

Rebuilding

A STUDY THROUGH **NEHEMIAH**



10 WEEK STUDY GUIDE Written by Travis Mundy

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Introduction & overview

Nehemiah is probably not one of the books of the Bible you have carefully studied or memorised. Unlike Genesis or Psalms or one of the Gospels, it's not a book we often turn to. Yet this little book in the Hebrew Bible contains a lot of relevance for us today.

Nehemiah is a book about rebuilding. It's about trying to reshape and understand your life coming out of an intense period of loss, despair and disorientation. It's a book about new beginnings. It's a book about false starts. It's a book that ultimately points us to Jesus and to his kingdom.

Like Nehemiah and its cast of characters (and audience), we find ourselves trying to re-emerge from a period of intense global uncertainty. Everything we once knew is gone and we are trying to rebuild in this new world – a world full of both possibilities and uncertainties. How will we end up? Will it all work out? Is there any hope? Where do we go from here? Do I re-engage or retreat? These are the questions Nehemiah and his audience are wrestling with.

Again, Nehemiah is a book about rebuilding. Though there are lots of failures and frustrations along the way, ultimately, it's about moving ahead. Our hope through this study is that we might find answers to our own questions: how can we rebuild our lives, our families, our faith rather than retreat? How can we know and rely on God, rather than our own brokenness, to help us rebuild? What does it look like to rebuild in the ways of Jesus?

Overview of the Book of Nehemiah

To help us understand the book of Nehemiah, we need to go backwards in time. Quite a bit of time, actually. Way back in the book of Genesis, in chapter 12, God calls a man named Abram out of obscurity. He makes a promise to Abram that Abram is going to become a father of a great nation and that through him, all the nations of the world will be blessed. Abram, in a demonstration of great faith, leaves everything behind and journeys to a new land. Eventually over time, Abram has kids who have kids who have kids (you get the point) until the family of Abraham (God changes his name at this point to “father of many nations”) is quite large. These people are called “Hebrews” and eventually find themselves in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh. They cry out to Yahweh (God’s name) for deliverance and He



calls Moses to help rescue his people from Pharaoh's oppression. Through mighty acts, God saves these people and at Mount Sinai, they make a covenant (a binding promise) that the Hebrews will obey God and be His people and Yahweh will care for them and be their God. But this covenant stated that if any party were to break this agreement, the consequences would be dire and the people would lose out on the blessings and care of God over them.

It took only minutes for the Hebrews to disobey and reject God and complain about Him. God would then give them what they wanted – a life without Him and the people found themselves wandering around in the wilderness. Then the people would say sorry and turn back to God and God would forgive them and bless them again. This pattern would continue for hundreds of years, through the period of the exodus, to the settling of the land to the period of judges and through the founding of the kingdom of Israel under Saul, David and Solomon. The people (now also called Israelites) would have periods of great trust in God and prosper, then do the complete opposite, rejecting God, turning to foreign gods and greatly mistreat one another. God sent prophets to the people to warn them to turn back: God's kindness and generosity will not last forever in light of this continued rejection. But the people didn't listen. After centuries of forgiveness extended and both gentle and harsh warnings, God allows His people to experience exile: life apart from Him. The kingdom of Israel splits into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, still called Israel, and the southern kingdom called Judah. Israel followed after their corrupt and idolatrous kings and were conquered by the Assyrians in 722BC. Judah swung between good kings and bad ones until they too eventually were conquered by the Babylonians in 586BC.

After this period, the capital city of Jerusalem and its temple (where God was thought to reside) were burned to the ground. The people of Israel who were left alive in the land intermarried with Assyrians who had moved into the territory (they eventually became known as Samaritans). The people of Judah who were left alive were taken as exiles into Babylon, where many integrated into Babylonian society, while others (like Daniel and Ezekiel) held onto their faith in Yahweh and looked forward to God's people being restored to the land and renewed in their faith.

