In chapters 3–4 we saw that Nehemiah exemplified Christ-like valor as he led the people of God to rebuild the wall at great risk to himself. Now, in Nehemiah 5 we will see him living a wartime lifestyle on a millionaire’s budget. ²

This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)
ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT
The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT

(1) Nehemiah learned that the Israelite leaders had been taking advantage of the people.

In the previous chapters of Nehemiah, the major obstacles to rebuilding were agitators Sanballat and Tobiah. This makes logical sense as they were pagans and had a vested interest in Israel’s demise. Would you be surprised to find out in Chapter 5 that one of the hindrances to the rebuilding project came from within the family of God?
The Jewish elders and nobles of wealth and power recognized that the impoverished and under-resourced were under even more duress during the rebuilding, as many of the men were participating in the rebuilding project. Instead of showing compassion and mercy, they sought to profit off of their circumstances by selling them unfavorable loans, which many likely viewed as their only option.

The story of Nehemiah serves to remind us of the greed and selfishness each of us possess. So what was actually happening? Why was Nehemiah angry? (V1-5)

5:1–5 Jewish brethren. Perhaps this refers again to the nobles who would not work and had alliances with the enemies (see note on 3:5). The people were fatigued with hard labor, drained by the relentless harassment of enemies, poor and lacking the necessities of life, lacking tax money and borrowing for it, and working on the wall in the city rather than getting food from the country. On top of this came complaints against the terrible exploitation and extortion by the rich Jews who would not help, but forced people to sell their homes and children, while having no ability to redeem them back. Under normal conditions, the law offered the hope of releasing these young people through the remission of debts which occurred every 7 years or in the 50th year of Jubilee (Lev. 25). The custom of redemption made it possible to “buy back” the enslaved individual at almost any time, but the desperate financial situation of those times made that appear impossible. 3

“Nehemiah’s charge is therefore that (in our terms) the lenders were behaving like pawnbrokers – and harsh ones at that – instead of like brothers.” 4

Why do you suppose the leaders and elders participated in such unethical practices?

How often do you think and talk about money and stewardship? Do you have a strategy for how to invest your money? Have you ever asked yourself whether something you do with your money harms other Christians?

(2) Nehemiah became angry and brought charges against the leaders.

So often (especially in our country) we place a high value on justice. We are guilty of responding to the poverty around us with remarks like, “That’s what they get for not being willing to work,” or “When you participate in things like x, y, z, why are you surprised when you end up poor?” In essence, we are content to let them suffer because it’s only justice rolling down. Everyone gets what they deserve.

The problem with this approach is, it forgets the Gospel. It resides in the hearts and minds of people with Gospel-amnesia. “We deserve our success because we’ve worked for it,” we say. “The under-resourced have no rightful claim to my disposable income because it is rightfully earned.” But what did Jesus say? He says blessed are the merciful, for they shall
be shown mercy. (Matthew 5:7) He says in view of God’s mercy, to offer our lives in service to Him. (Romans 12:1-2).

When a Christian refuses to show mercy and compassion to others, what does it say about his own understanding of grace?

Have you ever stopped to wonder what your life would be like if God treated us the way we treat the lessfortunate? What if God said, “Let justice roll down,” or “they got themselves into this mess, so they have to live with it.”

Friends, we have received mercy upon mercy. We have done far more to offend the heart of God than our suffering neighbors have done to offend society. And since God in his mercy spared us from what we deserved, we must be marked as a people who enthusiastically give and give out of the grace, mercy and compassion we have been shown.

Was Nehemiah’s response, “When you’re poor, these are the unfortunate consequences. There’s nothing I can do,”? No. Nehemiah cares for his people.

V8 Nehemiah’s Response: “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!”

V9-11 Nehemiah’s Response: “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.”

Look how Nehemiah appeals to the fear of God (v9). If they were walking in the fear of God, they wouldn’t settle for this type of treatment of the people. Nehemiah is not only concerned with whether this type of taxation was permissible under the Law, but also with the hearts of the offenders. Evidently, it was not forbidden to demand an interest against a loan (Deut 24:10-13) but in challenging times the idea here was not to exercise your right, but to exercise compassion with brothers and sisters.

(3) The leaders responded honorably.

V12-13 The leaders agree to Nehemiah’s demands and give their word to do as they promised.

5:13 I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.
(4) Nehemiah demonstrated the compassion he demanded of others through his personal generosity.

Nehemiah, who was recognized as the governor of Judah, did not take the tax that was normally allotted to someone in his position. For example, as governor he was expected to entertain persons of influence and pay the salaries of 150 officials (v17). Evidently, the costs for these expenses were supposed to come from a certain tax Nehemiah calls “food allotted to the governor.” But Nehemiah refused to collect this tax from his people, meaning, he took on these costs as a personal expense. It is clear Nehemiah spent his time working on the wall and not working for personal gain or expanded wealth.

“Nehemiah is as generous as he is wealthy. He feeds 150 people at his table. Apparently he believes that God has sovereignly given him plenty, believes it his responsibility to steward what he has been given rather than divest himself of it, and believes that he can use the excess at his disposal to advance God’s kingdom.” 6

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: Nehemiah demonstrated his mercy and compassion for his people by disallowing oppressive business practices and implementing a governing culture of generosity and sacrifice.

Our Main Point: As Christians, a people marked by forgiveness and mercy, it is mandatory that we respond to struggles of those inside and outside the church with compassion, generosity and sacrifice.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT (5-10 Minutes)

Imagine yourself in the story of Nehemiah for a moment. Imagine you confronted these leaders and said, “Come on guys. Really? We’re trying to rebuild God’s city and you’re capitalizing on the suffering of your own people?” What might they say to justify their decision? Have you ever been guilty of using justifications like that?

Examine your own heart. Is your heart warm toward those in need? Toward the weak and oppressed? In what ways has your heart grown cold or apathetic to those less-fortunate around you?

Who are some individuals or groups who are struggling and could use a hand? Who are the neglected in our city? In our church?
RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | Check out Christy Nockels “By Our Love”.
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_MD6bBW1AU
Lyrics: http://www.christian-lyrics.net/christy-nockels/by-our-love-lyrics.html#axzz520OQ9sbl

READ | Romans 5:7-9 “Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. 8 But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. 9 And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation.” (NLT) Even when we offend God with our sin, he is kind and gives us endless mercy. What does this tell us about how we should treat others?

