



Thank you for your interest in Old Lessons for a New Church—a nine-week study of the book of Nehemiah.

The pages which follow include:

- An overview of this series (5 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (5 pages)
- A sample handout (4 pages)
- A sample small group handout (2 pages)

Again, thank you for your interest in our material. If you have questions or want to place an order, contact us at:

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This series is gratefully dedicated to Bill Coleman.

His gifts have been used to serve the Kingdom.

His friendship and generosity have sustained us through difficult days.

Bill knows how hard a thing it is to *build*.

He has consistently encouraged and supported us

in our attempts to play Nehemiah.

May his tribe increase.

Tim Woodroof
Ron Stump
Portland, OR
October, 1995

Preaching through Nehemiah

It may seem strange to some that an Old Testament book should be as a source for a study of the church. Anyone familiar with this great story, however, knows how powerfully the lessons of *Nehemiah* speak to the needs of the modern church. There are important ideas here about leadership, mission, fellowship, conflict, and restoration which apply directly to the people of God today.

The church of Jesus has roots that run deep in the “church” of Moses. It would have been fun to explore many other O.T. themes that bear upon the nature and business of God’s people. Suffice it to say that the Kingdom of God is not confined to the Christian dispensation. God has been working from the beginning—through Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Nehemiah, to name just a few O.T. characters—to establish his Kingdom on the earth. If the nation of Israel tends to represent the Kingdom in its most tangible form, all the better to draw lessons for the spiritual Kingdom God is busy establishing today.

For that reason, time spent in the book of *Nehemiah* will bear rich rewards for the community of believers with whom you are working. These physical walls teach us much about the mission we face as disciples of Jesus. The disorganized, dispirited people of Judah, the courageous and thoughtful leadership of Nehemiah, the villainous opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah—all have their counterparts in the Kingdom today. This is an exciting story, powerfully told, which will encourage and motivate your congregation.

Bibliography

The following books are listed because they were especially helpful in my study of *Nehemiah*. I encourage you to purchase and read them. They will make good additions to your library and give you a solid base for preaching from this book.

Commentaries

Throntveit, Mark A. *Ezra—Nehemiah*. Interpretation Series. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992. 129 pgs. This concise and thoughtful book does not intend to give a verse by verse exposition of *Nehemiah*. Rather, as is true of the Interpretation series as a whole, it aims at a “theological reading” of the text. How the story is told, what the point of the story is, what the story meant for the community which first read it and what it means for us—these are the issues which Throntveit addresses. There are rich theological insights sprinkled throughout. Throntveit excels at peering over the top of *Nehemiah* to see both its primary messages and their implications for us.

Williamson, H.G.M. *Ezra, Nehemiah*. Word Biblical Commentary (Vol. 16). Waco, TX: Word Books, Publishers. 1985. 417 pgs. Much more detailed than Throntveit. However, the structure of this series of commentaries allows the reader to avoid losing the forest for the trees. All sections are dealt with from three perspectives: *Form/Structure/Setting*, where questions about organization, literary methodology, geographical and cultural issues, and points of scholarly debate are covered; *Comment*, where verse by verse exposition appears; and *Explanation*, where a summary is presented and significant themes from the text are explored. Williamson provides a reasonably painless way to delve into some of the thornier issues raised by the text. I would recommend reading through the *Introduction* and each of the *Explanation* sections first (to get a feel for the book as whole), and then read the *Form* and *Comment* sections on specific texts as you preach through *Nehemiah* each week.

Homiletical and Study Aids

- Hinkley, Karen (Ed.). *Nehemiah*. Life Change Series. Colorado Springs: NavPress. 1985. 128 pgs. This excellent series of study guides on various books of the Bible provides a structured way to encounter biblical texts. The volume on *Nehemiah* gives good introductory information about chronology, characters, culture, historical background as well as leading you through the book itself. It is designed not only for personal study but for groups as well. If you are using the Small Group component of *Look at the Church*, you might want to give your group leaders a copy of this work. After spending some time reading the text of *Nehemiah*, this little volume will help you organize your thoughts on the story. [You can also use my Study Guide included in the weekly handouts. Though not as comprehensive, the studies are tied directly to the themes you will be exploring sermonically.]
- Swindoll, Charles R. *Hand Me Another Brick*. New York: Bantam Books. 1978. 160 pgs. Good grist for the homiletical mill. Swindoll always has his eye on preaching and application. Some good ideas, outlines, and illustrations are available here. *Don't* read this first. But after doing your other homework, this paperback will repay the time it takes to read it.
- Fee, Gordon, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1982. 237 pgs. Chapter five (on Old Testament narrative) is a helpful introduction to approaching a book like *Nehemiah* on its own terms.
- Greidanus, Sidney. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1988. 374 pgs. Greidanus' comments on preaching Hebrew narratives (pgs. 188-227) will be helpful for you in thinking through hermeneutic and homiletic questions.

