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 TEACHER GUIDE

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START HERE (5 Minutes)
Choose a story, discussion starter, or media clip in order to spark the interest of students. These are provided in each lesson.

READ THE TEXT (2-5 Minutes)
Read the text. Keep students engaged by asking volunteers to read portions or have each student read one verse or paragraph until the entire text is completed.

REVIEW THE TEXT (15-20 Minutes or 25-30 Minutes)
Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the story, highlight the major scenes and moments, and explain their significance.

CONCLUSION - Summary statements explain the main ideas of each passage.

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. In this Bible Study section, teachers may choose the amount of information they’d like to cover using one of two routes.

• OPTION 1 TAKE THE DIRECT ROUTE - Follow the black text on the left side of the page for the simplest, most direct content. This option is great for discussion-based teachers. To allow more time for discussion, the direct route Review the Text section should take 15-20 minutes.

• OPTION 2 TAKE THE SCENIC ROUTE - Bulleted beneath the main text, you will find a gold arrow ➔ signaling additional commentary and content for those teachers focused more on lecture. Teachers who take the scenic route can expect the Review the Text section to take about 25-30 minutes.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT (5-10 Minutes)
In hopes of allowing students to reflect personally on the message of the text, and to allow for deeper relational ties important to discipleship, three questions will be provided to stimulate discussion in the class.

RESPOND TO THE TEXT (5 Minutes)
While many students are accustomed to receiving uplifting, useful information in Sunday School, it is critical to allow time and space for students to open their hearts to absorb the truths presented and begin to apply them in their lives. These short exercises are intended to graciously nudge students toward personalizing the messages of the text and move toward Christ-likeness in application.
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. [ESV Study Bible]

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 God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham (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

[Map of the Extent of the Persian Empire and the Extent of Alexander's empire, showing regions like Lydia, Meshech, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia.]
THE IDEA: Today, we start our study of Nehemiah. This is a man deeply distraught over the state of his people and his home city. We are going to see just how deep the pit was and how Nehemiah responded to the Lord. Are you ready to dive in?

TELL A STORY

Corrie Ten Boom and her family helped Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and, by all accounts, saved nearly 800 lives.

Her famous book The Hiding Place recounts her courageous and dangerous work, which ultimately led to the imprisonment of her entire family and the deaths of several loved ones. Amidst all her trouble and hardship, she said, “There is no pit so deep but He is not deeper still.”
SPARK A DISCUSSION

I want to begin class today with a question. First, I want you to think about a challenging or painful time in your life. I’ll give you a second to think about it. What was one of those times when you experienced deep pain or anguish? (You do not need to share the situation with the class).

Now, here is the question: Did God enter your mind during this painful time? What was your reaction toward God in that moment? Anyone willing to share?

SHOW A CLIP

The following clip is a simple, catchy introduction to the book of Nehemiah with a slightly humorous tone.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1bueK3KgKg

Visit ibclr.org/nehemiah for links to all media and resources for teachers.

READ THE TEXT (2-5 Minutes)

See Teacher Guide (p.4) for ways to creatively read the text.

Today’s Text: Nehemiah 1:1-4

1The 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

(The DIRECT Route 15-20 Minutes or The SCENIC Route 25-30 Minutes)

Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the story, highlight the major scenes and moments, and explain their significance.

CONTEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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

According to scholars, Nehemiah, and its shortened form (Nahum) were not uncommon names of the day. ¹

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.

It is thought that someone in this position was far more than what we would think of today as a butler. Few people had access to the King like the cupbearer. In fact, Nehemiah was likely with the King throughout every day considering his job involved testing the King’s food. Wiersbe believes perhaps someone in such a public position must have been handsome, cultured, and knowledgeable in order to converse with and advise the King. ²

The Month of Chislev runs from mid-November to mid-December on our calendars. ³

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.  

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. 

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 444BC. Shushan (Susa in the text) was the capitol city of Persian empire and the site of the King’s Winter Palace.
Some scholars believe that when understanding Daniel’s “70 Weeks Prophecy” (Daniel 9), the starting point for the countdown to the coming Messiah begins here in the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerses. Daniel states “from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem…” Since Artaxerxes allows Nehemiah to return and restore Jerusalem, some believe this is the starting point for Daniel’s breathtakingly accurate prediction of the coming Messiah.

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

Although this phrase “one of my brothers” could mean something as insignificant as “a fellow Jew,” Williamson says, the word should be taken literally here to mean biological brother. Since this name is relatively common, it is not 100% certain, but Nehemiah 7:2 (if this is the same person), would suggest that Hanani was his biological brother. 7

(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.

Williamson reminds us that Nehemiah’s reaction to the news is so strong that it would be highly unlikely he would be reacting to the destruction of Jerusalem about 140 years prior. Evidently some renewing and rebuilding processes had been undertaken but not completed. Williamson believes the decree to cease the rebuilding in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:23) is the likely event that caused such a reaction for Nehemiah. 8

At this point in the story, what do you think Nehemiah will do next after hearing this news? Become angry? Curse? Hurry to Jerusalem?