PRAY | Parents, ask “Who should we pray for tonight?” This gives your kids a chance to recognize where God has given them a concern for others. Pray for those who are struggling inside and outside the church. Ask God to give you:

a. a heart of compassion AND

b. the courage to be generous and merciful toward them

SOURCES
1 NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible 5:1-21
2 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, 124
3 Macarthur Study Bible NKJV Nehemiah 5:1-5
4 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.104
5 http://stevenwsmith.net/2012/10/repent-before-you-call-for-repentance/
6 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.133
Today’s Text: Nehemiah 6:1-14

Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. 3 And I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” 4 And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. 5 In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. 6 In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Geshem[a] also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. 7 And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.” 8 Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” 9 For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God,[b]strengthen my hands.
10 Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.” 11 But I said, “Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?[c] I will not go in.” 12 And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. 14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono—Ono. Located 27 miles (43.5 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem and 7 miles (11 kilometers) southeast of Joppa, near Lod (Lydda). It was in the westernmost area settled by the returning Jews (7:37; 11:35; Ezr 2:33). There is disagreement among scholars as to whether Ono was part of Judah. ¹

Open letter—Letters during this period were ordinarily written on a papyrus or leather sheet, rolled up, tied with a string and sealed with a clay bulla (seal impression) to guarantee its authenticity. Sanballat obviously intended that the contents should be made known to the public at large. ²

Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel—An otherwise unknown prophet who presumably summoned Nehemiah on the pretext that he had a prophetic message for him. ³

The prophetess Noadiah—unknown other than the reference here.

LITERARY CONTEXT

This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)

ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT

The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).
CONTENT

(1) Conspiracy 1: Deception (v1-3)

To this point in the story, Nehemiah has faced opposition via intimidation, physical threats from outside the camp. He dealt with greed and selfishness inside the camp. And now, his adversaries outside the camp want to try to distract Nehemiah from the work by luring him away.

At this point, the wall is virtually completed. With a finished wall (and gates, etc.), the Israelites could become a real force, capable of a revolt.

V1-2 Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem attempt to lure Nehemiah to a neutral area to talk.

V3- Nehemiah knew they hoped to harm him, so he declined, and kept working. Some scholars believe it may have been an attempt to kidnap him. Notice how Nehemiah wisely pointed to his priorities rather than accusing them of hostility.

Have you ever been in a situation like this? Perhaps someone wasn’t trying to kidnap you, but someone was trying to deceive you for their own benefit. How did you know the people involved didn’t have your best interests at heart?

Nehemiah’s response demonstrates not only his discernment to recognize their deceitful plan but also his laser focus on the task at hand. Because he knows for certain this mission is his calling, he cannot be distracted from it.

Are you a people-pleaser? So many of us are so uncomfortable with people disagreeing with us, we are willing to compromise in order to gain their acceptance. Be honest, would any of you think to yourself, “If I could just go up there and reason with these guys, I think they’ll find I’m a pretty good guy, and they’ll get on board.”?

(2) Conspiracy 2: False Accusation (v4-9)

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem now bring false charges against Nehemiah in hopes that this will lure him away from the work.

V5-7 They sent an open letter. (see historical context)

The open letter accuses:

a. The nations are saying…

b. And also Geshem is saying…

c. The Jews wish to rebel.

d. That’s why you’re rebuilding the wall.

e. You (Nehemiah) want to be their king.

f. You’ve set up prophets to appoint you (Nehemiah) as King.

g. The King will hear about this and so you should meet up with us.
So what are the grounds for this accusation? “People have been saying.”

V8-9 Nehemiah responded by speaking the truth.

Remember the lengthy accusation? Nehemiah’s response gets to the point:

a. None of these things are true.

b. You have made them up in your own mind.

Nehemiah believes he knows why they are starting these rumors. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem assume these rumors will frighten God’s people, they will “cause their hands to drop” and that the work will not be finished.

Have you ever faced a false accusation like this? What was it like? How did you respond?

Nehemiah’s heart is pure. He doesn’t waiver. Is your life single-mindedly focused on God? Or are you dreading the day when someone finds out your hidden improprieties?

(3) Conspiracy 3: False Prophet

v10- Finally, Nehemiah is approached by a prophet from inside his own people. His request:

“Come live in the temple since there is a threat on your life.”

But Nehemiah knows, “To enter and shut himself in the Holy Place would have been a desecration of the house of God and would have caused people to question his reverence for God. Shemaiah was the son of a priest who was an intimate friend of Nehemiah. This plan would give them grounds to raise an evil report against Nehemiah, who was not a priest and had no right to go into the Holy Place (cf. 6:13). It could also make the people question his courage (v. 11).”

V11-14 Nehemiah has “connected the dots” and knows what is happening. Tobiah and Sanballat have hired this man to speak a false prophecy to Nehemiah.

How did Nehemiah know not to follow this false directive?
“You want to know the will of God? Know the Bible. He has revealed His will. You want to know how to tell when someone is or isn’t in line with the will of God when they claim to reveal the will of God? Evaluate their claims by the Scriptures. Are they saying what the Bible says? Nehemiah’s knowledge of the Scriptures enables him to discern what is really going on…”

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: When Nehemiah’s adversaries attempted to halt the work by manipulating Nehemiah with various kinds of deception, Nehemiah resisted, exercised discernment, and remained resolute in the work.

Our Main Point: When our enemy uses all means of deception to distract from our calling to live for Christ, we can remain resolute by remembering God’s Word and yielding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Can you think of some lies Satan tells us in order to distract us from living for Christ? How do these lies work in taking our eyes off of Jesus?

Nehemiah responds to the temptation by saying that he is busy with important work that must not be compromised. He wouldn’t come off the wall. Is this the kind of resolve we feel toward the things God has called us to? What does it reveal about our faith when Satan tempts us, and instead of clinging to the important work of pursuing holiness, and obeying God’s Word, we give into temptation?

