



# REBUILDERS

The Book of Nehemiah

**Focus:**

Rebuilding a Culture of  
Faithfulness

**10 Week Study**

Notes and  
Discussion Guide



# Schedule

Each week's study concludes with the sermon. It should involve four steps for participation:

1. Read entirely through the passage for that week.
2. Read entirely through the notes on that week's passage.
3. Discuss the passage in small group using the discussion guide or engage in Bible Class.
4. Listen and engage with the sermon on that week's passage.



## **Week 1**

“I was cupbearer to the King”  
Nehemiah 1:1-2:10

## **Week 2**

“Assessing the Damage”  
Nehemiah 2:11-20

## **Week 3**

“Next to Him”  
Nehemiah 3:1-32

## **Week 4**

“Opposition”  
Nehemiah 4:1-6:14

## **Week 5**

“Fifty Two Days”  
Nehemiah 6:15-7:73

## **Week 6**

“With Unified Purpose”  
Nehemiah 8:1-18

## **Week 7**

“Confession and Covenant”  
Nehemiah 9:1-38

## **Week 8**

“Write Your Name on the Wall”  
Nehemiah 10:1-39

## **Week 9**

“A Joyful Celebration”  
Nehemiah 11:1-12:47

## **Week 10**

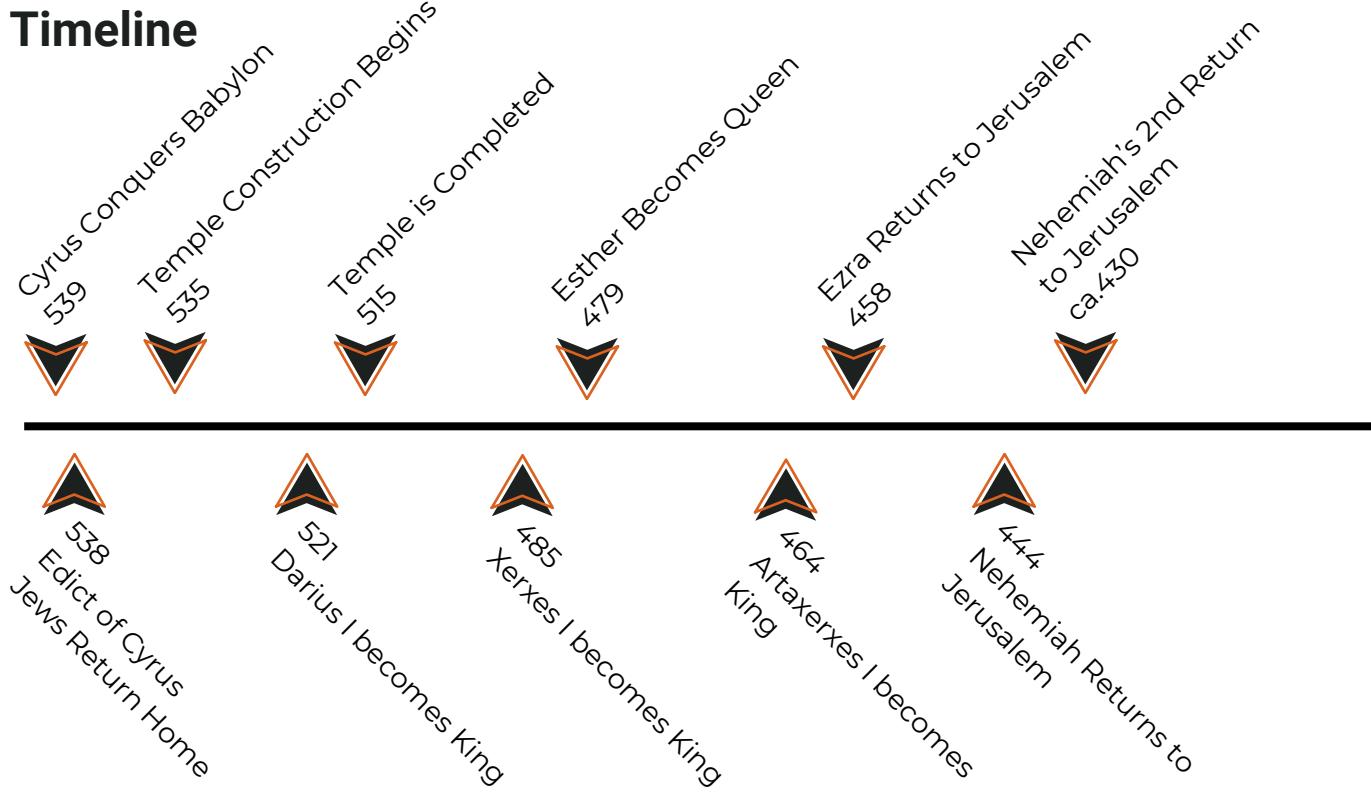
“Remember This in my Favor”  
Nehemiah 13:1-31



# ABOUT NEHEMIAH



## Timeline



## Setting

Nehemiah is a historical, autobiographical memoir that takes place in the delicate tension between politics and religion. The ongoing wars in and around the Middle East raged for centuries before Nehemiah and continue still today. Nearly a hundred and fifty years before Nehemiah, the Babylonians decimated the Israelites in their war against the Egyptians. 2 Kings 24 describes the aftermath of Babylon's defeat over Jerusalem, "Nebuchadnezzar led King Jehoiachin away as a captive to Babylon, along with the queen mother, his wives and officials, and all Jerusalem's elite. He also exiled 7,000 of the best troops and 1,000 craftsmen and artisans, all of whom were strong and fit for war." Not long afterward, the Babylonians themselves were overtaken by the growing force of the Persian empire led by Cyrus. In multiple coups within the Babylonian monarchy, Darius I replaced Cyrus then Xerxes I replaced Darius I. Two years later, Artaxerxes I takes control through multiple murders. Under his reign, we find Nehemiah serving as his personal cupbearer.

In contrast to the major players, Judah (Israel) is small in size and status. Its capital city Jerusalem lies in forgotten ruin not only by the exiled Israelites but also by the global powers. No one is concerned about Jerusalem. No one even gives a second thought to its power or influence. The ruined walls of Jerusalem are a side note in world history. Though they have been forgotten by the Persian kings, they have not been forgotten by YHWH, the eternal King. Like in all of Scripture, that which looks small and insignificant in the eyes of the world is immensely significant and useful in the eyes of God. So when word of the condition of Jerusalem reaches Nehemiah in the opening chapter, the reader immediately anticipates the good work God is about to do again right in the middle of the tension of politics and religion.



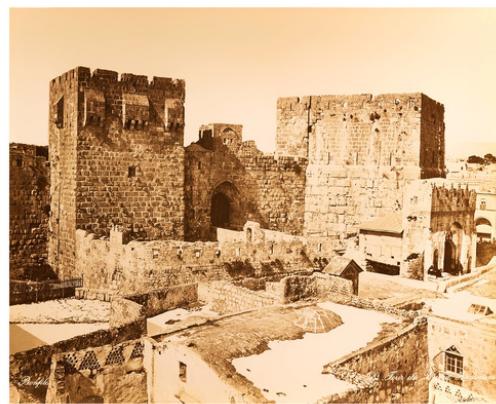


## Devotional

Confronted with the terrible news about Jerusalem, Nehemiah makes this short and powerful statement concerning his present status, **"In those days, I was the king's cupbearer."** I wonder how much he had thought about his job or his role in life up to this point. He was an exiled Israelite, but his family had been in exile for so long that it is doubtful he even knew his hometown of Jerusalem. There were stories about second cousins and a magnificent temple from the past. Yet, this was his present reality, his day-to-day life as one of the most important people in the Persian empire. He was cupbearer to the king. Nothing that will take place in the coming narrative around Nehemiah's role in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is possible unless he is cupbearer to the king. There were probably many Israelites who mourned over the condition of the walls of Jerusalem and, yet, could do nothing about it! Not Nehemiah, though. Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. God had specifically positioned him in the right time and the right place with the right role so that he might accomplish divine intention. The great things that Nehemiah will do on behalf of God first begin with a recognition that God put him in a place and a time to do something specific. So it might be for us as well? What is your specific point in time? What specific role has God given you with divine intention? How do your circumstances promote the good news of the kingdom of God? Where does God want you to rebuild?

## Summary

The book of Nehemiah is a collection of memoirs from Nehemiah himself. It opens in late autumn in the capital city of the Persian empire. Nehemiah receives word from his brother that their hometown, Jerusalem, lies in ruins. The temple has been rebuilt but the walls are rubble. Though Nehemiah himself has most likely never even been to Jerusalem, he is devastated by the news. He immediately turns towards prayer repenting on behalf of his people and begging God to restore the status of Jerusalem in line with covenant faithfulness. In his prayer, Nehemiah petitions God's own covenant established through Moses. Nehemiah develops a plan based on his role as cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes I. Some time later, while receiving his wine the king notices for the first time that Nehemiah appears sad and burdened. Again petitioning God but now speaking to the king he requests that he be allowed to return home to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Evidently, because of Nehemiah's long faithfulness and service to the king, the king allows Nehemiah to return with a delegation and work crew. He also allows provisions for the work while requiring a clear timeline for Nehemiah's return. In this text, we see God once again at work in the historical drama of worldly kingships and political requests. Whereas previous Persian Kings had disallowed the building of the walls for fear of a rebellion against their empire, in due time, God's people on God's timeline begin their path to restitution. **God is rebuilding again.**



Ruins of Jerusalem - 1923

## Who was Nehemiah?

Nehemiah is a politician. It is important to remember this when reading through these texts. It's easy as we study the Old Testament, to think of every figure as either prophet, priest, or king but Nehemiah's role as cupbearer was primarily political. Initially, we think of a cupbearer as someone who's in charge of serving the wine. That's the beginning of the job, but through time the role grew in significance. The scholar Edwin Yamauchi describes it well, "He would have been well trained in court etiquette (compare Dan 1:4, 13, 15; Josephus, Antiquities 16.230). He would certainly have known how to select the wines to set before the king. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Qamma 92b) states: 'The wine belongs to the master but credit for it is due to his cupbearer.' He would have been a convivial companion with a willingness to lend an ear at all times... Nehemiah would have been a man of great influence as one with the closest access to the king, and one who could well determine who got to see the king (Xenophon, Cyropaedia 1.3.8–9). Above all, Nehemiah would have enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king. The great need for trustworthy attendants is underscored by the intrigues that were endemic to the Achaemenid court."

