

# Creative Living Bible Study

## *Conquering Challenges - Fulfilling Dreams*

### Studies on the Book of Nehemiah

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*A man's best desires are always the index and measure of his possibilities; and the most difficult duty that a man is capable of doing is the duty that above all he should do.*  
Reverend Charles Brent, 18<sup>th</sup> Century

## Lesson 1

### *Introduction*

Life is full of dreams and challenges unique to us as individuals and to the seasons of our lives. Most of us are almost continually occupied with the quest to overcome some challenge or to see some dream fulfilled. Nehemiah contains the memoirs of a great and humble man who overcame incredible challenges and followed his God-given dreams to fruition. As we study his experience, we will observe important keys to having God's wisdom and power as we pursue the dreams and face the challenges unique to each of our lives.

But first, some background on the book of Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible, only being separated when the Scriptures were translated into the Greek Septuagint in 70 B.C. We are unsure of the author of these accounts, which include both Hebrew and Aramaic language and make up the last of the Old Testament historical books. The ending of 2 Chronicles is almost identical to the opening of Ezra, so some believe the "Chronicler" is the author. Others suggest that Ezra, a godly priest and biblical scholar, authored all these accounts. No one knows for certain.

We do know that the events of Ezra and Nehemiah hold an important place in God's overall plan of redemption, which is the theme of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This plan to mend our broken relationship with Him began in Genesis 3 when man's disobedience resulted in death, or physical and spiritual separation from God.

Yet even in the Garden of Eden, God, in His love for mankind, began to unfold a plan to bring us back into fellowship with Him (cf. Genesis 3:14-15; Colossians 2:13-15; Hebrews 2:14). This plan began when He called Abraham to be the father of a great nation and promised Abraham that this nation would forever inherit the land of Canaan and would bring God's blessing to the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:8).

Old Testament history documents Abraham's offspring becoming the nation of Israel. The New Testament goes on to record the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born among God's people to ultimately die on the cross to take the penalty for man's sin. The Son of God's life, death and resurrection made it possible for anyone in the world who believes in Him to be made right with God and live eternally.

How is the story of Nehemiah critical to God's plan of redemption? Because it shows how God re-established Israel as a nation after her people had been completely dispersed as punishment for years of disobedience and idolatry. The northern kingdom (ten tribes collectively called Israel) fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the people were scattered all over Assyrian territory. The southern kingdom (the tribes of Judah and Benjamin together called Judah),<sup>2</sup> was overrun by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The land was laid waste, Jerusalem and the magnificent temple destroyed, and the people taken into Babylonian exile.

About 70 years later, however, and in fulfillment of God's prophecy through Jeremiah (25:1, 11-12), the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. Rather than export captives from their homelands to keep them from rebellion, the new Persian King Cyrus courted cooperation from his captives by letting them keep their lands and forms of religion. Because of this, Cyrus allowed any Jews who so desired to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. This resulted in more than 42,000 Jews with servants and livestock making the five-month trip back to their ancestral land of Judah in Palestine in 538 B.C. (Ezra 2:64f). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, but with much opposition from neighbors who were not happy to see them back, they were able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem over the next 22 years, completing it in 516 B.C. (See Timelines, pp. 124, 125.) All attempts to rebuild the walls and secure the city, however, were thwarted.

Some 58 years later in 458 B.C., a second group of exiled Jews returned to Palestine with Ezra, a gifted priest and teacher of God's Word whom King Artaxerxes highly respected and charged to administer the affairs of the land (Ezra 7-8). With much prayer, Ezra led a national revival (Ezra 9-10), but all attempts to rebuild Jerusalem's walls were again thwarted.

Nehemiah's story began thirteen years later in 445 B.C. when this devout and humble leader left his prestigious position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes to become governor of Judah and orchestrate the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In spite of great opposition, the huge project was completed in just 52 days. Nehemiah and the people praised and thanked God, for He had not deserted, but rather acted again on behalf of, His people.

Nehemiah and those who worked with him could not have understood the importance of their work in God's plan of redemption, and specifically in fulfilling His promise to Abraham that all people of the world would be blessed through his offspring. As they fortified Jerusalem and once again united as a nation in the land God had given them, they laid the groundwork for the promised Savior and Messiah (Christ) Jesus, God's own Son, to be born in Israel about 430 years later. He would die on a cross outside Jerusalem and, through His death, provide redemption<sup>4</sup> for all who would believe. This made Nehemiah's work as critical in God's plan as the works of men like Abraham, Moses, David, and the Apostle Paul.

As we study this critical part of biblical and redemptive history, we will see the great importance of walking with God as we face the challenges and pursue the dreams of our lives. In the memoirs of Nehemiah, a great and humble leader, we will also observe keys to receiving God's supernatural wisdom and enablement that alone can ensure our success. And as we look at the whole picture, we can be assured from Nehemiah's experience that the eternal good that will come from our choices to walk with God is beyond what we can ever imagine.

# Lesson 1

## *Nehemiah and His Prayer*

### Nehemiah 1

“In the month of Kislev...I was in the citadel of Susa,” Nehemiah begins. The book continues like a journal as this God-appointed leader tells his awesome experience of seeing God do the miraculous: re-establish the walls of Jerusalem and the people’s commitment to love and serve Him. Having a key role in once again uniting God’s people on the face of the earth was no doubt an exhilarating experience for Nehemiah that he was compelled to document!