Many forms of temptation or distraction are clearly forbidden by Scripture. So long as we are students and retainers of the Word, we can stand for truth. But what do you do when the situation is less black and white? Have you ever been in a situation where it wouldn’t have been explicitly sinful to participate, but it would not have been wise? How did you know it wasn’t right?
RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | Check out “Your Word In My Heart (Psalm 119:9-11)” from Seeds Worship

Here’s a link to the song with some hand motions on RightNow Media:
https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/KidsSeries/136097#5

READ | Retell the story of Nehemiah facing these three types of deception. Read Psalm 119:9-11 as a family and discuss the importance of knowing God’s Word by heart.

PRAY | Pray that God would give us discernment when Satan and others try to distract us from honoring God and glorifying Jesus with our lives.

SOURCES

1 NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 2016. “Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono”
2 NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 2016. 6:5
3 Zondervan NIV Study Bible 6:10
4 Macarthur Study Bible NKJV 6:10
5 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.143
In today’s text, we read of the completion of the walls. For the sake of time, here is a selection from today’s text to get us back into the story.

**Today’s Text:** Nehemiah 6:15-19

15 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. 17 Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah’s letters came to them. 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to Tobiah, and his son-in-law Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. 19 Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

**Today’s Text:** Nehemiah 7:1-4

Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, 2 I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. 3 And I said to them, “Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is
hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.” 4 The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

No less than 52 days later—in less than two months—the project was completed (read Nehemiah 6:15). The sturdy stone wall was totally reconstructed, new gates were built and hung, and everyone rejoiced! Oh, they had plenty of challenges along the way, they had numerous obstacles from without and within, but each one was overcome as the job was finished in record time. All the leaders’ work of preparation paid off because the tasks were organized so well ahead of time. As the old saying goes, Nehemiah planned his work then worked his plan. 1

In Chapter 7, Nehemiah records the people who returned to Jerusalem using a census. There is much to be said about this list, especially when compared to Ezra’s nearly identical list from Ezra 2. For more information on these lists, see this helpful article by Jim Hamilton. http://jimhamilton.info/2010/06/27/are-there-errors-in-the-bible/

LITERARY CONTEXT

This week we finish the section of Nehemiah focused on the walls and move into the second section of the book, which focuses on the restoration of the people of God.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)

ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT

The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT

(1) THE FINISHED WORK: The walls were completed in 52 days.

The wall was completed incredibly quickly, in just over seven weeks.

V15- “So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.”
Did you notice how little attention is given to the completed wall here? Why do you suppose the text moves so quickly to talking about Tobiah and the corruption among the people?

“In many ways, our goal is not to find a new purpose for our work, but to recognize that the work we are already called to, the work that is right in front of us, is God’s good means of spreading his glory throughout the world.”

- Courtney Reissig

One of the most satisfying moments in life is when we have worked unwaveringly toward a noble calling and we finish the task exhausted. When we look back, however, what we see is that God’s grace, empowerment, and gifting carried us farther than our own efforts ever could have. What is so satisfying about this? Well, for one, there is no regret. With whatever courage, perseverance, tenacity and skills the Lord gave you, you expended every last ounce of it. You will never have to wonder if the reason you didn’t succeed is because you lost focus or became lazy. And yet, with all the efforts you made, the overwhelming sense is that God’s grace was greater still than all our efforts.

Whether it be striving for excellence in your job, pulling out of debt, restoring a marriage, Jesus beckons his followers to work resolutely for God’s glory. Let’s get in the game. The beautiful thing about working diligently for the Lord is, as believers, we do not work in order to GAIN God’s approval. Rather, we have been approved by God through the work of Jesus on the cross, and it is out of that approval that we enthusiastically work for his glory.

(3) THE FINISHED WORK: Counting and enlisting the people.

Why do you think Nehemiah would be so detailed to give us such a list of people in Chapter 7?

Chapter 7 gives us a glimpse into what is coming next. God desires true worship to be restored so there is mention of Levites and singers. God desires single-minded, faithful leaders and Nehemiah appoints this type of man. God wants families to be holy and fruitful so family units are mentioned here. Finally, and perhaps most profound is that Nehemiah’s “immediate concern was to get his people rightly oriented, sure both of their inheritance and their calling.” God is working here through Nehemiah to preserve the line, or at least the documented line. When the Messiah comes, it will be important to demonstrate that He was from the tribe of Judah and the line of David.
Let’s pause for a moment and remember where we are in the storyline of Nehemiah.

**Chronology of Nehemiah**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Month/Day</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanani brings Nehemiah a report from Jerusalem (20th year of Artaxerxes)</td>
<td></td>
<td>445-444 B.C.</td>
<td>1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah before King Artaxerxes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah arrives to inspect Jerusalem walls</td>
<td></td>
<td>445</td>
<td>2:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall is finished</td>
<td>6/25</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>6:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People of Israel gather</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>7:73-8:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People of Israel celebrate Feast of Booths</td>
<td>7/15-22</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>8:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People of Israel fast and confess sins</td>
<td>7/24</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>9:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah returns to Susa (32nd year of Artaxerxes)</td>
<td></td>
<td>433</td>
<td>5:14; 13:6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSION**

**Author's Main Point:** God used Nehemiah and his people to rebuild the walls in just 52 days.

**Our Main Point:** In view of God’s faithfulness to fulfill his promises to Israel, we can rest in the peace and assurance that our present joy and future hope are secure in Christ.

**REFLECT ON THE TEXT**

Let’s recount how far we’ve come in this Nehemiah Series. Who can tell the story of Nehemiah (to this point) in 1-2 minutes? Act as if someone you are talking to has never heard the story of Nehemiah and asked you, “What’s the story about?”

What has stood out to you so far? Has there been a “most memorable moment” from Nehemiah to this point? What has been an important truth or point of reflection for you as a result of going through Nehemiah?

How is your life different as a follower of Jesus as a result of going through Nehemiah?
**RESPOND TO THE TEXT**

**NEHEMIAH TRIVIA: TEAM CHALLENGE**

Divide the class into two teams. Today we are playing Nehemiah Trivia. What is at stake? Bragging rights. Each team has 15 seconds to deliberate and decide on a collective answer. If the team answers incorrectly, the other team may steal.