## Ezra and Nehemiah

The Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah are actually included together in the Hebrew Bible as one book. Their stories overlap in such a way that to tell one story is to tell the other. Ezra's primary responsibility is to restore the Scriptures and religion to the temple, which had been rebuilt earlier by Zerubbabel. With the temple being rebuilt, Ezra (who's name means Yahweh helps) can restore the temple as the religious center of Jewish life. It is where the sacrifices are to be made in compliance with Israelite law. From a fundamentalist perspective, the temple is the only place where the Jewish people can make restitution for sin and find right relationship with God. In a very simplistic understanding, the Jewish people need the temple to be restored in order that they may find good standing again with God and have their king re-established on the throne in Jerusalem. While Ezra is busy rebuilding the Jewish religious practices, Nehemiah gets to work rebuilding the physical walls of political security that surround Jerusalem and the temple within. As important as the temple was to Jewish religious life, the walls around Jerusalem were just as important to the Jewish political life.

## Text Notes

- 1:1 - *Nehemiah* (Hb. נָהָמִיא): Nehemiah most likely means "YHWH comforts."
- 1:1 - *Hakaliah* (Hb. חָקְלִיא): Hakaliah has two possible meanings. 1. "Darkened in the eyes by wine from the Lord." 2. "Wait on the Lord."
- 1:1 - *The Twentieth Year*: Scholars debate what the twentieth year refers to. It is either a reference to the twentieth year of Nehemiah's service as cupbearer or the twentieth year of Artaxerxes reign.
- 1:4 - *Fasting and Praying*: This is the first of nine prayers in the book of Nehemiah and it is the longest of the nine. It is different from most OT prayers because it begins not with a complaint but with petition and repentance.
- 2:2 - *sad* (Hb. עָז): This word has a variety of meanings from evil to disagreeable. The idea here is that it was risky for Nehemiah who was serving at and for the pleasure of the king to be sad in his presence. Hence, Nehemiah is fearful when Artaxerxes notices his displeasure. Greek historians Ctesias and Aristotle differ on how Artaxerxes gained the throne but both agree that he murdered whoever stood in his way. His violence was well known and Nehemiah shows amazing bravery in this moment.

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 1 - Nehemiah 1:1-2:10



## Opening Question

Answer either one of these questions:

1. What do you do?
2. Where do you live?

Read Nehemiah 1:1-2:10 as a Group



## Question One: Nehemiah

How would you describe Nehemiah according to this passage? What are some of his main qualities or characteristics? How do you see these play out in this passage?



## Question Two: Action Steps

Trace Nehemiah's reaction to the news he receives from his brother. What action steps does Nehemiah take? Is there an importance to the order of these steps?



## Question Three: Cupbearer to the King

Nehemiah understands that he has been given a specific role in a specific time for the glory of God. His place in life is not coincidental or accidental. If you reflect upon your own life in the same way, where and how do you see God using your status or place in life for his glory?

**Prayer and Praise**



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Before you pray together, read Nehemiah 1:4-11 again. Try and echo this prayer in your prayer time together.





## Devotional

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, I was at school in Arkansas. One of my friends was from Picayune, Mississippi exactly where the eye hit shore. I remember our friend group sitting together and watching the reports coming in through the TV. My friend sat with a heavy heart and eyes full of tears. After the storm cleared, she immediately began packing for a trip home. The roads were closed and FEMA had issued a no-travel zone around New Orleans, but she was going anyway. A few of us tried to convince her otherwise. I'll never forget her sobbing and repeating, "I just have to see it myself ... I just have to see it myself." That's where Nehemiah's at in this passage. He traveled the hard journey from the capital city of the Persian empire all the way to Jerusalem. On his third night, he sneaks out to assess the damage firsthand. This had to be emotional for him. This is the place where his family is buried. The destruction reminds him of his people's unfaithfulness to God and of the pain and destruction inflicted by the Babylonian army. Like a WWII vet looking over Normandy, the still and quiet of the present only accentuates the echoing screams of the past. Sometimes we just need to see it firsthand. We are so protected in our culture. Safety is our first priority. Still, sometimes we must experience it firsthand. We need to witness the blight and poverty in our own cities. We need to travel to third-world countries where running water is not common and sewage runs open through streets. We need to visit places where the trees and topsoil have been stripped and abused for the accumulation of wealth. We need to be reminded that sin has a terrible price. Sometimes we need to see it for ourselves.

## Summary

In this passage, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, and after three days rest he surveys the condition of the walls in a counterclockwise ride at night. This private affair involves only himself, his donkey, and a few others for his protection. The text is clear that he has kept his intentions for rebuilding the wall private as he entered Jerusalem. This is an important note as his arrival itself could not have been private or secret. A high-ranking political officer with an accompanying guard would have created quite the scene in Jerusalem. Everyone around the city was wondering why Nehemiah had arrived and he didn't want to act until he had first-hand knowledge of the job set before him. After assessing the walls on his night ride, Nehemiah makes his first action toward rebuilding the walls. Of course, he can't rebuild the walls by himself. He will need the help of all the people. So he begins building a coalition. It is interesting he doesn't start with the leadership of the Jewish people. He doesn't call a council for a meeting of the minds. Instead, he goes directly to the people. The text repeats three times their response, "Let us rise up!" They repeat this statement as an affirmation of praise for what God is doing through Nehemiah. You can almost hear their chants still echoing as the first layer of opposition also speaks up. Nehemiah quickly and succinctly rebukes the opposition with both his credentials before Artaxerxes I and, more importantly, Yahweh himself! The time to rebuild has come to Jerusalem.



The Dung Gate

# The Disgrace of the Walls

In their fascinating commentary on the book of Nehemiah, Shao and Shao draw out the Asian perspective on Nehemiah. We read and interpret scripture through our cultural lens formed from a Western perspective as Americans, and we forget that scripture is written from an Eastern perspective. So it's helpful to read Eastern/ Asian interpretations of scripture. This week's passage is a perfect example of that. In our Western thinking, we are drawn to the action plan of Nehemiah and his step-by-step approach to accomplishing his task. Yet, the Eastern perspective notices immediately a little line that we read right over, "end this disgrace" (2:17). The significance of the statement can't be understated. The condition of the walls is not just a practical nuisance or visual blight for the Israelites residing in Jerusalem. It is a constant, daily reminder of their disgrace and shame. Eastern cultures are based on the concept of honor and shame. The greatest purpose in life is to bring honor to your family's name and your God's name. Whereas we think of the greatest purpose in life as to accomplish something or fulfill our purpose. In the same way for us, the greatest disgrace is to waste a life or fail at our purpose. In Eastern cultures, the greatest disgrace is to bring shame upon your name, the name of your family, or the name of your God. So, the walls of rubble around Jerusalem are not only a disgrace to the Israelite people, but they also reflect shame upon the name of their God, Yahweh. People's response to Nehemiah's rising up and building the walls is not just a political act. It is also a religious and spiritual act of honor. They will honor the name of their family and the name of their God by rebuilding what has brought them shame. Shao and Shao put it this way, "Notice how carefully and sincerely (Nehemiah) invites his audience to sense ownership of the project by using the pronouns "you," "we," and "us." This inviting tone encourages listeners to feel privileged to join in the work in order to remove the disgrace that will affect all of them if it is left unattended."

## Text Notes

- 2:11 - *Three Days* (Hb. מִימִין שְׁלֹשָׁה): The theological significance of three days should not be missed. Though three days in the OT doesn't carry the same significance it does in the NT, it is still a prevalent theme of the OT. The Israelites ask Pharaoh to go three days into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to YHWH (Ex. 3:18; 5:3; 8:27) and routinely in the Exodus the ark of the covenant goes three days travel before them (Nb. 10:33). Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and then walks to Nineveh for three days (Jonah 1:17; 3:3). Most specific to Nehemiah is the Ezra overlap. Ezra camps for three days both at the riverside and in Jerusalem (8:15; 32) and then, more importantly, proclaims that anyone who wants to claim their property must arrive within three days (10:7-8). Three days appear to give everyone in Israel long enough to hear about the edict and arrive. It probably serves the same purpose in Nehemiah. Of course, in the NT Jesus remains in the ground for three days before being resurrected. Nehemiah's three-day rest before rebuilding is prophetically recalled in the rebuilding of God's city through Jesus.
- 2:12 - *God had put in my heart*: "Just as Ezra sees the beautification of the temple as being "put by God in the hearts" of the Persian kings (Ezra 7:27), so too Nehemiah understands his plans as those that "my God had put in my heart" (Shepherd & Wright, *Ezra-Nehemiah Commentary*.)
- 2:13 - *Jackal's Well* (Hb. תְּתִינָן): Might also be the "well of serpent's." It's unclear from archeology what well this is though it might be the major spring of Jerusalem which winds like a serpent.
- 2:13 - *Dung Gate* (Hb. אֲשֶׁפֶת): This most likely refers to the valley of Hinnom where Manasseh allowed child sacrifices (2 Kgs 23:10). Due to a play on the Greek word, "Gehenna" it later came to refer to the place of eternal punishment.
- 2:14 - *Fountain Gate* (Hb. עַיִן): A gate most likely on the southeast wall built by Hezekiah to water the royal gardens possibly, eventually the Pool of Siloam (John 9:1-11).

