

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

NEHEMIAH

VISION BEYOND WALLS

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS
LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE
TABLE OF CONTENTS

WEEK 1 (9/10):	NEHEMIAH 1:1-11
WEEK 2 (9/17):	NEHEMIAH 2:1-8
WEEK 3 (9/24):	NEHEMIAH 2:9-20
WEEK 4 (10/1):	NEHEMIAH 4
WEEK 5 (10/8):	NEHEMIAH 5:1-13
WEEK 6 (10/15):	NEHEMIAH 5:14-19
WEEK 7 (10/22):	NEHEMIAH 6
WEEK 8 (10/29):	NEHEMIAH 7
WEEK 9 (11/5):	NEHEMIAH 8
WEEK 10 (11/12):	NEHEMIAH 9 & 10
WEEK 11 (11/19):	NEHEMIAH 11-13

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE #1

NEHEMIAH (WEEK 1)

NEHEMIAH 1:1-11

9/10/2017

MAIN POINT

Nehemiah's response when he heard about the condition of the people and walls around Jerusalem was to fast and pray, seeking God's divine guidance.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Nehemiah details the inspiring story of people doing God's work despite significant challenges, opposition, and threats to their survival. It's also an instructive account of a return to faithfulness after a period of laxity. And the book provides encouraging insight into the kind of leadership required to bring these things about. The book of Nehemiah is intricately related to the book of Ezra. The overall purpose of Ezra and Nehemiah is to affirm that God works sovereignly to accomplish His redemptive objectives. Ezra emphasizes the religious dimensions of building a nation; Nehemiah emphasizes the political and military dimensions of the task.

About 12 years after Ezra first returned to Jerusalem, a Jewish man, Nehemiah, was serving as a royal official in the court of King Artaxerxes in Susa, a winter residence that served as one of the royal seats. While serving the Persian king, he received news that despite the return of thousands of Jewish exiles to Judea in recent decades, Jerusalem's wall was still in ruins and the city remained exposed to danger. In Nehemiah 1:1-11 we see Nehemiah's initial response to the news of this tragedy – he fasted and prayed, seeking God's divine guidance.

OPENING QUESTIONS

Since this is your first meeting as a Life Group for the Fall 2017 and follows Pastor Heath's new message series through the book of Nehemiah, you may want to begin your discussion by having group members briefly introduce themselves and share why they decided to join or continue with your Life Group this year.

When you hear negative reports about the state of your family, church, community, or country, what do you instinctively do? What is your initial response?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READ NEHEMIAH 1:1-11 (*then discuss historical background information below*)

Historical Background (*also review timeline in Comments section*): In 605-586 B.C., God chastened His people because of their continued unfaithfulness to His covenant and allowed the Babylonians to sack Jerusalem. However, God promised that after 70 years of captivity they would be allowed to return (Jeremiah 25:10-11). Ezra records the fulfillment of that promise. The return was accomplished through the help of three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, & Artaxerxes). Cyrus overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C. and in accordance with his policy of encouraging subject people to return to their homelands, he issued a decree in 538 B.C. allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. About 50,000 returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel, and the foundation of the Temple was laid (the Temple was completed in 515 B.C.). Ezra then led a second return in 458 B.C. to restore spiritual renewal, and Nehemiah led a third return in 445 B.C. to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem.

Who was Nehemiah and where was he when he learned about what was happening in Jerusalem? What was the situation in Jerusalem? (1:1-3)

What was Nehemiah's response and what does this indicate about him? (1:4)

Discuss Nehemiah's prayer (1:5-11)

- How do the elements in Nehemiah's prayer provide a useful model for us? (A-C-T-S: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication/Request)
- What does Nehemiah's prayer reveal to us about his concept of God?
- What does Nehemiah's prayer reveal about his faith?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS: How do you think Nehemiah became a person who was so concerned about Jerusalem? What can we do to increase our personal investment in spiritual matters? How do you think Nehemiah became someone who instinctively responded to challenges by crying out to the Lord? What can we do to develop a habit of prayer? What things in your life should you be crying out to the Lord for and making plans for the opportunity you may get to address the situation?