So the story begins with Nehemiah in the Persian city of Susa (see Map, p. 126), where he held the prestigious position of cupbearer to the Persian King, Artaxerxes. His job was to taste the king’s food and drink to be sure it was not poisoned, which meant he ate at the king’s table and shared his confidence. Certainly his life was comfortable.

But when Nehemiah received word from his brother Hanani, and others who had recently been in Jerusalem, that the walls and gates of the city were still in ruins, he became deeply burdened for the state of his ancestral home and the vulnerability of God’s people there. After some days of prayer and fasting, he humbly cried out to the LORD, “God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love him and obey His commands...” (1:5).

With this reverent address, Nehemiah went on to confess his sins and the sins of the Jewish people toward God that had led to their exile. Then he reminded the LORD of His promise to restore them in their land if they repented of their wickedness and turned back to Him (Deuteronomy 30:4; Ezekiel 29:14; Genesis 17:8). He beseeched God to honor his and others’ prayers and give Nehemiah favor with King Artaxerxes, who held the keys to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring the strength of God’s people there.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Knowing God*

With a broken heart, Nehemiah humbly approached God over the trouble and disgrace of His people in Judah. Nehemiah wanted to help and was willing to leave his comfortable position in the king's palace to dedicate himself to the work. But he knew God would have to bring about the circumstances that would make it happen.

So he put it all before the LORD, remembering that in the Name, or character, of the LORD, there is infinite power, love, faithfulness, forgiveness, mercy and redemption. Nehemiah remembered who God was as he faced the challenge and dream of re-establishing Jerusalem and God's people. Because he knew God, Nehemiah didn't waste any time considering how he himself might persuade the king to help. He asked God to move in Artaxerxes' heart. Perhaps Nehemiah knew the promise of Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases."

What we believe about God's character and nature as we face the challenges before us and pursue our dreams makes all the difference in how we approach our circumstances. In the situations we face on a daily basis, or in the bigger issues that challenge us, how we see God determines whether we pray for the supernatural or just sadly discuss our problems with Him. If we see the greatness and love of God as Nehemiah did, we will believe Him for great and loving answers to our prayers and will experience His supernatural power in our journey.

In this lesson, we will look at the importance of knowing who God is as we face the challenges and follow the dreams on our hearts.

## Lesson 2

### *The King's Favor & Beginnings in Jerusalem*

#### Nehemiah 2

Several months later, the LORD's answer came to the passionate prayers of Nehemiah and others. When Nehemiah took courage to tell the king of his heavy heart over Jerusalem, Artaxerxes responded by appointing Nehemiah governor of Judah (5:14), commissioning him to rebuild the city walls, and promising to completely fund the project. In addition, he granted Nehemiah's request for letters to the governors of areas around Judah, telling them of the king's edict and placing Nehemiah under heavy guard as he made the thousand mile journey to Jerusalem (See map, p. 126). All this happened, as Nehemiah stated, "because the gracious hand of my God was upon me" (2:8).

Immediately, neighboring governors bent on suppressing the Jews, namely Sanballat of Samaria to the north of Jerusalem, and Tobiah of Ammon to the East, were "very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites" (2:10). However, they could only watch as Nehemiah, the former cupbearer to the king, traveled to Jerusalem to fulfill the king's decree.

Upon arrival, Nehemiah, without revealing why he was there, settled in for three days, then took a secret horseback ride by night around the south ruins (see Jerusalem, p. 127). After this, he was ready to tell the leaders what God had put on his heart to do and how God had moved in the king's heart. Then he said, "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace" (2:17).

Seeing the strong leader God had sent, reading the edict of the king, and remembering God's promise through the prophets to restore them in the land, the officials responded, "Let us start rebuilding." Nehemiah humbly continued his memoir, "So they began this good work" (2:16).

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Making Prayer Central*

Nothing is more outstanding in the book of Nehemiah than the prayerfulness of this godly leader. As gifted as he was and highly regarded by the king himself, Nehemiah did not depend on these strengths. He was completely dependent on God. Whether in the longer prayer of chapter 1 or the quick prayer before answering the king's question in chapter 2, Nehemiah was a man of sincere communication with God. (Other prayers of Nehemiah: 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.)

Nehemiah's prayerfulness brought about God's miraculous work in the situation at hand and united Nehemiah with God in His desires. We see this in his declarations: "And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me..." (2:8), "what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem..." (2:12), "I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me" (2:18).

Nehemiah's continual communication with God, stating his dependence on Him and giving Him the glory for results, brought God's favor and wisdom to the challenges Nehemiah faced and the dreams on his heart, which were in fact desires God had given him.

If we, as Nehemiah, continually express our dependence on the LORD through sincere prayer, we become one with Him in purpose as He places His dreams on our hearts and brings His strength to the tasks before us. In this lesson, we will look at what the Scriptures say about the importance and power of humble prayer as we face challenges and follow our dreams.



# Lesson 3

## *Building Together*

### Nehemiah 3:1-4:5

Seeing the strong leader God had sent, knowing the king was behind the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, and remembering God's promise to restore them in the land, the officials responded to Nehemiah's proposal with, "Let's start rebuilding" (2:18). With this, as Nehemiah recorded, "...they began this good work."