**TEAM 1**
1. Who visited Nehemiah and told him the news about Jerusalem?
   a. Some of those who had escaped captivity.
   b. The prophetess Noadiah.
   c. Sanballat and Tobias.
   d. One of his brothers and some men from Judah.

2. What was Nehemiah’s position at the time?
   a. He was interpreter of the king’s dreams
   b. He was an engineer.
   c. He was cupbearer to the king.
   d. He was a scribe.

3. How did Nehemiah respond to the news that was told him?
   a. Wept and mourned
   b. Fasted
   c. Prayed
   d. All of the above

4. Who was the king whom Nehemiah served?
   a. Ahab
   b. Amraphel
   c. Artaxerxes
   d. Arioch

5. Nehemiah asked the king for letters to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and a letter to?
   a. Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest.
   b. Sanballat the Horonite.
   c. Tobiah the Ammorite official.
   d. Gesham the Arab.

**TEAM 2**
6. What did Sanballat, Tobia and Gesham accuse Nehemiah of?
   a. Stealing from the king’s forest.
   b. Prophesying falsely in the name of the Lord.
   c. Rebelling against the king.
   d. Stealing timber that was owned by them.

7. When Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry:
   a. But they did nothing more at that time.
   b. All plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.
   c. All plotted together to kill Nehemiah.
   d. But God sent a fire through their camp and they were burned to death.

8. How did Nehemiah respond when Sanballat and Geshem sent letters to Nehemiah asking him to meet them?
   a. I will cease work immediately and meet you at a time and place appointed by you.
   b. I will cease work tomorrow, and meet you at a time and place of my choosing.
   c. I am doing a great work and I cannot come down.
   d. I will send my brother down to meet with you.
HOME 22:6

SING | Become familiar with a fantastic hymn entitled “Facing a Task Unfinished”
Here is the song with lyrics embedded:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=32&v=zOpt_bulJxY

READ | In lieu of reading the account of Nehemiah completing the work of rebuilding the walls, you might watch the Ezra/Nehemiah section of “What’s in the Bible.” It is, of course, designed for young children, but you will find that it is quite informative even for adults. While watching, have Nehemiah open and talk through the sections we’ve covered so far in this series.
Here’s a link to What’s in the Bible: Ezra and Nehemiah: https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/KidsSeries/662#1

PRAY | What are the tasks God has called you to that he has used you to accomplish? Thank God for working among you and ask him to continue and finish works in progress in your life.

SOURCES
1 Swindoll, https://www.insight.org/resources/daily-devotional/individual/make-your-plan-and-work-your-plan
2 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.111
3 https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart_16_01/
And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on
his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. 17 And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. 18 And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

**REVIEW THE TEXT**

**CONTEXT**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**Water Gate**- Near the Gihon Spring on the eastern side of Jerusalem (cf. 8:16; 12:37). ¹

**Book of the Law of Moses**- There are at least four views about what this book represented: (1) a collection of legal documents, (2) the collection of priestly writings, (3) the laws from what we know as the book of Deuteronomy or (4) the Pentateuch as a whole (Genesis – Deuteronomy). Ezra could certainly have brought back with him the Torah, i.e., the Pentateuch, which is the view now favored by most scholars. What we recognize as the books of the Torah, and the Torah itself, would likely have been compiled over time from individual documents (scrolls, tablets, etc.) that had been archived and repeatedly taught and recopied since the time of Moses. ²

**Feast of Booths**- Feast Of Tabernacles (Exod 23:16; Lev 23:39-43), both a harvest festival and a reminder of the wilderness wanderings symbolized by people living in tents and booths (vv. 15-17). It was on the 15th of the month, which gave nearly two weeks for preparation. This was another visual link with the exodus and thus a reminder of the mighty acts of God. ³

**LITERARY CONTEXT**

This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the restoration of the people.

i. **The Walls (Ch 1-6)**

ii. **The People (Ch 7-13)**

**REDEMTIVE CONTEXT**

The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).
CONTENT

(1) HEARING: The Word of God is central to the restoration of the people.

Reading the Law was one of the first things the people did upon returning to Jerusalem. Think about it. The walls were finished and the people had returned, what did Nehemiah do next? The people needed to return to God and they did it by his word.

Why didn’t Nehemiah just tell the people to pray for 7 days straight, asking God what he wanted them to do next?

V3- The people were attentive to the Word of God.

“And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law”

Look at the response of the people:

a.  The people stood in honor of God’s Word.  (v5)

b.  The people responded “Amen, amen.”  (v6)

c.  The people worshipped God with their faces to the ground.  (v6)

The people were deeply moved by hearing God’s Word. Their souls were dry and parched, and the Word of God was providing the truth and nourishment they needed to come alive again with worship and vibrancy for God.

Do you share a similar passion for God’s Word? These people possessed only a fraction of what we hold today as the completed Bible. Do we long for its reading and long for it to be preached that we might encounter God? Why or why not?

(2) DOING: Careful obedience is central to the restoration of the people.

As the people read and understood the Word, one of the things they read about was the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles).

You can read about the details of this festival in Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:33–44; Num. 29:12–38; Deut. 16:13–17

V16- 17- They heard the Word of God, and they obeyed it. This was the time of the year when this feast was to be observed, so this gave them time to prepare.

Evidently the feast of booths had been celebrated since the time of Joshua, but just not with such enthusiasm. There was great rejoicing.
Take a moment to remember the timeline here. Look at the graphic below. Notice the first and second deportations of the Southern Kingdom in 597 and 586BC. Nehemiah returning to rebuild the walls and people did not occur until between 444 and 432BC. The people had not been in the land in more than 100 years. But Nehemiah suggests that the people had not celebrated this mandated feast (with this kind of joy at least) since the time of Joshua. Of course, the people in Joshua’s day would’ve remembered to celebrate this feast. It was to be a reminder to them of God’s leading them out of Egypt and sustaining them through the desert. After all, Joshua's generation lived in both the desert and the Promised Land.
Now you can imagine the sense of joy this must have brought the people. They celebrated the feast of booths remembering, “We are a gathered people once again. We are God’s people. Our God, the one true God, is the one who promised us a land, rescued us from slavery, sustained us in the desert and now has brought us back from captivity.” And there was great rejoicing.

