



C L E A R

a study in Nehemiah

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How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Nehemiah 1 – Return: Hearing God’s Call

The Book of Nehemiah is about how God called Nehemiah and led him back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. The first chapter is about how God positioned Nehemiah to be able to accomplish this work that He had for him. As we study, we will see how God calls us and how we can respond.

Before we begin the study of the book, it is important for us to be able to know a little about where it is found in the Bible and how it fits into Bible history.

WHERE NEHEMIAH FITS IN THE BIBLE:

Nehemiah is a book found in the Old Testament. It is classified as one of the History Books. Here is where to find it in the roadmap of the bible:

- The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament
 - o Old Testament is written primarily in Hebrew and is about God’s choice of the people of Israel
 - o New Testament is written in Greek and is about Jesus and the Church
 - o Nehemiah is in the Old Testament

- Old Testament is broken down into 4 groups:
 - o Law, History, Writings, Prophets.
 - One of the biggest obstacles to reading and navigating the Old Testament is not understanding this 4-fold division. So take out your Bible, open to the Table of Contents and label the Old Testament books in these groups:
 - o Law – (Also Called the Torah, Pentateuch, and the 5 Books of Moses) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
 - o History – Joshua through Esther. These books tell the story of the formation, division, collapse, exile, and restoration of the nation of Israel. (see below OT history for more on this.)
 - o Writing – Job through Song of Songs. These books are a collection of wisdom literature (Proverbs), Worship Songs (Psalms), Philosophy (Job, Ecclesiastes), and Love Poetry (Song of Songs)
 - o Prophets – The rest of the OT contains the writings of the prophets. They are divided into two Groups, Major and Minor Prophets. This had nothing to do with the importance of each work. It has mainly to do with length. The Major Prophets wrote longer works.

- Major Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (We include Lamentations, which was written by Jeremiah, in the list of the Major Prophets, though in the Hebrew Bible it is listed in the writings with Proverbs, Psalms, etc.)
- Minor Prophets – Hosea through Malachi

WHERE NEHEMIAH FITS IN BIBLE HISTORY

Nehemiah is a story that occurs after the Exile.

- Old Testament History in a Nutshell – In order to understand any book of the OT, you need to have a basic understanding of where it fits in the scope of OT history. By placing it in context, you will be able to have a greater appreciation for what is going on.
 - o Patriarchs – the Story of God calling Abraham and working in the lives of his children. Contained in the Book of Genesis.
 - o Slavery/Exodus – The story of how God brought Israel out of Egypt, led them through the wilderness and to the Promised Land. Contained in Exodus-Deuteronomy.
 - o Conquest – The story of how the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, conquered the other people living there, and established an early system of rule. Contained in Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel.
 - o United Kingdom – In 1 Samuel, Israel demands a king. So God gives them Saul. The 12 tribes of Israel are only united as one nation for the reigns of 3 kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. Contained in 1 Samuel.
 - o Divided Kingdom – After the excesses of Solomon, the 10 northern tribes of Israel rebelled, broke away, and started their own nation. From this point on, the term Israel refers to the 10 northern tribes; Judah refers to the nation composed of the 2 remaining tribes: Judah and Benjamin.
 - o Exile/Return – Both nations became whisked and were judged by God. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC and were absorbed into their empire. They reappear as the Samaritans in the New Testament. The nation of Judah lasted until around 600 BC when it was also conquered, this time by the Babylonians, who transported many of them to Babylon (modern day Iraq) where they remained in exile for about 70 years before being allowed to return and rebuild the city and the temple.
 - o For more, watch the intro to this sermon on Ruth (starting at about the 4:00 mark): <https://vimeo.com/136524262>

WHO WROTE IT –

On first glance, the question seems easy. Nehemiah 1:1 says, “The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah,” so the answer is Nehemiah wrote it. Like many books in the Old Testament, however, this question isn’t as easy as it seems. Here are a few facts to consider as we try to piece together the answer of authorship:

- Originally 1 Book: For at least the first thousand years after it was written, Ezra and Nehemiah were considered a single book. One book being divided into two happens frequently in the Old Testament. 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles are all single books that were each divided into two because they wouldn’t fit onto a single scroll.
- Ezra the Chronicler: The last verses of 2 Chronicles are the same as the first verses of Ezra. The author of Chronicles is not mentioned in the text. Many scholars believe that Ezra is the unnamed author based on similarities of style between Ezra and Chronicles.
- Why Divide: If Ezra wrote the book of Ezra and if Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, then wouldn’t it be reasonable to believe that Ezra also wrote Nehemiah? If that is that case, what do we make of Nehemiah 1:1? Many people believe that Ezra wrote the book of Nehemiah, but his main source was a memoir written by Nehemiah. The bulk of the book comes from Nehemiah himself. Many of the events recorded are told from the first person perspective. Ezra then compiled the memoir into a coherent narrative and added various lists and genealogies like in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7.
- So What: So Nehemiah composed much of the book, but someone else, probably Ezra wrote it down, organized, and edited it. At this point, you may wonder “who cares” or “so what.” The trust is that in this case the issue of authorship, though a little complicated, is not that problematic. The reason it is mentioned here is to remind us of the way authorship works in the Old Testament so that we are able to think clearly and answer fairly when people try to attack the Bible by questioning who wrote it.

Nehemiah’s Problem (v.1-3) –In 586, the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried off all of the leaders, and many of the leading citizens, and most of the population into captivity in Babylon (modern day Iraq). For several decades, the Jews remained there in what came to be known as the Babylonian Exile or Captivity. In around 539 BC, Babylon itself was conquered by Persia, a nation to the East in modern day Iran. Much of this story is recounted in the book of Daniel. The book of Nehemiah opens with the Nehemiah himself in the city of Susa, the capital of the Persian empire. A delegation came to visit him, who had visited Jerusalem and could give a status report of how the people were doing and what condition the city was in. The news is not good. The people are few, scared, and discouraged. The city is indefensible. Its walls had been torn down. Its

gates had been completed burned. No one was safe. Based on the chronology mentioned in the first verses, the events portrayed in Nehemiah happened around 445 BC, a little more than a decade after the events in the Book of Ezra, and almost a hundred years after the Persians allowed the Jews to begin returning. So, for almost a century people have been slowly trickling back into Judaea, but things aren't improving. They're getting worse, even after the reforms brought about by Ezra. Nothing good has been accomplished. The news broke Nehemiah's heart, and he spent several days brokenhearted over the news.

God's call frequently starts with a problem. Nehemiah saw the desolation of Israel and it broke his heart. Many times the call of God in our lives starts when we lift up our eyes and behold some great need that we didn't see before. It was always there, but God has focused our attention to see it.

Nehemiah's Prayer (vv.4-11) – The news from Jerusalem devastated Nehemiah. He is crushed and stays down for several days. What he does next is significant: he prays. He doesn't wallow in his misery. He doesn't beat himself up for being sad. He doesn't tell himself to get over it. He also doesn't saddle up his horses and get to work. God's call starts with a problem, but He is not calling us to be perpetually overcome with grief nor to do it all ourselves. He is calling us to seek Him, see what He is already up to, and learn how we can be included in His plan.