Nehemiah continued his memoir with a careful listing of the builders of the wall, starting with the northern sections and going counter-clockwise around the city. Everyone, including the High Priest, participated and were named according to family (e.g. 3:3), town (3:5), or profession (3:8). There were influential people like Shallum, ruler of half of Jerusalem (3:12), people who came from other Judean cities (3:2), and Jerusalem homeowners among the willing workers. Side by side, they began the heavy task of reconstructing the wall, which, like a national flag today, once again identified the Israelites as God's people.

Nehemiah was clearly in authority and responsible for the remarkable organization of the project, but his record instead emphasizes the contribution of individuals and groups. The outstanding solidarity and resolve likely resulted in part from the almost one hundred years of abuse and opposition from surrounding peoples.

And that opposition came in force now. Sanballat, the Samaritan ruler north of Jerusalem, was enraged on hearing of the rebuilding effort. He and Tobiah, the Ammonite, openly ridiculed the Jews in front of associates and the whole Samaritan army (4: 2), saying they were feeble, doomed to failure, and their work so flimsy that "if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

Nehemiah's immediate response was to turn to God in prayer, asking Him to give their enemies, who also showed they disdained God, what

they deserved: the very things they wished upon the Jews. Unless they repented, Nehemiah was in fact declaring God's opposition to those who willfully opposed Him and His people. Also, even though it was true that the Jews were feeble and their task impossible, God was behind it so there was no chance of failure.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Pursuing the Right Dreams I*

Nehemiah had a dream to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the city that represented God's glory and God's kingdom on earth, and God's people worked side by side with Nehemiah to fulfill that dream. Even though they soon met opposition, their success would not be thwarted because God was with them in their efforts to bring about that dream.

We all have dreams in life, but the dreams that bring the most fulfillment are not focused on temporal personal goals, but those we share with God and that He helps us accomplish. And the dreams He gives us will ultimately always be a part of rebuilding His kingdom in our lives and in our world, a kingdom broken down with the fall of man (Genesis 3) and restored through the cross of Christ.

Jesus taught us to pray, "...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). He was not only referring to the day when He will actually rule over the earth, but also to His present reign in the hearts of believers around the globe. As His subjects, we are all called to work alongside believers throughout the world to introduce people to the King, and to help His people establish His sovereignty in their everyday lives.

## Lesson 4

### *Resisting Enemies of God's Work*

#### Nehemiah 4:6-23

In their anger that the Jews were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, a leader in Ammon, first tried to hinder the work by mocking the effort. But Nehemiah led the people to pray and ask God to deal with the hecklers.

Yet once the walls reached half their restored height, Sanballat and Tobiah plotted with Arabs, the Ammonites, and the men of Ashdod to fight against Jerusalem and “stir up trouble” (4:8). Again, Nehemiah first prayed about it, then posted guards around the clock.

Meanwhile, the people were growing weary of the extremely heavy work involved and becoming fearful of enemy threats to come among them and kill them. Jews who lived near these enemies warned Nehemiah “ten times over” (4:12) of plots to infiltrate and attack.

With this, Nehemiah posted men with their families, armed with swords, spears and bows, at vulnerable points in the wall. He encouraged them above all to “remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes” (4: 14). Half the men worked while the other half stood guard, and every worker carried a weapon.

In addition, since the workers were so spread out, Nehemiah kept the trumpeter with him so that should there be an attack, the trumpet would sound for all to join the battle at that place. “Our God will fight for us!” Nehemiah promised (4:20). At night, all slept and kept guard inside Jerusalem, and Nehemiah and his close associates did not even take off their clothes. As a result, “our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it” (4:15).

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Getting Through Hard Times*

Nehemiah's memoir makes it seem as though the issues of this chapter were almost nothing to navigate. In reality, he was facing enormous problems which involved thousands of people and jeopardized the entire work now half accomplished. The boulders were big, the rubble massive, and the people were weary. Their energy was also drained by the deadly threats to them and their families from enemies that surrounded Jerusalem.

Although the pressure on Nehemiah must have been intense, he took simple steps that not only allowed him to survive the hard time, but also to restore security, peace and confidence in the people. In this lesson, we will look at what he did and didn't do that we can emulate as we make our way through difficulties in our lives today.

## Lesson 5

### *Opposition from Within*

#### Nehemiah 5

Nehemiah moved from the threat outside the walls to a threat inside the community. Men *and women* "raised a great outcry," showing that feeding their families was the bottom line issue.

Three desperate groups of poor people rose up in complaint against the rich. The first group no longer owned land and had no means of

producing food. They had been forced to mortgage their property to “eat and stay alive” during famine. A second group was impoverished from loans and interest borrowed from the rich to pay Persian taxes on their mortgaged properties. The third group consisted of those who were selling their sons and daughters into slavery because their fields and vineyards now belonged to wealthier Jews who had taken them through the mortgage, loan and interest business.

Seeing how wealthier Jews had heartlessly made a profit from the desperate circumstances of other Jews made Nehemiah “very angry.” After “taking counsel with himself” about the situation, he called a large meeting of rich and poor. What was at stake was the exiles’ most valuable asset—their unity and brotherhood as God’s people. The wealthy Jews had violated God’s laws designed to establish a unique society built on compassion and love (i.e. “love your neighbor as yourself” Leviticus 19:18). Such a community would reflect the goodness of God to other nations. Nehemiah stated that the rich among them who sold fellow Jews into slavery to non-Jews were not only showing contempt toward the LORD, but were also being a poor testimony for Him to the world around them.