Is this the way we feel as part of the Church? We are God’s new people, not just from one nation but gathered from all nations. How does our enthusiasm for worship and service compare to theirs?

As we will see in Chapter 9, the people recognize that their deportation into captivity was due only to their unwillingness to obey God’s commands. Here we see them wanting to get off on the right foot. They read the Word and they obey it.

James 1:22 “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

Have you ever known a new believer who was so excited about following Jesus that they would read the Word every day and then strive to do what it says? THE IDEA: While we sometimes laugh at this as youthful passion, new believers set the example for us in this.

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: The initial action of God’s people restored to their land is to read and respond to the Word.

Our Main Point: The initial action for God’s people, redeemed through Christ, is to read and respond to the Word of God.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

Hebrews 4:12 says “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” How is the Word of God at work in your life right now?
Matthew 28 tells us that we should teach young disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded. Ps 119 says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” 2 Tim 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” It seems that the Word of God is central to the Christian life. Is this true of your life? How is the Bible central to your life as a Christian?

Most of us would admit we don’t spend as much time as we should in the Bible. What’s the hold up? Take a few minutes and talk honestly about the reason we’ve not made the Bible a priority in our lives.

**RESPOND TO THE TEXT**

**HOME 22:6**

**SING** | Check out “The Word of God” from Seeds Family Worship.
https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/KidsSeries/136097#9

**READ** | Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Family, how is God at work in our lives through his Word?

**PRAY** | 2 Tim 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Before you read the Bible today, practice asking God to help you go beyond reading words on a page to being changed through the Holy Spirit.

**SOURCES**
1 Macarthur Study Bible “Water Gate”
3 NIV Zondervan Study Bible. “Feast of Booths”
4 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.150
Today we will be covering a large portion of text. In Chapter 8, God’s people read the Law and obeyed it with great rejoicing. One of the results of Ezra’s ministry of the Word was a reckoning of sorts for the people. They were face to face with the holiness of God in His Word which meant they were face to face with their own rebellion. In perhaps the most profound portion of the book of Nehemiah, the people cry out to God in corporate confession.

**Today’s Text:** Nehemiah 9:16-21

16 “But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. 17 They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.[c] But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. 18 Even when they had made for themselves a golden[d] calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, 19 you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. 20 You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. 21 Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.”
REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
“The text as it stands refers to events that occurred two days after the end of the Feast of Booths, which took place from Tishri 15 to 22. According to Leviticus 16:29, Tishri 10 was the great Yom Kippur or Day of Atonement, on which every man searched his own heart. Though not held on the tenth day, this day of penance resembles the spirit of the Day of Atonement.”

LITERARY CONTEXT
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ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT
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CONTENT
The earlier sections of Nehemiah can be a bit challenging when thinking of ways to apply the message of the text. God has not called his people (the Church) to a particular city or to possess some sort of national identity. God dwells not in a temple but in the hearts of those who have trusted Christ. When we read of God’s people rebuilding the walls, we do not resonate with the literal building project, but we can certainly relate to fulfilling God’s will, working diligently against injustices, etc. The applications aren’t as straight-forward.

In the latter parts of the book, the applications are much more clear because the text deals mainly with the spiritual restoration of the people. They want to worship God whole heartedly, as do we. They read God’s Word, which demonstrates the holiness and faithfulness of God. We do the same. They recognize their lack of holiness and confess. As Christians, we do this in a salvific sense when we turn from our sin and trust Christ for salvation. We also do this in a sanctification sense as we grow to become more like Christ.

In chapters 9-10, the people get to the core of the issue, their hearts. And they experience a renewing of their hearts toward God. Dr. Smith has suggested that in order to experience this kind of spiritual renewal, four elements are typically present: hearing from God, worship, confession, and action. The people heard from God in chapter 8 (through the reading of His Word) and now in chapters 9 and 10, we will see how they worship, confess, and respond in action.
(1) Worship

Nehemiah moves back and forth in chapter 9 between confession and worship. It is quite a moving text. Let's look at the way in which God's people worship God for who he is and what he has done.

FOR WHO HE IS

- “Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. You are the Lord, you alone.” (v5-6)
- “But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (v17)
- “you are a gracious and merciful God.” (v31)
- “…our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God” (v32)
- “Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.” (v33)

FOR WHAT HE HAS DONE

- You created everything and you preserve all things. (v6)
- You chose Abram and made a covenant with him. (v7-8)
- You heard our cry when we were in captivity in Egypt. (v9)
- You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh (v10)
- You divided the sea saving our people and destroying our enemies. (v11)
- You guided our people with a cloud by day and fire by night (v12)
- You gave our people the laws and commandments at Sinai. (v13-14)
- You sustained them with bread from heaven and water from a rock. (v15)
- You did not forsake them when they refused to obey and made an idol. (v17-19)
- You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. (v20)
- You gave them the promised land. (v22)
- You multiplied their children. (v23)
- You subdued their enemies. (v24)
- You saved them from the hand of their enemies. (v27)
- Amidst rebellion, you “heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies.” (v28)
- “Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets.” (v30)
- You keep your covenant and steadfast love. (v32)
These lists are staggering. Seeing all of these wondrous characteristics of God in one chapter helps to demonstrate the relationship between worship and confession. Think of it this way.

More worship = More confession  
The more we are enamored with the goodness, faithfulness, and might of our God, the more our sin stands out in stark contrast.

More Confession = More Worship  
The more we cry out to God for forgiveness, the more we are aware of his great love and mercy which moves us to further worship.

Let’s look at the confession that is interspersed here with the worship.