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 2 - Nehemiah 2:11-20



## Opening Question

Emotions can often be tied to specific places. In your life, what place that you visit evokes specific emotions? Why is that?

Read Nehemiah 2:11-20 as a Group



## Question One: Three Days Rest

When Nehemiah arrives at Jerusalem, he takes a three day rest. What is the significance of this? Why three days? Where else in scripture do we see three days and how does that relate to this passage?



## Question Two: Emotional Health

When reading through the commentaries on this passage, many of them point out that in the opening chapters Nehemiah displays maturity and emotional health. Where and how do you see this in Nehemiah so far?



## Question Three: God's Role

So far in Nehemiah there has been many mentions of God and direct petitions to him, but we haven't seen God visibly active in the way we do in many OT stories such as the miracles of the Exodus or the words of the prophets. When you think about the opening two chapters of Nehemiah, how do you see God at work? How does this relate to the way he is at work in our lives still today?

**Prayer and Praise**



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Pray for God to bless specific actions that we can take that will bring glory to his name.





## Devotional

There is a recurring theme in chapter three that is often overlooked. It's two little words, "next to." It's used fifteen times (3:2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 17, 19) though many English translations don't translate every occurrence. If you read the passage in the NASB you will see the repetition. It's used twice in just the second verse "next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built." There is something about working next to someone else. Recently, my father and I were clearing out freshly mowed Johnson grass from the edges of a hayfield. As usual, we didn't really have the right equipment for the job. We needed a tractor with a large drag harrow rake. Instead, it was him and I with a couple of garden rakes. So we started raking the best we could clearing the ground and making space for good grass to grow. Not long after we started my shoulders began to burn and my back started to hurt. It was hard, hot work. I caught my breath as I leaned on my rake and out of the corner of my eye I saw my dad right next to me still working away! Something about him being next to me pushed me on in that moment. I dug a little deeper strengthened by our mutual resolve. Who are the ones that are next to you in your spiritual life? Who are the ones you stand beside that push you along as you push them along? Too often we think of faithfulness as a long solo mission, but it's not! Scripture teaches time and time again, it matters whose standing next to us. Maybe it's a son in the faith or a mother of the church; a Sunday school teacher or facilities deacon. Maybe it's a friend that you meet with for coffee through the years. Nehemiah 3 encourages us to not only stand up but stand next to!

## Summary

As we read through Nehemiah, we are going to encounter some long lists of names and places. Scripture and other ancient near eastern historical works are filled with these accounts. Let's be honest, they are hard to read. It's not only that people's names can be incredibly difficult to pronounce and understand, but also that the passage seems to have no movement or broader theological implications. It's not like Nehemiah 3 is constantly quoted on our verse of the day notifications! Yet, these passages were important to ancient people. Maybe in some ways even more important than the narrative around the list. Scholars think that the list in Nehemiah 3 might even predate the rest of the writing in Nehemiah. Ancient people revered these lists. What should we take away from these lists then? First, these are actual people in an actual place and time. Though Nehemiah is the focus of the book, each of these people played an important role in rebuilding of the wall. Try and imagine each of them as different people such as a friend that you know from down the street, a second cousins once removed or the guy you run into at the coffee house all the time. These are John's and Kyle's, Susan's and Sarah's. They are real people just like us. Second, the list serves as a reminder of all those that "rose up" and met the challenge before them. Like the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 13, these people should be remembered and honored for their faithfulness to God in trying times. When everyone else set on their hands, each of these people chose to rebuild. As you read through the names, remember them as people and show them honor in their faithfulness.



Tomb of David

## The Social World in a List

One of the things that's really neat about Nehemiah chapter 3 is the descriptions of the people. This is one of the things that sets it apart from other lists in scripture. Most lists are genealogical or given for a census. Nehemiah 3 though is a list of all of those who have chosen to stand up and serve. The way he describes all of these people is not based exclusively on their genealogy. In their commentary on Nehemiah, Shao and Shao point out the significance of this list, "The social world of ancient Israel is reflected in the list of various professions, which includes cultic officials (3:1, 17, 22, 26, 28), political leaders (3:9, 12, 14-19), and various business fields, such as goldsmiths, perfume makers, and merchants (3:8, 32). Based on the usage of the word "ruler," the list identifies five administrative centers: Jerusalem (3:12), Beth-hakkerem (3:14), Mizpah (3:15), Beth-zur (3:16), and Keilah (3:17)."

## Nehemiah, the Great Organizer

Nehemiah is universally applauded for his leadership and organization of this project. He not only rallies the people to work, but he also has a specific plan for what they should do and where they should be working. He gives great attention and detail to the reconstruction of the gates. He even appears to have those who would use each gate serve for the reconstruction of that specific gate. Likewise, the scholar Mark Thorvbeit points out, "Nehemiah seems to have organized the builders in such a way that, as far as possible, each would be responsible for the part of the wall that lay opposite his own house. This eliminated arguments as to who would work where and motivated the workers to make that part of the wall that defended them as secure as possible."

## Tower of Hananel

The text specifically mentions that the Tower of Hananel was rebuilt and dedicated to the Lord. There were two towers on the North wall as the hillside left that area most naturally unprotected. The Tower of Hananel's rebuilding is more theologically significant than just fortification. It is mentioned twice in Nehemiah (3:1; 12:39) and only two other times outside of Nehemiah. Both other texts specifically reference the rebuilding of the tower in conjunction with the reestablishment of the eternal reign of God. The day of expectation can be marked by the rebuilding of the tower in Jer. 31:38 and Zechariah 14:10.

## Text Notes

- 3:1 - *Eliashib the high priest and the other priest started to rebuild.* Eliashib was the grandson of Jeshua (12:10) who was a leader in the reconstruction of the temple. He continues his family legacy by "rising up" and beginning to work. Two things should be noted. First, the priests don't sit idly by and let the lay people work. Instead, they are the first to begin the rebuilding. Second, the theme of rising up that was initiated in chapter 2 (2:17, 18, 20) finds fruition in the priests response in this verse where Eliashib literally "arose with his brothers."
- 3:1 - *Dedicated it (Hb. תִּשְׁלַח).* Twice in the opening verse the priests consecrate or dedicate their work to their Lord. It seems this double blessing serves literally as an opening statement that seems to blanket the rest of the text. The gates and walls are being rebuilt and dedicated to the Lord.
- 3:12 - *His daughters.* This is the only mention of women involved in the repair of the walls. Still, its inclusion in a highly patristic culture is stunning. Women were included in not only the work but in the memory of the work.

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 3 - Nehemiah 3:1-32



## Opening Question

How do you think other people describe you? Do they talk about your occupation or family?

Read Nehemiah 3:1-32 as a Group



## Question One: Know More About

Skim through the list of names in Nehemiah one more time then pick out one person or group of people that you would like to know more about. Who is someone or some group in this list that you would like to have dinner with and hear their life story?



## Question Two: Organizational Genius

One of the commentators on Nehemiah refer to him as an organizational genius based upon this passage. In what ways do you see Nehemiah's organizational genius in this passage? What sticks out to you about how the rebuilders are organized?



## Question Three: Next to Him

In Nehemiah 3 we see the recurring refrain, "next to him." The text reads as though everyone is working shoulder to shoulder, side by side together. God is using them to rebuild and they are doing it together. Who are the ones in your life that are standing beside you? Who do you stand next to? Why is it important to have someone next to you as God rebuilds?

**Prayer and Praise**



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Pray specifically for people who are "next to you" in your faith journey.





## NOTES & QUOTES

### Devotional

Rumors and innuendo will destroy a man as fast as his own moral failing. Contemporary tabloids and social media are really nothing new in the history of the world as we see in the case of Nehemiah chapter six. In this chapter, the opposition attacks Nehemiah personally through rumors and innuendo. Three main figures try to discredit Nehemiah: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab. All three of these men are opposed to the rebuilding of the wall as outsiders who are profiting from their control of Jerusalem. They begin baseless rumors to catch Nehemiah in a trap. The purpose of the rumors underlies the Hebrew of the text. Nehemiah says in 6:9, "they were just trying to intimidate me (make me afraid)." This same word for "make afraid" is used in v. 13, 14, & 19. Nehemiah's response to these rumors is helpful for us today. Rather than defend himself or start rumors against his opponents, he simply continues his work. The simplicity of his reply to Shemaiah is stark, "Should a man like me run away? Should one like me go into the temple to save his life?" Nehemiah is able to battle the rumors of innuendo with the truth of his integrity. Fear will not cause him to run away or hide. In the face of false rumors, Nehemiah stands with integrity and continues his good work. May we do the same.