COMMENTARY

Approximate Timetable (B.C.) of Events:

- Daniel taken to Babylon with first exiles 605
- Complete fall of Jerusalem to Babylon 587
- Most Jews (Judah) carried to Babylon 586
- Cyrus overthrows Babylon 539
- Zerubbabel returns with first wave 538
- Haggai and Zechariah begin to prophesy 520
- Temple rebuilt 515
- Reign of Ahasuerus (Queen Esther) 486-465
- Ezra returns with second wave 458
- Nehemiah returns with third wave 445
- Nehemiah rebuilds the wall around Jerusalem 445

When God stirred the heart of Cyrus in the book of Ezra and Artaxerxes in the book of Nehemiah, He was doing essentially the same thing, but in a different way, that He did when He used Pharaoh during the first exodus from Egypt. The declaration in Proverbs 21:1 is true: “A king’s heart is like streams of water in the Lord’s hand: He directs it wherever He chooses.” The Bible shows us that God can move the stream of water (the king’s heart) such that His promises to restore and bless His people are fulfilled. His acts of deliverance and graciousness toward His people remind us that He is always working out His purposes for His glory in the world. God has not changed since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The book of Nehemiah is an inspiring account of people doing God’s work despite opposition and threats to their survival. It’s also an instructive story of a return to faithfulness after a period of laxity. And the book provides encouraging insight into the kind of leadership required to bring these things about. Nehemiah complements the book of Ezra. The overall purpose of Ezra and Nehemiah is to affirm that God works sovereignly through responsible human agents to accomplish His redemptive purposes. Whereas Ezra was especially concerned to rebuild the spiritual walls of Jerusalem – to bring Israel back to obedience to the Law of Moses, Nehemiah was especially interested in rebuilding the physical walls of Jerusalem. Ezra emphasized the religious dimensions of building a nation; Nehemiah emphasized the political and military dimensions of the task. But the overarching theme of Nehemiah is the Lord’s protection of His people and the need for their faithfulness in keeping the Law and their faithfulness in worship.

About 12 years after Ezra first returned to Jerusalem, a Jewish man, Nehemiah, was serving as a royal official in the court of King Artaxerxes in Susa, a winter residence that served as one of the royal seats. Today, Susa's ruins are located in southwestern Iran. In the month of Chislev (9th month – Nov/Dec), while serving the Persian king, Nehemiah received news that despite the return of thousands of Jewish exiles to Judea in recent decades, Jerusalem's wall was still in ruins and the city remained exposed to danger. In Nehemiah 1:1-11 we see Nehemiah's initial response to the news of this tragedy – he fasted and prayed, seeking God's divine guidance.

Nehemiah provided a passionate response to the troubling news regarding Jerusalem and the people. He wept and mourned for several days. Nehemiah also prayed for approximately four months if you consider that the events in Chapter 2 (see 2:1) occur in the month of Nisan (March/April). In his prayer, Nehemiah first identified the One to whom he was praying. By calling God by His covenantal name – the Lord or Yahweh (1:5), he affirmed that God was a living being, a dynamic personality who had reached out and acted on behalf of His people in the past. Second, Nehemiah spoke of the "God of heaven" (1:4-5). Nehemiah knew that God was not bound by created order. His was big enough to handle the biggest problems. Next, Nehemiah confessed that his God was a promise-keeping God, one whose most basic attribute was love (1:5).

Nehemiah admitted that he and his ancestors had acted in a way that was undeserving of any gift of God's love. They had acted disobediently. He expressed a confession recalling all the sins of the past and acknowledged that Israel's sin had led to the deplorable situation in Jerusalem. Nehemiah quoted from Deut. 9:26-29, indicating that he saw himself as "standing in the breach" as Moses had done (Ps. 106:23) to save Israel through prayer – responding to God's promise to Israel in 2 Chronicles 7:14. Nehemiah then asked for God's help in 1:8-11. Nehemiah lived out the fulfillment of what God promised when He said He would scatter Israel, exiling them among the nations. He experienced the exile, and he prayed that he might experience what God promised would come after the exile.