(2) Confession

- Acted Presumptuously  
  “But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.” (v16)

- Refused to Obey  
  “They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck….” (v17)

- Idolatry  
  “…they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies…” (v18)

- Disobedience  
  “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you…” (v26)

- Ignored & Killed Prophets  
  “killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you…” (v26)  
  “Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear.” (v30)

- Did Evil  
  “But after they had rest they did evil again before you” (v28)

- Rebellion  
  “they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey.” (v29)

“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. 11 For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.” - 2 Cor. 7:10-11

“Why confess our sins? First, because God tells us to (James 5:16). Second, because confessing a sin breaks its power over us, since the power of sin grows more readily in the dark.”  
–Charles Stanley

How do you see worship and confession working together in your walk with Jesus? When you think about what is happening in your heart during corporate worship on Sundays, do you see worship and confession present? How so?
After a Sunday morning sermon, how often is your response to the sermon confession? How do you respond? Do you find yourself confessing quietly in your pew? Do you like to go to the front for a time of prayer?

(3) Action

Finally, after the reading of the Word, corporate confession and praise, the people make a covenant to reverse course and honor the Lord anew.

THE OATH INCLUDED:

• 10:29 “to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes.”

• 10:30 “to not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.”

• 10:31 “And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.”

• 10:31 “forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.”

• 10:32 “We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God”

• 10:34 We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers’ houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law.

• 10:35-39 to bring the necessary offerings to the house of God according to the Law

After 1,000 years of unfaithfulness, do you suppose that this particular oath will have the type of spiritual inertia to kick them out of the cycle for good?

FROM THE PASTOR:

“Covenant is what you do when you have confessed sin and you are ready to get serious. You are ready to do business with God. You are ready to make the application of the word.”

–Dr. Steven W. Smith

READ • REVIEW • REFLECT • RESPOND
NEHEMIAH AND THE GOSPEL

Romans 3:23-26 (ESV)
23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,25whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.26It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 8:3 (ESV)
3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin,[a] he condemned sin in the flesh,

Due to the sinful nature of men, the law was powerless to bring about true holiness. The law could not rescue sinners from its penalty or make them holy. Rather, the law continues to make man aware of his sin. And our awareness of our sin, along with our inability to reconcile ourselves to God leads us to throw ourselves at the mercy of Christ for salvation. Here in Nehemiah, God’s people responded to their confession by vowing to make every sacrifice, every time, in careful order. Because they could never live up to the standard of God’s righteousness, God sent Jesus to live the holy life we could never live.

So today, under the new covenant, when we are confronted with our sinfulness and God’s holy standard, we respond a bit differently. We don’t immediately make an oath. We trust Jesus. We don’t promise to do better. We remember our inability to do better and thank Christ that he saved us even while we were still sinners.

What about a Christian’s call to the pursuit of holiness? After all, John 14:15 says “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” The beauty of the Gospel is that, though we are powerless to reach God’s standard of holiness on our own, believers are sealed with the indwelling Holy Spirit. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” (John 16:13). Do you see the contrast? The Jews operated in the old covenant. They wanted God to bless them and prosper them, so they vowed to improve. As believers, God has already blessed us eternally in Christ, and so we joyously grow in Christ-likeness. We enthusiastically throw off the old ways of the flesh and put on Christ.

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: In response to God’s Word, the people participated in a time of corporate confession, praise and vows to God.

Our Main Point: The reading of God’s Word should bring forth an attitude of confession, praise and a consistent calling to mind our great hope in Jesus Christ.
REFLECT ON THE TEXT (5-10 Minutes)

Have you ever wondered (or heard others ask) why God enacts such judgement in the Old Testament? How does this passage shed light on God’s judgment in the Old Testament?

What does this show us about the Law, sin, and man’s ability to uphold the Law? What does it mean when the New Testament tells us that the purpose of the Law was to show us our sinfulness?

Nehemiah chapter 9 is a wonderful picture of returning to God and a revival of the hearts of the people toward God. If our church were to experience a renewal, a new vibrancy toward God, a new resolve to live according to his Word, what would happen among us?

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

HOME 22:6

SING | The Hymn “I Need Thee Every Hour”
Lyrics; https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/371
The Modern Song: “Lord I Need You”
Song & Lyrics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuvfMDhTyMA

READ | Nehemiah 9:16-21 Talk about the various sins committed by Israel. While we probably didn’t commit these exact sins, I’d bet we’ve committed sins with the same heart or attitude. Ask family members, “Do you struggle with any of these things that Israel did?”

PRAY | As a family, pray a prayer of confession. Go around the room and for a couple of minutes anyone can chime in: “God forgive me for ____________________________.”
“God, I’m sorry for the way I ____________________________.”
SERMON NOTES

SOURCES

1 Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary of the Old Testament
2 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.128
27 And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. 28 And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; 29 also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. 30 And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.

31 Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate. 32 And after them went Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah, 33 and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, 34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, 35 and certain of the priests’ sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph; 36 and his relatives, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. 37 At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the Water Gate on the east.

38 The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half
of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, to the Broad Wall, 39 and above
the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah,[a] and by the Fish Gate and the Tower of
Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, to the Sheep Gate; and they came to a halt at the
Gate of the Guard. 40 So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God,
and I and half of the officials with me; 41 and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah,
Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; 42 and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi,
Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. 43
And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with
great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

Service at the Temple

44 On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the first fruits,
and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for
the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the
Levites who ministered. 45 And they performed the service of their God and the service of
purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and
his son Solomon. 46 For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the
singers, and there were songs[b] of praise and thanksgiving to God. 47 And all Israel in the
days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and
the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart
that which was for the sons of Aaron.

REVIEW THE TEXT

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Priests & Levites- 11:1–4a. Along with the leaders, one-tenth of the Israelites were to reside
in Jerusalem, here called the Holy City (cf. v. 18; Isa. 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Rev. 11:2). They were
chosen by lots (cf. Prov. 16:33). Those who volunteered (Neh. 11:2) were either the ones
chosen by lots who gladly moved to the city, or were additional men. Some priests and
Levites including temple servants ... lived in surrounding towns and villages and “commuted”
to Jerusalem when they served in the temple. Others who were not civil or religious leaders
took up residence in Jerusalem. They were of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. 1

For our study today, we will focus mainly on 12:27-47, here are some brief descriptions of
what is being described in the preceding verses.