Tobiah's Palace, Temple: 445 BC



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# NEHEMIAH 4-6

## WEEK 4

### Summary

The people have barely started rebuilding the walls when the opposition begins. It comes in three waves covered in chapters four through six. Chapter four describes **a wave of opposing intimidation** where outsiders try to bully the Jews into stopping. This is led by Sanballat who is described as "very angry" and flying "into a rage." He tries to intimidate through vein threats and ignorant taunts. Nehemiah hears that a force of bandits is ready to retake Jerusalem and destroy the walls. Though he's uncertain about the threat's validity, he takes precaution by splitting his workforce in half. Half continues to tirelessly work on the wall while the second half stands watch night and day. Chapter five describes **a wave of internal opposition**. Nehemiah takes this wave of opposition the hardest. His own people have been charging exorbitant interest to their fellow Jews. That debt holding coupled with a famine in the region creates internal conflict. The wealthy continue to increase their wealth while the poorest fall further into dept, even to the point of having to sell their daughters into slavery. The irony is clear. As they continue to rebuild the walls to keep their people safe from outsiders, it is the insiders who are doing the most damage. Nehemiah responds by calling his people to repent. He challenges them to forgive debt and not charge absurd interest. Also, he sets an example by not collecting any taxes while serving as governor. Nehemiah is not just rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He is rebuilding the social structure of the Jewish people. Chapter six narrates **an opposing wave of innuendo**. First, a rumor is started by Sanballat and Geshem that Nehemiah is trying to overthrow the reign of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah simply responds, "there is no truth in any part of your story!" Tobiah and Sanballat then hire a prophet Shemaiah to start a rumor that Nehemiah will be murdered. Shemaiah tries to convince Nehemiah to flee into the temple for his safety. Nehemiah is not allowed in the temple and if he enters it he will sin. Again, he calls out the rumor for what it is: lies! The three waves of opposition fail to keep The Jewish people from rebuilding!

## The Strength of the Walls

Jealousy and vitriol often come out in mockery. So it is with the accusations of Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites when they mock the conditions of the half rebuilt wall. They taunt the Jews by saying that even just a small animal like a fox running across the top of the wall would cause it to crash down. Of course, they are making fun of not only the integrity of the wall but also the competency of the ones building the wall. There might be some truth to this accusation. Primarily the Jewish people were farmers, shepherds, bakers, and fishermen. Surely some were craftsman, but not the majority. Likewise, they were crafting the wall out of the damaged rubble that had been burned and scorched through the sacking of Jerusalem 150 years prior. Yet, in the end we know that their taunts were like clouds without rain. Archaeological evidence has demonstrated that Nehemiah's wall was between nine and twelve feet in width. Many contemporary structures still stand upon this rebuilt wall as the foundation. Though the original ruins might have been scorched a bit, the stones were still strong. Though the workers might not have been paid carpenters or masons, their work has lasted thousands of years. Despite the mocking, Nehemiah's wall was strong.

## Slavery in Israel

Slavery in ancient Israel was not illegal, but it was strictly regulated by the mosaic law (Ex. 21:1-11). The law never allowed forced slavery. The law did allow for chosen slavery in payment for a debt. Likewise, a debt holder could offer his sons or daughters to work as slaves until the debt was repaid. This would allow the family to retain their property while still paying off their debt. It was common for a daughter given in slavery to be taken as a wife. The Mosaic law requires that the husband then care for his wife even if he takes a second wife. Male and female slaves were both required to be released in the sixth year and the law strictly prohibits a slave being kept into their seventh year (Lev. 25:39-43).

## Shemaiah

We don't a lot about Shemaiah as he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament. The text indicates that he is the son of Delaiah. If this Delaiah is the same as the one in First Chronicles 24:18 then we know Shemaiah was a priest and had access to the temple. This would make practical sense in the context. The passage also says that he was shut in at his home though it is unclear why. It might be that he was physically incapable of leaving the house though that wouldn't make sense as he tells Nehemiah they will flee to the temple together. Scholars think a better understanding is that he is shut in his house as a way to show Nehemiah that he should be afraid of those who are opposing him. Either way, he has sold out to Sanballat and Geshem. There are clear laws and rules in the Old Testament against false prophets and the penalty for serving as a false prophet is death (Deut. 18:20). Nehemiah can recognize this false prophet by knowing that a true prophet will never offer a word that contradicts what God has already revealed (Is. 8:19-20.)

## Text Notes

- 5:4 - Taxes (*Hb. לְמִדָּת הַמֶּלֶךְ*), *lit.* "king's Tax." The Persians continued military expenditures created high taxes throughout their empire. Modern estimates suggest they collected twenty million dollars a year in silver and gold. This created massive inflation across the empire at a nearly 50% rate.
- 6:2 - Valley of Ono. "Ono was about seven miles southeast of Joppa. It may have been in neutral territory between Judah and Samaria, although the references to Jews living in Ono (Ezra 2:33; Neh 11:35) make it more likely that it was in the extreme northwestern part of Judah" (Breneman.)

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 4 - Nehemiah 4-6.



## Opening Question

When is a time in your life you have faced serious opposition?

Read Nehemiah 4-6 as a Group (YOU CAN DO IT!)



## Question One: Opposition

In the notes we describe three waves of opposition, one in each chapter. These are waves of intimidation, internal strife, and innuendo. Where do you see each wave of opposition and how do you see Nehemiah respond?



## Question Two: Sticks out to You

This is a long reading for this week. As you've read through the text, what sticks out to you? It could be small side note in the passage or a large point that got your attention. What sticks out to you and why?



## Question Three: Integrity

Nehemiah is referred to as a man of integrity. What does integrity mean? How would you define it?

### **Read Proverbs 10:9.**

How do you see the truth of this Proverb playing out in this life of Nehemiah?

How have you seen the truth of this Proverb playing out in your life?

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Pray specifically for integrity in different areas of your life.





### Summary

In the extended passage for this week the wall is completed after only 52 days of labor. The majority of scholars agree that the date is October 2, 445 BC. There are three important things in summarizing this text. First, Nehemiah points out the great reversal in this text. Whereas before those opposed to the building of the wall were trying to frighten and intimidate Nehemiah, now it is those same people who are frightened and intimidated by their work. Of course, Nehemiah does not claim credit for himself or the Jewish people. Rather, it is God who has done the work! The walls are strong and Yahweh is again to be feared. Second, though the walls are completed, the opposition does not stop. Rather, Tobiah tries to take a political approach by winning the nobles of Judah away from Nehemiah. Nehemiah makes a bold political move by establishing his brother Hanani and a faithful servant Hananiah as the governors over Jerusalem. The Jewish people are as strong politically in Jerusalem as they have been in a century. Third, Nehemiah finds the registry of Jerusalem. This was a list of people who had historic claim to the land in and around Jerusalem. For anyone to remain and settle in Jerusalem, they must have been able to make that historic claim. This is the same census that appears in Ezra 2 with a few minor differences. With the walls rebuilt, the people begin to rebuild their homes as well. In summary, the wall is completed, the Jewish people are politically strong in Jerusalem, and the people are resettling the city of God.

### Devotional

It's anti-climactic. It is literally one sentence. The entire story of Nehemiah has been leading to this moment. From the first time Nehemiah hears a word from his brother on the condition of the walls through his fearful request of the king to the stringent opposition trying to hinder his singular focused task. He is on a quest to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah describes all that he has done in one sentence. "So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun" (NLT). I laugh every time I read it. How could it be that the climax of the entire story is described in one casual sentence?! There's no extended description of the final brick being chiseled out and mortared into place. There are no trumpet sounds, loud parades, or songs of joy. Just one simple line. There's something powerful in the simplicity. I think the simplicity reflects Nehemiah's lack of surprise. As we read the text, we wonder if it will be rebuilt, but in Nehemiah's mind, it was never in question because it was never really *his* task. He states clearly that the work was done "with the help of our God." I think we see in Nehemiah's simple statement, an internal trust in God. It was no surprise that God would finish what he set out to accomplish. God finishes what he sets out to accomplish every time. It shouldn't surprise us any more than it surprises Nehemiah. I wonder how many times in our life, we could summarize the work of God through one sentence:

"They found the cancer was gone."

"The pregnancy test was positive."

"And now our marriage is strong!"

"The church grew and loved each other."

"It was exactly the community I needed."

What is your one statement that could summarize the faithful and unsurprising work of God?



Nehemiah's Wall Currently

## Uncovering Nehemiah's Wall

Prior to 2007, most archeologists believed the foundation below the Hasmonean tower on the north end of Jerusalem dated to the second century BC. Yet, in 2007 Dr. Eilat Hazar and her team of archeologists were commissioned by the Israel Antiquities Authority to carry out a full rebuild of the crumbling tower. The plan was to pull each original stone, label it, and replace it with new mortar. Thus, rebuilding a stronger tower with its original stone. The problem came when they got to the foundation. Rather than finding a strong 2nd-century foundation, they found what appeared to be a hastily constructed wall predating the 2nd century. This led to a six-week excavation that uncovered both pottery shards and dog burials from the Persian period. After much excavation and further study, Mazar concluded that the Northern tower and the wall were constructed in the middle of the fourth century BC. They had uncovered a part of Nehemiah's wall! Archeology once again had affirmed the biblical story.

## Tobiah

T. J. Betts in his commentary on Nehemiah does a wonderful job of describing Tobiah. "Tobiah, who is apparently a fellow Judean, persists to undermine Nehemiah. At first, Tobiah tries to appear noble in his efforts. After all, Tobiah's name means "Yahweh is good," and he named his son Jehohanan, meaning "Yahweh is gracious." Tobiah is very well connected and apparently wants to grasp a position of power in Judah. Tobiah married into two families of the Judean aristocracy. His son married the daughter of Meshullam, the son of Berachiah. He is most likely the same Meshullam who worked on the wall. Also, Nehemiah 13:4 indicates he is related by marriage to Eliashib the priest. Tobiah's close association with Sanballat and his connections in Jerusalem no doubt explains how Nehemiah's enemies are so well-informed. All of this points to the possibility that there are those who are willing to help Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall who are less supportive of Nehemiah himself and the comprehensive reformation he envisions for the people of God. Once the work is done, they are ready for Nehemiah to step aside. When Nehemiah does not fall for their letters commanding Tobiah, Tobiah resorts to sending letters to Nehemiah in order to frighten him. Tobiah reveals his true intentions of opposing Nehemiah."