In 539BC, the Babylonian Empire came to an end at the hands of the Persians. The Persians were more relaxed in their rule and under king Cyrus, the Jewish people were allowed to head back to their homeland in Israel to rebuild. A man named Zerubbabel led the first wave of people back in 536BC and by 516BC, they had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. A scribe named Ezra led a second expedition back in 455BC and Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer of the king, leads a third journey back in 445BC.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah form a pair in the Old Testament. They have similar themes and happen during the same 10 year period. Their aim was rebuilding: rebuilding the city and its walls, but also, rebuilding a people who have been decimated by exile and loss. ■


WEEK 1

Before we dive into this chapter, we should remember this book's main theme is on rebuilding. Through these studies we seek to answer the questions: in light of the trauma we've just experienced, how do we rebuild? What does that look like? How do we do it well? With that said, let's jump in.

READ

NEHEMIAH 1:1-11

Some helpful notes. Susa was one of the major capital cities of ancient Persia (now located in western Iran), approximately 1,200km away from Jerusalem (as the crow flies). Nehemiah's name means "The LORD comforts". His father Hakaliah's name means, "he who waits for the LORD." And Nehemiah's brother Hanani's name means "Here I am."

 Before we even get into the story, what does this background information tell us about what to expect? Why do you think that the previous exile returnees found themselves in "great trouble and disgrace"?


Mixed results


Ezra and Nehemiah were originally written as a single unit by a single author. In the book of Ezra, there are two movements that happen in a similar pattern. The movements go like this: a Persian king issues a decree allowing and helping the Jewish people return to their land to rebuild. The people return and encounter some local resistance. The "locals" are those who were left in the land after the exile who intermarried non-Jewish people. These locals seem keen to help, first in rebuilding the temple under Zerubbabel, and then keen to help join in worship and obeying the Torah under Ezra. Both leaders tell the locals they don't want their help and essentially they're not welcome. The locals then cause all sorts of trouble for the people before there seems

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to be an acknowledgement that God is still at work: first in the rebuilding of the temple and secondly in the renunciation of foreign wives. But are these good results? The temple is restored, but it is not as magnificent as pictured in Ezekiel's vision of God's renewed dwelling place and there is no indication God's presence returned to the temple. The exiles (or some of them, at least) acknowledge they won't turn to foreign gods again like their ancestors and so divorce their foreign wives, but this doesn't really live up to the same picture the prophets paint of all nations coming to Jerusalem to worship God and be invited into His family. Nehemiah opens with this same mixed result image: the people are back in the land, but the land isn't "flowing with milk and honey" - it's burned down. The people aren't thriving and strong in the Lord, but weak and depressed. Something is still not right. ■

 How does Nehemiah react to the news? The people are back in the land...but things are still terrible. What can we learn from Nehemiah's reaction when we feel the same? How should we react when life is "back to normal" but still seems so far from being right?

 What stands out about Nehemiah's prayer? How can his prayer in a time of despair and uncertainty be helpful in your prayer life?

Nehemiah's prayer is actually a chiasm (where each part matches another, except for the middle, which is the "highlight"). Here is its structure:

A. Calling on God to listen (vv. 5-6a)


B. Negative confession: focusing on Israel's and his own sin (vv. 6b-7)

C. Appeal to the covenant promises (vv. 8-9)


B'. Positive confession: we are your people (v. 10)


A'. Calling on God to listen (v. 11a)


This structure is common through many prayers in Scripture. It involves repeatedly asking for help, repeated confession (both positively and negatively) but emphasizes the appeal for God to keep His promises; to hold up His end of the bargain.

 Why do you think in so many prayers throughout the Bible the “highlight” (so to speak) is asking/telling God to remember and keep the promises He’s made?

Let’s turn this back to ourselves.

 When faced with disaster, fear, uncertainty, suffering, do you sit down, weep, mourn, fast and pray? Why or why not?

 If this book’s main theme is rebuilding – how does rebuilding start with prayer? Why is that important?


 How can you rebuild in your own life by praying? What might that look like practically/daily?


Week 2

Rebuilding not as slaves, but servants


READ

NEHEMIAH 2:1-20

 What other stories can you think of within the Old Testament of a man or woman of God being in a position of some power in the king’s court who must bravely overcome their fears to speak up for God’s people?

 Based on those other people, what does this say about what Nehemiah’s life and mission might look like?


Between chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, four months have gone by. From hearing about the sad state of Jerusalem and its people, Nehemiah broke down, wept, prayed fervently and looked for an opportunity to respond. But four whole months went by!

