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THE LIFE OF
NEHEMIAH

STUDY GUIDE

NEHEMIAH 1:1-11

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said: "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king. (NIV)

KEY POINTS

As we come to look at, think about, and get in touch with our scripture passage, there are some points for us to consider as Nehemiah has something to teach those who want to rebuild the foundation of their lives:

1. Stay in touch with your heart.

Nehemiah 1:1-4 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

It was just another day of work in Susa when Nehemiah hears one of his brothers deliver a report of how difficult life was for the Jews back in Jerusalem. Their walls were broken down, and neighboring kings and armies were continually raiding them. The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and the first group of exiles had started to return in 538 after Babylon had been conquered by Persia. Not much was done to rebuild the city, so it stood exposed and indefensible. The second group, led by Ezra, had returned in 458 and found the city of Jerusalem in terrible shape. It is someone from this group who brings the news to Nehemiah. As Nehemiah hears the report, he does not dismiss it as someone else's problem or ignore it all together. This text tells us the news drove him to tears, that he spent days weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying. Nehemiah teaches anyone who wants to rebuild the foundation of their best self—to stay in touch with your heart.

- What does it mean to you to stay in touch with your heart?
- What do you believe are some of the causes for us not to do so?
- How might we approach life, situations, people differently if we did?
- How might we approach the Lord differently if we did?

2. Pray with honesty and boldness.

Nehemiah 1:5-11a Then I said: "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

Nehemiah's broken heart drives him to prayer. This is the first of at least 11 times Nehemiah's immediate response to something that breaks his heart or confronts him is to pray. This is an amazing prayer—he begins with praise, but quickly moves to confession. He is well aware his present situation (exile) and the condition of Jerusalem (broken walls and burned gates) is no one's fault but the Jews—who repeatedly and serially broke their covenant with God before God allowed Babylon to be his instrument of judgment. An important thing for us to remember when it comes to praying with boldness is that we must be honest about our sin. Nehemiah confesses his sin and then boldly prays—asking God to allow him to return and help rebuild Jerusalem, recognizing he needs God's help. If we want God to help us rebuild the foundation of our lives, it is important to be honest and bold in prayer.

- Do you think the reason we lack boldness in our prayers at times is because we fail to be honest about our sin?
- What do you think are some of the obstacles to being honest with God and ourselves?
- What do you hear God saying here to you?

3. Know who and what you are.

Nehemiah 1:11b *Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.*

As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah was the most trusted servant of King Artaxerxes of Persia. In this role, he put his own life on the line every time he served food or drink to the king. As cupbearer, he had access, opportunity, and the trust of the king to be able to ask just about anything. He knew exactly who and what he was and was about to reconcile his public life with his private life. When we begin to rebuild the foundation of our lives, it's important to have a good understanding of who and what we are.

- Do you think we do a good job of reconciling our public life with our private life – that is, are we consistent in who we are?
- Why is this important?

4. Be willing to be vulnerable.

Nehemiah 2:1,2 *In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; 2 so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid,*

The grief Nehemiah was carrying in his heart was evident on his face—and the king noticed. The king asks Nehemiah why he is sad, and Nehemiah tells the king what is breaking his heart. If we are going to be successful in rebuilding the foundation of our lives, we must be willing to be vulnerable. We must be willing to do the heart work that results in prayer, repentance, and spiritual disciplines that lead us back to God—who gives us confidence in who we are.

- Is it easy or difficult for you to be vulnerable?
- What makes it easy? What makes it difficult?
- What steps do you need to take in this area of your life?
- How might the group help you with this?

5. Be bold in asking for what you want.

Nehemiah 2:3-8 ...but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" 4 The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5 and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it." 6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. 7 I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? 8 And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.

When the king asks Nehemiah what he wants, Nehemiah boldly asks. He asks for permission to rebuild Jerusalem, a letter of safe passage through surrounding kingdoms, access to the king's resources to pay for the work, and an armed escort to protect him along the way. The king gives Nehemiah everything he asks for and releases him to leave Susa and head to Jerusalem as the newly appointed governor of Judah. If we are going to be successful in rebuilding the foundation of our lives, we must be bold in asking for what we want.