Sermon Summary

The series on *Nehemiah* lasts 9 weeks. I have included two forms of support for your preaching. The first is a sermon outline for each week. I have preached through these outlines myself. They range from 4 to 6 (or more) pages—a lot of information! I tend, however, to speak quickly and for about 30 minutes. You may want to use these outlines verbatim, modify them to your own style and situation, or throw them out entirely. I hope they can at least serve as a starting point for your own sermons.

The second form of support is a weekly handout for your congregation. As with other series in this program, the handout is closely tied to my sermon outlines. Any changes to the sermons may require you to make changes to the handouts as well.

Sermon Title	Text	Page #s Outline	Page #s Handout
1. Welcome to <i>Nehemiah</i> An inductive introduction to some of the major theological themes of the book. Why was the book written? What message was God wanting to convey? What questions does <i>Nehemiah</i> attempt to answer? You will lay out some of the historical background and give a quick overview of the major ideas touched on in the course of this series. The notion that “one of the best ways to address present concerns is to tell old stories” is stressed.	Overview	1-5	1-4
2. The Story of <i>Nehemiah</i> A dramatic presentation of the book. This is a worship assembly built around the retelling of the events of <i>Nehemiah</i> . You may find it difficult to use this assembly in your congregation since it involves some drama and special music presentations. It seems appropriate, however, to spend a Sunday doing precisely what the book itself does—tell a story. With modifications, you should be able to help your congregation experience the events of <i>Nehemiah</i> .	Overview	7-15	5-8
3. A Leader Willing to Lead The marks of a godly leader are explored in this sermon. Leadership is less a matter of <i>position</i> than <i>character</i> . God’s leaders care about the Kingdom, are willing to involve themselves in its problems, pray for God’s guidance and strength, and risk themselves to accomplish God’s mission.	Neh 1:1-2:9	17-22	9-12
4. A Mission to Accomplish Have you ever wondered why God invites us to be his partners in kingdom business? He could do things so much better and faster himself. <i>Nehemiah</i> addresses this issue. God will not do <i>for</i> us what he can do <i>with</i> us. He works best with people who think and plan. And many a work that God wants done has been sunk by people who were unwilling to do it.	Neh 2:11-18	23-28	13-16

5. A People Willing to Work **Neh 3** **29-33** **17-20**

The list of workers in *Nehemiah* 3 makes boring reading but an important point. The diversity of the workers is noteworthy. Their eagerness to work, and work hard, is commendable. And their capacity for sacrifice confronts our own feeble excuses when it comes to kingdom work.

6. An Enemy to Confront **Neh 4** **35-40** **21-24**

Nehemiah had to fight a war in order to build a wall. There were enemies who worked to see him fail. This lesson looks at who they were, how they attacked Nehemiah, and what he did to defend himself and his mission from them. The modern church could use some of the lessons which Nehemiah teaches on this important subject.

7. The Enemy Within **Neh 5** **41-46** **25-28**

Enemies are one thing. Traitors are another. God's people face enemies "without and within." There are those who, like parasites, profit from the sacrifices of others. Not only do they fail to contribute to the work of the kingdom; they make it more difficult for those who are contributing. Instead of asking, "What can the church do for me?" perhaps more of us should be asking, "What can I do for the church?"

8. A People to Restore **Neh 8, 9, 10** **47-52** **29-32**

Ultimately, the story of *Nehemiah* is not about rebuilding walls, but rebuilding people. Chapters 8-10 describe the "great Jerusalem revival." In this lesson, we notice some characteristics that were necessary for this revival: Ears to hear, hearts to break, tongues to confess, lives to commit. Whenever these traits are present, revival can break out again among God's people.