Nehemiah knew it, and his prayer illustrates it. He takes his heartache and gives it to God. Psalm 62:8 says, "Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us." You can trust God with your life. That doesn't mean you will never be confused or brokenhearted. It means that when you are, you can run to God, tell Him everything that is on your heart, and trust Him to protect you. That is what it means to be a refuge. It is a place you run to be safe.

Look briefly how Nehemiah seeks God in prayer.

- **He Remembers God's Character (vv.5-6a)** – Nehemiah starts by praising God for who He is. Look at all the words that Nehemiah uses to describe God: He is great and awesome. HE presents the covenant. Full of lovingkindness. He listens to prayers. Often, we are tempted to sin when we have started believing a lie about who God is. We think He doesn't know, doesn't know, isn't up to anything. So, we take matters into our own hands. Nehemiah praises God for all the things God is and in the process reminds himself.
- **He Remembers God's Commands (vv.6b-8)** – Nehemiah then moves to confession. He remembers that God has given commands and we have broken them. God's big plan for His creation is a rescue mission. He is saving us from the destructive power

of sin. If we are to be used by Him, we have to fight first against the sin in our own lives.

- He Remembers God's Consolations (vv.9-10) – Sometimes confession can be demoralizing. We confess to God how we have failed and wait nervously for His punishment. Such thinking is counter to the promises of God. It is sin that causes death. God brings life. Living out of accord with his commands has consequences. His lovingkindness, though, is proof that He is eager to forgive and restore. Nehemiah confesses his and his people's sin, then he rests in the consolation of God that He promises restoration.
- He Requests God's Control (v.11a) – It might sound odd to “request God's control.” But the truth is that many times we want to be in control. When we include God, we want to use Him to do what we say. Nehemiah makes requests of God and invites His involvement in the situation. Ultimately, though, he desires not to control the situation but to be in a situation controlled by God.

Praying that way puts you in a position to be used by God to do great things.

Nehemiah's Position (v.11b) – The last part of verse 11 seems like an afterthought. It would almost read better if the word “now” was translated as “Oh, and by the way.” Nehemiah didn't just have the passion to see Jerusalem restored. He hadn't just been praying earnestly for God to do something. He also happened to be in the perfect place to be used by God to accomplish some part of it. He was the cupbearer to the king, the emperor of the whole Persian Empire. He had direct access on a daily basis to the most important person in the world.

God places us right where He needs us. Often, the place we find ourselves is an important indicator of what He has called us to do. There are many things in the world that can awaken grief in us. We should give them to God in prayer. A calling is when God shows us that we have been strategically placed to be able to do something about it.

Sometimes we find ourselves right where we need to be in order to accomplish what is on our hearts to do. Sometimes using our position to accomplish God's work requires risk, but failure to realize why we are where we are can make us miss the opportunity to be used by God. A similar situation happened in the Book of Esther, where Esther has the opportunity to help her people, but it requires her to be bold and potentially risk her life. Her uncle Mordecai encourages her with the following words in Esther 4:14, “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?” Staying quiet won't prevent God's plan from being accomplished. Staying quiet

won't remove you from danger. Staying quiet will simply keep you from experiencing the blessings of being used by God to accomplish His plan. Who knows? Maybe you have been places right where God wants you "for such a time as this."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How is the Old Testament organized? Where does Nehemiah fit in the Bible?
2. What are the major events of Old Testament history? Where does Nehemiah fit in the history?
3. How can God use our awareness of a problem as a way to call us into His service? Has there been something like this in your life?
4. Have you ever been tempted to wallow in grief or try to solve problems all by yourself? How can we learn to take our problems and direct them to God in prayer?
5. How can our position be an indicator of what God has called us to do? Have you ever seen how God has placed you somewhere "for such a time as this?"

Nehemiah 2 – Rebuild: The Faith of a Leader

Leadership is one of those buzzwords that our society can't get enough of right now. We have leadership degrees, seminars, books, etc. We want our kids to be leaders. A fair amount of our obsession with leadership is sinful temptation to elevate ourselves over other people. On the other side, though, our concern with leadership development also shows a desire to be equipped and to equip others, to influence other people in a positive way instead of being influenced in destructive manners.

As Christians, we know that leadership looks different from a Biblical perspective. Sometimes we add words and call it “servant leadership”. The problem is that many times we start with what the world tells us on how to lead, then try to sprinkle in Christian principles.

One chief difference is that a Christian leader is, first and foremost, a follower. Christianity is an imitating and mentoring religion. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says, “Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ.” We will only ever be able to lead well if we are following those who are following Jesus.

The Bible is full of wonderful examples of what real Biblical leadership looks like. Nehemiah is one such person. We say in the previous chapter how he heard God's call and began to pursue it. In chapter two we see how he moved from his desire to do something about the calamity of his people and ended up in Jerusalem rebuilding the wall. Along the way, we will see personality traits that reveal him to be a tremendous leader but, most importantly, a man of faith. If we want to lead like Nehemiah, we will need to copy not just leadership strategies, but his faith. That is what this week's lesson is about: The Faith of Leader. We will look closely at what Nehemiah's interactions with the king, his enemies, and his own people reveal about what Nehemiah believed about himself and God.

So many times leaders think they have to do everything and that it's all up to them. Christian leaders may look to God for direction but still view their role as to “take the ball and run with it.” Nehemiah shows us how Nehemiah wasn't passive, but he also wasn't arrogantly assuming that he was the solution to the problem. His actions reveal a person willing to be used by God where he was to do great things. If we want to be like Nehemiah, we should learn to copy his faith.

Patient Faith: Trusting God's Timing (vv.1-3)

According to at least one American singer/songwriter/philosopher, the waiting is the hardest part. When Nehemiah realized God was calling him to be a part of rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem, he was probably eager to get to work. He saw a problem, had a passion to see it solved, and found himself in a position to do something about it. Many of us in his shoes would have barged in and started making requests. Nehemiah was aware of the situation and knew that the God who was calling him was also the God who was directing his steps. He had patience and trusted God's timing. He did the hardest thing any of us could do in his shoes: he went back to work. Nehemiah 1:1 says that the messengers came from Jerusalem

in the month of Chislev, which is the third month of the Jewish civil calendar. Nehemiah 2:1 says that the events in this chapter happened in the month of Nisan, which is the seventh month. Four months might not seem like a long time, but put yourself in his place. Imagine you were passionate and excited about something you felt God calling you towards. Now imagine you were waiting on God to open the next door. How long would you wait until you started to get discouraged? Nehemiah's willingness to wait is proof he had a patient faith.

Dependent Faith: Trusting God's Guidance (v.4)

Nehemiah went to work every day for four months, then one day the king finally noticed he seems sad and asked him what was wrong. When Nehemiah told him about Jerusalem, the king makes a staggering statement: "What would you request of me?" Imagine the wealthiest, most powerful person on the planet offered to do any favor for you, what would you do next? What Nehemiah does next is perhaps one of the easiest to overlook parts of the story. Before he speaks, he prays. The end of verse 4 says, "So I prayed to the God of heaven." In a split second, in the presence of the king, before Nehemiah spoke, he asked for the help of the King of Kings. This shows that Nehemiah had a dependent faith. He was not trying to operate in his own self-sufficiently. He was relying on God constantly. Copying this aspect of Nehemiah's faith means learning to go to God for more than just to tell Him what we want or to get our marching orders from Him. He calls us into relationship and relationship means constant interaction.