## Text Notes

- 7:3 - *Do not leave the gates open during the hottest part of the day.* Other translations have, "the gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot" (NIV). Usually, city gates opened at dawn. This phrase might either mean that the gates are not to be opened till later in the day or that the gates are to be closed during the heat of the day. Scholars debate this issue but agree that the gates were not kept open all day long most likely from a shortage of workers.
- 7:4 - *Large and spacious (Hb. רַחֲבָת יָדִים וְאֶלְלָה), lit. "wide of two hands and large."* This phrase literally means the distance of one person reaching out their hands. It appears to mean that there was an abundance of space in the city even though the walls had been contracted.
- 7:5 - *Population was small (Hb. יְהֻעָם מַעַט בַּתְּכַחַת), lit. few people were within.* Allen and Laniak in their commentary on this passage note, "Even with the postexilic capital reduced to the eastern hill (having lost its western suburb), it must have had the air of a ghost town after most of the wall builders left Jerusalem and went home."
- 7:66 - 42,360. The genealogical list in Nehemiah 7 is the same as the list in Ezra 2 with a few exceptions. Both lists concluded with 42,360 people in the census. Neither list number comes to this total. Yet, the precise number is less important than the theological significance as this number is divisible by 12 and signifies God's faithfulness to his covenant by returning his people to the promised land.

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 5 - Nehemiah 6:15-7:73



## Opening Question

What is a significant task you have finished in your life and how long did it take?

Read Nehemiah 6:15-7:73 as a Group



## Question One: Political Integrity

Even with the completion of the wall, Tobiah attempts to keep control over Jerusalem. How does he attempt to do this in this passage? Does it work?

How does Nehemiah respond?

What does this teach us about political integrity?



## Question Two: Reversal Theology

There is a great reversal in 6:16. What is this reversal?

What is the theological significance of this reversal?

What other great reversals do you see in scripture?



## Question Three: 52 Days

Nehemiah describes the completion of the wall in one simple sentence, "So on October 2 the wall was finished - just fifty-two days after we had begun." Why do you think he describes the completion of the wall in such a simple phrase?

Take a minute to think about the great work God has done in your own life. If you narrowed that down to one simple sentence, what would you say?

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Give praise for the great work God has accomplished in your life!





## Devotional

As discussed in the summary, Nehemiah is only mentioned twice in chapters 8-10 (8:9, 10). The narrative has moved away from Nehemiah as the main focus. At the onset, it looks like the main focus is now on Ezra, a priest and scribe of God, who is returning the people to covenant law, but it's actually not. The main focus in chapter is on the people. The text opens with the phrase "all the people" signifying a significant shift has taken place. The phrase "the people" or "all the people" is mentioned ten times in the first twelve verses of chapter eight (1, 3, 5, 5, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12). Having rebuilt the wall and re-established the honor of Jerusalem, the people rise up once again by bringing the next wave of revival themselves. Nehemiah has stirred the pot, and now the pot is boiling over! It's easy when studying through the book of Nehemiah to focus on Nehemiah as a role model. We read the narrative to glean lessons from his life and leadership. This is important, but I think we should also pay attention to the way the people respond as instructive for us. The truth is most of us (pastors included) function most of the time not as Nehemias, but as Israelites. We are a part of the people called to respond. We aren't the leaders but those being led. We are challenged to respond. So we should follow the example of God's people in chapter eight. We should respond to a call for rebuilding by listening attentively to the teaching of the Law, by repenting in our hearts and expressing that repentance before one another, by eating together and breaking bread in celebration and remembrance, and by showing up again the next day to continue the work of renewal!

## Summary

In chapter eight, the narrator makes a dramatic shift in the focus of the story. No longer is Nehemiah the primary actor nor is the wall the primary concern. Instead, the text moves to the people as the main actors with a return to covenant faithfulness as the primary task. In fact, it is so stark a change from chapters 1-7 to 8-10 that most scholars think these three chapters existed as a separate account and were included by Nehemiah in his final collection. This seems obvious if you read chapters 1-7 and then skip directly to chapter 11. The narrative in 11 picks up where 1-7 left off. It is hard to date chapters 8-10 as the chronology doesn't line up well with the rest of Nehemiah's narrative, nor does it line up well with the narrative of Ezra. Most scholars think that this is either a callback to the revival and return to the covenant law that happened prior to the rebuilding of the wall as described in Ezra or having finished the wall, there is now a second wave of revival. Regardless, chapters 8-10 repeat three scenes recurring in a specific pattern: noting the day, assembling the people, encountering the law, applying the law, and responding accordingly. The three scenes are 7:73-8:12; 8:13-18; 9:1-10:39. The passage for this week covers two of these scenes. The people gathered on October 8 to hear the law. They reply in praise in worship as well as mourning and finally celebrate a feast together. On day 2 they gather to hear the law and respond by celebrating the festival of booths.



Dead Sea Scrolls

## Reading the Law

Two remarkable things should be noted in Ezra's reading of the law. First, the people need the word translated for them. Notice Nehemiah 8:8, "They read from the Book of the Law of God, translating it and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read." Remarkably, it appears that in the 140 years since the destruction of the Temple, the people have lost their ability to speak Hebrew. Only the priestly line has retained the ability to interpret the language that belongs to the people. This gives us insight into how far the Israelites have already acquiesced to the Persian culture. Of course, there are still ethnic markers but in just a few generations they have adopted the language of their captors. It's unclear how this translation process took place, but one can imagine a line being read from the Mosaic Law and then interpreted to the people by the priests. The entire time the people are standing from sunrise till noon. Second, the location of the reading of the law is fascinating. You would expect that the reading would take place in the temple, but instead, it takes place in the public square on what appears to be a makeshift stage. Why would they do that? Temple regulations only allowed for Israelite men to be in the temple courts where the law would have traditionally been read. Israelite women and children were allowed in the outer court and foreigners were not allowed in any part of the temple. Yet in this case all the people want to hear the law. So the law is brought out to the people in public square. The text specifically notes, "he read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law." These two points are rather remarkable in religious history. Most religious texts at this time were bound to their culture by language and location. They were only to be read in their original language and only in a specific location. Even in the 5th century BC God's word is brought to the people and translated for the people.

## Second Exodus and The Festival of Booths

Nehemiah has continually tried to paint the rebuilding of the walls as a "second Exodus" from Egypt. This is apparent again in this text as he refers to the people in 8:17 as, literally, "those who returned from captivity." This appears to be an allusion to the original captivity in Egypt. Also, the people respond to the reading of the law on the second day by celebrating the Festival of Booths where they remember and reenact the wilderness wandering. In his commentary, Throntveit points to the significant shift in their understanding of this festival, "This is especially so since, according to Deuteronomic theology, Joshua's celebration is related in a context of covenant renewal (Deut. 31:9-13). Prior to Ezra's reinterpretation, this aspect seems to have been lost, and Booths was celebrated as a harvest festival in which God was praised for the bounty of the agricultural year. Now, after the reading and explanation of the law, the people were invited to focus on the festival's earlier emphasis: the effective presence and nurturing care of God toward the small community that had been so graciously redeemed and mercifully preserved."

## Text Notes

- 8:10 - Rich Foods (Hb. מִשְׁנָתִים). Literally, "eat the fat." The idea is to prepare the highest quality of meat available to eat. Just as steaks in our world today are labeled Prime as the highest quality because of their fat marbling, so the Israelites are to eat the well fattened meat in celebration of renewal.
- 8:10 - *The joy of the LORD is your strength* (Hb. כִּי־הָרְחֵב תְּהִנֵּם). This precise word for joy (hedwah) only occurs here and in 1 Chronicles 16:27, "Honor and majesty surround him; strength and joy fill his dwelling." The scholar Wong has suggested that this should be understood not as the Israelites joy in God but God's joy within himself now delighting in them. God's joy brings strength and refuge in difficult times.

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 6 - Nehemiah 7:73-8:18



## Opening Question

What is one of your favorite passages in scripture and why is it meaningful to you?

Read Nehemiah 7:73-8:18 as a Group



## Question One: Reading of the Law

In Nehemiah 8 the people gather to read the law and they are deeply affected by it. What catches your attention about the reading of the law in this passage? Does their response surprise you? Why or Why not?



## Question Two: Out of Place

The author and compiler of the book of Nehemiah (most likely Nehemiah himself) includes chapters 8-10 in the Nehemiah memoirs even though they don't focus on Nehemiah and don't appear to have originally belonged there. Why do you think these passages are included?

What do they offer to the memoirs of Nehemiah that we would be missing without them?



## Question Three: The Lord is Your Strength

Nehemiah (or Ezra) says to the people in 8:10, "Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!" How do you think the Israelites would've heard this phrase? What would it have meant to them in their place and time after rebuilding the walls?

When is a trying time in your life that you needed reminded that "the joy of the LORD is your strength?" How did God remind you of this joy during that time?

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Give praise to God for his joy in your life.