9. The Never-Ending Story **Neh 12-13** **53-58** **33-36**

Nothing lasts forever—even revival. And so, there is not a happy ending for Nehemiah. Just a sad commentary on human nature. And a tribute to the courage of Nehemiah who starts over again and begins rebuilding the people once more. There is a cycle to the kingdom we must not ignore. The people will rise and fall. They will revive and languish. There is no such thing as a permanent restoration. Rather, the call is to constant restoration.

Welcome to Nehemiah

Introduction: Questions for God's Church Today

Is God in control of anything any more? I believe He created this world and intended to do something good with it. But there are those who say that God wound up the universe in the beginning and then walked away to let it slowly wind down—for the life of me, there are times when I wonder if they might not be right. I look around at the suffering in our world, at the injustice, at the evil. I read the stories of war and plague and random violence. I see wicked men grow powerful and rich while the people of God are increasingly ridiculed and abused. Is God working in our world any more?

Is God still concerned about His people? I know God claimed the people of Israel and the church in Jerusalem. But does He claim us? And I know He loved Abraham and Moses and David and Peter. But does He love me? Like that? I look at the long apostasy of the church, and the sins of my forefathers, and the baggage that has built up over the centuries and I wonder if God still recognizes in the church today any continuity with the ancient church. I look at my *own* sins and the apathy that pervades us and our current crisis of identity, and I question whether the promises made to other people at other times can possibly be extended to us. We are *descended* from godly people, but are we the people of God ourselves?

Perhaps it is wise for us—in these difficult times—to keep our heads down and voices low. Maybe—in the face of God's silence and our uncertainties—it would be best to blend in with the culture around us, not appear too different, not draw attention to ourselves. A few careful compromises, a few concessions for the sake of peace—that is the course we should pursue.

What difference does it make, after all? God just expects us to hang on. The great deeds have all been done; there are no dragons God expects us to slay. The great men and women of God are the heroes of our past; God isn't calling any of us to be as daring and visionary as they. Surely our duty is to protect what we have, not to provoke any controversy or opposition, to enjoy the peace while it lasts.

Transition: What do you think? When put bluntly like this, we all would reject such a course of action for the church and for ourselves. Yet, we would be foolish to think that these questions never bother us, that these very same conclusions are not reached by many who claim to be Christians. It may not be conscious. It certainly would never be stated so boldly or baldly. But many a church, and many a disciple of Jesus, find themselves precisely where I have just described.

We would also be foolish to think that we were the only ones who have asked such questions. Today, I want us to visit another people from another time who were struggling with just these kinds of issues.

I. Questions for God's People Long Ago

There was a period in the history of Israel that the people began to wonder whether God was still alive and well and at work in this world. Oh, He had moved powerfully in the world centuries before—He had rescued Israel from Egypt and thundered from Sinai and led their armies in battle. But God had been awfully quiet for hundreds of years now.

1. The Northern Kingdom had been destroyed and carried away by the Assyrians.
2. The Southern Kingdom had been broken by Nebuchadnezzar.
3. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The Temple had been burned and torn down.
4. Much of the Jewish population had been deported to foreign lands, far from the land that God had promised to His people.
5. Evil men, tyrants and despots, reigned as King over the Israelites.

The people were asking “Where is God in the midst of all this? Is He working in our world any more?”

Even harder for them was the question, *Does God still care about his people?* It would have been tough for them not to take this silence of God very personally.

1. God had promised that this land would belong to Israel, but now it belonged to the Persian Empire.
2. God had promised that He himself would be king over the land, but now Cyrus was King and one of his vassals controlled Jerusalem.
3. God had promised to dwell “forever” in the Temple Solomon built, but now it lay in rubble—a constant reminder of the broken covenant between Israel and Yahweh.

God had made so many promises to the people of old. Did he intend to keep any of them for his people now? Did he still consider this ragtag band of exiles His “holy nation”? Had God given up on the nation of Israel? These people knew they were *descended* from godly people, but were they still considered the people of God?

In light of all this, many of those living in Jerusalem had decided that the best course of action was simply to keep their heads down and not draw attention to themselves. When groups of exiles wandered back to Judah from the east, there would be a flurry of religious fervor or talk about rebuilding the city. But it soon died down. At the first sign of opposition or difficulty, good intentions turned into pleasant memories. And life settled down once more into the routine of hanging on, not making waves, and enjoying some peace while it lasted.