Humble Faith: Trusting God's Blessing (vv.5-8)

Nehemiah proceeds to ask not only for permission to return to Jerusalem, but also asks for the king's protection (verse 7 mentions letters to the governors of the provinces, and verse 9 mentions army officers and cavalry) and the king's provision (verse 8 includes letters to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest). He asked to go. He asked to be protected as he went. He asked for the king to fund his repair of the gates of Jerusalem. Imagine you asked a modern leader, even some well-known pastors what the secret to their success was. Now look at verse 8, how Nehemiah described why he was able to succeed. It wasn't because of his brilliance, strategy, vision, or anything like that: "The good hand of God was on me." The emphasis is not on me, but on God and His good hand. Nehemiah prayed. God answered. Nehemiah attributes what happened as a result to God and not himself. Nehemiah has a humble faith. He trusts God's ability more than his own. Leading like Nehemiah means not trying to copy other's success, or claiming credit for our own, but asking God to bless the work He has put in our hand to do.

Persevering faith: Trusting God's Protection (vv.9-10)

The journey to Israel could take weeks, even months. When Nehemiah arrives in Israel, he is not received warmly by everyone. Two specifically are mentioned that are extremely displeased. Many times we think that the purpose of God's blessing is to remove obstacles from our way. It is true that sometimes that is the case, but not always. Sometimes God's call involves difficult labor. Sometimes God's blessing mean that the enemies of God will become your enemies. Jesus prepared his followers for this by telling them John 15:18, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you." Nehemiah acknowledges the obstacles he is facing, but he doesn't back down. The reason he is able to keep going is because Nehemiah has a persevering faith. He trusts the will of God will never take Him outside the protection of God. We can do the same. When opposition meets us, we can trust that God is still leading us and will protect us.

Wise Faith: Trusting God's Timing 2.0 (vv.11-16)

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he immediately goes out to tour the city and see its current state. These verses also tell us something else that Nehemiah does, or actually doesn't do. He doesn't tell the people why he has come. Nehemiah 2:12 says, "I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem." Verse 16 says, "I had not as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the rest who did the work." Nehemiah didn't just keep his mission from his opponents, he kept it from everyone. He didn't do this to be secretive, or selfish. He was doing this out of wisdom. He didn't know who he could trust and who he would need on his team. When a new guy with power, position, and money shows up in a new place, he is often flooded with people who want to get his hear. Maybe he was worried how he would be perceived. A guy with power and money might be seen as arrogant and having a savior complex. Nehemiah kept his mission to himself until he was acquainted with the situation and had a feel for his collaborators. In the same way that Nehemiah waited for the right time to speak with the king, he waited for the right time to tell the people of Israel what he was intending. Waiting for the king illustrated the patience of his faith. Waiting in this situation illustrates his wisdom. He wasn't in a rush. His actions reveal that he trusted God's oversight of the situation. God would make clear the people he needed on his team. God would help him build his team and build trust before he started to build a wall. Following Nehemiah's lead means being wise with the mission he entrusts to us and willing to wait and watch God help us develop the relationships and rapport that we need to accomplish His work.

Inspiring Faith: Trusting God's Call (vv.17-18)

Finally, Nehemiah decides to tell the people what he is up to. He first points out the sorry state of the walls and tells about his desire to see them rebuild. But he doesn't stop there. He tells the story of "how the hand of God had been favorable" (v.18) to him up to that point

and encourages them. The story of God's leading in Nehemiah's life inspires the people to join forces and rebuild the wall. He doesn't have to bargain or negotiate. He doesn't have to cajole or persuade. He trusts that the God who called him to this work, would call others too. So many times we think we need to be clever to be persuasive. Nehemiah shows them the problem, tells the truth about what God has done up to that point, then asks people to get involved and join in the task. We can do the same. Inspiration doesn't come from us. It comes from us being faithful to share our stories of God's faithfulness in our lives. We don't inspire others. God inspires others through us.

Confident Faith: Trusting God's Power (vv.19-20)

After they began, opposition reared its ugly head again, and this time there are more enemies. Sanballat and Tobiah mentioned in verse 10 have recruited a third bad guy, Geshem. They mock and despise Nehemiah's work and they lie about his intentions. We will look later specifically how to handle opposition, because that is something that Nehemiah faces a lot. It is enough now to notice how Nehemiah responds. He has confidence, not in himself, but in God. He tells his enemies that the God who called him to this task will bring it to success. When we encounter opposition, we can learn from Nehemiah. We can renew our confidence in the God who is able to bring success. We can do what Nehemiah did. "We His servants will arise and build"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does the world define the attributes of a leader? How does that picture differ from what a Biblical leader is supposed to be?
2. How has worldly leadership crept into the church and among Christians? What can we do to change it?
3. What does it mean that a leader needs to be a follower? Why is the faith of a leader so important? Do you know a leader who leads like this?
4. What does it mean to trust God's timing? In what two places does Nehemiah trust God's timing?
5. Which aspect of Nehemiah's faith do you find the easiest to emulate? Which aspect of Nehemiah's faith do you find the hardest to emulate? Why?

Nehemiah 4 – Ridicule: Dealing with Discouragement

There is a distortion of Christianity that says if we are in the center of God's will then we will experience only blessing. Normally this blessing is understood primarily in terms of physical, worldly blessing: success, health, abundance. From that perspective, lack in any of these areas is seen as lack of faith or even sin. Such thinking is not new. In John 9:2, the disciples ask Jesus about a blind man and wanted to know who did what wrong, "And His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?'" The rich young ruler in Mark 10 perceived his wealth as a sign of God's blessing and was astonished that Jesus asked him to leave it behind. God does promise to bless us. Jesus constantly reassures His followers both that God is good and that God knows how to give good gifts to his children. But that doesn't mean getting everything we want is a good thing. It also doesn't mean that opposition or discouragement are signs we are on the wrong road. Jesus makes it clear that His disciples should not expect smooth sailing. In John 16:33, Jesus says, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Sometimes trouble and tribulation are the signs you are on the right road. If the enemy is attacking you, that is a sign that you are doing something that he doesn't like. This is the story in Nehemiah. God calls him to rebuild the wall in Jerusalem. God has His hand on him and demonstrates His favor to him in many ways. But Nehemiah also has many enemies who don't want to see him accomplish the work. In Nehemiah 4, the whole chapter seems dedicated to showing how people tried to discourage and defeat the people of Israel. Looking closely at how Nehemiah led his people and helped them overcome discouragement can help us persevere when we feel overwhelmed.

Overcoming Discouraging Words (vv.1-6)

The type of discouragement faced by Nehemiah and the people was discouraging words. The ring leader of those opposed to Israel, a man named Sanballat, became furious and very angry when he heard about how work was proceeding. His first step was to mock everything about Israel and the work.

- What are these feeble Jews doing? He mocked the Jews' strength calling them feeble, weak, and withered.
- Can they offer sacrifices? He mocked their devotion to God. The idea being that the Jews think that praying and sacrificing was all they needed to do to rebuild their wall.
- Can they finish in a day? He mocked their endurance. The work is massive, and they might be able to organize and build for a day, but it will take longer than a day to rebuild the wall.

- Can they revive the stone? He mocks their resources. Stone is heavy to move, so when walls were destroyed, the overturned rocks were left there. To prevent them from being reused, sometimes conquering armies would build fires around rock piles. Most of the rock used in wall building was limestone, burning it would weaken it. He is claiming that even if they manage to reuse the stones, the stones they have are weak from being burned.