The accused were silent, recognizing they were guilty as charged. Nehemiah proceeded to lay out a plan for the redemption of rich and poor alike. He told the officials and nobles to “fear God” in their actions, stop charging interest, give back the property of those they had exploited, and return all interest charged. “We will give it back,” was their unanimous response, “and not demand anything more from them.” The priests had them take an oath to do what they promised, and Nehemiah pronounced a curse on any who failed to fulfill their promise. The whole assembly said, “Amen” and “praised the LORD.”

As Nehemiah continued his memoir recorded years later, he recalled the ways he had sought, over the years, to be an example to the rich and powerful. As governor, he and his assistants did not “lord it over” the people, but rather worked on the wall alongside everyone. He did not acquire land as other governors had; instead he fed hundreds at his table without asking for a food allotment that would put further demands on the people. Recalling this, Nehemiah simply asked God to “remember him with favor” for his service.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Pursuing the Right Dreams II*

How easy it is to fall into the same trap of self-absorption as the nobles and wealthy officials in Nehemiah's day. At the heart of the problem was their disregard for God and the laws of love He had given Israel. Their focus instead was on the money, self-satisfaction, and pleasures that have a powerful draw on the selfish nature in all of us. Their hearts had become hardened to the fact that they were actually adding to the desperation of others. Nehemiah responded in anger to the people of means that fell into this trap. He chastised them, saying, "Here we are trying to pull the nation together, and you are destroying it with your greedy practices!"

Indeed, self-absorption is destructive to others and to us! It defies God's laws of love and keeps us from a personal walk with God that can give us the deepest joy and fulfillment. Greed and self-absorption robs others of blessings we are meant to give them, and robs the world of the picture of God's loving and compassionate nature that we are meant to display.

Nehemiah was a stunning example of a man who pursued the right dreams. If he had been self-absorbed, he never would have left the king's court in Susa. Graciously, God used Nehemiah to lead rich and poor alike to experience the joys that obedience to God's laws of love can bring. In this lesson, we will look at the blessings that only come from taking those laws seriously, rejecting the inner pull toward self-absorption, and seeking to live a life focused on loving others.

# Lesson 6

## *Further Opposition*

### Nehemiah 6

The wall was finished with only the massive doors left to install. Upon hearing this, Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of Israel's enemies sent an invitation to Nehemiah to meet them in a neutral location for peace talks. But Nehemiah discerned they were plotting to harm him (perhaps kidnap or kill him), so he replied truthfully that he was too busy with the great project to take the days off in travel and meetings. Three more times they pressed him with the same request, and three more times he answered the same way.

Finally, Sanballat sent his aide with an open letter that everyone could read designed to frighten and discourage the people. It claimed that Nehemiah and the Jews planned to declare Nehemiah king, and prophets were in place to support the declaration. The letter also added that this "plot" was verified by Geshem, the Arab and becoming known everywhere. If Nehemiah did not agree to meet to talk about it, Sanballat threatened to tell the king of Persia, who it was suggested would bring strong consequences on Israel. Nehemiah's cool response was simply, "You know you are lying. There is no truth in any part of your story" (6:8, NLT). Then he turned to God in prayer, asking Him to give the people even greater strength to finish the work.

Sanballat and company made one last effort to halt completion of the wall. They hired Shemaiah, perhaps a priest, to pose as a prophet sent by God to tell Nehemiah his enemies would kill him that night, and he should hide in the temple area forbidden to laymen. Nehemiah assured Shemaiah he would never flee from his enemies and exposed him as a fraud, hired to trick Nehemiah into sinning in a way that would ruin his credibility with the people. Then, Nehemiah turned to God once again, asking Him to deal with Shemaiah and the other false prophets and enemies of the rebuilding to which God had called them.

At last, the great doors were hung and the wall completed after just fifty-two days! Thousands had worked hard on the project, but its completion was still a miracle. Surrounding nations were “afraid and lost their self-confidence,” realizing only God could have enabled the Jews to accomplish such a massive task in so short a time.

Nehemiah concluded his account of plots and intrigues by highlighting Tobiah’s alliance with Jewish nobles through his marriage and his son’s marriage to daughters of a prominent Jews (cf. 3:4,30). Though an Ammonite leader, Tobiah and his son Johanan have genuine Jewish names. They may have been descendants of the northern tribes of Israel as well as related to Ammonites (2:10). Tobiah’s alliance with Jewish nobles allowed him to deliver threatening letters to Nehemiah throughout the fifty-two day period, putting a heavier burden on the already greatly burdened leader.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *The Power of Truth*

When ridicule and threats didn’t work, Nehemiah’s enemies came with lies and deception. But all along, the strength of truth—Nehemiah’s faith in God’s truth and Nehemiah’s own straightforward honesty—won the day for this leader. Nehemiah’s story proves that when we stand on God’s truth and respond truthfully, God will give us victory in the challenges we face.

In this lesson, we will explore how knowing and building our lives on God’s truth protects us and sets us free from destructive entanglements and bondage to lies and deception. God also loves honesty, and is behind us with His power when we simply tell the truth.



# Lesson 7

## *Organization and Revival*

### Nehemiah 7-8

Finally, in spite of tremendous and unrelenting opposition, the walls and gates were finished after just fifty-two days (October, 445 B.C.). But the huge effort to rebuild would be futile and a short-lived victory if the city were not occupied with God's people focused on God's Word. The returned exiles mostly lived in their ancestral villages (see map, p. 128) and only went to Jerusalem for worship at the temple. But, as we will see in Chapter 11, Nehemiah would ultimately secure the Holy City by arranging for one-tenth of the Israelites of pure Jewish heritage to move inside Jerusalem.