 Does God always call us to instantaneous action? How does Nehemiah’s petition reflect his heart?

Given he had four months to think about this, Nehemiah not only asks that he might return to his homeland, but has thought of very specific steps he needs put in place.


READ

LUKE 14:25-33


 How does Jesus relate radical discipleship (giving up everything to follow) with thoughtful and careful planning? How can passion and thoughtfulness work together?

Nehemiah uses his position for the benefit of his people and the accomplishment of God's will, even at great personal risk. What might this look like in your own context?


In this first section of chapter Nehemiah begins as someone who had some influence and power, but he was still a slave. This king wasn't the chosen king of his people. This land he lived in wasn't his home. Even the position he had was as a slave – bringing wine to the king and having to check it personally for poison (imagine the stress of that job!). Yet as Nehemiah leaves, things change. He's given the king's blessing AND he's sent with a substantial amount of equipment, building material and an army!

 How is this movement from slaves to servants or “partners” seen throughout Scripture?


Yet, despite these blessings and the thoughtful and prayerful plan to restore God's land and His people, opposition happens. Sanballat (which means “enemy in the bush”) is from Moab, Tobiah (“The LORD is good”) is from Ammon and Geshem (“Rain”) from Arabia. All of these places are Israel's surrounding neighbours (to the east, southeast and southwest, respectively). After Israel and Judah were conquered and many of its people killed or exiled, these kingdoms moved in and settled in the land.

 Why would these men be unhappy about Nehemiah's arrival and plans?

 Why is it that wherever God is moving and directing, there always seems to be opposition?

 Upon completing his inspection of the city, what challenge does Nehemiah give to the people? How do they respond?


On finding the situation in Jerusalem to be as dire as he heard, Nehemiah chooses hope over discouragement, issuing a call to rebuild.


 How does Nehemiah's example challenge you to think and act when you find yourself in a similar situation? What good work has the Lord given you strength to build or rebuild?

Week 3

Rebuilding in the face of opposition

A quick read of chapter 3 (if you want to glance through) is a list of various people from various places rebuilding various sections of Jerusalem. It may seem that this chapter is full of unnecessary information or at least information that we have no reference point for ("oh, he's THAT sixth son of Zalaph! I was wondering who he was..."). However, this chapter describes the beautiful picture that is painted when various people come together to accomplish something bigger than themselves. You may notice that most of these people are not professionals. There are men and women rebuilding. Goldsmiths and perfume makers. Security guards and mayors. People from inside Jerusalem. People who live far away from Jerusalem. Priests and laypeople.

 What does this picture mean to you? In what ways is this a picture of what the church should look like?


 How have you seen NBC do this well? How have you benefitted from being part of a team like this?


READ


NEHEMIAH 4:1-23

This reads like a plot to the movie. There's an immense task before the heroes: to rebuild their city. There is a threat that starts out small (mocking) but then exponentially grows (plotting to kill the heroes). The heroes then formulate a hectic plan – work with spears in hand, taking turns building and guarding, sleeping and working.


 Why are these opponents so threatened by the rebuilding of the city?


 How do the people working on the rebuilding react to opposition (see verses 10 and 12)? Have you ever reacted this way when faced with opposition?

 How does Nehemiah respond to this stressful situation (see verses 4-5, 14 and 20)? Where does his strength lie?

 Why is it that (often) whenever things are going great or we find ourselves living in line with God's plan or we're working together well as a team, something tried to ruin it?

The voices of Sanballat, Tobiah and the others are the voices we hear all the time. They're the same voices that whispered to Adam and Eve in the garden in Genesis 3. They're the same voices that tried to tempt Jesus to give into his desires and fears in the wilderness. They're the same voices that tell us to panic, "every man for themselves" instead of staying the course, instead of rebuilding, instead of holding on to God. This voice is that of the enemy (or of our own doubts and fears) telling us it will be better to abandon ship than cling to Jesus. That God isn't as good or trustworthy as He says He is. That He won't come through and you have to figure it all out on your own.

 What voices like this are in your life right now? How do we combat this type of opposition? What can we learn from Nehemiah's response?