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.

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
TEMPLES, WALLS, & ISRAEL: HOW DO WE RELATE TO NEHEMIAH TODAY?

JIM HAMILTON

This is a fascinating aspect of the Bible’s theology. After the exodus, Israel used the plundered wealth of Egypt to build the tabernacle. David was not allowed to build the temple, but he set Solomon up to do it by amassing great plunder from the Gentiles he conquered (1 Chron. 29:2–5). In Psalm 68, David brings the building of tabernacle and temple together as he describes the way the building of the temple on Mount Zion means that “Sinai is now in the sanctuary” (Ps. 68:17), then speaks of the use of enemy plunder in the building of God’s dwelling place (68:18). In keeping with this pattern, Ezra 1–6 describes how the pagan kings Cyrus and Darius used their wealth to pay for the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1:1–11; 6:1–15). God repeatedly builds his dwelling place with enemy plunder.

Jesus, scion of David, came as a carpenter, a builder, asserting that he would build his church (Matt. 16:18). When Paul describes how Christ built the church, he says that Jesus built the church the same way Moses built the tabernacle and Solomon built the temple: with the plunder of the enemy. Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 to capture this point, as he describes the way that Jesus came down, bound the strong man, plundered his house, then “gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11–12). And the body of Christ is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16).

So under the old covenant in the days of Ezra–Nehemiah, God dwelt in the temple by his Spirit, and the focal point of God’s cause in the world was his dwelling place. Now that Christ has inaugurated the new covenant and the church is the dwelling place of God by the Spirit, the focal point of God’s cause in the world is the church.

Believers today can be encouraged to be as zealous for the upbuilding of the church as Ezra and Nehemiah were for the rebuilding of temple and wall.

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.
REFLECT ON THE TEXT (5-10 Minutes)

The purpose of discussion questions is to (a) allow the teacher a way to gauge the level of comprehension and (b) allow students to develop bonds around spiritual truth.

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 (5 Minutes)

The purpose of these short activities is to encourage students to personalize the truth and begin to develop an application in their lives.

CORPORATE BRAINSTORM & PRAYER

RESOURCES NEEDED (if available): Dry erase board and marker.

TEACHER TIP:
If you are able, try to get each person in the class to verbalize something for the list.

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 Williamson, H.G.M.  Word Biblical Commentary, p.170
2 Wiersbe, Be Determined, p.20
3 Wiersbe, Be Determined, p.20
4 https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ezra-nehemiah-your-place
5 ESV Study Bible
6 Wiersbe, Be Determined, p.20
7 Williamson, H.G.M.  Word Biblical Commentary, p.171
8 Williamson, H.G.M.  Word Biblical Commentary, p.172
9 https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ezra-nehemiah-your-place
LESSON 2
BROKENNESS
CH 1:4 - 5

START HERE  (5 Minutes)

Utilize one of the following tools to ignite the interest of your students. Tell a story, spark a discussion, or show a clip.

THE IDEA:
A poem was pulled from his nightstand, which he never intended for anyone other than his mother to read: (a poem which became a favorite hymn.)

TELL A STORY

Tell the story of Joseph Scriven. An Irishman in the 1800s, a friend to the poor and needy, he lost his fiancee on two separate occasions due to tragic deaths. You can read his full story here, staugustine.com/living-religion/2015-04-23/story-behind-song-what-friend-we-have-jesus.

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer.

As we continue in the story of Nehemiah, let’s look at how Nehemiah responded to his anguish over his people and his city.
SPARK A DISCUSSION

Set It Up

I want to begin class today with a little debate. First, let’s divide into groups of 4-5 people. You have one minute to come up with an answer to this question and you all must agree on the answer.

Here’s the question: What is the single best word (one word) to describe God?

Debate It

SHOW A CLIP

The following clip is a funny excerpt from Christian comedian Tim Hawkins.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgfq0RxIakQ

TEACHER TIP:

Now go around and have each group share. Now say, “Of these that were shared, which is the best (one word) to describe God?” Let them playfully debate why they think theirs most fully captures who God is.

THE IDEA:

A lot of times, our prayers are thoughtless, routine, boring recitations of phrases we’ve picked up in church over the years. What if we got serious about developing a rich meaningful prayer life with God? Nehemiah will serve as a great example of that today.

READ THE TEXT (2-5 Minutes)

See Teacher Guide (p.4) for ways to creatively 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...
LESSON 2

REVIEW THE TEXT (15-20 Minutes)

Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the story, highlight the major scenes and moments and explain their significance.

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 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.