For the time being, Nehemiah appointed Levites to stand guard at the city gates, which were open only a few hours a day. At night, he instructed the inhabitants of the city to keep watch from designated posts on the wall or from their homes. Nehemiah also put his brother Hanani (1:2) in charge of the city, along with Hananiah, a godly man and the governor of the citadel, or fortress (2:8), north of the temple.

To help select those who would occupy the city, God led Nehemiah to take a census of the people in Judah. To verify ancestry, he also used a list of the exiles who returned to the area almost a century earlier with Zerubbabel. This list named eighteen families and clans (7:8-25) and the inhabitants of twenty towns and villages (7:26-38). It also listed priests (4,289 of them; 7:39-42), Levites, temple singers and gatekeepers (7:43-45), other temple servants, and the people who could not find ancestral registrations tracing their lineage (7:61-65). However, before populating the city, it was time for all the people to hear the Word of the LORD. Nehemiah had everyone gather at the Water Gate as Ezra, the godly scribe and priest who had returned to Jerusalem fourteen years before Nehemiah, stood above the people on a platform. From daybreak to noon he read the Law of Moses (first five books of the Bible) to the thousands standing below him. Levites

moved among the people to periodically explain Scripture passages, making sure everyone understood what was read (8:7-8).

This exposition of God's Word brought revival! People were convicted of sin and shed tears of repentance. Yet Nehemiah and the leaders encouraged them to consider this sacred day as a time to feast, give to others, and "celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words read to them" (8:12). "Do not grieve," Nehemiah told them, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:10).

The next day, Ezra read about the Feast of Tabernacles<sup>2</sup> which the Law stated should be held during the seventh month (October-November). All the people proceeded to enthusiastically build the booths in which this feast required them to live for a week, then came back together for a great assembly on the eighth day as prescribed in the Law. Nehemiah records that it was the greatest celebration of this feast since the days of Joshua almost a millennia earlier; "their joy was very great" (8:17).

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Strength in the Joy of the LORD*

The evidence of God in their midst re-establishing the Israelites as His people was unquestionable on that morning. It was a miracle that God had sent Nehemiah, an organized and unstoppable leader, to rally the thousands of returned exiles to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And even their enemies knew that only God could have made it happen in just fifty-two days!

The restored walls and gates surrounded them as the people—tens of thousands of men, women, and children old enough to understand—gathered before dawn in the square at the Water Gate to hear the Word of the LORD. Ezra, another great gift from God sent to revive their faith, led them in praise and worship as he read, and Levite teachers explained, the Scriptures for the next five hours.

The people humbly stood and received God's Word. As the Holy Spirit moved in their hearts, they began to mourn and weep, convicted of their failure to obey God's commands. They were also filled with gratitude that He had not cast them off but instead come to them in mercy to restore their city and them as His people. They wept tears of deep joy over the assurance of God's love and forgiveness which He always gives those with repentant hearts. They were lost in the deep mixed emotions of revival when Nehemiah took the platform and shouted for them not to grieve, but celebrate and share with others, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:10).

We all yearn for the joy that only comes from humbling ourselves before God, confessing and being cleansed of our sin, and giving ourselves to His purposes. God created us to be filled with joy and wants to give us this joy. Jesus said that He came that we "might have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10b) and told His disciples that He wanted them to experience the fullness of His joy (John 15:11, cf. 17:13).

Obviously, Jesus' joy was not tied to His circumstances as He was about to endure the cross. Likewise, the Apostle Paul was in prison when the Spirit had him pen the words, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). The people of Nehemiah's time still had enemies and poverty among them as they discovered the *joy of the LORD* that gives strength.

We look for joy in dreams coming true or by getting beyond the current challenges in our lives, but these joys will only be temporary if we have not discovered the real joy in the Lord we yearn for. In this lesson, we will observe what characterizes this joy so that we, as the people of Nehemiah's day, may experience the fulfillment and strength only this joy can give.

## Lesson 8

### *Confession and Rededication I*

## Nehemiah 9

Under Ezra's and Nehemiah's leadership, the Israelites had been restored in their identity as God's people. The revival at the Water Gate led to an amazing day of confession and rededication three and a half weeks later. The Israelites came in humility to confess their sins and the sins of their forefathers and to rededicate themselves to putting God first in their lives.

Ezra read the Law for three hours that day, followed by three hours of confession and worship. A solemn prayer, the longest in the Bible and probably written by Ezra, became the centerpiece of their time together. The prayer contained an overview of the whole history of Israel, beginning with creation (9:6) through God's calling and promise to Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, to give his descendants the land of Canaan (9:7-8; cf. Genesis 12:2-3). The prayer declared God's faithful fulfillment of His promise when hundreds of years later, He miraculously delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and through the Red Sea (9:11), guided them day and night with the Shekinah cloud, provided all their needs for forty years in the wilderness (9:12,15), gave them the commandments at Sinai (9:13), and finally brought them into the rich land of Canaan (9:22-25) where they reveled in God's great goodness (9:25).

But in spite of God's goodness and mercy toward them, the people were grossly unfaithful. Although their sins included disobedience, rebellion, blasphemy, arrogance, disregard for God, and evil practices, God still remained faithful to "His covenant love" (9:32). In their prayer they confessed, "In all that has happened to us, You have been just; You have acted faithfully, while we did wrong" (9:33).