Again, the first thing Nehemiah does in response is pray. Verse 4 contains the prayer. He laments to God about how they are being despised. He asks God to shield them from the attacks of their enemies and to turn their criticism back on their own heads. It may sound harsh to ask God not to forgive their sin. But it is important to realize that Nehemiah is refusing to respond. He is asking God to intervene on his behalf, take the words of their enemies seriously, and protect Israel from them. Many times we can get distracted from our task by trying to respond to our critics. Nehemiah doesn't get into a fight. The words of his enemies hurt, but he refuses to be distracted from building the wall.

The second thing Nehemiah did was go back to work. Verse 6 says plainly, "so we built the wall." They didn't allow the criticism derail them. Sanballat had said many true things. They were few, they were relying heavily on God, their work was massive, and their resources were literally garbage. It would be easy to sit down and have a pity party, and say to yourself, "you know he's right" and give up a little bit. But they didn't. They kept going because, as verse 6 says, "the people had a mind to work."

Overcoming Discouraging Work (vv.7-10)

The next kind of discouragement has already been alluded to: the work itself. They had a ton of work to do, and they were literally working with rocks from the trash heap. After World War II, many cities that had experienced the calamities of war mounded up the rubble of destroyed buildings and started fresh. In the city of Berlin there is a manmade mountain called Teufelsberg made from the war rubble of the city. Imagine what it would be like if you had to rebuild a city out of bricks taken from one of these massive rubble heaps. Well, that was what Nehemiah was doing. It can be demoralizing work, stumbling through a massive rubbish heap looking for usable building material. The work is made harder by the fact that these torn down bricks are reminders of previous defeats.

In addition, Sanballat and his group of enemies move from speaking against them to conspiring. They are planning to come and fight. Imagine doing a massive amount of hard labor with poor materials all while bad people were trying to attack you.

In the face of this discouraging work, Nehemiah again prays. We aren't told the content of this prayer, but we can assume it had to do with the asking God for protection because they immediately set up a guard. It may also have been an honest declaration to God of their exhaustion similar to the words of verse 10. They are tired, they are overwhelmed, and they are unable to continue on their own.

The way Nehemiah handles this discouraging work reminds us that when we are overwhelmed by our task, we need to pour out our hearts to God. Sometimes we think that when we are doing “the Lord’s work” that we always need to have cheery disposition and eager hearts. When we don’t feel that way, we shouldn’t suppress it, we should share it with God. Many times such discouragement in our work comes from laboring in our own strength. The confession of verse 10 is “we ourselves are unable to build the wall.” Sometimes discouragement in our work is a way for God to show us that we can’t do it without Him. God sometimes gives us more than we can bear. However, He never gives us more than He can bear. This point is summed up perfectly by Paul in Colossians 1:29, which says, “I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” There comes a time when we have to learn to say to God “you gave me this work to do, I also need Your strength to do it.” That is what Nehemiah and the people do. That is how they overcame discouragement in their work.

Overcoming Discouraging Worry (vv.11-23)

The third type of discouragement that Nehemiah and his followers face is worry. They have been bombarded by mocking words. They have been burdened by overwhelming work. The rest of the chapter tells the story of how the Jews are constantly worried about where their enemies will attack. They post guards. They develop an alert system. They even resorted to cutting their work load in half so that one person could stand guard while the other person worked. They went everywhere in their armor. All of this shows that the people were under tremendous stress worrying where their enemies would attack. In verse 14, Nehemiah says “when I saw their fear...” Nehemiah knows he needs to address the situation to keep worry from overwhelming the people. He doesn’t try to pretend that there aren’t any dangers. Rather, after making preparations, he tells people to change their focus. Don’t focus on your enemies. Focus on God, who is great and awesome. Focus on your family, who are worth fighting for. This isn’t a call to be neglectful of danger. Nehemiah took every precaution necessary. But when they had done everything they could think of, they decided to focus not on worry but on God.

When you focus on what’s in front of you that you are afraid of, you can shrink down and give up. When you focus on what’s behind you that you are defending, you will find courage to stand tall. When you realize that a strong and awesome God is standing with you, you realize you have nothing to fear.

This passage underscores the importance of focus in battling worry. What you focus on ends up consuming you. Focus on your fears, you will be overwhelmed by them. Focus on God and the good, and you will find peace. This is a truth that runs throughout Scripture. In Philippians 4:6-8, Paul says, “Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” The key to dealing with worry is not focusing on it but giving it to God, then focusing on the good, honorable, true, right things.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been overwhelmed by discouraging words? How did you handle it?
2. Have you ever been overwhelmed by discouraging work? How did you handle it?
3. How did Nehemiah respond to discouraging work? How can we learn to do the same?
4. Do you have an experience of being overwhelmed by worry?
5. How can changing our focus help us overcome our anxiety? How can we address problems without dwelling on them? In the midst of worries, how can we train ourselves to focus on God and the good rather than being consumed by worry?

Nehemiah 5 – Reform: Dealing with Division

External conflict can promote a sense of unity. We all band together in order to resist those attacking us or overcome some obstacle. But even in such times, internal divisions rarely go away. They may drift into the background, or become less important, but they are still there. In addition, there are some people who will look to profit from hard times and exploit their neighbors. This is what was happening in Nehemiah's day. On the heels of leading the Jews to triumph over external adversity, he must now conduct an internal reform to heal the division which is plaguing his people.

Studying how Nehemiah leads his people through reform can help us deal with division in our own lives. We shouldn't be surprised at division, but we also shouldn't be callous to them either. Internal divisions can be healed, but they require leadership like Nehemiah's.

Discovering Division: Reform Requires Compassion (vv.1-6)

We are not sure the exact relationship between the events of chapter 4 and chapter 5, but the point is that even in the midst of unity against a common foe, division is possible. In this case, the problem was caused by a famine. Hard times always bring out the worst in people. Some suffer, some want to help, some see an opportunity to better themselves. Farming has always been hard, risky work. Someone once said about farming, "You will never work so hard to be so poor." You literally put all your eggs in one basket. You plant your seed and if something, anything, goes wrong you are in a bad situation. Without refrigeration, or government relief, if your crops failed for any reason, you were at real risk of starving with little to do but wait and hope and wonder. There were at least two problems going on.

First, verse 3 says, "We are mortgaging our fields...that we might get grain because of the famine." The idea is that they were asking people who had extra grain to give them grain on loan. The borrowers, then, would promise to repay what they borrowed once their harvests came in. When famine hits, borrowers are caught in an endless cycle of needing food but not being able to grow enough to pay what they borrowed back, so they end up selling their fields.

The second problem was taxation. Governments run by collecting taxes from those they protect and serve. Farmers are taxed on the size of their fields and the amount of food they produce. The problem is that taxes are normally paid in money not grain, so the grain has to be sold. But in a famine, there is little grain to sell, so money has to be borrowed as well.

The result was that people found themselves in a perpetual debt cycle. Unfortunately, there was no bankruptcy in the ancient world. The primary remedy was slavery. Based on our own terrible cultural history, we tend to think of slavery as a permanent situation primarily based on race. Though this existed in the ancient world, slavery could exist for other reasons as well. Once such reason was debt slavery. If you couldn't pay your debts, you could be sentenced to serve the one you owed for a certain amount of time until your debt had been paid off. Something similar happened in Early America when people agreed to work for seven years for someone in exchange for them paying for transportation to America. We call that institution Indentured Servitude, but it was really a form of debt slavery.