Others include 2:4; 4:4,9; 5:19; 6:9,14; 9:5; 13:14, 22, 29, 31. Wiersbe also points out that the book happens to open and close in prayer. There is no way to study Nehemiah at any depth and ignore the idea of prayer. Prayer and action are never to be pitted as enemies, though we do tend to gravitate towards one or the other. For those of us who are guilty of doing before praying, Alan Redpath’s quote should provide a needed course correction. “There is too much working before men and too little waiting before God.” 1
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?

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

This good man was greatly affected by the sad news which he heard. He was not indifferent to the condition of his countrymen. He did not say, “We are getting on very well here. I am a Jew and I am in the palace of Artaxerxes, but I cannot do anything to help my brothers and sisters. You, who are away there at Jerusalem, must do the best you can.” No. Nehemiah said no such thing! He looked upon himself as being part and parcel of the whole Jewish race, just as every true believer should regard all Christians as being near akin to himself. We are not 20 churches, brothers and sisters, nor two hundred—our Lord Jesus Christ is the Head, and we are members of that one body which is His Church. We ought to sympathize with all who are in Christ, and especially, if the cause of God is not prospering in any place, we should do as Nehemiah did—he wept, and mourned, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven. ² -Charles Spurgeon

“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

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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
When he began to pray I have no idea that he thought he was to be the instrument in God’s hand of building the walls of Jerusalem. But when a man gets into sympathy and harmony with God, then God prepares him for the work He has for him. No doubt he thought the Persian king might send one of his great warriors and accomplish the work with a great army of men, but after he had been praying for months, it may be the thought flashed into his mind:

"Why should not I go to Jerusalem myself and build those walls?" 3 -D.L. Moody

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 4

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.

In the midst of Nehemiah’s position amidst Pagan rulers, it is not a coincidence that the phrase “God of heaven” is chosen. Surrounded by the idol gods of earth, Nehemiah appeals to the one true God, the one who reigns in heaven. Interestingly, Daniel used this phrase as well. 5
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.

If your class has time, Leviticus 26 is worth a look. Nehemiah is telling God he is true to his Word because THIS is His Word:

1. ‘Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the Lord your God.
2. ‘Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord.
3. “If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands,
4. I will...

14. “But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands,
15. and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant,
16. then I will do this to you...

Why were God’s people in misery and their city in shambles?

If your class has time, take a moment to read some or all of Nehemiah Chapter 9. Nehemiah makes it clear there that God has acted justly and righteously with the Israelites, and yet the reason they are in ruin is because of their own “stiff necked” response to God and his commands.

God is the “God of heaven,” who as Creator of the universe is awesome and great (1:5; 2:4, 20; 4:14; 9:6, 32). The Lord’s sovereignty is seen most clearly in His appointment and protection of Nehemiah, accomplished through the mighty kings of Persia (2:8, 18). He was the guarantor of Nehemiah's success (2:20), which even his enemies admitted was divinely accomplished (6:16). God frustrated the plots of the Jews’ enemies and was the source for the rallying cry, “Our God will fight for us!” (4:15, 20).
But God is not just awesome in might. He is also depicted as a God of covenant steadfastness who dealt faithfully with Israel on the basis of its election (1:5–7; 9:7–37). He is holy and demands a righteous people, a sanctified priesthood, and a hallowed place of worship (12:30; 13:9, 23–28, 30).

“There is more than rhetoric in this elaborate opening. It deliberately postpones the cry for help, which could otherwise be faithless and self-pitying. It mounts immediately to heaven (as the Lord’s prayer does), where the perspective will be right, and it reflects on the character of God – not only for its encouraging aspect of staunchness and love, but first of all for the majesty which puts man, whether friend or foe, in his place.”

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 (5-10 Minutes)

The purpose of discussion questions is to (a) allow the teacher a way to gauge the level of comprehension and (b) allow students to develop bonds around spiritual truth.

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?

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  *(5 Minutes)*

The purpose of these short activities is to encourage students to personalize the truth and begin to develop an application in their lives.

DEVELOPING A NEW PRAYER HABIT

RESOURCES NEEDED *(if available)*:  None.

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.

CLOSING CHALLENGE:  This week, I want you to keep that prayer with you. At the beginning of each prayer, try to recite this part first. Perhaps some of you would be willing to share with us next week how this affected your prayer life.

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/unsa/owtext.html

PRAY  |  As you pray, try asking the kids to chime in one at a time “God we praise you because
_________________________________________________________________________.”

SOURCES

1 Wiersbe, Be Determined, p.23
3 Men of the Bible, D.L. Moody,
   http://biblehub.com/library/moody/men_of_the_bible/iv_the_prophet_nehemiah.htm
4 https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/weeping-gods-people/
5 Wiersbe, Be Determined, p.24
7 Holman Bible Handbook, Nehemiah Intro
8 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.85
START HERE  (5 Minutes)

Utilize one of the following tools to ignite the interest of your students. Tell a story, spark a discussion, or show a clip.