 How might we pray and encourage each other to keep going in the Lord, to keep rebuilding our lives and faith, despite opposition we feel around us?

Week 4

Rebuilding with generosity


READ


NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

 What's happening in this passage? How did we go from unity and teamwork in chapters 3-4 to disunity and division in chapter 5?

READ & COMPARE

LEVITICUS 25:35-43


 How bad is this situation?


 How does Nehemiah respond to this situation (see verses 6-8)? How does he balance his anger with a thoughtful response?

 When you're angry at an injustice, how do you react?


The nobles and officials let greed guide their decision making, resulting in injustice and selfishness.

 How does greed damage the modern-day church?


 What character trait is Nehemiah calling the nobles and leaders to in verses 9-11?


 How have you seen justice and generosity operating within the body of believers? How could you join in those efforts? What specific steps could you take to demonstrate fairness and generosity in your relationships?

Nehemiah's love of the Lord prompts him to radical generosity.


 Instead of using his allocation of governor all for himself and sit back in luxury while everyone else does the work and suffers, what does Nehemiah do (see verses 14-18)?

Although he was entitled to feast and relax as leader over these people, Nehemiah instead joins their ranks and shares all that he has – feeding hundreds of people at his own table.

 When have you been the recipient of radical generosity like this? How did that shape you?

 How does generosity rebuild our relationships, our workplaces and our communities?

In verses 9-11 and 14, Nehemiah issues a radical challenge: stop being greedy and practice radical generosity. If you refuse and continue to hoard and mistreat those around you, you have no part in God's family.

 In what ways is this challenge convicting to you? Where do you need to stop greediness and instead practice generosity? How can you demonstrate generosity to someone this week?

Week 5

Rebuilding in the midst of trials

READ

NEHEMIAH 6:1-7:4



What is happening in this passage? What is the main theme here?

This scene is very similar to that in Ezra 4. In that chapter, the people are rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem when the neighbouring enemies threaten them in order to make them stop. The threat that eventually is followed through with is that a letter will be written to the king of Persia, warning him that the Israelites were rebuilding because they were intending to rebel. The king then ordered the rebuilding to cease. A dramatic pause culminating in a culmination of tension in the plot.



How do we see a similar pattern repeated here?



What is the conflict? How does Nehemiah respond to this conflict? How is his response unlike others in the Bible?



When you are faced with constant obstacles in your faith, how do you respond?

It's interesting how instead of praying for the vanquishing of his enemies, Nehemiah prays, "Strengthen my hands." In self-care, psychologists talk about how we can control what we can control – meaning we cannot control how others think or act, but we can control our response. Nehemiah's response here, instead of worrying about his opponents, is to ask God that he might continue the good work he's started.




How can we focus on God and the things He has put in front of us to do instead of worrying about everything and everyone else around us?

Despite his focus on God and his own work, Nehemiah's troubles don't go away. A "prophet" named Shemaiah tries to give Nehemiah counsel (presumably from the Lord) that he ought to lock himself up in the temple for his own safety.



How does Nehemiah discern this man is a false prophet? (Hint: who is allowed into the temple?)


 When we persevere in our work and faith, how does the story end for us? How does it end for those against us? (see verse 16)

This section ends with another “two steps forward, one step back” moment. The wall is complete in a mere 52 days. At the completion of the task, the once depressed people have a new lease on life and new roles to undertake. But the opposition still remains (as this guy Tobiah keeps sending Nehemiah hate mail). As we reflect on this, we should be drawn into our own contexts.

 What prevents you from moving forward in your faith? In your work?

 What can you do to keep going despite opposition like Nehemiah?

Nehemiah’s preferred method of sustaining his spiritual, physical and mental health is prayer. He constantly prays during various moments and periods. He submits everything to God in prayer. When we are faced with trials, whatever they may be, one of the best ways to continue and endure is through spiritual disciplines. There’s a lot of spiritual disciplines we can practice, but the general idea is that through regular practice of that discipline, we remain connected to Christ and therefore strengthened to persevere. Jesus himself throughout his ministry gets away, rests, fervently prays, celebrates, turns to God’s Word.

 What spiritual practices have you found helpful? Or what spiritual discipline might you try this month to keep you connected to Jesus and to find strength?