The prayer ended by calling on God to be merciful and bless them again. The people acknowledged that their present oppressive situation under Persian rule was the result of their and their fathers' sins and that to once again receive God's care, they must rededicate themselves to follow His laws and put Him first in their lives. So together they made a solemn promise in writing to diligently keep His commandments, trusting that God would once again bring His protection and blessing to their nation and individual lives.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Winning the Battle for Faith*

One of the greatest challenges we continually face if we are committed believers is the *never-ending* battle over our relationship with God. It is easy to stand amazed at the Israelites' repeated withdrawal from God's blessing and protection when life apart from Him always ended in misery.

But the truth is, western nations today have done the same. They have been abundantly blessed with the truth of the gospel and God's abundant provisions for their needs. Yet, they have also turned away from His laws for life, even though this continually leads them down the same destructive path.

In our individual lives, we have the same tendency to repeat the pattern of the Israelites. Our human natures are just as rebellious toward God as theirs were. As Robert Robinson wrote:

*Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it—  
Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart—O take and seal it,  
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

While we cannot make decisions for a nation, we can individually choose to draw on God's power to resist the enemies of our walk with Him and so guard against repeating the mistakes the Israelites made.

Perhaps the first step in doing this is to recognize the forces that continually challenge our relationship with God (the same forces that took the Israelites down time and time again). The Bible identifies two of these forces as the *world*, or worldly perspectives, and our own sinful nature, or *flesh*. In this lesson, we will look briefly at what

characterizes these enemies of our faith and what the Bible says about winning the ongoing battles they produce in our lives.

## Lesson 9

### *Confession and Rededication II*

#### Nehemiah 10

The people had been reminded through the prayer of Chapter 9 that Israel had responded to God's consistent graciousness and mercy with more and more rebellion, ingratitude and disrespect. Even so, when God finally allowed their enemies to take them into bondage, He still did not abandon them, but remained faithful to "His covenant love" (9:32). Together, Nehemiah and the people acknowledged, "In all that has happened to us, You have been just; You have acted faithfully, while we did wrong" (9:33).

The prayer ended with an expression of their yearning for freedom from the present oppressive Persian rule they were experiencing as a consequence of Israel's sin. To once again receive God's blessing on their nation, they publicly made a written and binding commitment to "follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our God" (10:29).

As tokens of their pledge to carefully follow God's laws, they made the following five specific promises in areas that would sustain their community as God's people:

- (1) To prohibit mixed marriages for both men and women (to avoid bringing the worship of pagan gods into their midst, which had destroyed them in the past).
- (2) To preserve the holiness of Sabbaths by not making purchases from non-Israelites on the Sabbath or other holy days.
- (3) To protect the poor by allowing land to lie fallow every seventh year so the poor could help themselves to anything growing on it (Exodus 23:11), and by forgiving all debts every seventh year (Deut. 5:1-11).
- (4) To give their firstborn sons to the LORD at the temple (which would mean paying a redemptive price; Numbers 18:14-19).<sup>1</sup>
- (5) To pay a temple tax and tithe, offer wood for the sacrifices, and give first of animals, crops, etc. (in order to provide for the temple operation and the fulltime work of Levites and priests throughout Judah). “We will not neglect the house of our God” (10:39).

These promises meant great sacrifices in the economically depressed community already burdened by Persian taxes. Rich and poor alike promised to forego marrying foreigners for money and trading on the Sabbath, to give first fruits of their produce, and pay temple tax and tithes. These laws would be costly and self-denying for everyone, and required great faith and commitment to God and each other.

This covenant document, signed first by Nehemiah, then religious leaders and family heads, and finally verbally promised by the rest of the people, declared their commitment to put their merciful and gracious God first in their lives. In so doing, they were trusting God to bestow *shalom*—peace, well-being, harmony, and prosperity—on His faithful and loyal people. This was His promise and their hope as they rededicated their lives to Him.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

## *Finding Significance*

A basic human need around which many of our dreams in life revolve is the need to feel significant. God graciously met this need in the Israelites as He re-established that they were His people. He enabled them to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem together, then revived their understanding of His Word. Finally, He brought them together to be reminded of His faithfulness and mercy throughout the nation's history, and called them to love and serve the LORD by promising to keep His "good and right" laws once again.

These laws were focused on sustaining their relationship with God through temple worship and on caring for each other. Keeping the laws would allow each person to give according to their means toward these priorities. For example, rich merchants would generously help the less fortunate, farmers and ranchers made food for the community, and Levites and priests were to serve people's spiritual needs. Each person was significant as they shared their unique God-given abilities and resources to contribute to the good of the whole. Such a community, built on loving God and loving each other, would glorify God, be a "light to the Gentiles," and "bring blessing to the whole world" (Genesis 12:3).

God wants each of us to find significance as His child. Motivated by our response to His love, we are each called to use our God-given assets—in time, possessions, abilities and talents—to walk with God, build others in the faith, and meet each others' needs. As we all do our part, the body of Christ throughout the world will reflect His goodness to the non-believing world and draw people to His love.

In this lesson, we will observe what the Bible says about how God equips each of us to find significance through His unique calling on our individual lives.



# Lesson 10

## *The Joy of Jerusalem*

### Nehemiah 11:1-12:47

Before the seventh month revival events (chapters 8-10), Nehemiah had begun to work on repopulating Jerusalem. Few people lived in the city before rebuilding the walls, but now it was “large and spacious,” and its abandoned homes needed to be rebuilt and occupied to secure the city.