TELL A STORY

“A certain man was driving along the New Jersey Turnpike one summer afternoon. And a Lincoln Town car was one hundred yards ahead in the same lane. The man was shocked when he saw the right rear door of the Lincoln, still moving at full speed, swing open. The passenger threw a collie onto the pavement. The dog hit the concrete and rolled into a ditch. Bleeding profusely, the collie got up and started running after the car and the owner who had cruelly abandoned him. His relentless faithfulness was not conditioned or diminished by the abuse and callous disregard of his master.

I submit to you that the faithfulness of that collie is nothing in comparison to the stubborn love of God. In spite of the fact that we keep kicking him to the curb, the hound of heaven keeps pursuing us with his furious love. Why? Why does God keep putting up with us? Why does God keep on loving us?” ¹
SPARK A DISCUSSION

David said in Psalm 32 that when he kept quiet about his sin, his bones wasted away through his groaning all day long. (Ps 32:2-3)

Among your Christian friends, would you say there is a culture of confession? Is the major idea among your friends that everyone is in good shape with few struggles? Or that everyone is broken, in need of comfort and forgiveness?

SHOW A CLIP

THE IDEA: Today we will see Nehemiah, hundreds of years before Christ, model a rich and powerful prayer in response to his brokenness.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-_lmGR9EdE

THE IDEA: Today we will look at Nehemiah’s prayer of brokenness. His sadness over the state of Jerusalem lead him to prayer. Nehemiah appeals to God to intervene, but he does so on the basis of God’s faithfulness, not Israel’s deservedness.

READ THE TEXT (2-5 Minutes)

See Teacher Guide (p.4) for ways to creatively read the text.

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  (15-20 Minutes)

Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the story, highlight the major scenes and moments and explain their significance.

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.

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

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.
Lesson 3

(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

▶ 1:5 keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You. After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, God kept His promise to restore His people to the Promised Land. The promise appeared to be failing, and Nehemiah appealed to God’s character and covenant as the basis by which He must intervene and accomplish His pledges to His people. ²

▶ The fact that God “keeps the covenant” will be significant once Nehemiah gets down to his request. He is calling on God to do what He has promised to do, so the fact that God keeps the covenant means that Nehemiah is asking God to do what God is committed to doing. God not only keeps covenant, He keeps steadfast love. God steadfastly maintains His devoted faithful love to those with whom He has covenanted, and Nehemiah appeals to God’s faithfulness to His commitment. ³

Quickly flip to the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6.

9 Pray then like this:
“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
10 Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread,
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.

How does Jesus’ model of prayer parallel Nehemiah’s?

▶ 1:5 In this address Nehemiah captures both the transcendence of God and His immanence. The true God is not only far above His people as the God of heaven (v. 4 note); He is near His people as the God of the covenant (Deut. 4:7). ⁴

“The idea:
Both begin with praise.”

FROM THE PASTOR:
“Prayer to God reveals our passion for God.”
-Dr. Steven W. Smith

“Of course, the Lord wants you to bring your cares to him— he tells you to in his Word. But when you pray, let your very first words, and the attitude of your heart, be to bring him praise and glory.” ⁵

~Jack Graham
“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?

1:7 commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. Alludes to Deut 28:64; 30:1-4. The unique revelation to Moses forms the prayer’s centerpiece. The Mosaic law is prominent in Ezra (3:2; 6:18; 7:6) and Nehemiah (v. 8; 8:1,14; 9:14; 10:29; 13:1). (Zondervan NIV Study Bible)

“Nehemiah says, “You told us this would happen.” Nehemiah’s confession in his prayer is, “We have acted corruptly against your law. You told us this would come if we turned our backs on you. You are the one true God, and we have chosen things that were not God to serve, and in serving things that are not God as though they were God, you did exactly what you said you were going to do.””

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

“He is empty-handed, but not uninvited. He knows the threats and promises of Scripture well enough to make a strong, not a tentative plea.”

–Derek Kidner
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.

1:8–11. Nehemiah reminded God—to lead Him to act, not to recall for Him something forgotten—that He had told Moses that if the nation Israel was unfaithful He would disperse them from their homeland (Lev. 26:27–28, 33; Deut. 28:64), but that if they obeyed Him then those who were exiled would be regathered to Jerusalem (Deut. 30:1–5). (Bible Knowledge Commentary)

WHY WOULD NEHEMIAH ASK GOD TO REMEMBER?

“Nehemiah used the word remember often in prayer (1:8; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). In his opening prayer, Nehemiah asked God to remember, not because he thought God might forget, but as a way of saying, "I’m remembering what You said in Your Word, Lord, and I’m depending on Your faithfulness." In all his other prayers, Nehemiah asked God to remember people, including himself. When he prayed "remember Tobiah and Sanballat" (6:14) or "remember them" (13:29), he was entrusting others into God's hands for just judgment rather than trying to exact vengeance himself (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). But Nehemiah most often prayed, "Remember me, my God" (5:19, 13:14, 22, 31)." - David Jeremiah

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?