## NOTES & QUOTES

# NEHEMIAH 9:1-38

## WEEK 7

### Devotional

We live in a victim culture. By this, I mean that we are taught and formed to feel as if we are routinely the victims of circumstances beyond our control. When something bad happens to us, we blame others. We process hurt and pain in our lives as the consequence of either someone else failing to keep us protected or someone else causing us harm. No longer do we just get sick but now we must trace our illness to the perpetrator who gave us the illness. It's their fault and we are the innocent victims. We do this not only in our personal lives but also collectively. You can hear the constant refrain. "It's the liberal's fault." "It's the conservative's fault." "It's rich people's fault." "It's welfare's fault." "It's because of overseas interest or mass marketing." We always have someone to blame both individually and collectively. Chapter nine of Nehemiah might be useful for all of us today. The Israelites have been victimized by the Babylonian empire destroying their homes and dragging them into exile. They are now under the rule of the Persian empire with little more status than slaves. Yet, as the people read the word of God and allow God's word to impact their heart and mind they recognize themselves not as victims but as transgressors. The people collectively repent for their own sins. They don't blame the Babylonians or the Persians. Instead, they take responsibility for their own sinfulness. In doing so, they are able to better grasp the height and depth of the faithful love of God. In their collective prayer of repentance, they don't wallow in self-pity. Instead, they take the chaos of their trauma before the creator God and beg him to redeem them one more time. When we recognize our own role both individually and communally in the trauma of this world, we better grasp the amazing mercy of God. It's one thing to save a victim and a whole other to forgive a perp.

### Summary

The people have rebuilt the wall, reestablished God's word as the centerpiece of their cultic life, and, now in chapter nine, they are repenting communally before the Lord. This beautiful prayer is a song or poem to God. The Levites, standing on behalf of all the people, lead the people in a collective song. This song has five main parts that move through Israel's history yet focus on God's primary role in each season of Israel's life.

**God creates (v.6).**

**God makes promises with Abraham (v. 7-8).**

**God liberates through the Exodus (v. 9-11).**

**God guides in the wilderness (12-21).**

**God gives the Israelites the land (22-31).**

For the Israelites, there is a personal connection between retelling their history and repenting. The story of the Israelites is different than the story of other nations in that they have a close, intimate relationship with their God. While surrounding nations attempt to appease their deity in order to prevent anger, when the Israelites read the law they realize that they have once again hurt the heart of God. This can be seen in the language of the confessional prayer which begins with you, "You alone are Lord (v. 6)" and also climaxes with you "what a great and merciful God you are (v. 31)." The Israelites repent because they know God personally and to retell their history is to retell their history with Yahweh.



A Piece of Ancient Sackcloth

# Themes in the Prayer of Repentance

There are three primary themes in the prayer of repentance found in Nehemiah nine that are noticed in a close reading of the Hebrew text. Three words occur a combined total of 37 times in this short prayer. First, the Hebrew word *natan* ("to give") occurs fourteen times. God gives the law, the land, his Spirit, etc. Second, the Hebrew word *ares* ("land") occurs thirteen times as God delivers the land, hands over the land, and brings them into the land. Finally, the second personal pronoun in Hebrew *atta* ("you") occurs ten times in the poem demonstrating their personal relationship with God. Throntveit also points out that many of theme's established throughout the prayer are then returned to in the final verses of 33-35. Thus, he along with many other scholars see the prayer concluding with v. 36. His charting of the passage is provided alongside.

8	you are righteous	33
8	Abraham and God faithful	33
6, 10, 17, 31	God does ('asah)	33
18, 18, 24, 26, 28	people do ('asah)	34, 34
26, 29, 29	your <i>torah</i>	34
16, 29	(not obey) your commandments	34
26, 29, 30	warn	34
17, 26, 28, 28, 29	turn, repent ( <i>šub</i> )	35
22	kingdoms	35

## Remembering and Telling

Why is it that so often in the OT when the people return to God there is a retelling of their entire history? In their commentary on Nehemiah, Shao and Shao provide a wonderful response to this question. They write, "Many prayers and teachings in the Bible include a long summary of Israel's history. In ancient Israel, most households did not hold copies of God's word. Instead, the teachings and legacies of the historic patriarchs were passed on orally. Thus, it was necessary to keep track of God's interventions from the past to the present in order to remind the people of their great heritage and of God's promises. The Israelites take it to heart to remember their founding history, repeating and reviewing it with their children and their children's children, so that it can be passed on to future generations (Ps 78:3-8). Recalling their history reveals their honesty in addressing their weakness and wickedness, their humility in seeking God's forgiveness, and their gratitude for his willingness to take them back into his loving embrace. *Memories help bring the past into the present while also pointing to a hopeful future.*"

## Text Notes

- 9:1 - *Dressed in burlap and sprinkled dust on their heads* (Hb. **וּבְשָׁקִים וְאַדְמָה עַל־לֵבָם**). This was the traditional garb of mourning and repentance for Israelites (Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31; Job 16:15, et al). The sackcloth was a cloth garment made from goat skin designed to cover the loins. The dust was often gathered from the ashes of the destruction alongside the mourner. The idea was to be seen as naked, exposed, and sinful in repentance and mourning. As Job says well, "I repent in dust and ashes" (42:6).
- 9:5 - *Then they prayed*. There are some difficulties in the text around who is precisely saying the prayer. There are three options. 1. The LXX adds that Ezra leads the prayer but that has no manuscript support. 2. The Levites say the prayer on behalf of the people. 3. The Levites lead all the people in the communal prayer together.
- 9:5 - *From everlasting to everlasting* (Hb. **מִן־קָדוּלָם עַד־קָדוּלָם**). This wonderful Hebrew phrase is common in the OT. It's usage here as the lead in to the prayer of repentance calls back to the covenants established by God with Abraham, Moses, and David. Forever and ever he keeps covenant.
- 9:6 - *stars* (Hb. **צְבָאָם**). This Hebrew word, "saba" literally means "host." It refers to an army organized for war. In this poetic context it can refer either to all the stars in the sky or to the angelic beings thought the dwell in the sky. The former would be a slight to opposing nations who often worshipped the stars as deities. Yet, for Yahweh the stars are but an army created by him and under his reign.

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 7 - Nehemiah 9:1-38



## Opening Question

If you could have one “redo” in your life what would it be and why? This could be something big or small.

Read Nehemiah 9:1-38.



## Question One: Themes

The notes point out three main themes in the song or prayer of repentance found in 9:1-37. What are these themes and where do you see them in that passage?

What other main themes stick out to you in this passage?



## Question Two: Telling and Retelling

There are so many places in the Old Testament where the people in a prayer or song to God retell their history. What do you notice about the parts that they chose to specifically highlight?

Why is it important for them to tell and retell their history?

Is it important for us today to do the same?



## Question Three: Repentance

This whole chapter centers around the Israelites collectively hearing the word of God and then confessing their sinfulness in response to God's word. Why would God's word provoke confession of sin?

Does it still provoke confession of sin today?

What is different between the way the Israelites confess their sin and the way we do it today?

Why is confession an important part of rebuilding God's good culture?

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Spend some time in communal confession together. Ask God for forgiveness for our failures and sinfulness as Christians today.





## Devotional

I got the email early on a Monday morning. I knew it was coming. I signed up my daughter for youth basketball about a month before. They had asked for people interested in coaching. My wife and I decided I was over-committed as it was and I wouldn't be coaching. We also both laughed about how hard it was going to be for me to watch someone else "coach them wrong." Sure enough, early on a Monday morning, the request came for more coaches. Up to this point, my commitment level had been simply signing and paying. Now the question was forced upon me, would I actually sign up for the commitment of coaching? The Israelites hit this point of commitment in their rebuilding and revival as well. They've signed up for the temporary task of rebuilding the walls. They had stepped up to hear the law and respond accordingly. Now they were confronted with the hard work of long-term commitment to keeping God's covenant. This wasn't just a matter of a head nod or a "yeah I'll be there." No, it's time for them to sign their name on the wall and they do! They make a promise to God to keep his law and lead their families in his ways. This is a hard commitment, but they step up to the challenge. I feel like genuine commitment is at an all-time low. It's no longer unusual for someone to sign up and then not show. I've wondered lately if it's not the same issue I have with signing up to coach. It's not that I don't want to keep my commitment, but I am so overcommitted that it is simply impossible. The more that we commit to, the more watered down our commitment becomes because we are finite. It's impossible to keep all the commitments we make and so we become very comfortable with not. It's good for us to be challenged by the Israelites. Can we stand before God and still make a commitment? What commitment would you make today to him? What commitments to him have you neglected? Let's not forget God is committed to us and he is never overcommitted.

## Summary

The people have now heard God's law read on three different occasions. On each occasion they responded differently by first rejoicing, then reestablishing the festival life of remembrance, and finally confessing their sins publicly before God. The people seem genuinely changed by this experience. The building of the walls has done something more than just fortifying the capital city, it has given them hope. Nehemiah has provided the spark that started the fire of revival. The people are also committed to remaining faithful to their changes for the long run. In this week's passage, they make a promise before God that they will keep his law and commandments from this day forward. This promise has three main parts as Shao and Shao point out and label well in their commentary:

**Admitting the pledge (9:38).**

**Approving the pledge (10:1-27).**

**Affirming the pledge (10:28-29).**

They do well to refer to this as a pledge or promise and not a covenant. The Hebrew word for covenant (*berit*) is not used in this passage. Instead, the word for promise is used (*amana*). This appears to point to the human origin of the promise they are making. In most of Israelite history, God initiates the covenant. Yet, in this case, it is the Israelites who make a promise. The distinction is clear. God originates eternal covenant as his people try to simply keep their promise.