In case you’re stuck, here’s a short list of some spiritual disciplines:

Prayer ● *Reading/Studying/Reflecting on the Bible*

Confession ● *Silence* ● *Fasting* ● *Sabbath/Rest*

Meditation/Reflection ● *Worship* ● *Journaling*

Generosity of time/talents/treasures ● *Celebration/Feasting*

Communion ● *Gratitude* ● *Simplicity*

Week 6

Rebuilding through worship and God's Word

Nehemiah 7 is virtually one long genealogy. This is almost word-for-word the same list of people we've already seen in Ezra 2. We are told that a total of 42,360 people are now inhabiting Jerusalem that could be linked to previous generations, both returned exiles and people who were already living in the land. Most of us won't know or much care about these people and the numbers listed, but genealogies were (are still are) significant to communal-focused people groups. Why? These people listed in this genealogy represent the "Second Exodus" – that is, they have fled slavery and exile in a foreign land and come (back) to the land God promised them. Nehemiah 7 goes out of its way to explain how these Second Exodus people are connected with their "First Exodus" (people fleeing slavery out of Egypt) ancestors. In other words, God is doing what He's done before: rescuing and restoring His people. So here there is a fervent desire to be connected with previous generations; it is a mark of honour and a reminder of God's blessing. But there were also others who couldn't find a connection to previous generations (see verses 64-66) and had to wait for a priest to come and restore them to community.

Another interesting thing to note in Nehemiah 7 is that there is a movement in this genealogy from the general public (verses 6-38) to those who are involved in service and worship of the Lord (verses 39-63).



Why do you think that is? Does it have anything to do with the completion of the wall in Jerusalem?

READ

NEHEMIAH 7:73-8:18



Who initiates this whole scene (see verse 1)? How far ahead did these planners think (see verse 4)? What is the "Book of the Law" and what happens when Ezra reads from it?

It's all Hebrew to me?

As Ezra reads, the priests start interpreting it for those who didn't understand Hebrew (vv. 7-8). During their time in exile, the people had to adapt to a new culture, which meant having to learn a new language.

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Aramaic was the commonly used language in the ancient Middle East. And after several hundred years of Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian rule, many forgot Hebrew, their mother tongue, and now spoke only Aramaic (which is a sister language to Hebrew). In this scene, some people are able to read and understand Hebrew, but others would have been in the dark. This is where the priests (Levites) step in to interpret and explain God's Word to a new generation. ■


 Why do you think the people wept as the Book of the Law was being read? (is Leviticus all that dramatic?)

Compare this scene to when the Book of the Law was first being introduced to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai.

 How do these scenes compare to one another?

 When you read God's Word, do you ever weep or feel convicted? Why or why not?

 Why does Nehemiah decide that wrestling through God's Word prompt a massive celebratory party? How can the Bible lead us to celebrate and feast and not just be serious and fasting?

 What ancient Jewish holiday do the people celebrate in verses 13-17? Why is this celebration significant? (see [Leviticus 23:23-44](#))

 What would it look like to celebrate around God's Word?

 How can you make God's Word a central part of your life?

Week 7

Rebuilding through repentance and remembering

This particular study is a bit shorter. There are less questions than other weeks. The point of it is so that you might spend extra time reflecting, sharing and praying. Please make sure you do that (whether by yourself or within your group) thoughtfully and slowly.

READ

NEHEMIAH 9:1-37



What is happening in this passage? Who initiated this gathering?



What significant events and moments are shared here? What themes do you see reoccurring? How are both the justice and mercy of God shown through these events?



What do the people see and recognise at the end of this confession?

Think back through your own history with God. Take a few moments to share your “history” with those around you.



What themes do you see reoccurring through your journey? Where have you seen God’s justice? Where have you seen God’s goodness and faithfulness? Where did it seem God was absent? How did those situations turn out?



How can remembering our history help us to navigate our present and future?

The people respond by serious reflection and repentance. They bring their ancestor’s mistakes to the present and make them their own. They examine every moment in light of God’s design and purposes and present them all to God to seek His mercy and forgiveness. It’s a very humbling moment.




How often do you incorporate repentance into your life and faith?