“But Nehemiah knew that nothing would be accomplished in his own strength, wisdom, and authority. No matter how willing he was, the success of the entire project rested in the helping hand of God. And because Nehemiah knew that the outcome was in God’s hands, he prayed bold, specific, and courageous prayers. Look at verse 11 again: “give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

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.

“In the midst of these responsibilities and duties, with all this influence, Nehemiah knows the Bible. Nehemiah’s supreme concern is for God’s kingdom.”

–Jim Hamilton

THE POINT:
It reveals a shallow faith.

THE IDEA:
Our prayer won’t contain praise unless our kids know God deeply through his Word. Our prayers won’t contain confession unless we model for our kids our own need for God’s daily grace. Our prayers won’t be rooted in the promises of God if we have not committed them to memory.
REFLECT ON THE TEXT (5-10 Minutes)

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?

RESPOND TO THE TEXT (5 Minutes)

The Richest, Most Honest Prayer You’ve Ever Prayed

Could you pray a rich and meaningful prayer like Nehemiah’s? Our action item this morning is to give it a try. For the next 5 minutes, jot down some ideas under each of these four categories.

PRAISE GOD FOR WHO HE IS:
• God you are _________________________________
•
•

CONFESS YOUR SINS TO GOD:
• I have _________________________________
•
•

DECLARE BACK TO GOD HIS HOPEFUL PROMISES TO YOU:
• Your Word says _________________________________
•
•

TEACHER TIP: With tough questions like this, it is wise to be willing to share first. Again, the point is not to reveal our darkest secrets in a public setting, but to model for the class that each of us has daily and weekly sins which need to be confessed.
CALL UPON GOD TO RESPOND:

- 
- 
- 

Would you be willing to kneel down in a special way tonight, either alone, with a spouse, or with your family and pray this prayer? As an accountability, would you be willing to text or call a friend in class when you’ve done it? Tell them how it went.

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

2  Macarthur Study Bible NKJV 1:5
3  Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.100
4  Reformation Study Bible, 1:5
5  https://resources.jackgraham.org/resource-library/devotionals/whats-the-focus-of-your-prayers
6  https://www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/sermons/rebuilding-with-prayer
7  https://www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/sermons/rebuilding-with-prayer
8  Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.86
10 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.103
Utilize one of the following tools to ignite the interest of your students. Tell a story, spark a discussion, or show a clip.

TELL A STORY

Roger Staubach, who led the Dallas Cowboys to the World Championship in ‘71, admitted that his position as a quarterback who didn’t call his own signals was a source of trial for him. Coach Landry sent in every play. He told Roger when to pass, when to run and only in emergency situations could he change the play. (And he had better be right!) Even though Roger considered coach Landry to have a “genius mind” when it came to football strategy, pride said that he should be able to run his own team.

Roger later said, “I faced up to the issue of obedience. Once I learned to obey there was harmony, fulfillment, and victory.”
Lesson 4

SPARK A DISCUSSION

As a Christian, which is better? To pray or to act?

“We Christians sometimes seem to act as if there were a rigid wall between actively pursuing our own agenda and passively waiting for God to act. We are aware that this is a false duality, which is why, for example, orthodox/historic Christian theology rejects the Christian Science premise that medical treatments are acts of unfaithfulness to God. Yet, at moments, we are tempted to become passive while waiting for God to act. If you are unemployed, yes, God wants you to have a job. To get the job God wants you to have, you have to write a resume, conduct a search, apply for positions, interview, and get rejected dozens of times before finding that job, just as everyone else has to do. If you are a parent, yes, God wants you to have enjoyment in raising your children. But you will still have to set and enforce limits, be available at times when it’s inconvenient, discuss difficult topics with them, cry and suffer with them through bumps, broken bones, and broken hearts, do homework with them, ask their forgiveness when you are wrong, and offer them forgiveness when they fail. You don’t get time off as a reward for good behavior such as taking your kids to church. Nehemiah and company’s arduous work warns us that trusting God does not equate with sitting on our hands waiting for magical solutions for our difficulties.” 1

SHOW A CLIP

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LA_uwWPE6lQ

THE IDEA: Do we fall into the trap of simply praying that things will improve or that miraculous things will occur while not being willing to participate in God’s will through obedience and action?

READ THE TEXT (2-5 Minutes)

See Teacher Guide (p.4) for ways to creatively read the text.

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.

REVIEW THE TEXT (15-20 Minutes)
Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the story, highlight the major scenes and moments and explain their significance.

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.”

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

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?

(2) Nehemiah makes his request to go to Jerusalem.

So, how does Nehemiah act on his brokenness? He puts his life on the line and makes an enormous request of the King.

V2- Did you notice the end of verse 2? He was afraid. Many times, we assume heroic biblical characters are super-human, beyond the struggles and emotions of “ordinary” people like us. The question is not whether something causes us fear, the question is will we trust God and move forward in faith.