A Seal from the First Temple Period

## Jewish Scripture Interpretation

Those making the promise clearly lay out the different elements of the promise in 10:30-39. On a surface level reading, it appears they are simply repeating elements of the original law handed down through Moses. Yet, a closer reading recognizes some distinct differences in what they agree to do and what is laid out in the Law. What we see in this text is a fascinating movement of scriptural interpretation for life in the current context. The people are taking the heart of the law and applying it to their present circumstances. For example, the Israelites “promise that if the people of the land should bring any merchandise or grain to be sold on the Sabbath or on any other holy day, we will refuse to buy it” (31). The original stipulations in the Torah do not prohibit commerce with foreigners on the Sabbath as that would not have been an issue for the Israelites in a homogeneous context. Now as the Israelites are a minority in the diverse Persian empire, they interpret the heart of the sabbath regulations to restrict commerce in their present setting. This approach to interpretation will define Jewish life from here forward. Nearly every commentary on this passage points to the magnificent work of D. A. Cline who explores five interpretive developments in this passage: creation of a facilitating law (10:35), revision of the facilitating law (10:39), creation of new prescriptions (10:33), redefinition of categories (10:36), and integration of competing legal prescriptions (10:36-40). The Apostle Paul offers a similar though much more developed approach in his letters when he holds to the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. In the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, we also see attempts to stay faithful to the heart of the law while offering guidance to Gentiles now under a new covenant. Of course, the perfecter of Jewish interpretation is Jesus himself, who time and time again points to the heart of the law as the foundation for Godly living in the present. We recall lines like, “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” and “You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

## We Will Not Neglect the House of the Lord

The final statement of the sealed promise appears to function in a comprehensive way much like the statement “and other duties as assigned” in a position description. They say, “we will not neglect the house of the Lord.” Of course, the house of the Lord refers to the Temple. This statement appears to be a direct response to the preaching of the Prophet Haggai some 70 years prior, “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’ Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’” (Haggai 1:2-4, NIV).

## Text Notes

- 10:1 - *Sealed* (Hb. **הַקְרִיטִים**). This is an official document and agreement made together before God so it is sealed with the names of 2 leaders, 21 priests, 17 Levites and 44 laypeople.
- 10:20 - *Hezir* (Hb. **חַזֵּיר**). Literally this word means “swine” (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8, etc.). It is most likely a derogatory nickname. Jews were not allowed to eat pigs though archeological records do show that pigs were raised around Palestine during this time period.
- 10:37 - *New wine* (Hb. **תְּרוּשׁ**). “Some... Christians have argued that “new wine” refers to unfermented grape juice. But it is far more likely that “new wine” refers to the first juice - sweet and of high quality - that oozed from the piles of grapes, under the pressure of their own weight, before the treaders entered the winepress” (Yamauchi, “Ezra and Nehemiah” in ZBBC, 448.)

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 8 - Nehemiah 10:1-39



## Opening Question

When is a time in your life you have signed and sealed a promise? How did you handle that experience?

Read Nehemiah 9:38-10:39



## Question One: Themes

Why was it important for the people to “sign a promise” about their reforms? Why do you think this is referred to as a promise and not as a covenant?



## Question Two: Revised Law and Agreement

This is a tough topic to wrestle with but it's important. Nehemiah 10:30-39 lays out the exact stipulations of their promise. When you read through this list, which ones stick out to you and why?

These promises both come from the Mosaic Law and, yet, they are slightly nuanced for the Israelites present context. What can we learn about interpreting scripture from this passage?



## Question Three: Neglecting God's House

The agreement concludes in 10:39 with “We will not neglect the house of our God.” What do the Israelites understand as the “house of God” and why is this statement so important to them?

**Read Hebrews 3:1-6.**

According to Hebrews, what (who) is the house of God today? What dual role does Jesus play in this house?

What would it mean for us today to make a pledge to “not neglect the house of God?”

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group?





## Devotional

"I don't want to be a Christian because you guys throw the worst parties! " Those were the words spoken to me by one of my good friends when I was much younger. We had been studying scripture and learning about Jesus. I had invited him to one of our church get-togethers. He found the whole thing a little too serious though he admitted the food was pretty good. Of course, he was being facetious about making his Jesus following conditioned on the parties, but I think he did make a point. At least enough of a point that it has stuck with me. Throughout the end of Nehemiah, the people joyfully celebrate. Their party is so loud that it can be heard throughout the countryside. I think many of us Christians today might call that a little over the top but maybe we shouldn't. I mean, no one in this world should have as much joy as those of us who hope for eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus. People throw city wide parades because a football team won a game. Our victor defeated death... FOREVER! How might people who don't know Jesus view us differently if we celebrate like we should over Jesus's victory? What if we were a little loud sometimes? We get plenty loud when we tell people what they're doing wrong, but then we seem so meager and quiet when we celebrate the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Of course, our parties will always be different than the parties of the world around us just like in Jerusalem at the dedication of the wall. Still, we might just need to remind the world around us from time to time that we have no problem throwing a good party!

## Summary

Chronologically Nehemiah chapter 11 picks up where Nehemiah chapter 7 ended. They have finished building the wall and now are inhabiting the city. These two chapters are a reflection on the dedication of the wall and the joyful celebration of God's reestablishing his people in Jerusalem. If you remove the two lengthy list of names. (Is anyone sick of reading all these names yet!) you get a smooth narrative flow that explores the great celebration of God accomplishing his work once again. As we have seen repeated in Nehemiah, what God sets out to accomplish, he will complete.

The passage is lined out in the following way:

### Resettling Jerusalem: 11:1-36

*Those Resettling Jerusalem 11:1-24*

*Those Returning to their Homeland 11:25-36*

### Clans and Celebration 12:1-47

*Registering Priests and Levites 12:1-26*

*Dedicating the Wall 12:27-47*

Nehemiah is hardly mentioned in these two chapters though the narrative switches to first person in 12:31. Once again, we see the main actors are the people, God's people rise up to re-establish the city offering themselves as a tithe of occupancy. Likewise, it is the people themselves who celebrate joyfully the good work that God has accomplished.



A Jewish Shofar (Or Trumpet)

## Dueling Choirs

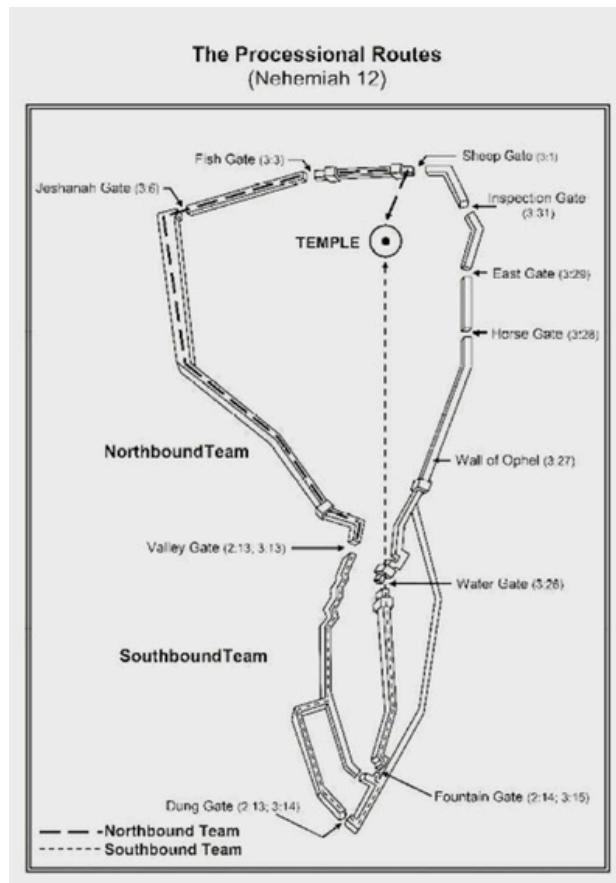
The Israelites are finally ready to celebrate the dedication of the wall! The Levites throughout the land are invited to lead the celebration with songs, cymbals, harps, lyres, and trumpets. They create two different choirs to march alongside the north and south ends of the wall with both meeting at the Temple. The similarities between the choirs are obvious in the text as both have seven priests (12:33-35; 41), eight musicians (12:36; 42), and half the officials (12:32, 40). Zechariah is the precentor of the south choir while Izreiah serves the same role for the northbound. Hoshiah leads the south procession while Nehemiah leads the north. Ezra is granted the honor of leading the entire procession (12:36). The parade route recalls the night ride of Nehemiah and makes note of similar geographic markers like the Fountain Gate and Water Gate. It is worth noting that Nehemiah again displays humble leadership by allowing Ezra the scribe to lead the entire procession while he leads only one of the two choirs. The parade climaxes at the temple with sacrifices and loud joy!

## The Holy City

Twice in Nehemiah chapter eleven, Jerusalem is described as the holy city. In the broadest sense the word holy (Hb. *qodes*) means “to be set apart.” In the OT the word means more specifically to be dedicated or committed. It is not just to be set apart but to be specifically set apart or consecrated for the duty of worship to God. Thus, Jerusalem is set apart as God’s city for the purpose of worshipping Yahweh. In the same way the text notes that a tithe (10%) of the people are dedicated to living as holy people in Jerusalem. As T.J. Betts in his commentary points out, “Moreover, the holy city requires a holy people, a people devoted to worshiping the Lord and serving God in whatever capacity is required to remove its reproach and see it thrive once again.... Just as the tithe is dedicated to the service of Yahweh at the temple in Jerusalem, these people who consist of the 10 percent of the population who relocate to Jerusalem devote themselves to the revitalization of the holy city. Certainly, it is a sacrifice. Nevertheless, it is a special privilege and sacred calling.”