- Do you find it easy or difficult to boldly ask for what you want from another? From God?
- What makes it easy? What makes it difficult?
- What steps do you need to take in this area?

6. Expect mixed reviews.

Nehemiah 2:9,10 *So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me. 10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.*

As soon as the news hits the region of Judah, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Amorite start to raise questions about the authenticity of Nehemiah's quest. They had a stake in keeping Jerusalem weak and defenseless as they had raided and pillaged it often over the years. This serves as a reminder to anyone who tries to rebuild the foundation of their lives that there are people in our lives who prefer to keep us exactly where we are so that it continues to benefit them. And when we decide we're going to rebuild, to do something different, we need to be aware that opposition will arise—and often from the most surprising places. Expect it.

- How have you experienced opposition in your life and how did you deal with it and/or overcome it?

7. Inspect and rally support.

Nehemiah 2:11-18 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days 12 I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. 13 By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. 14 Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; 15 so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. 16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work. 17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem—and after spending three days to rest, he takes a small group of men out for a nighttime inspection of the situation. He walks all the way around the rubble that had been lying there for 136+ years, and he then begins to share his plan with some of the leaders of Jerusalem. He affirms his belief God has called him and the king has assigned him to help them out of their situation. They immediately respond, "Let us rebuild!" And so they start. Whenever we decide to rebuild the foundation of our lives, it's important to inspect the situation, develop a plan, and rally support from any place possible.

- Do you think we take the time necessary to do this?
- How might we be more effective if we did so?
- What steps do you need to take in this area?

8. Deal with opposition with prayerful faith.

Nehemiah 2:19,20 But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" 20 I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

The opposition increases as Sanballat and Tobiah are joined by Geshem the Arab—and they begin mocking and ridiculing the work. They start sowing seeds of discord that Nehemiah is acting independently of the King. They try to undermine his credibility and play on the fears of the people. Nehemiah's response, however, is prayerful faith. He believes God is going to bless their effort and reminds them they will have no claim on Jerusalem when the work is done. Nehemiah, rather than

allowing himself to be distracted by opposition, keeps his mouth shut and pours out his heart to God. If we're going to rebuild the foundation of our lives, we'll be well served to ignore the nay-sayers, pray for help and protection, and trust that God is faithful.

- What do you hear God saying to you about dealing with opposition?
- Do you think we resort to faithful prayer as often as we should when it comes to facing difficulty and opposition?

RESPOND

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

H (Highlight): What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

E (Explain): How would you explain the meaning of this passage to another?

A (Apply): How can you apply this passage to your relationship with God and your faith journey?

R (Respond): What response do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to make? What will be your response?

WEEK TWO – October 17

“HOME”



NEHEMIAH 4:1-23

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, 2 and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble — burned as they are?" 3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building — if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" 4 Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. 6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. 7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. 9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. 10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." 11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." 12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." 13 Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. 14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." 15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work. 16 From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, 18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. 19 Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. 20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" 21 So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. 22 At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." 23 Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water. (NIV)

KEY POINTS

As chapter 4 unfolds, we will see, understand, and get in touch with the kinds of things we can expect when we're trying to rebuild our foundation that hits close to home.

1. We can expect increased opposition.

Nehemiah 4:1-3 When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, 2 and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble — burned as they are?" 3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building — if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

Sanballat apparently has brought the army of Samaria (from the north) to inspect what is happening, and he and Tobiah increase their opposition in an attempt to undermine the morale of the people of Jerusalem. Make note—when you begin to rebuild the foundation of your life or home, you will face opposition. Some will speak words that bite. The actions of some will distract. Some will issue threats that will scare you. It goes with the territory. Our response needs to be to pray and focus our attention on God rather than them.

- In what ways have you faced opposition when you sought to rebuild the foundation in your life? In your family? In your home?
- How did you handle it? What did you learn?
- What did you hear God saying to you in the midst of it?
- Why is our focus so important?

Nehemiah teaches us the next right thing to do when opposition increases.