Transition: They thought the great days had passed, that all God's great deeds had been done. They had lost any sense of *mission*, any sense of *calling*, any sense of *challenge*. As a result, they almost missed their chance to see God act powerfully among them, to experience His reclaiming them as His beloved people, and to hear His summons to do great things and to be a great people all over again. Thank God for Nehemiah!

II. Background for *Nehemiah*

The book of *Nehemiah* is the last installment of a three-volume work. Probably completed around 300 years before the birth of Christ, it tells the story of a time—around 440 B.C.—when the people of God rediscovered themselves and their Lord.

1. The story really begins in the book of *Ezra*, about 538 B.C., when Cyrus, the King of Persia, declared that the Jewish exiles living in Babylon could go home.
 - a. Zerubbabel, the grandson of the last King to sit in Israel, led a contingent of 50,000 exiles home again.
 - b. Over the next 23 years, they rebuilt the Temple and reinstated the sacrifices which for so long had been impossible.
 - c. This “first volume” is found in *Ezra*, chapters 1-6.
2. The “second volume” takes up the story 58 years later.
 - a. In 457 B.C., Ezra the priest and some 1800 families make the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.
 - b. What they find there is discouraging. The people, who made such a good start under Zerubbabel, have once again become lax in observing the Law.
 - c. Ezra, over the course of a year, confronts the sin of the people, calls them to repent, and restores in them obedience to the law.
 - d. This “second volume” is found in *Ezra*, chapters 7-10.
3. The story of Nehemiah takes up some 10 years after Ezra’s return.
 - a. In 446 B.C., Nehemiah returns with a small band for the purpose of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
 - b. Immediately, he organizes the people for the task, and in the amazing period of 52 days—under constant threat of attack—the walls of Jerusalem are raised.

Transition: At first glance, a story about rebuilding a city that occurs so long ago and so far away might seem irrelevant for the needs of God’s people today—who are more interested in building a church right here and right now. But on closer inspection, the story of Nehemiah is one we need to pay careful attention to—for there is, in this ancient book, a very immediate word to God’s people now.

III. Overview of Major Themes

A. This is a Story about Leadership—Read Neh 1:1-4

1. Nehemiah is a man who *cares* about the people of God and the place where they live.
 - a. He hears what is happening in “the city of his fathers”.
 - b. He weeps over the trouble and danger faced by his countrymen.
2. But Nehemiah does more than mourn—he is willing to *do* something.
 - a. He makes the long journey to Jerusalem himself.
 - b. He brings with him the one ingredient that is most needed—leadership.

B. This is a Story about Mission—Read Neh 2:17-18

1. There were walls needing to be rebuilt.
 - a. The walls were demolished and there were no gates to protect the city.
 - b. Jerusalem was a laughing stock and a dangerous place to live.
2. But more than walls were at stake. There was a *people* needing to be rebuilt.
 - a. The broken walls become, in this story, a symbol (metaphor) for a broken people.
 - b. Nehemiah was not just mending a battlement; he was mending a nation.

C. This is a Story about Involvement—Read Neh 4:6

1. This isn't just a narrative about the great Nehemiah.
2. It's about a people who become great because they are willing to work together to accomplish a common goal.
 - a. We will notice, over and over, how everyone pitched in to do the work.
 - b. Four out of the 13 chapters in *Nehemiah* list the workers and volunteers who were involved in this project.

D. This is a Story about Opposition—Neh 4:1-2

1. We will meet Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham—the villains of this story—who do everything in their power to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
2. We will see how godly people handle adversity and those who oppose God's work.

E. This is a Story about Restoration and Renewal—Read Neh 9:1-3

1. **Before**—a broken, disorganized, discouraged bunch of individuals. They were alienated from God and from one another.
2. **After**—a strong, well-organized, committed and proud community. They were rededicated to God, recommitted to each other, and respected by their enemies.

Transition: That's why we want to spend some time in this book. There are lessons here for us that we would do well to heed.

1. We also need to think about *leadership*. What makes a good leader?
2. We need a renewed sense of *mission*. Has God given us any tasks to accomplish?
3. We need to rethink the importance of *involvement and cooperation*.
4. We could use some lessons about handling *opposition and hostility*.
5. If the result of all this is *restoration and renewal*—a stronger, more unified, more committed community of Christians—our time will have been well spent.