LITERARY CONTEXT

We have been studying how the people rebuilt the wall in Nehemiah 1–6, reestablished
the identity of the people in chapter 7, re-read the Torah and re-celebrated the Festival of
Booths in chapter 8, confessed their sin and rehearsed God’s mercy in chapter 9, renewed
their commitment by making a covenant to keep the covenant in chapter 10, and now we
see them repopulate the city and dedicate the wall in chapters 11–12.
This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the restoration of the people.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)

ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT

The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT

Chapter 12 marks a real moment of celebration for Nehemiah and the people. The walls have been rebuilt and what comes into focus here is that the purpose of the restoration was not as much about the walls as it was the people and the right worship of God. The walls provided the protection and order they needed to operate once again as the people of God.

Today, let’s look at some of the features of the restored worship in the temple.

(1) True worship ascribes glory to God. (v27-28)

“And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgiving and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. 28 And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites…”

If you listen closely before worship services at Immanuel, you will notice something our pastor says often to prepare us for worship. He reminds us that our goal, our hope is to fixate on Christ and exalt him. These statements may soar past us if we’re not careful because we are accustomed to the worship service being mainly about singing and a sermon. But Dr. Smith has rightfully called forth in us the most important thing: that our hearts are pointed Godward. Here, the musicians and singers gather to ascribe glory to God.

If true biblical worship ascribes glory to God, what is false worship?
Two choirs marched around the city.

(2) True worship is characterized by the pursuit of holiness. (v30)

V30- “And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.”

It is not all together clear what type of ceremony was performed here but the intention is clear. The people of God wanted to be clean before God.

For Israel, offering animal sacrifices to God appeased the wrath of God and offered them forgiveness of sins. And the offering of the animal also represented a personal turning from sin for the people. Their act of faith in offering the sacrifice resulted in God’s cleansing and forgiveness. And they committed themselves to a life of holiness.

In a similar way, for those who are in Christ, we are both declared righteous (Rom. 3:23-24) by faith because of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but we also become holy as we grow in Christ, repent of sins, and obey God’s Word. Under the new covenant, we would not say we purify ourselves. Rather, 1 John 1:9 says “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” When we turn from our sin, Christ purifies us.

Romans 12:1 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers,[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

In Romans 12:1-2 what is our spiritual act of worship or “reasonable service”?

This is what the Israelites were doing. They were giving themselves completely to God. No hidden sins. No compromise. Holiness, purity and obedience would be marks of God’s people.

(3) True worship comes from a heart of joy. (v43)

“And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”

Think of the contrast here. In the preceding years, God’s people were scattered among the nations. The temple and walls had been destroyed and the people of God were mocked. And here, in the most unlikely turn of events, God had softened the heart of a King to allow God’s people to return, and against heavy opposition, had guided the rebuilding of the city and the temple. Surely they shouted, “God is faithful to his promises. God has brought us home!”

This is precisely why joy is necessary evidence of a God-changed life. This far off, wandering people were brought home. They were prisoners set free. They were disobedient and had been restored. How much more ought the church be a place of joy?

“For the people of God here, seeing this procession on the wall, that was so recently broken, but now built, would have filled their hearts with joy. They were looking at God’s faithfulness.”

-Carrie Sandom
Romans 5:6-11
“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Is your walk with Jesus characterized by joy? As a church, are we known as a joyous people? Possessing more joy than the rest of the world?

V43- The joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar. What a testimony! May God make us families like this, whose joy rings out through the neighborhood. May God make us employees like this, whose joy rings out through the workplace. May God make us a church like this, whose joy rings out through our city. For we are a redeemed people. We’ve been brought near to God.

(4) True worship produces generosity. (v44)

“On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered…”

V47- All of Israel participated in God’s redemptive plan.

Non-monetarily: When you survey your personal life or your family’s life, are you “all-in” for the work of God through our church?

Monetarily: Has the tremendous grace and blessing you’ve found in Christ yielded a generosity to God’s mission?

How has your giving (of your time, talents, creativity, and money) changed since being saved?
In conclusion, let's recount what the worship of God was like in the restored Jerusalem. The people's hearts were pointed Godward. They consecrated themselves for holy living. They worship God openly and joyfully. And they gave generously to the work of ministry.

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: The dedication of the restored temple, walls, and city was marked by true, wholehearted worship.

Our Main Point: As disciples, we must respond to Christ with single-minded devotion, a pursuit of holiness, a joyous countenance, and enthusiastic generosity.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

In the new covenant, we don’t worship in the temple. We don’t dedicate the temple or a city to God. Romans 12:1 tells us that we are to dedicate ourselves to God to his service. How would you compare the dedication of the temple in Nehemiah 12 with the dedication of your life as a believer?

“The household of God [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19-22). If one of the New Testament metaphors for the church is a temple, what does it mean for the church to dedicate herself to Christ? How would you compare the dedication of the temple in Nehemiah 12 with the dedication of us as a church?

Let’s think for a moment about family life. What does it look like for a family to be centered on God? What should look different about the Christian family on a street compared to the neighbors next door? Is this type of dedication evident in your own family?
RESPOND TO THE TEXT  (5 Minutes)

ENCOURAGE A FRIEND

Can you think of a friend, family member, or colleague who exemplifies this type of dedication? Today, during our time of response, take time to send a text message or e-mail to the person to encourage them. Tell them that we are studying Nehemiah and true, devoted worship. Tell them that it reminded you of their passionate devotion to God. General encouragements like “I admire you,” or “you set an example” are great, but try your best to be specific. How have you seen them model a life of devotion to God? If someone prefers to write a hand-written note later, that is, of course, fine, but it is preferable that everyone respond right now, in the moment. Take five minutes to send a friend a message of encouragement.

HOME 22:6

SING | Sing the simple, memorable chorus, “In my life Lord, be glorified"
In my life Lord, be glorified, be glorified
In my life Lord, be glorified today.
In my song Lord be glorified, be glorified
In my song Lord, be glorified today.
In Your church Lord be glorified, be glorified
In Your church Lord, be glorified today.

READ | Read Romans 12:1-2. Talk about the dedication of the temple and the dedication of our lives as Christians.