2. It is best to respond with prayer and hard work.

Nehemiah 4:4-6 Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. 6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

When we face adversity, especially as we seek to follow God's plan, it's easy for us to try to take matters into our own hands. Nehemiah turns to God in prayer as he prays in such a way to turn the attention toward their detractors—asking God to hold them accountable for what they are doing. The text ends saying the wall had reached half of its height because the people were working with all of their heart. They did not let the adversity hinder them as they both prayed and continued their work.

- Do you think we turn to God as our first response when faced with adversity in our lives, our homes, our families—or do we seek to deal with it ourselves? If the latter is true, why do you suppose we do this?
- How have you found prayer helpful in times of adversity?

3. Opposition often grows.

Nehemiah 4:7-9 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. 9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

This time Sanballat and Tobiah are joined by the Arabs, the Amorites, and the people of Ashdod in their opposition. They are angry to hear Jerusalem is becoming defensible again, and they begin to plot together to attack and destroy the city. As they are literally surrounded on all sides—which might distract a weaker leader and people—Nehemiah's faith and resolve shines through as they pray again and take the additional step of posting a guard.

- How do you handle those times when it seems like, no matter what you do, the opposition just continues to mount?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning those moments?
- What can you learn from Nehemiah's example?

4. Opposition comes from within.

Nehemiah 4:10-12 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." 11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." 12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

This time, the opposition came from the people of Judah—others Jews who were living in the region. They could tell the people were getting tired, and the rest of their enemies threatened to launch a surprise attack. So the campaign of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham to discredit Nehemiah now included all the enemies surrounding Judah and the Jews outside of Jerusalem. Nehemiah could no longer ignore this external threat, so his next steps focused on keeping his people engaged and continuing the rebuilding effort.

- How do you handle those times when the opposition you face comes from within – perhaps your friends or even your family?

5. Sometimes we need to expose the opposition's plans.

Nehemiah 4:13-15 Therefore, I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. 14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." 15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.

Nehemiah heard the rumors and positioned his people in family groups to defend their part of the wall. He then announced to all who could hear him (including the enemies who've drawn close), "Don't be afraid, remember God is great. Fight for your families, your sons and daughters, your wives and your homes!" Once the enemies knew they were exposed, they retreated.

- Do you think in the midst of our struggles within our lives, our families, our homes, we remember as often as we should the greatness of God and turn to Him?
- What tends to get in the way?

6. Do not stop—no matter what.

Nehemiah 4:16-23 From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, 18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. 19 Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. 20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" 21 So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. 22 At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." 23 Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

The rest of the rebuilding of the walls was undertaken with tools in one hand and a sword in the other. It was done with the whole city ready to rally to the sound of trumpets when needed. There were men at all times standing guard from sunset to sunrise. They worked and defended each other until the job was done. In the process of rebuilding our lives, our families, our homes—especially in the face of opposition—we're called to make sure we never throw in the trowel.

- Are there times when the opposition you face causes you to want to give up?
- What do you hear God saying to you?
- How can the group help?

RESPOND

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

H (Highlight): What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

E (Explain): How would you explain the meaning of this passage to another?

A (Apply): How can you apply this passage to your relationship with God and your faith journey?

R (Respond): What response do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to make? What will be your response?

NEHEMIAH 6

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it — though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates— 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me; 3 so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" 4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. 5 Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter 6 in which was written: "It is reported among the nations — and Geshem says it is true — that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king 7 and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together." 8 I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." 9 They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed." [But I prayed,] "Now strengthen my hands."

10 One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you — by night they are coming to kill you." 11 But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" 12 I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me. 14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me. 15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. 17 Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. 18 For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. 19 Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me. (NIV)

KEY POINTS

As we come to look at, think about, and get in touch with our scripture passage, there are some points for us to consider as Nehemiah teaches us something about the work of rebuilding:

1. Don't be distracted from rebuilding. Maintain laser-focus.

Nehemiah 6:1-3 When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it — though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates— 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

When the opposition finds out the walls are complete and before the gates (which will make the city of Jerusalem secure), they change tactics. To this point, they've tried rumor, intimidation, psychological attacks, and a thwarted surprise attack—but now they appear to be trying diplomacy. "Come, let us reason together...can't we all just get along...come and sit down with us on the plains of Ono." They want to get Nehemiah away from the city and those who are with him—or to have him take so many troops with him that Jerusalem would be left undefended. But Nehemiah sees this for what it is—a trap.