This is the situation that many in Jerusalem found themselves in: in debt, enslaved, exploited. They cry out to Nehemiah for help. Verse 6 shows that Nehemiah responds by being “very angry.” He wasn’t angry at them for being bad with their money; he was angry at the situation that had caused their outcry. Such a response reveals that Nehemiah had compassion for the people’s struggles. He doesn’t tell them that legally there was nothing that he could do. He doesn’t lecture them about learning to be better farmers. He doesn’t scold them about being such poor planners. He doesn’t encourage them to be better about the debts they take on. He sees things from their perspective, and it makes him mad. He knows that healing division starts with having compassion with those who are suffering.

Compassion is an attribute that is sorely lacking in our society. Compassion literally means “to suffer alongside.” It refers to the ability to feel someone else’s pain, put yourself in their shoes, and be merciful to them. So many times instead of compassion, we offer cruelty. Listen to how people in our society offer advice. It usually takes the form of “maybe you shouldn’t have been so stupid or made such poor choices.” We beat people up with the results of the bad decisions that they can’t undo. Such treatment is pointless and cruel. We all do things that in retrospect should have been obvious that they were going to turn out poorly. What we need is not someone to beat us up, or teach us a lesson, or rub our noses in it. We need someone to have mercy on us. That is why Romans 12:8 lists mercy as one of the spiritual gifts that we are supposed to exercise.

Dealing with Division: Reform Requires Confrontation (vv.7-13)

Nehemiah is compassionate. He is so compassionate, he gets angry. But he doesn’t stop with being emotional. He also doesn’t allow his emotions to get the best of him. Verse 7 says that the first thing he does is “consult with myself.” He allowed the raw emotions to die down a little. He thought through the best thing to do next. He decided what he needed to do was hold an assembly and confront those who had caused the problem. Nehemiah had three things that are needed to heal division: emotion, reason, and action. Sometimes, we let our emotions run wild. We get angry and like to stay angry. Nehemiah allows his emotion to be the spur but he promptly funnels it through his reason to figure out the most productive methods of resolution. Lastly, he acts. Sometimes we can be emotional about a wrong and even have an idea about what needs to be done, but failure to confront the wrong can allow division to remain.

In the assembly, Nehemiah needs to address the wrong, generate understanding, and promote change and restoration. The problem is that he doesn’t have a legal leg to stand on. Legally, there was nothing he could do. The nobles had “technically” done nothing wrong. But “technically” is a lousy place to live. Nehemiah confronts the nobles by appealing to something besides the law.

- **He Appeals to the People of God (vv.7-8)** – Nehemiah starts by appealing to the nobles as fellow Jews. Sometimes we like to group ourselves with people who are most like us. In times of conflict, we can see ourselves as Americans, or Jews in their case. But in other times, we divide ourselves in other ways, like rich and poor,

powerful and weak, etc. Nehemiah reminds the nobles that they are brothers with the people they are oppressing. The word “brother” is used 4 times in the course of Nehemiah’s speech. He wants them to see what they have in common with those they are exploiting, so that they can have compassion a well.

- He Appeals to the Perception of God (v.9) – The next appeal Nehemiah makes is to how others will view Israel and Israel’s God based on how they are acting. He warns them of the “reproach of the nations.” He is worried people will look at how Jew is treating Jew and think that the Jewish God must not be all that great. We would be wise to remember this as well. When we fight with other believers, we run the risk of discrediting in other people’s eyes the God we serve and hope in.
- He Appeals to his Personal Practice (vv.10-11) – Nehemiah doesn’t just tell others what to do; he leads by example. He is a noble. He is a person of some standing with a fair amount of wealth. He shows that he isn’t asking them to do what he is unwilling to do himself. He says he is helping not exploiting and asks the other nobles to do the same.

Departing from Division: Reform Requires Conduct (vv.14-18)

Following Nehemiah’s appeal and example, the nobles of Jerusalem agreed to give back what they had taken from their brothers. This matter was resolved satisfactorily. Nehemiah’s actions afterward, however, reveal that he knew he needed to lay a new groundwork if he was going to keep his people from falling back into the division he had just led them from. Verse 14 starts with an important word, “moreover.” The next few verses show the increased steps that Nehemiah takes to build a culture of unity instead of division. He hunts out things that he is doing that might unintentionally be causing conflict and division. He resolves to stop claiming the food allowance he was allowed as governor. This allowance was a part of the tax paid by the people he was trying to unite. He had a right to claim it. Verse 17 shows us that he had several hundred people dependent upon him for provision and therefore needed to claim it. But verse 15 tells us, “I did not claim it out of the fear of the Lord.” Verse 18 says, “I did not demand the governor’s food allowance because the servitude was heavy on this people.” He didn’t insist on his rights. He didn’t even insist on his needs. He showed by his conduct his willingness to serve others and trust God. That is how a leader helps people depart forever from division.

Depending on God to Heal Division: Reform Requires Consecration (v.19)

An easily overlooked part of Nehemiah’s actions occurs at the end of chapter 5. Nehemiah prays. Nehemiah is a man of prayer, and this incident is no exception. He asks God to see his service and bless it and the people he is trying to serve. He isn’t bragging to God. He isn’t asking for special privileges. He is simply acknowledging that he has done the best he could to heal the division but that it will be for naught unless God pours His blessing upon it. We need this reminder. For some reason, we sometimes create a false division between

prayer and action. Some people pray a lot but never act. Some people think it's all up to them and never pray. We need both. We need to do all that we can. We also need to realize that when we have done all we can think to do, we need to submit it to God and watch him do "exceedingly beyond all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:21).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been in an environment characterized by division? Where was it? Work, family, church? How did it affect your daily life?
2. What is compassion? How do we offer it to people? What is the opposite of compassion? Why do we like to give that to people instead?
3. Why is conflict hard? What can we learn from Nehemiah about how to handle conflict?
4. What does Nehemiah do to go the extra mile to make sure he didn't leave room for division? What would it look like in our lives to copy that?
5. As a parent or grandparent, what can you do in your home to handle conflict and division like Nehemiah?
6. What role does prayer play in restoring division? How can we learn to both pray hard and work hard like Nehemiah does?

Nehemiah 6 – Resistance: Dealing with Lies

Lies are all around us. Everyone has to deal with people telling us things that aren't true. Sometimes when faced with lies told about us or to us, we wonder how to respond. Is this something we need to ignore or respond to? If a response is required, what do we do? Some people try to respond the same to every circumstance. Some people try to ignore everything. Others try to confront everything and everyone. Both have negative consequences.

The truth is that people lie to us and about us for a wide variety of reasons. Discerning those reasons are key in helping us dealing with their lies. It is also important to underscore the common goal they share: separation. Lies separate. People use lies to separate us from a variety of things: from themselves, from each other, from God, from our work. This has always been the case from the beginning. Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the garden by using lies about what God had really said (Gen. 3:1). The goal was to separate us from God.

This week we are going to look closely at an episode in Nehemiah's life where he had to deal with lies spoken about him. We will look closely at the motivation of each lie, the separation it was trying to cause, and the way Nehemiah addressed himself differently to each. By looking closely at each occurrence, we can gain valuable insight into what response is required from us.