PRAY | The ultimate prayer of dedication is to pray what Jesus prayed when he said “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39). Ask God to have his way and to do his will in our lives.
SERMON NOTES

 SOURCES
1 Bible Knowledge Commentary 11:1-4
2 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah (201-202)
3 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.138
Today’s Text: Nehemiah 13:1-31

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

4 Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, 5 prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. 6 While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king 7 and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. 8 And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. 9 Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

10 I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. 11 So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. 12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. 13 And I appointed
as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. 14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.

15 In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. 16 Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! 17 Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster[a] on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”

19 As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. 20 Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. 21 But I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. 22 Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

23 In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. 25 And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. 27 Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?”

28 And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

30 Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; 31 and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good.

**REVIEW THE TEXT**

**CONTEXT**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

“The key to this situation is Nehemiah’s absence. After 12 years as governor (445-433 BC), he had returned to King Artaxerxes to ask permission to return for a further period. The round
trip would have taken some two months, and Nehemiah would probably have stayed at the court for an appropriate time; so it seems reasonable that he was absent from Jerusalem for at least six months. King of Babylon. Some question this title, but see Ezra 5:13; 6:22, where Persian kings are called “king of Babylon” and “king of Assyria,” respectively. In some sense the successive empires took on the identity of their predecessors.”

LITERARY CONTEXT
This week, we remain in the section of Nehemiah which deals primarily with the restoration of the people.

i. The Walls (Ch 1-6)
ii. The People (Ch 7-13)

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT
The story of Nehemiah is critical to redemption history. The return of God’s people to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls served two purposes. Not only did they display God’s enduring promise to preserve Israel, they also set the stage for the events of the coming of Christ. For more on the redemptive context, see Redemptive Context Guide (p. 6).

CONTENT
(1) Futile Theology: The Compromise of the People
Let’s look at four things that had declined while Nehemiah was gone.

First, they compromised for Tobiah.

Remember Tobiah, the agitator in the opening chapters of Nehemiah? It is almost comical that God’s people set up a living arrangement for Tobiah.

V7- “I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.”

Deuteronomy 23:3-6

3 “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, 4 because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. 5 But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; instead the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. 6 You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever.

By housing Tobiah the Ammonite, they had not only disobeyed God, but had desecrated the temple. It is thought that Tobiah, who possessed a Jewish name, was not a full-blooded Ammonite.

Why do you think they so quickly fell from the strict standard of God’s Word?
Second, they allowed the priests to neglect their temple duties.

*How can we tell the difference between righteous anger and sinful anger? How can we be sure our heart is in the right place?*

Third, they dishonored the Sabbath.

V15- “In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food.”

Fourth, they intermarried.

V28- “And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite.”

When it’s easy and fun to follow God, everyone has strong theology. But what happens when your theology (your personal convictions and beliefs about God) would cause you hardship? Ask a Christian couple on their wedding day what it is they believe about marriage. The Bible says that marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman, under God for life. It is devastating to hear only a few short years later, a couple on the brink of divorce because they aggravate each other and don’t share the same interests. Their theology was futile, meaningless, weightless, inconsequential.

Honoring God in the temple would mean forfeiting allegiances for personal gain. While everyone in power around them gains even more power and influence by fraternizing with pagan leaders, they must not. They must be different.

Honoring God in worship would mean joyfully parting from their tithe. While the peoples around them can keep and invest their financial gains, the people of God must not. They must be different.

Honoring God on the Sabbath would mean to walk away from major profits. Not only would they lose one day of revenue, but they would likely be unable to keep up with area competition. They must be different.

Honoring God in the home would mean marrying within the family of faith. They must be different.

When following Christ costs you, do you cave or do you stand?

“The identity of the church as the people of God is to be evident in its pure confession of Christ, its bold testimony to the Gospel, and its moral holiness before the watching world. Nothing less will mark the church as the true vessel of the Gospel.”

-Albert Mohler
(2) Prayerful Reparation: The Correction of the People

a. He voiced his displeasure.
   V8-9. He was displeased.
   V25. He pronounced a curse on them.

b. He prayerfully took action.
   V8. He threw out Tobiah's furniture and returned the room to its intended temple-purpose.
   V11-13. He reinstated the tithing and assigned the priests to full time temple service once again.
   V28. He cast out the grandson of a high priest when it was found the grandson had intermarried.
   V14, 22, 29, 31. Nehemiah offers brief prayers throughout the situation.

   How do we know when it is time to boldly call out sin and when to patiently wait for God to intervene?

   “There will come a day when God’s people no longer need to be summoned to repent, when we will no longer need correction. Between now and then, the only way that we are going to be able to love each other and get along in harmonious, happy relationships is for us to confront sin and respond in humility and repentance when confronted. That’s the only way to have good relationships—until the day, that hoped for day, when we are made like the One for whom we long.” ♦

CONCLUSION

Author’s Main Point: Nehemiah, sharing God’s passion for holiness, forcefully rebuked the permissive people and restored them to proper worship and order.

Our Main Point: In pursuing personal and corporate holiness, we must readily identify and repent of sin and follow Christ whole-heartedly.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

One of the problems for God’s people in this time was a compromising of strong theology. Are there areas of disagreement in theology that are tolerable? How do we know which areas must be addressed and which are secondary or even tertiary matters?
Lesson 14

What are some areas of sin that are easy to compromise on? What types of things do you say to justify these sins?

What might Nehemiah say to us if he were to address us in modern times? What things would he observe about the way we worship? The way we relate to each other and the society? If you’ve identified things we need to, by God’s grace improve in, what is one way you can be part of a renewal of that area? Is there something we can do as a class to promote a more biblical body of Christ?

.respond.to.the.text

HOME 22:6

SING | “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”

Here’s the song along with the story of how it was written:

- Warning: this story could be troubling for young children as it involves a family martyred for faith. Parents should watch this before sharing with children.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KOBSu_A4LU

Here are the lyrics: https://hymnary.org/text/i_have_decided_to_follow_jesus

READ | Peter 1:15-16 Talk about why God wants us to pursue a holy life of following Jesus.

PRAY | Thank God for the lessons learned about God, about people, about leadership, about worship and about his church through the pages of Nehemiah. Tell God the ways in which you are different through studying his Word.

SOURCES
1 NIV Zondervan Study Bible 13:6
2 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.225