Also, don't miss the significance of the fact that Nehemiah was a highly placed political official. As cupbearer to the king, he likely tasted everything that went to the king before the king partook. This would mean that the king trusted Nehemiah. Even while carrying out these responsibilities, with all this influence, Nehemiah knew God's Word and his primary concern was for God's kingdom. What things in our lives should concern us more than they do? In Nehemiah, we see something rare among believers today – zeal. We see the actions of a zealous servant of God, passionate for God's kingdom, people, and purposes!

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE #2

NEHEMIAH (WEEK 2)
NEHEMIAH 2:1-8
9/17/2017

MAIN POINT

King Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah's prayerfully prepared and planned request – demonstrating the good hand of God!

INTRODUCTION

We have seen that Nehemiah was a student of Scripture, that he passionately loved God's people and God's kingdom, and that he was a man of prayer. His first resort was to prayer (1:5-11), and he spontaneously prayed even in the presence of the king (2:4-5). Now we see that he also planned for what he could do and was ready to go into action when he got the opportunity. Nehemiah took a risk when making his request before the King, and Artaxerxes responded favorably – demonstrating that the good hand of God was upon Nehemiah and his efforts to restore Jerusalem.

OPENING QUESTIONS

What stood out to you most from our study of Nehemiah Chapter 1 last week?

How does praying persistently for a significant period of time prepare us for moments of decision and crises of belief in our lives? Any personal examples?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READ NEHEMIAH 2:1-8

What was the "success" for which Nehemiah prayed in 1:11? (see 2:1-8)

Nehemiah was approaching the same king, Artaxerxes, who had ordered the apparent rebels to cease building in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21-22), and Persian kings commonly executed officials who displeased them.

- Why would the king notice Nehemiah's demeanor?
- Why would Nehemiah be "very much afraid?"
- Why do you think Nehemiah took this risk?
- What can you tell about Nehemiah's character from his encounter with the king?

It appears that Nehemiah prayed about the situation in Jerusalem from Chislev (1:1), which was the ninth month (November/December), until Nisan (2:1), which was the first month (March/April). Why do you suppose Nehemiah might have spent four months praying about the situation in Jerusalem?

Compare the prayer in 1:5-11 with the prayer in 2:4. Length and nature of the prayers? Where the prayers took place? Purpose of the prayers? How do these two kinds of prayer (prolonged and persistent prayer versus "practicing God's presence" in the moment) complement each other? How can we follow Nehemiah's example today?

What were the elements of Nehemiah's request (2:5)? Importance of those requests (2:7-8)? What were the king's responses (2:6-8), and what do his responses indicate about his relationship with Nehemiah?

Nehemiah made very specific requests – what does this indicate about his planning?

What is the significance of the fact that God's good hand was on Nehemiah (2:8)?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

What is the difference in how Nehemiah depended on God and how you do it? List any principles from 2:1-8 that you think are relevant and applicable today.

If the Lord gave you an opportunity to advance His kingdom, what aspects of "staying in the Persian palace" would be tempting? How can we keep proper perspective?

COMMENTARY

The events in Nehemiah began in 1:1 in Chislev (November/December), and now we pick up the story in 2:1 in Nisan (March/April). Nehemiah had been praying for four months, and from the way things play out in Chapter 2 we see that he had also been preparing. Nehemiah's expression of sadness was a dangerous emotion to express in the king's presence. Nehemiah was "very much afraid" because he feared that either his countenance or his request would anger the king and lead to his death (see Esther 4:11 and 5:1-3). To reassure the king of his loyalty, Nehemiah responds with "let the king live forever" (Optional Discussion Question: How does Nehemiah provide an example for us when faced with challenging situations in our work environments?).