Lies to Slow Me (vv.1-4)

- **The Situation:** The first lie comes after Nehemiah had already dealt with threats, discouragement, and division. His enemies were frustrated in their attempt to prevent the work from being completed, so they looked for ways to convince or compel Nehemiah to stop the work on his own. The first tactic they use is arranging a meeting, perhaps suggesting that they should make peace and help each other out. They offer to meet him in a place called Chephirim, which is about halfway between them and Nehemiah, located in the Plain of Ono (or perhaps it should be called the "Plain of Oh No!").
- **The Separation:** The goal of the lies is to slow down the work. The walls have been built, but the doors haven't been put in place. Until that happens, there is still a chance. Getting Nehemiah to meet them in a place far removed from Jerusalem would buy them some valuable time. But there is also a hint that perhaps these people want to meet to offer help. If that is the case, they are trying to use peacemaking as an opportunity to weasel their way into the work they had previously opposed. They decided that if you can't beat 'em or join 'em...take over. They want to separate Nehemiah from his convictions. The temptation is for Nehemiah to compromise his work to allow enemies inside the gates.
- **The Response:** Nehemiah sees it all from a mile off. He calls them enemies (v.1). He says, "they were planning to harm me." What does he do? He doesn't accuse. He doesn't answer. He just keeps working, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down" (v.3). He knew the request was a delay tactic and may have even been

a temptation to compromise his convictions. Why might he be tempted? Because he was tired, the work had been long and hard, and he was finally offered a break and some help. But he didn't take it, because it was from the wrong source. This isn't a lesson on refusing to compromise. We all need to be open to compromising and working with others. It's a lesson about refusing to compromise with enemies. When your work and your convictions are at stake, don't stop working, don't let enemies inside the walls, and don't give these lies the time of day.

Lies to Slander Me (vv.5-9)

- **The Situation:** After trying four times to delay Nehemiah, they switch tactics and concoct a lie to slander Nehemiah. In the world without airplanes or gunpowder, thick walls were an obstacle difficult to overcome. The only way to fight against a fortified city would be to scale the walls or lay siege to the city and starve the inhabitants. The lie they tell is that once Nehemiah finishes the wall, he is going to declare himself king and rebel against Persia.
- **The Separation:** They were trying to get Nehemiah in trouble with those who gave him the power and authority to do what he is doing, specifically with Artaxerxes, King of Persia, who also happened to be the most powerful and wealthiest person in the world. Persia had up to this point blessed the work Nehemiah was doing. They were hoping that Persia would hear about this potential rebellion and put an end to the work.
- **The Response:** Nehemiah takes a different approach this time. He doesn't ignore and avoid. He realized their motives. Verse 9 says, "For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, 'They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.'" He prayed also for strength: "But now, O God, strengthen my hand." Lastly, he confronted: "Then I sent a message to him saying, 'Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind'" (v.8). Nehemiah knew that when the lie is directed at you, ignore and avoid. When the lie is about you but directed at influencing someone else, then it is important to confront and refute. He doesn't belabor the point. He doesn't continue until the enemies back down. He tells them they are mistaken, then goes back to work.

Lies to Scare Me (vv.10-14)

- **The Situation:** The next scenario is a little odd. Nehemiah goes to the house of a man named Shemaiah. The text says that he was 'confined at home,' which seems to mean that he was worried about something and scared to go outside. He then tells Nehemiah that he should be worried too because people are coming to kill him, and that the only thing to do was hide in the temple. We find out in verse 12 that Shemaiah was also a prophet. He wasn't just a troubled soul. He was a man who claimed to speak for God and had been hired by Nehemiah's enemies to lie to Nehemiah about an impending murder in order to scare him.

- The Separation: The goal of this lie was to scare Nehemiah into doing something he shouldn't. Nehemiah isn't a priest. He knows he shouldn't go into the temple. His enemies are trying to use this lie to separate Nehemiah from God. He is being offered ample justification for disregarding the laws of God. He is being encouraged to disobey in order to pursue self-preservation. They also wanted reason to tarnish Nehemiah's reputation. Verse 13 says, "so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me."
- The Response: Nehemiah realized that this wasn't a man of God. Verse 12: "Then I perceived that God had not sent him." He also realized the goal of the lie. Verse 13: "That I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin." He chooses to trust God and not his fear. People often choose sin because they think there is no other way. Fear is a prime motivator of such actions. Nehemiah chose not to listen to fear and chose rather to trust God and obey His commands.

Lies to Steer Me (vv.15-19)

- The Situation: The final strategy mentioned in this chapter involves the enemies of Nehemiah exploiting family relationships to influence Nehemiah. The Jews had been warned about intermarrying with people who didn't follow their God. Many ignored this warning. Now one of the enemies of Jerusalem attempts to exploit these marriage alliances for his own purposes. The people in Jerusalem were literally serving as the eyes and ears of their enemies.
- The Separation: Though no specific lies were mentioned in this passage. It is clear that the enemies of Nehemiah have ceased trying to fight directly with him and started to focus their attention on others. Perhaps if those around Nehemiah can be influenced, then they can still get what they want. No doubt, they used similar strategies as those listed above that they used against Nehemiah. The goal is to separate Nehemiah from the people he leads. They want to find ways of manipulating and steering Nehemiah in the direction they want him to go in.
- The Response: Nehemiah responds not by ignoring or confronting. He doesn't try to expose the people and drive them out. He recognizes the potential for manipulation. He realizes that the problem is their split loyalty, but he also realizes that he has an obligation as a leader not to abandon them to the enemy but to help them rediscover their desire to serve God. The next few chapters are about the steps Nehemiah took to renew the commitment of the people to the laws of God and to lead his people into a period of revival. When Nehemiah found himself in a position to be manipulated by people with divided loyalty, he didn't fault those who were being used by the enemy as instruments of manipulation. He sought to win them over. That is what we will look at next week in chapter 8.

Conclusion

We serve a victorious God. He is opposed by a defeated enemy. The enemy uses lies to try to keep us from persevering in the work God calls us to. This passage in Nehemiah shows us that our struggles are nothing new. By looking at how he dealt with lies, we can learn how to stay faithful, trust God, and keep working towards the plan he has called us to.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever found yourself attacked by lies but were unsure about how to respond?
2. Have you ever seen someone use lies to slow you down or distract you from your work? Why are we tempted to respond? Why is avoiding the best policy in this case?
3. Have you ever seen someone use lies to slander or discredit you? How can we learn to confront the lies without becoming bogged down in being defensive?
4. Have you ever seen someone use lies to scare you into disobeying God? How can we learn to trust God instead of our fears?
5. Have you ever seen someone use lies to manipulate you? What are some synonyms for manipulation? How do we sometimes excuse it when we do it?
6. What are some ways you can help your kids/grandkids be truth tellers and fight against the lies they hear around them?

Nehemiah 8 – Revival: Pursuing Renewal

Revival. Just saying the word evokes extreme responses both positive and negative in people. Some think positively about a bygone time when people took faith seriously and were eager to reconnect with God. Others may conjure images of charismatic evangelists using emotional appeals and maybe even threats to manipulate people.