The central mission of Nehemiah's life at this point is to remain laser-focused on the prize. We need to understand opposition is always present in ministry, and our adversary is always trying to distract us from our primary mission. Sometimes the distraction is a temptation—other times, it's the invitation to get involved with something that might be "good," but will distract us away from what God has called us to be and do. At each turn, it's vitally important for those who wish to be faithful to maintain laser-focus—or we'll become distracted from what's most important.

- What are some of the things, people, and situations that tend to distract you in your service for the Lord and from living out your faith?
- What can we learn from Nehemiah concerning being laser-focused?
- What steps do you need to take to become more laser-focused?
- What do you hear God saying to you?
- How can the group help you?

2. Remember—the devil is a deceiver.

Nehemiah 6:4-7 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. 5 Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter 6 in which was written: "It is reported among the nations — and Geshem says it is true — that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king 7 and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."

The Apostle Paul reminds us, "We do not battle with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers in heavenly places." From the very first time we are introduced to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham, they are pawns in a larger game to distract Nehemiah and derail the restoration of Jerusalem (which will ultimately be necessary for the completion of the redemption mission of Jesus). These antagonists are not going away, and they keep getting louder and louder as they stoop to lower and more devious techniques. They send messengers to Nehemiah—inviting him to the plains of Ono on four different occasions—and Nehemiah refuses to be distracted. Their fifth attempt was sending an unsealed letter. Not only did they send the letter, it was filled with "fake news!" Nehemiah was called by God and legitimately worked with the blessing of the King of Persia. The only ones being "hurt" by what Nehemiah was doing were the ones screaming the loudest. Satan works in many ways—often through people, some even close to us. We need to be on our guard.

- Have you ever encountered Satan using someone or a situation to distract you from what God was calling you to do or be?
- What helped you in and through that time?
- What do you hear God saying to you?
- How will you respond the next time it happens?

3. Speak the truth, and stand fast.

Nehemiah 6:8,9 I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." 9 They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."

Nehemiah calls it the lie that it is, but he realizes the negative impact this kind of harassment can have on the people doing the work. Nehemiah continues to submerge himself in prayer and refuses to run away or stop his good work for any reason. So he prays (again!) for God to strengthen their hands.

- What helps you to stand steadfast in the midst of adversity?
- How have you experienced the power of prayer in these times?

4. Be sure to use discernment.

Nehemiah 6:10-14 One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you — by night they are coming to kill you." 11 But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" 12 I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me. 14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.

The three opposition leaders take the next step of trickery and deceit by engaging Shemiah (a homebound, disabled citizen of Jerusalem) in their plan. Shemiah asks Nehemiah to go with him to meet in the temple because people are plotting to kill him. He's using his apparent disability and proximity in the city to deceive and try to remove Nehemiah. Thankfully, Nehemiah sees right through this sham. He uses his discernment and avoids the trap.

- Why is discernment so important when it comes to our relationship with God and our faith life?
- Do you think we seek discernment from God as we seek to serve Him and live out our faith?
- What are some obstacles we come up against?
- How might we overcome them?

5. Nothing slows down opposition faster than success.

Nehemiah 6:15,16 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

The entire wall was rebuilt in 52 days—amazing. Recently, excavated portions of what is believed to be Nehemiah's wall south of the temple mount have been discovered. Exploring this small section of the wall bears testimony to the fact this was a Herculean effort completed by people under distress and constant ridicule, but who maintained focus and worked with all of their heart. Once the walls were finished and the gates were in place, the opposition (while still there) began to decrease. The deceivers could not argue with what God had done through Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem.

- Have you ever experienced a time when you faced opposition and yet it was silenced by the mighty hand of God working in your life or in the situation you were facing? If so, please share.