Conclusion:

About 300 years before Christ was born, some anonymous soul sat down with Nehemiah's diary, the official records of the day, and the stories about Zerubbabel and Ezra, and wove together the material we now know as Ezra/Nehemiah. He didn't do it because he wanted to write a best-selling book. He didn't do it as a term paper for some class in religious history. He must have been dealing with people:

- who were themselves discouraged,
- who wondered if God was still working in this dark world,
- who needed reassurance that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was *their* God too,
- who were being tempted to compromise with the world around them,
- who had lost a sense of mission and calling.

Whoever this writer was, he understood something profound about the people of God and about the power of story.

God's people don't change much through time.

- a. They face similar dilemmas and ask the same hard questions.
- b. They consistently have their periods of doubt and faith.
- c. They are ever in need of reassurance that God is still there.

One of the best ways to address present concerns is to tell old stories.

- a. Stories about God's people in past times.
- b. Stories about similar difficulties and doubts.
- c. Stories about God never giving up, always at work even when He can't be seen, always calling His people to greater things.

What the writer of *Nehemiah* understood, I want us to apply.

1. We are no different from the people of Jerusalem some 2400 years ago.
 - a. Oh, we wear different cloths, drive cars rather than horses, and live in a republic rather than an Empire.
 - b. But we ask their questions and need to hear God's answer all over again.
2. We, like them, are a "story-formed" people.
 - a. The story of the cross. The story of the apostolic church.
 - b. Let's allow the story of Nehemiah to shape us also so that we can find greater confidence that our God is at work, greater faith that he is at work *in us*, and greater courage for the task he has given us to do.



INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

Three great questions always seem to thrust themselves on God's people: Is God still at work in our world? Does he continue to care about his people? How should we conduct ourselves in spite of his silence and our own nagging doubts?

The book of Nehemiah tells of a time when such questions were asked in earnest. God had moved powerfully in the remote past—He had rescued Israel from Egypt and thundered from Sinai and led their armies in battle. But God had been strangely quiet of late. The promised land lay wasted and Jerusalem was in ruins. The Temple was burned and the walls of the city were in heaps. Foreign rulers now decided the fate of God's land and God's people.

Where was God in all this? Though a few still prayed to Yahweh, most wondered if he was still listening.

Many had decided that the best course of action was simply to keep their heads down and not draw attention to themselves. When exiles wandered back to Judah from the east, there would be a flurry of religious fervor or talk about rebuilding the city. But it soon died down. Life had settled into the routine of hanging on, not making waves, and enjoying some peace while it lasted.

They thought the great days had passed, that all God's great deeds had been done. They had lost any sense of *mission*, any sense of *calling*, any sense of *challenge*. As a result, they almost lost their chance to see God act powerfully among them, to experience his reclaiming them as his beloved people, and to hear his summons to do great things and to be a great people all over again. Thank God for Nehemiah!

*They set fire to God's temple
and broke down
the wall of Jerusalem;
they burned all the palaces
and destroyed everything
of value there.
He carried into exile
to Babylon the remnant,
who escaped from the sword,
and they became servant to him
and his sons until the kingdom
of Persia came to power.*

2Chr 36:19-20

THINK ABOUT IT:

- ♦ The challenge always faced by the people of God is to keep listening so that, when God does speak, we can be ready to hear and obey.
- ♦ God's people don't change much through time. They face similar dilemmas and ask the same hard questions. They are ever in need of reassurance that God is still there.

STUDY GUIDE

MONDAY

Understanding the background of Nehemiah is critical to understanding how Jerusalem was rebuilt. The chronology at right gives some of the significant dates involved (according to the traditional and best attested view) and also notes the biblical passages which relate important details of the story. Spend some time this week in Old Testament history and immerse yourself in the background of the great story of Nehemiah.

Fall of Israel 722 B.C.

The ten northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians. Read *2 Kings 17* for the story.

Fall of Jerusalem . . . 586 B.C.

Nebuchadnezer sacked Jerusalem and carried the people into exile. Read *2 Kings 24-25*. Events in *Daniel* occur during and after this same period.

Zerubbabel 536 B.C.

Chapters 1-6 of *Ezra* tell of Zerubbabel's return. The temple was rebuilt. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied at this time.