“Prayer is the preview of God’s action.”
-Mark Dever

“You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”
-John Bunyan
HOW DO PRAYER AND ACTION FUNCTION TOGETHER?

“...as Christians, we believe prayer actually accomplishes something. We believe that God hears our prayers, and that things change as a result. As James says, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Whether the change is internal or external, small or big, God shows up when we pray.

When we pray, our heart is softened to the needs of those around us. We become sensitive to the suffering of others, and often God plants within us ideas to act on our love for others. For Christians, prayer is the spring from which our love and mercy for others flows. Prayer is where we awaken to the needs of those around us—and to the specific calling God has given us to care for those needs.

But, in prayer, we discover what we can do: the handful of things given to us by God. And with these few things, we can participate with God in making a real difference. Perhaps our labors will be grandiose. Perhaps we’ll drop what we’re doing, move to Washington, and start lobbying. Or perhaps, in a much smaller yet equally important way, we counsel that couple with the dysfunctional marriage in our congregation, winning a small victory over the power of evil in our midst. Either way, we can pray both for those who are far off and those who are near, knowing that even if our labors are directed more to the near, our prayers for those far off will not go unheeded.

“Nehemiah was careful in replying. In fact, he was even afraid. A servant was never to let his negative emotions show before the king, for it might suggest dissatisfaction with the king. To do so might jeopardize his position or even his life. Also, Nehemiah knew that his request was a bold one. As already stated, a few years earlier this king had stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem and now Nehemiah was going to ask that the order be reversed. The cupbearer was risking his life! But his response was wise, no doubt reflecting the fact that he had been thinking about this opportunity, should it come, for a number of months.”

THE IDEA:
God is clearly at work. We should pray that God grant us these kinds of favorable responses as we move through life doing God’s will.

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?

“Nehemiah saw the truth of Proverbs 21:1 firsthand: “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord, He turns it wherever He wishes.”
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.

2:7 let letters be given to me. Official letters transferred a portion of the king’s authority to Nehemiah. In this context, he needed to pass through the lands of Judah’s enemies who could harm him or prevent him from rebuilding Jerusalem. The roads upon which messengers, ambassadors, and envoys of all sorts traveled had stations where such letters could be inspected for passage. Three months of travel from Susa to Jerusalem was long, dangerous, and ridden with protocol where letters were required for passage. The danger associated with the passage, but particularly the administrative authority which Nehemiah carried in the letters, led Artaxerxes to send captains of the army and horsemen with Nehemiah for protection. 7

If we are impressed with the realism and boldness of these requests, so too was the king. Vagueness, at this point, would have shown up the project as a mere dream or sudden impulse; but Nehemiah had prayed long enough (see on verse 1), and had had faith enough, to visualize the operation in some detail, even to the building technique he would be using for the wall. 8

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).” 9

“Let me encourage you to follow in Nehemiah’s footsteps on this point. He seeks to be used of God to see his own prayers answered. Study the Bible. Pray for God to do what He has promised to do in the Bible. And give thought to how and what you can do to be used of the Lord to bring His promises to pass.” 10

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  
(5-10 Minutes)

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  
(5 Minutes)

DESIGN AN ART PIECE

TEACHER: “If you were to design a custom art piece for your home, which verse from today’s study would you choose? Take 2-3 minutes to identify the verse, and write it down separately in your notes.”

Ask two or three people to share the verse they chose and why.
HOME 22:6

SING | Teach your kids the old hymn, “Trust and Obey”

A Free Sing A Long:  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDTlseoCDtU
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.

SOURCES
1 Does Trusting God Mean Turning to Prayer, Taking “Practical” Action, or Both? (Nehemiah 1:11-4:23) in Theology of Work Bible Commentary
3 Zondervan NIV Study Bible, Nehemiah 2:8
4 https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/thoughts-thoughts-prayers/
5 Bible Knowledge Commentary, Nehemiah 2:1-4a
6 Charles Stanley Study Notes, Nehemiah 2:8
7 Macarthur Study Bible, Nehemiah 2:7
8 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.88
10 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.105
START HERE (5 Minutes)

Utilize one of the following tools to ignite the interest of your students. Tell a story, spark a discussion, or show a clip.

TELL A STORY

Adrian Rogers once told a story from the pulpit about boldness and fear.

“When I was a little boy there used to be a program on the radio called the Low-Pressure Salesman, and he had to go out and make sales but he was intimidated by people and he would knock on the door and then say, “Nobody home I hope, I hope, I hope.” Do you remember that program? That will date you if you remember that, the Low-Pressure Salesman. And I believe that there are a lot of people like that when they go out to testify for Jesus. Their loyalty makes them go on the one hand, but their fear makes them slow on the other. They just are not the vibrant testimony for Jesus that they ought to be.”

1
READ • REVIEW • REFLECT • RESPOND

LESSON 5

SPARK A DISCUSSION

As a Christian, when you hear the word ambition, do you think of it as a positive thing or a negative thing? If Christ says that we are to lose our lives to follow him, is it possible for a Christian to have ambitions? Why or why not?