6. Beware of those who want to re-write history.

Nehemiah 6:17-19 Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. 18 For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. 19 Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

Apparently, Tobiah had a great deal of relationships with the nobles in Jerusalem. He had conducted business with them, and one of his daughters was even married to a noble's son. These nobles continued to tell Nehemiah what a good guy Tobiah was—as if they were trying to advocate for him. We need to remember Tobiah tried to undermine Nehemiah from the moment Nehemiah entered the country. He had partnered with Sanballat and Gesham to enlist Samaria, the Ammonites, the Arabs, and Ashdod to be willing to attack Jerusalem. The nobles were part of the problem and were trying to rewrite or rehabilitate Tobiah's reputation—while at the same time Tobiah keeps threatening Nehemiah.

- What do you perceive is the greatest threat coming from those who seek to re-write history?

RESPOND

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

H (Highlight): What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

E (Explain): How would you explain the meaning of this passage to another?

A (Apply): How can you apply this passage to your relationship with God and your faith journey?

R (Respond): What response do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to make? What will be your response?

WEEK FOUR – October 31

“COMMUNITY”



NEHEMIAH 8:1-10:39

In chapter 7, after the walls are complete and the gates are in place, Nehemiah appoints various leaders and restores civil order. The scripture includes a list of all the people who've returned from exile, and the chapter ends with all of God's people settled in their own towns and Jerusalem being secure. But while the civil order was being restored, the national identity of God's people needed to rebuild.

The last three chapters of the book of Nehemiah revolve around rebuilding the distinctive community of God's people. These chapters walk through what the community looks like once the return and the rebuilding are complete. It contains great imagery regarding what the priorities are for the community, what is needed in the community, and the important role everyone plays in keeping the community faithful and strong in their faith with God.

KEY POINTS

As we look at, think about, and get in touch with our scripture for today, we come to consider the following points:

1. We read and respond to the Scriptures.

Nehemiah 8:1-6 When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, 8 all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. 2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 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. 4 Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. 5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. (NIV)

This passage describes the law, the Scriptures, being read and the people hearing and responding. It sparks the celebration of the festival of booths—which had not been celebrated in centuries—a time of great rejoicing.

- Do you think we're as faithful as we should be when it comes to reading and responding to the scriptures?
- Do you think we allow them to be the guiding force in our lives?
- What do you hear God saying to you in this area? How might you respond?
- How might the group help you?

2. We repent and renew our covenant.

Nehemiah 9:1-3,38 *On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. 2 Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. 3 They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God.*

38 *"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."*

This chapter records the prayers of repentance and praise recited by the people as a community. They quote the story of Moses, bringing them back to the beginning of the story of slaves becoming free and entering into the Promised Land while repenting from the failures of kings, leaders, and priests. The chapter ends with God's people renewing and signing a covenant.

- Do you think we understand the importance of repentance? If not, why not?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning repentance?
- What does the covenant mean to you as it applies to God and as the community of faith?
- Do you think we understand the importance of living in covenant with God—both as individuals and as a community of faith?
- Do you think we understand the importance of living in covenant with one another as the Body of Christ?
- What steps are necessary to reclaim our covenant relationship?

3. We serve with all we have and all we are.

Nehemiah 10:30-39 *We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons. 31 "When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts. 32 "We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: 33 for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on*

the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God. 34 "We — the priests, the Levites and the people — have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law. 35 "We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the Lord each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree. 36 "As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there. 37 "Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our [grain] offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. 38 A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. 39 The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay. "We will not neglect the house of our God."

This chapter lists those who signed the renewed covenant and describes what the people are willing to do with their talents, gifts, passions, and services/roles in order to remain humble and faithful to God. The chapter ends with these words: "We will not neglect the house of our God." In the end, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem was not nearly as important as restoring this covenant—but the covenant would not have been able to be restored if the walls had not been rebuilt.

- What does it mean to you to serve God and others with all you have and all that you are?
- What are some of the obstacles that get in the way of us doing so?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning serving?

RESPOND

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

H (Highlight): What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

E (Explain): How would you explain the meaning of this passage to another?

A (Apply): How can you apply this passage to your relationship with God and your faith journey?

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