When is the last time you reflected and truly sought God’s forgiveness when you’ve gone astray or trusted yourself or ran after other things? Why is it hard for some Christians (or for you) to repent?

Take a moment and ask yourself (without the need to share out loud):

 What is an area of your life you need to seek forgiveness or reconciliation for?

Week 8


Rebuilding through covenant commitment


READ

NEHEMIAH 9:38-10:39

Before we begin, we need to remember what happened in the previous chapter (Nehemiah 9) because this section follows directly on from it.

 What do you remember from last week's study?

 What is another word for “a binding agreement” as seen throughout the Old Testament?

 What are some instances we have seen binding agreements made between the people and God up to this point?

 What is the point of these sorts of agreements (hint: see [Nehemiah 10:29](#) and [Deuteronomy 7:11-14](#))?


To cut an agreement

The Hebrew word that we usually translate as “covenant” is *karat* (“*kah-rot*”). That word was used in other settings and simply means “to cut”. How did a verb for cutting get translated into a noun that meant “a binding agreement”? If we rewind all the way back to [Genesis 15](#), God promises to Abram that He will make Abram into a great nation – more numerous than the stars in the sky. Abram believes God but questions


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the finer of how this is going to happen. So the Lord directs Abram to take various animals and cut them in half and lay these halves opposite each other (what a scene that must have been). God then puts Abram to sleep and “walks” through the middle of the pieces of animals. Why? Because God essentially was saying to Abram, “If I don’t come through on my end of the deal, may I become like one of these animals you’ve cut into pieces.” So hence, why a covenant is something that is “cut” – it’s not something you enter into lightly or flippantly! ■


 Why is part of this agreement exclusive? Why is intermarrying foreigners wrong? (see [Deuteronomy 7:3-4](#))? Do you think this promotes unity and holiness or do you think it takes away from God’s vision that all nations will be blessed?


The second part of their agreement is preservation of the Sabbath.


 Why is Sabbath keeping so important for them? Why is it important for us?

 Do you actually practice Sabbath rest? Why or why not?

The last part of the agreement is to not neglect the house of God (the temple) and proper worship.

 Why is this so important? Does this same value still apply today and if so, how?

 Do you think these people held up their end of the agreement? How do you know?

 If you were to make a covenant with God to receive His blessing and follow His ways, what would you focus on? What areas of your life need the challenge of accountability?

 How has God held up His end of the deal even when we don’t?

Week 9

Rebuilding through rejoicing

READ

NEHEMIAH 11:1-2

NEHEMIAH 12:27-47



What is happening in this passage?

We need to remember that at this stage, Jerusalem is now rebuilt, but most people are still living outside the city.



Why is re-inhabiting Jerusalem such a priority for the people? How does this fulfill God's promises?



Have you ever had to take on a responsibility that was clearly the will of the Lord but one that you never would have willingly volunteered for on your own? How did the Lord work through your willingness to serve?

In Nehemiah 11:3-12:26 we have another long list of names, places and jobs. This is a memorable event in the history of the Jewish people, so it makes sense to record everyone who was there when Jerusalem was re-settled. But lists have another function in Jewish literature: lists reveal the order and purpose of God. Think back to Genesis 1. There we find a long list of the days of creation and all the things God spoke into being. We might think it easier to simply say, "God spoke and everything came into being." But the author of Genesis instead gives us a detailed description (or list) of all the various parts of creation in the order they came into being.



Why? What purpose does "order" (through lists) tell us about the character of God?



What causes the Israelites to worship with such joy and extravagance? Does your worship focus on your own feelings or on giving God the honour He is due?



Why is celebration such a big deal?



When is the last time you (or your church community) celebrated?



What does celebration do to/in us?

Chapter 12 describes joyful worship occurring after the people have repented and expressed faithfulness to the covenant.



How are faithfulness and repentance linked with joyful worship?



Do you feel great joy during worship? What act of faithfulness or repentance might add to your joy?



Think about your own life as a believer. What completed work of “rebuilding” can you worship God for? What area in need of rebuilding can you trust Him for?