Whatever our response to the word, the truth is we all long for renewal of some sort. We all feel like things have gone astray. Our hearts testify to the fact that we are fallen creatures, and we long to be restored to the heights from which we have fallen. Sadly we are often confused about how to do so. Hence the emotionalism or nostalgia that plagues terms like “revival” today. We try to repeat or recapture previous times when we felt close to God. But to no avail.

A great example of this is found in Nehemiah 8. The people have finished the wall around Jerusalem. They realize that this is more than a civil accomplishment. They have been blessed by God. Ever since God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed and its inhabitants carried off into exile in Babylon, the Jews had longed for the day when God would restore His people. They knew that seeing the wall rebuilt was one step towards this restoration and so they marked the occasion with a celebration. By looking at how they marked this occasion and sought renewal, we can learn something about how to seek renewal and restoration with God.

Returning to the Word (vv.1-5)

The starting point for the renewal of the people was the word. This revival wasn't imposed on people. It was a grass-roots endeavor. Look closely at verse 1: “the people gathered... the people asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law...” The people wanted the word, because the people knew that returning to God starts here.

God is not an impersonal force or a machine. He is personal. He may use events or activities to draw people closer to Himself, but it is God not the event or place that is doing it. He calls us to seek Him and has shown us the way. It starts with His word. If you were lost, one thing you would do would be to listen for the voice of a person looking for you. Such is the case with returning to God. Hearing His voice is central to finding your way back to Him. Because of this, real revival doesn't start with an eloquent speaker, or great music, or an excellent location. It doesn't start with people looking for spiritual highs or worshipful experiences. It starts with people earnestly seeking God in His word. What God does when we do this, changes everything.

Many times in our churches, we forget that the Bible is the starting point to finding answers to life's questions. Many Christians, even pastors, think the Bible is fine but actually look to secular business advice or the latest education models or technology trend or pop psychology for guidance in how to lead. We need to be like these people in Nehemiah's day who knew that the starting point was returning to God's word.

They didn't just pay lip service to God's word. They gathered to hear it read. Verse 3 says that Ezra read "from early morning until midday." They didn't drift off, or get bored. They were eager for it. They sacrificed for it. They built a pulpit so that everyone could see and hear. They were gathered together, unified, and attentive to hear the word of God speak.

Receiving the Word (vv.6-8)

The first few verses of this section says *that* Ezra read the word. This section focuses on *how* he read it and how the people received it.

First, they read it as God's word. Verse 6 says that Ezra began by blessing "the Lord the great God." This means that he began his reading by acknowledging that he was doing more than reading a religious text, or an ethical treatise. The words he spoke had their source in God.

Second, they read it worshipfully. Ezra's blessing and the people's response demonstrate that this wasn't a classroom lecture but a time of worship. The people responded verbally with "amens" and physically by bowing down before God. They realized that reading God's word was an act of worship and that true worship involves our whole person.

Last, they read it seeking understanding. The Bible was written by a wide variety of authors, in multiple languages, over a span of several hundred if not a thousand years. It can be hard to understand sometimes. The two extremes to avoid are thinking someone else should read it for you and just boil it down; or that you can read it by yourself without any help. We need to read the word for ourselves, but not by ourselves. We see the people and the Levites doing just that. They read the word, and they helped make its meaning clear to the people so that they understood it for themselves. They weren't giving their own ideas. They were showing people what the word said and making the scriptures makes sense to them.

Rejoicing in the Word (vv.9-12)

What happens next is amazing. The people have heard the word and their first response is to be overcome with grief. They have been disobedient and rebellious. They immediately begin mourning and weeping. It seems like an appropriate response. The word of God is full of God's commands. They realized they had not kept them, so the natural response is to do what they did.

Ezra stops them. He tells them that they shouldn't grieve but rather celebrate. They should eat, drink, be merry, and invite others to celebrate with them. The reason they should do this, Ezra tells them, is because "the joy of the Lord is your strength." He reminds them to have joy in what God has done.

The people had mistaken the primary message of scripture. They heard the law and recognized their own disobedience and figured the story was about their failure. That isn't the point of scripture; that is the setting. The point of scripture is that God is rich in mercy, motivated by love, and devoted to His people. We aren't supposed to weep and wail over

our sin. We are supposed to celebrate because our sin didn't wreck God's plan or exhaust God's love. We are supposed to read in the words of scripture the hope and promise that God never tired of forgiving and restoring His people.

This isn't about thinking that we can do what we want. It's about realizing that our failures don't disqualify us from being the people of God. He is still eager to do a new work in us and through us.

Verse 12 says that the people did as they had been commanded "because they understood the words which had been made known to them." Once we see God's love and faithfulness as the center of our story, we cannot help but to rejoice.

Responding to the Word (vv.13-18)

The revival that took place began in the word, was rooted in joy, and wasn't just a single act or emotional high. It provoked a response. The people didn't just "feel" restored. They acted restored. They began trying to obey all of God's commands as best they could. They discovered a festival that God had commanded them to celebrate called the Feasts of Booths, which required them to build temporary shelters in the hills and live in them for a week. The purpose of the festival was to remind them of their period of wandering in the wilderness when God led them and provided for them. The people had just finished a wall and were in the process of restoring the city. How odd it must have been to spend a week camped outside the newly completed walls. This festival reminded the people to trust in God and not their circumstances. God, not the walls, was the true source of their security, protection, and provision.

So many times we experience the blessings of God and immediately begin hoping and relying on the blessing rather than the God who provided it. Festivals like this are physical reminders that God leads, God provides, and God calls us to depend on Him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of when you hear the word revival? Where do people's positive or negative responses come from?
2. What does it mean that revival starts with the word? What are some places that people try to start revivals besides the word? How can learn to hunger for the word? What do we hunger for instead?
3. What does it mean that we need to read the Bible for ourselves but not by ourselves?
4. What does the phrase "the joy of the Lord is our strength" mean? How can we learn to live it out? What are some ways your can live by example in front of your kids/grandkids?
5. How did the feast of Booths remind the Jews to trust God and not their new walls? Have you ever been blessed, then started trusting the blessing instead of God? How can we remind ourselves to depend on God?

Nehemiah 9 – Repentance: Dwelling on God

Repentance. Like *revival*, which we talked about last week, *repentance* is a word that carries a lot of baggage with it. Maybe you imagine a person standing on a street corner shouting into a megaphone something like, “Repent. The End is Near.” We associate repentance with the idea of swift judgment and harsh punishment. Because of that, a call to repentance often sounds like a threat. Get right now, or feel God’s wrath.

Such thinking creates a further problem. When we think that God is going to unleash punishment and we are trying to get back on his good side before He does so, we will associate repentance with trying to show God we are truly sorry for our sins. This makes repentance about us and our ability to demonstrate suitable remorse for our failings and gratitude for our forgiveness.

All of this constructs an image of repentance that sees God as perpetually angry. If you think that God is mad at you, it means that you need to keep weeping, wailing, and beating yourself up in order to convince Him to let you into heaven.

Such an approach to repentance is a misguided extreme. Some people, in response, focus on the forgiveness we already have in Jesus and remove the necessity of repentance. The problem with this is that repentance was essential to Jesus’s message. The ministry of Jesus began with a call to repentance. Mark 1:14-15 says, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” If it was part of Jesus’s call to discipleship, we should consider it central to our understanding of what it means for us to be His followers.