## Text Notes

- 11:1 - A tenth of the people... were chosen by sacred lots to live there. (Hb. נְקֻדּוֹתִים). In Jewish tradition Nehemiah became known for not only the rebuilding of the walls but also for the resettling of Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus writes, “Nehemiah... urged the priests and Levites to leave the countryside and move to the city and remain there, for he had prepared houses for them at his own expense.” This approach to resettlement was common in the Greco-Roman world where rulers instituted *synoikismos*, the forceful repopulation of metropolitan centers necessary for commerce and trade.
- 11:35 - Valley of the Craftsmen (Hb. נְהַרְשִׁים). The valley of the Craftsmen might be the broad plain between Lod and Ono where wood from the nearby oak tree's were readily available for artisans to work with.



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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Week 9 - Nehemiah 11:1-12:47



## Opening Question

When have you attended a good party? What made it so fun?

Read Nehemiah 11:1-12:47 (Take turns, it's long.)



## Question One: Holiness

What do you see described in these two chapters as holy, distinct, or set apart? Even if the exact term "holy" is not used, what is still described as set apart?



## Question Two: Resettling

In Jewish history, Nehemiah is known not only for the rebuilding of the walls but also the resettling of the people in Jerusalem. Why was it necessary for Jerusalem to be resettled?

What would it have been like to be one of the people chosen to resettle? Would you have liked it? Would you have volunteered?

In our world today, where do we still see conflict around resettlement?



## Question Three: Neglecting God's House

What catches your attention about the great celebration in 12:27-48?

Why do you think we as Christians today seem to be so mild in our celebrations? Why do you think we have a hard time celebrating?

What could we do practically in our church, home, etc. to instill a better spirit of celebration?

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Also share something you want to celebrate and everyone cheer after someone shares.





## Devotional

I worked tirelessly all morning cleaning the house. I scrubbed the kitchen and arrange the living room. I vacuumed and mopped, dusted and wiped. It was a shining bastion of hope as I moved into the garage to do the same. About an hour later I realized the kids were no longer in the backyard playing. My wife would be home at any minute and I wanted to get them cleaned up as well. Though the garage wasn't finished, I thought the house alone would bring joy to her heart. If I was lucky, she would remember what I had done! When I entered back into the kitchen I found my children and their impact. It was chaos: crayons, markers, glue, goldfish, cheese sticks, and crumbs... so many crumbs. My fury was matched only by the volume of my voice! I could not imagine anything making me more mad than the area I had just cleaned to honor my wife being absolutely destroyed within only an hour. This must have been how Nehemiah felt when he returned to Jerusalem and found that the people had forsaken their promise to not neglect the house of God. Nehemiah learned the same lesson I learned that day as I cleaned for the second time. Revival and renewal don't just happen once. A clean house only gets messy again. As the scholar Marv Breneman concludes in his commentary, "In order to have lasting results, reform, and revival require constant renewal and constant courage."

## Summary

Chapter thirteen serves as a summary statement and note of conclusion to the Nehemiah memoir. Much like the final minutes of a movie might describe the long-term status of different characters in the movie, chapter thirteen briefly describes the long-term reformations that Nehemiah still has to make. In this chapter, Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem after a twelve-year absence where presumably he continued his work as the King's cupbearer. Upon his return, Nehemiah finds that in some areas the Israelites have backslidden into sinfulness. He calls for three reforms in Jerusalem. Each of these reforms is marked out with a simple prayer of remembrance containing three elements: a call for God to remember, a petition for mercy, and a summary of Nehemiah's accomplishments. Based upon these prayers the passage can be marked out well by the themes of holy space, holy time, and holy people.

**13:1-14 - Holy Space: Cleansing of the Temple Complex**

**13:15-22 - Holy Time: Reinstating the Sabbath**

**13:23-31 - Holy People: Rebuke of Intermarriage**

The main point of these themes taken together is obvious: holiness. The practical politician Nehemiah who worked tirelessly to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem does not petition God to remember his rebuilding work. Instead, he calls on God to remember his restoration of holiness. Infrastructure is one thing, but cultural faithfulness is always more important to the heart of God. The cupbearer to the Persian king has helped restore covenantal faithfulness for the Jews.



Elephantine Papyri (454-404 BC)

## Remember This in my Favor

“Remember this in my favor, O my God.” These are the final words in the entire book of Nehemiah. Three times in the final chapter he repeats this phrase. Each is a little different but each starts with a call to *zachar*, which is the Hebrew word for remember. In fact, many scholars believe that chapter thirteen of Nehemiah actually belongs immediately after chapter five because of the connection with the phrase “remember.” In 5:19, Nehemiah says, “Remember, O my God, all that I have done for these people, and bless me for it.” The Hebrew word *zachar* is fairly common in the OT but also fairly significant. In scripture, God remembers time and time again. He remembers his covenant (Ex. 6:5), he remembers his people (Gen 8:1; 30:22), he remembers the land (Lev 26:42), and he remembers that we are dust (Ps 103:14). In the same way he calls on his people to remember as well (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 24:9, 18, 22, et al). The psalmist David asks God to remember him and not remember his sins (Ps. 25:7).

Nehemiah’s petition that God remembers him for his deeds seems almost arrogant to our contemporary sentiments. Who is Nehemiah in the grand scheme of things to ask God to remember his work? Yet, within this broader view of OT theology, it fits well. Nehemiah uses the word, remember, in his prayer when he petitions God to “please remember what you told your servant Moses: ‘If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.’” Nehemiah wants God to remember his work not for vanity or fame, but so that God’s people would come home and God’s name would be once again honored.

## Sabbath Keeping

Sabbath keeping has always been an important part of faithfulness to God. There are many regulations about the Sabbath in the Mosaic law (see Ex 20:8-11; 35:1-3), but the theology of the Sabbath goes all the way back to the creation story of Genesis 1-2. After six days of toil, God rests (2:1-3). He looks at all he has created and declares it good (Gen. 1:31). It shouldn’t surprise us at all that one of the final waves of reform is a call to return to Sabbath keeping. Having done the hard work of rebuilding the walls and returning to covenant faithfulness in the hearing of the law, Nehemiah now calls on the people to rest again in the promise of God’s work. Interestingly, he not only calls upon the Israelites to Sabbath but also all merchants whether Jew or Gentile because God’s place, Jerusalem, is holy. We are reminded in reading this section that God’s Sabbath principle is not only for our benefit but also for the benefit of the land and holy spaces of God.

## Text Notes

- 13:6 - *I was not in Jerusalem at that time.* Edwin Yamauchi makes an interesting note on this passage, “The Elephantine papyri provide us with an interesting parallel to Nehemiah’s absence. Arsames, the satrap of Egypt, left his post in the fourteenth year of Darius II (410-409 BC) and was still absent at the Persian court in the seventeenth year (407-406) - that is, for three years. As in Nehemiah’s case, internal conflict and a breakdown of order took place during the governor’s absence.” The Elephantine Papyri and Murashu texts are two ancient documents from 4-5th century BC that give insight into the lives of many Jews in the Persian exile.
- 13:14 - *Faithfully Done* (Hb. יָתַן). Nehemiah asks God to remember his *hesed*. This is the great Hebrew word for faithful love. The scholar Scot McKnight translates it as rugged commitment. It is the word used to describe God’s character in Exodus 34:6-7. Nehemiah asks God not to remember just one single deed, but his entire life of loyal love.

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Week 10 - Nehemiah 13



### Opening Question

At the end of your life, what are some things you would like people and God to remember you for?

Read Nehemiah 13:1-31



### Question One: Holiness

This chapter can be broken into a revival of holy space, holy time, and holy people. How do you see these three categories play out?

Do we still have holy spaces, holy times, and holy people today? Why or why not? If so what are they?



### Question Two: Revival upon Rebuilding

In the concluding statements of his outstanding commentary on Nehemiah, Mark Throntveit writes, "The text reminds all readers of the continuing need for commitment and challenges them to seek out those areas in their lives that call for reform and renewal."

What do you think about this quote as a spiritual summary of Nehemiah?

In what areas of your life do you see God constantly calling for reform and renewal? What about in your family or church?



### Question Three: Reflecting on Nehemiah

***Congratulations you read all of Nehemiah!!!***

As you reflect on the last ten weeks of reading through Nehemiah, what still sticks out to you?

What will be some lasting lessons you have learned from Nehemiah?

## Prayer and Praise



Based upon this passage, what prayer requests or praises do you have to share with the group? Ask God to send revival and renewal to us again.



# NEHEMIAH



# REBUILDERS

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# NEHEMIAH

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# Schedule

## Fall 2023

Each week's study concludes with the sermon. It should involve four steps for participation:

1. Read entirely through the passage for that week.
2. Read entirely through the notes on that week's passage.
3. Discuss the passage in small group using the discussion guide or engage in Bible Class.
4. Listen and engage with the sermon on that week's passage.



### **Week 1 - Sept. 17**

“I was cupbearer to the King”  
Nehemiah 1:1-2:10

### **Week 2 - Sept. 24**

“Assessing the Damage”  
Nehemiah 2:11-20

### **Week 3 - Oct. 1**

“Next to Him”  
Nehemiah 3:1-32

### **Week 4 - Oct. 8**

“Opposition”  
Nehemiah 4:1-6:14

### **Week 5 - Oct. 15**

“Fifty Two Days”  
Nehemiah 6:15-7:73

### **Week 6 - Oct. 22**

“With Unified Purpose”  
Nehemiah 8:1-18

### **Week 7 - Oct. 29**

“Confession and Covenant”  
Nehemiah 9:1-38

### **Week 8 - Nov. 5**

“Write Your Name on the Wall”  
Nehemiah 10:1-39

### **Week 9 - Nov. 12**

“A Joyful Celebration”  
Nehemiah 11:1-12:47

### **Week 10 - Nov. 19**

“Remember This in my Favor”  
Nehemiah 13:1-31