Spend some time together in prayer

Here are some ideas you might want to spend time reflecting on and praying through:

- Confess and repent of places in your life where you have withheld your joyful worship for the Lord. Ask Him for a desire to experience more joy in worship.
- Thank the Lord for the work of rebuilding He has done and continues to do in your life.
- Ask Him to remind you of His faithfulness to you and how you might continue in your faithfulness to Him and the things/people/ministry He has put in front of you.
- Thank the Lord that His commitment to you is certain, that your salvation is secured and that Jesus is coming back to set all things right again.

Week 10

Rebuilding and the need for the Kingdom to come

READ

NEHEMIAH 13:1-31



What is happening throughout this chapter?



How did things go from a people who were mourning that they did not fulfill their part of the covenant and re-committing themselves to the Lord to almost everyone in the country reneging on this agreement?



What “sins” in particular do you see the people committing?



Are these issues really that bad? Why or why not?




How do you see this situation and Nehemiah’s reaction reflected in [Mark 11:15-58](#) with Jesus?

Some commentators have declared Nehemiah 13 to be a mixed bag. Some of the issues are clear and obvious: buying/selling on the Sabbath in the temple area, neglecting and using God’s house as a personal storeroom for accumulation, priests neglecting their duties. But other issues Nehemiah raises are a bit more questionable: outlawing foreigners from worship at the assembly of God and forcefully abusing people who married and had children with foreign women. These commentators suggest that this is opposite of the picture the prophets paint of Jerusalem and its people returning from exile (Read Isaiah 60, for example).





How do you react to Nehemiah’s behaviour? Is he demonstrating righteous anger or Pharisaical legalism?

In Nehemiah 13 we see the re-appearance of two enemies from previous chapters: Tobiah and Sanballat. These two men opposed Nehemiah and the work of rebuilding, but disappear after God blesses the work of the people. Nehemiah returns to Persia, where he remains for three years before once more returning to Jerusalem. It seems in that time, these two rabble-rousers have chosen to once again scheme and plot against God’s people for their own gain.

 Why is it that despite the conquering of sin in our lives, we often see those same sins/temptations trying to creep back in? What does it say about God’s people when we let these old issues come back into our lives or communities without resistance?


This chapter is about remembering and forgetting.

 What gets forgotten in this chapter? What is remembered (or asked to be remembered)?

 How often do you forget the promises or commitments you’ve made to Christ? Why is this a constant battle for believers?


 What might we need to forget? What might we need to remember?

Nehemiah starts with promise. It’s a book that begins with a sad report about the devastation of Jerusalem and its people. After years of neglect of their relationship with God, Yahweh has sent them into exile (giving them what they want – a life without Him). As promised by God to the prophets, the people after some time are able to return to the land, but find it in ruins. Nehemiah, through prayer and faithfulness and intelligent leadership not only rebuilds the city and its walls, but rebuilds a broken people. This culminates in a massive outpouring of praise, worship, repentance and re-dedication by the people to God. They say, “Never again will we allow ourselves to make the mistakes our ancestors did. We will stay faithful to you!” And yet, very quickly, the people are back to their old habits, the temple is being neglected again and a godly leader who worked so hard to rebuild is driven to breaking point. And this is how Nehemiah ends.

 Why do you think the book ends like this?

 What does the end of this book point us to?

No matter how godly we are, no matter how hard we work (for the Lord and for our community), no matter how much we promise and commitment and re-commit ourselves to follow after God and live the way He’s designed us to, we will ultimately fail. Nehemiah is this incredible book about overcoming adversity, repentance and faithfulness, about community coming together to accomplish great things through the power of God and teamwork. Yet at the end of the day, everyone is back where they started.

 What does this say about human (and our own) efforts?



How is Jesus and the promise of His kingdom the hope for us and our world?

Confession

It is probably fitting to end this study with a time of humble confession and asking for Jesus to return and establish His rule and reign. What can only be transformed by Jesus' return? What reoccurring sins can only be erased when Jesus comes back? What joy and hope do you see on the horizon as you anticipate the return of the King? Spend some time praying together, asking God to make you new, to make this world new and to come again. ■

Then one final question:



How can you be a faithful rebuildler like Nehemiah who rebuilds your life and community not only in your own power and for the present, but through the power of God for His kingdom?

NBC

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