The way to avoid both extremes regarding repentance is to look at what it actually means and how it’s actually done. Repentance does mean to mourn your sins and to desire to return to God. But it isn’t done out of fear to escape punishment, but out of a desire to find life. We see such a scene unfolding in Nehemiah. After the period of celebration mentioned in chapter 8, the people gather to together repent of their sins. By looking at how Nehemiah and the people repent, perhaps we can learn how and why to do so when we find ourselves far from the Father and wanting to come home.

Don’t Dismiss Your Sin (vv.1-4) – Getting close to a bright light exposes minute flaws in ourselves. Being close to the brightness of God’s holiness does the same thing. The people had seen God do a good work in their midst. God’s goodness had made them realize how much they still were living in sin and made them realize their deep need for God and made them long to return to Him completely. They responded with sorrow. They responded by fasting, wearing sackcloth, and even by putting dirt on themselves. These acts were done to demonstrate humility. Sin is an act of arrogance where we tell ourselves and God that we know best. By humbling themselves they were showing that they realized they weren’t as smart or powerful or important as they thought they were. It also shows that they took their sin seriously. Sometimes we turn God’s grace into cheap grace by not realizing the severity of our sin. God hates it. God pours out His wrath on sin, because sin causes death. We should hate it too. God doesn’t dismiss our sin. He dealt with it. We shouldn’t dismiss our sin either.

Don't Dwell on your Sin (v.5) – Until we realize the severity of our sin, we will never truly want to be separated from it or truly repent of it. We should not dismiss our sin. But we also shouldn't dwell on it. After spending time humbling themselves before God and confessing their sin, verse 5 recounts the commands of the Levites: "Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever!" The people are called to change their focus from their sin to the goodness of God. What we focus on ends up consuming us. Recognizing sin will help you realize the problem. But focusing on your own sin won't help you get it out of your life, it will only make you either beat yourself up more or cause you to excuse the sin. Imagine a glass of water. Imagine someone puts a few drops of dye in it. You can't get the dye out by trying to scoop it out with a spoon. You have to flood the glass to overflowing with fresh water. That is what the Levites call the people to do. You have acknowledged your sin. Now dwell on the goodness of God. Flood your life with the truth of who God is. The rest of the chapter is a hymn of repentance. Its central message is not how sorry the people are, but how good God is.

Dwell On Who God Is (vv.6-38)

The prayer the Levites lead the people in is a story of God's goodness and faithfulness. The words in verse 5 say, "O may your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise." The rest of the chapter shows why God's name should be praised..

- Praise God Because He Creates (vv.6-8) – The first reason to praise God is because He is the Creator. He created the world (v.6) and all the life the world contains. "You give life to all of them." He also created a nation out of one man (v.7). He made a covenant with him to give him land, and kept that promise by giving it to his descendants (v.8). Thinking of God as Creator reminds us to respect His power, and to acknowledge that He can claim author's rights over everything in the world. But it does more than that. It reminds us that we serve a God who enjoys creating things out of nothing. He doesn't rejoice in destruction. We can praise God as Creator because He can take even our lives, which may appear formless and void like the earth in Genesis 1, or our bodies, which may appear as good as dead, like Abraham's, and create in it something that we could not have imagined.
- Praise God Because He Leads (vv.9-14) – There was a group of philosophers and theologians in the 18th century called Deists, who believed God created the world but that He was no longer involved in it. Many of us often live our lives as functional deists. We know God created but think we are on our own to take it from here. The promise of Scripture is that God is still involved in the world. The next few verses focus on God's deliverance of His people out of slavery in Egypt. He focuses on how we should praise God because He leads us. Verse 9 shows us that God sees us and hears us when we cry out to Him. Verses 10-11 recount the miracles that God did to deliver the people out of slavery. Verse 12 shows how God guided the people with a pillar of fire and cloud "showing them the way in which they were to go." Verse 13-14 show the guidance God gave when He spoke the law to them at Sinai. He show us the paths that lead to life and calls us to follow Him. All of this reminds us that we need never despair about being abandoned and alone. We can praise God because He leads us. God hears us in our calamity. God leads us along the path He has marked out for us. God is able to move miraculous obstacles.

- Praise God Because He Forgives (vv.15-25) – The story of Israel’s history is going well until verses 15-16, which tell the story of God’s faithfulness and Israel’s disobedience. Israel had been given everything they needed and every reason to trust God. God told them to “enter in order to possess the land,” which He “swore to give them.” Verse 16 says, “But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly,” which means they decided that they knew better than God what they should do. Verse 17 says, “They refused to listen to God, and didn’t remember” the things God had done leading them up to that point. Israel had disobeyed God and become stubborn in their rebellion. But God doesn’t respond with anger or abandonment. The end of Verse 17 says, “You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; and you did not forsake them.” God does not forsake us when we forsake Him. Verses 18-25 show how God stays faithful to them even in their rebellion and how God raised up a new generation who had seen His goodness and miraculous provisions in the wilderness, a generation that would enter the land and take possession of it. We can praise God that He is compassionate, that He never repays our rebellion with evil, that He always provides, and that He is eager to forgive.
- Praise God Because He Disciplines (vv.26-31) – The hymn continues by talking about the rebellion of the next generation. The message seems to be that all of us, even after we have experienced the miraculous provision of God, are prone to forget who God is and to go our own way. In a span of 5 verses, the hymn recounts the repeated cycle of Israel’s rebellion, God giving them over to their enemies, Israel crying out to God, and God’s deliverance. It is easy to focus our attention on Israel’s repeated wanderings, but this hymn is about God. We are supposed to see a God who loves us enough to discipline us. He sends prophets to remind us of the right path and to warn us of the consequences of continual rebellion. When warning doesn’t work, God gives His people over to the consequence of their rebellion. The purpose of this isn’t anger or spite but so that we can learn firsthand the effect of our sin. The goal is always the same, as verse 26 says, “so that they might return to you.” Every time we have had enough and cry out to God, He is quick to redeem and restore. He doesn’t grow tired of continually doing the same thing over and over again. We should praise God that He disciplines us. It is a sign that He loves us and longs for us to return to Him.
- Praise God Because He Restores (vv.32-38) – The hymn to God ends with a request. The people remember who God is. They confess that their hardships are the result of their own rebellion. They agree that God is faithful and they have acted wickedly. This is their statement to God that they want to come home. They wish to return to God, to live under His commands, and to experience the blessing and life that comes from this. They end by telling Him of the agreement they have made to renew the covenant which they broke. They are not beating themselves up for their failures, they are praising God because He restores. Verse 36 says, “Behold, we are slaves today, and as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it.” They see themselves as part of the continuing story of God. They realize that they have failed, but they also remember

what God did for a group of slaves once, what He did for a rebellious people over and over again, and they trust that He can do it again.

Conclusion

That is what real repentance means: realizing who we are without God, realizing the continual goodness and faithfulness of God, and realizing He never tires in restoring us. Such realizations don't give us excuse to wander, but freedom to come home when we have. That is what real repentance is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some bad ideas or images associated with repentance? Where do you think those ideas came from?
2. How does this passage show us what real repentance looks like? How can we make repentance less about what we've done and more about who God is?
3. How does praising God as Creator help us repent?
4. How does praising God as one who leads us help us repent? How is the law an aspect of God's leadership?
5. What does it mean that God disciplines us? How does God discipline us? What is the goal of God's discipline? How might this shape us in how we discipline our kids?