SHOW A CLIP

THE IDEA: When we see things through God’s perspective, it should break our hearts and move us to action. Today, in response to seeing Jerusalem’s ruins, we’ll see Nehemiah respond by boldly declaring the truth.

READ THE TEXT (2-5 Minutes)

See Teacher Guide (p.4) for ways to creatively read the text.

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** (15-20 Minutes)

Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the story, highlight the major scenes and moments and explain their significance.

**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 Ge 1:21, referring to the chaos creatures of the water (see note on Ge 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 Ch 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 Ch 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**

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)

**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) 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.*
Lesson 5

V11-16 Nehemiah wanted to survey the destruction.

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

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?

THE IDEA:
We often gain credibility by taking time to gather the facts before influencing others to join us.
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.

NEHEMIAH, THE WALLS, AND THE GOSPEL

Today, God’s name is no longer at stake in a city with walls and gates. God’s name is now at stake in the lives of His people, who are the new temple of the Holy Spirit. What walls and gates need work in your life? Your marriage? Your children? Does your eye-gate need attention? Do you need to put guards over your eyes and ears and be more strict about what kind of music you listen to or what movies or shows you watch?

Maybe you recognize that just as Jerusalem lay in ruins with gates burned in Nehemiah’s day, so your life is in ruins today. Your gates are burned down, and you are helpless to put out the flames destroying you. The message you need to hear is that there is a greater leader than Nehemiah who can deliver you from all the danger facing you. There is One who is more zealous for God’s name to be hallowed, for God’s kingdom to come, and for God’s will to be done. That zeal led Jesus to give His life so that all who trust Him will be saved. Hear the good news that God has worked salvation in Christ, and this day trust in Jesus in order to be saved from God’s wrath over your sin.

(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?
2:17 Ruins. The condition of the walls and gates of the city since their destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., in spite of abortive attempts to rebuild them. The leaders and people had evidently become reconciled to this sad state of affairs. It took an outsider to assess the situation and to rally them to renewed efforts. 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

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.

Nehemiah was a man of great confidence, because he understood the trustworthy and loving nature of the Lord. He understood his task to be not primarily political or civic, but spiritual, even though it concerned the building of a physical wall. When God puts something on our hearts, the core issue is always spiritual—whether or not we will trust Him.
DOES GOD’S PROMISE TO PROSPER NEHEMIAH APPLY TO CHRISTIANS TODAY?

“The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12, 15, 17, 22) is one of the theological bases of the prosperity gospel. It’s good that prosperity theologians recognize much of Scripture is the record of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, but it’s bad that they don’t maintain an orthodox view of this covenant. They incorrectly view the inception of the covenant; more significantly, they erroneously view the application of the covenant.

In his book Spreading the Flame (Zondervan, 1992), Edward Pousson stated the prosperity view on the application of the Abrahamic covenant: “Christians are Abraham’s spiritual children and heirs to the blessings of faith. . . . This Abrahamic inheritance is unpacked primarily in terms of material entitlements.” In other words, the prosperity gospel teaches that the primary purpose of the Abrahamic covenant was for God to bless Abraham materially. Since believers are now Abraham’s spiritual children, we have inherited these financial blessings. As Kenneth Copeland wrote in his 1974 book The Laws of Prosperity, “Since God’s covenant has been established and prosperity is a provision of this covenant, you need to realize that prosperity belongs to you now!”

To support this claim, prosperity teachers appeal to Galatians 3:14, which refers to “the blessings of Abraham [that] come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus.” It’s interesting, however, that in their appeals to Galatians 3:14 these teachers ignore the second half of the verse: “that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Paul is clearly reminding the Galatians of the spiritual blessing of salvation, not the material blessing of wealth.”


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 (5-10 Minutes)

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 (5 Minutes)

What Would You Do?

Divide the room into 2 groups. Give each group 3-5 minutes to discuss the following hypothetical scenario. Ask them to try to come to a consensus as to what they would do as a group.

THE SCENARIO: You have been made aware through a friend that someone in your Sunday School class is living a deceitful double life. His life of church attendance is a façade for a life of greed and sexual immorality. The Sunday School class member is a long-time, well-known faithful participant of the group. This week, the normal SS teacher announces that he will be out of town next week, and this member in question will be the guest teacher next week.
THE QUESTIONS:

1. Would you confront the immoral person?

2. If so, how would you respond if they answered, “It’s no big deal. Who are you to judge? Aren’t we all sinners?”

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.

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14 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.108
15 NASB Charles F. Stanley Life Principles Bible Notes, 2011. 2:20
16 https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-errors-of-the-prosperity-gospel/
START HERE  (5 Minutes)

Utilize one of the following tools to ignite the interest of your students. Tell a story, spark a discussion, or show a clip.