Nehemiah began the process of selecting Jews to live in the holy city by having all families register and by referring to the list of those who had returned from exile almost a century earlier to validate ancestry. Lots were cast to determine which one out of ten people God wanted to move to the city. Those who agreed willingly were commended by everyone.

Several lists follow which include:

- (1) those who lived in Jerusalem (11:3-24),
- (2) other towns where Jews lived (11:25-36),
- (3) priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel (12:1-9), and
- (4) high priests, priests and Levites in more recent years (12:10-26).

After this, Nehemiah’s memoir records the great celebration and dedication of the newly-rebuilt walls. This was a joyful event filled with singing and thanksgiving to God, who had saved them as a nation. Truly they would not exist as a people had it not been for God’s faithfulness and mercy. He had replaced kings, moved in kings’ hearts, and provided leadership through men like Ezra and Nehemiah in order to re-establish them as a people in the Promised Land. So the dedication of the walls was really a celebration of the goodness of God, for the walls were His gift to them for their protection and to perpetuate His name in the world.

The ceremony began with a procession of two groups around the top of the walls, beginning together probably at the Valley Gate (on the southwest side) and meeting again at a point northeast near the temple. Ezra led one group which went right (counter-clockwise) while the other with Nehemiah went left (clockwise; see Jerusalem map, p. 127). Both groups included huge choirs of Levites with cymbals, harps, lyres and trumpets to accompany their songs of praise. The groups, which represented everyone in Judah, converged together and proceeded into the temple for more singing and thanksgiving. The people were filled with joy over the goodness of God, and “the sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away” (12:43).

In the following weeks and months, the people continued to fill the storehouses of the temple to provide for the Levites and priests, “for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and the Levites...singers and gatekeepers” (12:44-45). As they had promised, the people contributed daily to the needs of the temple workers as all continued to experience the joy of self-giving, worship, and learning the Word of God.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *The Beauty of a Thankful Heart*

The people were filled with joy. Hundreds of gifted singers and musicians led them in songs of thanksgiving as they walked on the massive walls that had been in ruins just two months earlier. They worshiped in the temple that had also been rebuilt since the downfall of the nation 140 years earlier. The people knew these were God’s gracious gifts to them. He had brought them back and restored them as His people. He had made His presence, power, faithfulness and goodness tangibly real to them, and their thankfulness only increased the joy in their hearts.

We as well could have celebrated that day with Nehemiah and the people. God had restored the nation of Israel so that Jesus Christ, His Son and our Savior, would be born to live His perfect life in Palestine

and die on the cross outside Jerusalem. He would take our sin on Himself and credit those who place their faith in Him with His perfect life so that we, along with believers of all time, could be made right with God and have eternal life. How wonderful it would have been to understand what we do today and walk the walls with God's people that day, joining in songs of thanksgiving sung by thousands!

We have so much to be thankful for, but it is so easy to be so busy conquering challenges or reaching for our dreams that we do not take time to thank God for all His goodness toward us. Instead, we take daily blessings for granted, fill our minds with worry and negative thinking, and are quick to blame God for the difficulties and disappointments caused by the selfish and sinful world we live in.

Yet if we take time to celebrate God's goodness as Nehemiah and Ezra led the people of that day to do, we can experience that deep and abiding joy that energizes our lives and gives us victory over life's challenges. God rewards the thankful heart with the richest blessing a heavenly Father can bestow.

## Lesson 11

### *More Rebuilding*

#### Nehemiah 13

After twelve years as governor (5:14; cf. 2:6), Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes, King of Babylon. Then some years later, he was granted leave to return to Judah where he found great abuses to the promises the people had made to God and to the care of His house.

First, Nehemiah found that the priest in charge had made an apartment for Tobiah, who had been a major enemy of the re-establishment of

God's people (2:10; 4:3, 7-8; 6:1, 17-19), in a chamber of the temple designated to store tithes and offerings. Nehemiah evicted Tobiah, purified the rooms, and put back the temple provisions.

Then Nehemiah discovered that the Levites had left their temple responsibilities to make a living on farms because people had stopped giving promised contributions. Nehemiah called the Levites back to their posts, reinstated collection of contributions from the people, and put trustworthy Levites in charge of the storerooms and of distributing supplies.

He also found that men of Judah were working and selling on the Sabbath, along with certain men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuked the leadership responsible for letting this happen, reminding them of how disregard for the Sabbath had led to Israel's downfall in the past. It was a holy day to worship God and rest from their work. Nehemiah had the city gates closed before sundown when the Sabbath began and reopened after the Sabbath so that products could not be brought into the city for sale on that day. When some merchants camped outside the gates, Nehemiah threatened to lay hands on them himself (13:21). He placed formidable Levite guards at the gate "in order to keep the Sabbath day holy" (13:22).

Finally, as Nehemiah went about the countryside, he found Jewish men, in spite of the oath they had taken not to do so (10:30), married to women from pagan nations, where multiple gods were worshiped. Their children didn't even speak the language of Judah, which meant they would not be able to understand reading of Scripture or temple worship. Nehemiah knew that on many levels, intermarriage could lead to the dissolution and disappearance of the Jewish people as a nation. He used King Solomon, who was especially loved and blessed by God, as an example of the downfall that resulted from intermarriage. He punished some for their actions and made all offenders retake the oath to cease giving themselves or their children in marriage to non-Jews.