Ezra 458 B.C.

Chapters 7-10 of *Ezra* tell of the return of Ezra and others. They began to rebuild the walls, but stopped due to opposition (Read *Ezra 4:7-23*).

Nehemiah 446 B.C.

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem. He remained for 12 years as governor, returned to Babylonia, and then came again to enact his final reforms (*Neh 13*). The prophet Malachi was a contemporary.

TUESDAY

Read *2 Kings 24-25*; *2 Chronicles 36:15-23*; *Daniel 1-4*. These passages tell of the fall of the Southern Kingdom and the Babylonian captivity.

- Who was the last king of Judah?
- What happened to him?
- Who was the leader of the Babylonian army? What do we know about this man?
- What was the crisis which provoked the siege of Jerusalem?
- Notice that it was the Babylonians who broke down the walls of Jerusalem and set the stage for the events of *Nehemiah* (*2Ki 25:10*; *2Chr 36:19*).

WEDNESDAY

Skim the following passages: *Jeremiah 39:1-40:6; 41:16-43:7; Ezekiel 1:1; 33:21.*

- Where did Jeremiah end up and what was the condition of the people with him?
- Where did Ezekiel live while prophesying?

Look quickly through these passages for answers to the following questions: *Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2.*

- Who led the first return?
- Compare *Ezra 3:2 and Mt 1:12*. Comment?
- What was the primary task this first group of returning exiles set out to accomplish on reaching Jerusalem?
- How long did it take to complete this task, and why did it take so long? [Compare *3:8* with *6:14-15*.]

THURSDAY

Read *Ezra 4:7-23; 7:1-10.*

- What do we know about Ezra?
- Notice that Ezra (*Ezra 8:22*) is ashamed to ask for the very same things which Nehemiah is only too happy to receive (Compare to *Neh 2:7&9*). Comment?
- Evidently, Ezra made an initial attempt to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (see *Ezra 4:12*). What and who stopped him?

FRIDAY

Read *Nehemiah 1:1-2:9.*

- Obviously, the kings of Persia play an important role in the return of the exiles. Who was king when the following people returned?

Zerubbabel

Ezra

Nehemiah

- Artaxerxes is especially important to the story of both Ezra and Nehemiah. What do we know about him? How does this affect our understanding of Nehemiah?

Ezra 4:17-22

Ezra 7:1, 11-26

Neh 2:1-9

- ♦ *God's people don't change much through time. Whether it is the exiles of Nehemiah's day or the church of our own, the same questions and struggles are shared by us all.*
- ♦ *One of the best ways to address present concerns is to tell old stories, stories about God's people in past times, stories about similar difficulties and doubts, stories about a God who never gives up on His people.*
- ♦ *Does God still care about His people? Certainly. And He still intends to do great things through us—if only we will let Him!*

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

At first glance, a story about rebuilding a city that occurs so long ago and so far away might seem irrelevant for the needs of God's people today, who are more interested in building a church right here and right now. But on closer inspection, the story of Nehemiah is one we should pay careful attention to—for there is, in this ancient book, a very immediate word to God's people now.

In this book is a word about *leadership*. Nehemiah is a man who *cares* about the people of God and the place where they live. He returns to Jerusalem intent on being the instrument of God for the rebuilding of the Holy City

In this story is a word about *mission*. There were walls needing to be rebuilt. But more than walls were at stake. There was a *people* needing to be rebuilt. The broken walls become a symbol of the broken nation. Nehemiah took on the task of mending not just the city but the community as well.

There is a word here about *involvement* and the need for cooperation and mutual sacrifice on the part of God's people. These people become great because they are willing to work together to accomplish a common goal.

Here is a word about *opposition* and how godly people handle ungodly resistance. We will meet Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham—the villains of this story—who do everything in their power to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem. We will see how Nehemiah and the Jews of Jerusalem handle adversity and those who oppose God's work.

Finally, there is in this great book a word about *restoration* and *renewal*. As the walls are rebuilt, so are the people. A broken, disorganized, discouraged bunch of individuals becomes a strong, well-organized, committed and proud community.

That's why we want to spend some time in this book. The church today is badly in need of some words about *leadership, mission, involvement, opposition, and restoration*. By listening closely to the story of Nehemiah, we may well discover a word of God to us—fresh and powerful and reinvigorating, so that once again we can know that God is at work among us to accomplish great things.



INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

Small Group Member's Guide

ICE BREAKER

Let's see what we know about Nehemiah. Can anyone tell the basic story told in the book? Identify the significant players? Name the general historic time-period. Explain the connection between Ezra and Nehemiah? Perhaps most importantly, why should we study this ancient story? What can we hope to learn and gain?

A Story for Our Time

All of the stories in Scripture are by now ancient—the newest, after all is nearly 2000 years old. The story of Nehemiah is even older than that. It predates us by some two and a half millenia! When we read about these strange tumultuous events in tiny Jerusalem, its just as if someone were reading about us in the year 4495! Wow! Who but the professional historian will want to do that?

*By the rivers of Babylon we
sat and wept when we
remembered Zion.
...for there our captors
demanded songs of joy...
How can we sing the songs
of the Lord while in a
foreign land?*

Psalm 137:1-4

In fact, the stories of the Old Testament are even more foreign to us than their mere age would suggest. Nearly everything about the people of the OT is alien to our modern experience. Concepts of time, family, history—and the future, government, language, life, nature, were all radically different than ours. We do ourselves and the people of that great age a terrible disservice by assuming that they were really just like us—only dressed differently!

Yet—and this is the reason these stories still speak to us—many of the questions, doubts and fears that plague us today are the very same concerns that so troubled these ancients: Is God still at work in our world? Are we his people and does he still control our destiny? If he is still leading us—how exactly does he want us to follow? Difficult—and ancient—questions. And, surprisingly, the old story of Nehemiah provides some exciting, encouraging, and challenging answers!

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To Discuss

The Jews in captivity in Babylon had good reason to ask these questions. All of the hallmarks of their special standing before God were gone: the promised land, the twelve special tribes, the holy city, the Temple—and all that it represented as the dwelling of God on earth and the place for worship and atonement. On top of which God had now been silent for a very long time.

How could they not wonder if he was still there for them? Did he any longer recognize them as special before him? Were they, in fact, still *a people*? Was the Land still theirs? Would he bless their attempts to reclaim, rebuild, and renew? Did he hear their prayers? Was atonement possible? Did they still have a God-given purpose on earth?

Any of these questions speak to our struggle today? God has been *quiet* now for almost two millenia. Has he given up on his *special people*? Are we so far removed from him that all hope of restoration and renewal are vain? Is he still working to save the world through his chosen ones? Will he be with us as we seek to fulfill our mission? Do we, still, have a *mission*?

As we'll discover together over the next several weeks, Nehemiah has some powerful—and wonderfully encouraging—answers to *our* questions. But before we can ask *our* questions we need to hear *their* questions. Specifically, we need to give some thought to the situation the Jews found themselves in—spiritually as well as physically—when the events of Nehemiah take place.

We are so comfortable with our Christian perspective of a *spiritual* Kingdom that its hard for us to understand the spiritual importance of the *physical* Kingdom to the ancient Jew. For the purposes of our study in Nehemiah we must recognize what Jerusalem represented spiritually.

It was not simply the capital city of a defeated Kingdom. It was the spiritual center for a people who owed their entire existence to a privileged relationship they enjoyed with God. Central to this privilege had been God's gift of a land for them to colonize. This land—and its capital city with its temporal dwelling place of God—was the physical proof of their privileged status. If it was a physical representation of spiritual realities, what did its loss mean? The rebuilding of the city meant the promise of a renewal of that privileged relationship. It was not merely nostalgia or even national pride that drove Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Rather, it was the hope for spiritual renewal that motivated the physical renewal.

- ♦ *The book of Nehemiah was written a very long time ago to a people very different from us. Brainstorm a few minutes about just **how** different they were.*
- ♦ *Despite the great differences, there are obviously points of commonality--or we probably wouldn't read these stories at all. Thinking specifically about their relationship with God, discuss areas of commonality we share with them.*
- ♦ *If our church building should burn down we might simply build another. Why was the Jew's loss of the Temple radically different than this? What did the loss of the promised land mean to them? Why did these losses cause them to question their standing before God?*
- ♦ *In his prayer (Neh 1:9) Nehemiah reminds God of his promise to re-gather his faithful children to the place he had chosen for the dwelling of his Name. What was the significance of inhabiting this place?*