TELL A STORY

Young William Wilberforce was discouraged one night in the early 1790s after another defeat in his 10 year battle against the slave trade in England. Tired and frustrated, he opened his Bible and began to leaf through it. A small piece of paper fell out and fluttered to the floor. It was a letter written by John Wesley shortly before his death. Wilberforce read it again: “Unless the divine power has raised you up… I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that (abominable practice of slavery), which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might.” ¹
SPARK A DISCUSSION

I want to start out this morning by finding out a little bit of what’s going on in your lives by asking a question. How many of you would say you’re facing opposition in some way in your life? Would you be willing to share? Who is opposing you and why? In general, how would you say you do in situations when someone or something opposes you?

SHOW A CLIP

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_bvcVrfWUc

Reverend Robert Graetz, the white pastor of an all-black church in Montgomery, Alabama, became a target of racial hatred because of his civil rights activism, including the bombing of his house on two separate occasions.

READ THE TEXT  (2-5 Minutes)

See Teacher Guide (p.4) for ways to creatively read the text.

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 (15-20 Minutes)**

Take time to unpack the text. In the case of historical narrative, set the context, retell the
story, highlight the major scenes and moments and explain their significance.

**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

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) 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.

3:1 – 32 This chapter describes how Nehemiah effectively organized work crews to repair sections of the city wall, beginning at the Sheep Gate in the north and proceeding in a counterclockwise direction for the 1.5-mile (2.4-kilometer) circuit of the wall. Some cities, such as Bethlehem, are not represented; some segments of society, such as “the nobles” of Tekoa, refused to participate (v. 5), but others repaired double sections (v. 27). Archaeological evidence indicates that Nehemiah must have abandoned areas on the steep eastern slope of Ophel. Only one crew was needed to repair the southern half of the western wall (from the Valley Gate to the Dung Gate). On the other hand, the eastern section required twice as many work crews as the western section. 2

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?

“The ministry of the people of God requires all the people of God.”
–Tim Keller
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 dwells. 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?

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

“This chapter is one of the most important in the OT for determining the topography of Jerusalem. Though some locations are clear, others are not. Opinions differ widely about whether the wall enclosed the southwest hill, today called "Mount Zion" (2 1/2 miles, enclosing 220 acres), or only the original settlement—including the temple area—of the southeast hill of Ophel (just under 2 miles, enclosing 90 acres).

The list, which was probably preserved in the temple, proceeds in a counterclockwise direction about the wall. Some forty-one parties are named as participating in the reconstruction of forty-two sections. The towns listed as the homes of the builders seem to have represented the administrative centers of the Judean province. In total, ten gates are listed. Most of the rebuilding was concerned with the gates as the enemy’s assaults were concentrated on these structures. Not all of the sections of the walls or buildings in Jerusalem were in the same state of disrepair.”
(2) God's people respond to intensified persecution with prayer and perseverance.

Retell the story:

4:1-3 Sanballat and Tobiah mock the progress of God’s people.
- The point of Will they sacrifice? is probably: Are these fanatics going to pray the wall up? It’s their only hope! Will they finish up in a day? i.e. have they any idea of what they are taking on? And the final question simply exaggerates the destruction, for there was plenty of usable stone.  

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.
- 4:5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins. Cf. Jer 18:23. This is not personal resentment but a plea to God to vindicate his work and honor his name. It is similar in tone to some of the prayers for deliverance from enemies in the Psalter (e.g., Pss 74; 79)  

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.”
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?

FROM THE PASTOR:
“God is great, so we can do great work with great faith.”
–Dr. Steven W. Smith

A MOMENT OF PERSONAL REFLECTION
“Let me be specific: meditate on the way that God is more powerful than your sinful urges and more powerful than your wicked opponents. As you think on that, take action against the enemies of the gospel by calling on God to do justice against them. As you fill your mind with God’s greatness and fill your mouth with prayer, recognize how the sin that tempts you would crush those you love in its iron jaws, grinding them in its merciless evil. Flee temptation. Fight the good fight. Set your mind on Christ. Be valiant.”

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 (5-10 Minutes)

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 (5 Minutes)

The 3-Minute Challenge: Can You Memorize a Scripture in 3 Minutes?

Direct the students to Nehemiah 4:14. Ask them if they believe they can memorize a phrase in 3 minutes.

1. Try Option 1: “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.”

2. Feeling confident? Try Option 2: “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.”

Set a timer for 3 minutes, and challenge them to memorize it.

Finish the class by asking someone to recite Option 1, and someone to recite Option 2.
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 Daily Bread, June 16, 1989.
2 NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 3:1-32
3 Expositor’s Bible Comentary Old Testament (Abridged Version) 3:1-32
4 Kidner, Derek. Ezra and Nehemiah, p.98
5 NIV Zondervan Study Bible 4:5
6 NIV Zondervan Study Bible 4:12-14
7 Hamilton, James. Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah, p.119