Nehemiah even discovered that the high priest's grandson had married Sanballat's daughter! Sanballat, the Horonite, had been the arch enemy of the wall restoration and of the re-establishment of the Jewish people (2:10; 4:1, 7-8; 6:1). But worse was the fact that this intermarriage

grossly defiled God's covenant of holiness with the Aaronic priesthood (Leviticus 21:6-8, 14; Nehemiah 13:29). Such action deserved banishment from the nation, so Nehemiah "drove him away" (13:28).

Nehemiah had given himself completely to glorifying God and establishing the spiritual well-being of His people in Judah. As a man of constant prayer, he concluded his memoirs with, "Remember me with favor, O my God." Perhaps part of God's answer to Nehemiah's prayer was making his memoir a permanent part of Scripture.

Jerusalem's walls were strong again, but her people were still in need of the promised Messiah. In about 400 years, He would be born of a virgin in a stable in Bethlehem, and His life, death, and resurrection would fulfill the promises of God to Israel found in Isaiah 53, 60, and 61. Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, would bring light and salvation to the nations, along with the forgiveness for sin and the heart change that would allow Jew and Gentile alike to eternally walk with God.

## BUILDING ON THE BASICS

### *Focusing on Faithfulness*

All of Scripture, and especially the teachings of Jesus Christ, emphasize the importance of faithfulness in overcoming challenges and fulfilling the dreams God has for us. The final chapter of Nehemiah illustrates two very important principles regarding faithfulness. We learn the first from the experience of the people and the second from the experience of Nehemiah.

In the experience of the people, we see the importance of carefully and intentionally resisting compromise in our walk of faith. While Nehemiah 12 ended with the people joyfully walking with God, having committed themselves to follow His laws and stay in the center of His will, Nehemiah 13 records that in just a few years many had already reneged on their promises.

Like the Israelites, it is so easy for us today to make genuine commitments to the Lord, then to go back on our promises when faced with the temptations and pressures of everyday life. Indeed, the Bible warns that the secular world, our old sin nature, and the devil<sup>1</sup> will relentlessly attack our faithfulness. Nehemiah 13 demonstrates why we must always be on guard to stubbornly resist these enemies of faith and continually choose to abide in Christ and follow the lead of His Spirit.

The second principle regarding faithfulness is illustrated by the up-and-down experience of Nehemiah. What a joy to see the walls rebuilt and revival among the people, but what a discouragement to see the people again being unfaithful only a few years later. He could have felt defeated, but instead he simply asked God to remember and honor his faithfulness.

The apostle Paul had a similar experience. Through his missionary journeys, he saw God's Spirit use him to establish churches all across the Roman Empire. But at the end of his life, as Paul sat in a damp prison cell awaiting his execution, he knew that false teachings were flooding into the church and threatening its existence (2 Timothy). Paul simply declared, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (4:7)."

But how God used both these men's faithfulness beyond what they could imagine! Out of Nehemiah's re-established Israel, God brought His Son, the Savior, into the world. And through Paul's faithful writings to the churches, millions upon millions around the world have received the Savior and been transformed by the gospel God used Paul's writings to explain.

The point is, we, like Nehemiah and Paul, are not able to evaluate the success or failure of our faithfulness by what we see. But we can know that as we simply focus on doing what He calls us to do, God will honor our faithfulness in ways we cannot imagine.

Indeed, faithfulness is all God asks of us as we pursue the dreams He puts on our hearts. As we conclude our study, we will look at these two

important components of faithfully walking with God: resisting compromise and focusing on just being faithful.

## General Timeline

(Dates are approximate.)

**2000 B.C.**     **Abraham** called to father a nation.

1900

**Joseph:** Israelites in Egypt.

1800

1700

1600

**1500 B.C.**

**Moses:** Exodus, wilderness, promised land.

1400

1300

1200

1100

**1000 B.C.**

**David:** Israel under kings.

Kingdom divided (930): Israel (North) Judah (South).

900

800

Northern Kingdom (Israel) falls to Assyria (722).

700

First exiles to Babylon (605).

600

Southern Kingdom (Judah) falls to Babylon (586).

**500 B.C.** Return from exile (beginning 538).

400

300 **Intertestamental Period**

200 Silent Period--no prophets.  
God's people waiting for Messiah.

100



Christ (Messiah) is born. God's people in Christ's kingdom.



## Detailed Timeline (Ezra and Nehemiah)

(Dates are approximate)

	Events	King
<b>600 B.C.</b>	586: Judah captured and taken into exile by Babylonians. Jerusalem and its temple destroyed.	Nebuchadnezzar Babylonian
<b>550 B.C.</b>	539: King Cyrus takes over Babylon and decrees that Jewish exiles may return to their land. Zerubbabel in 538 leads the first return and begins to rebuild the temple. 536-520: Temple rebuilding halts. 516: Temple completed.	Cyrus  Cambyses—Persian Darius—Persian
<b>500 B.C.</b>	486-464: Esther's reign as queen takes place during this period.	Xerxes I—Persian
<b>450 B.C.</b>	458: Ezra leads the second return and teaches God's people the Law. 445: Nehemiah leads the third return and rebuilds Jerusalem's walls. He and Ezra lead the people in worship and rededication to the Lord.	Artaxerxes—Persian

**400 B.C.**

**Reference:** Kathleen Buswell Neilson, *Nehemiah: Rebuilt and Rebuilding*.