Nehemiah had evidently earned enough trust, that the king allowed him to make a request. The situation unfolded quickly, and interestingly, in this intense moment, Nehemiah's thoughts went to God. He instinctively called on God (probably silently). Nehemiah's private times with God spilled into his daily life, and his immediate response to the king illustrated the continual nature of his prayer life – demonstrating for us what it truly means to "practice the presence of God" daily.

The king agreed to Nehemiah's initial request without much deliberation, asking only that Nehemiah commit to a return date (Optional Discussion Question: What might this indicate about Nehemiah's relationship with the king?). Interestingly, 2:6 mentions that the queen was sitting beside the king at this point. Since Esther was the queen of the previous king, Ahasuerus (Xerxes), and the stepmother of Artaxerxes, it could be that she had previously influenced the present king and queen to be favorably disposed to the Jews or perhaps she was present for Nehemiah's encounter with Artaxerxes.

We then see that Nehemiah was well prepared for the rest of the conversation. Consider these facts: Nehemiah can give the king an amount of time that the journey and rebuilding will take (2:6); he knows exactly what kind of authorization he needs west of the Euphrates (2:7); and he knows exactly what materials he will need for the temple, wall, city, and his own dwelling (2:8). From these facts, it appears that Nehemiah had been praying *and planning*. Nehemiah had been asking the Lord to "have mercy/compassion on him" in the presence of the king (1:11), and so when the opportunity arose, he was prepared to make his requests and unfold his plan.

The good hand of God (2:8) is a common phrase used in both Ezra and Nehemiah. It provides a frequent reminder that God works through his servants to accomplish His will – orchestrating blessing for His people. The phrase is a way to refer to God's power, so it means that the benevolent power of God is on Nehemiah.

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE #3

NEHEMIAH (WEEK 3)
NEHEMIAH 2:9-20
9/24/2017

MAIN POINT

Nehemiah arrived on the scene, secretly inspected the walls around Jerusalem, and motivated the people to join him in the rebuilding project.

INTRODUCTION

Nehemiah and his military guard safely made the 1100-mile trip to Jerusalem. Once there, Nehemiah took 3 days to assess Jerusalem's ruins. After presenting the challenge of rebuilding the city's walls, the people agreed to build despite growing opposition from external forces. In 1:4 – 2:8, we see Nehemiah model what it means to be a person of compassion and prayer. In 2:9-20, Nehemiah models careful planning combined with vision and faith.

OPENING QUESTIONS

What stood out to you most from our Life Group study of Nehemiah Chapter 2:1-8 last week or from Pastor Heath's sermon covering 2:9-20 this week?

Review: Why do you think Nehemiah abandoned an influential and comfortable job with the king to take charge of a backwater province boiling with dissension? What does this tell you about his priorities?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READ NEHEMIAH 2:9-20

Remember from our study of Ezra last spring that Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for an escort (Ezra 8:22), but Nehemiah made use of an escort. Does this demonstrate a lack of faith on Nehemiah's part? How might the situations differ?

Summarize what happens in 2:9-12 and what it reveals about Nehemiah.

Why did Nehemiah want to arrive in Judah with an escort and letters from the king?

Why do you think Sanballat and Tobiah were so disturbed (2:10) when a new governor of Judah arrived in this style?

What did Nehemiah find when he inspected the walls (2:13-16)? Why did he spend three days in Jerusalem without telling anyone his plans and survey the walls at night with only a few selected friends?

In 2:17-18, what reasons did Nehemiah give for trying again to build the wall? One of his reasons was that the ruins were a disgrace (2:17); why would he have characterized the situation this way (see Lamentations 2:15-18)?

What leadership lessons do we learn from Nehemiah's approach to the people?

In 2:19, how did Nehemiah's enemies initially try to discourage him and his followers? Why did they not use force immediately (2:9)?

What do we learn about Nehemiah in 2:20? What significance do you see in Nehemiah's response to his enemies?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

What can you learn from the passage about handling opposition to God's work? How might your situation differ from what Nehemiah faced in his day?

To what did Nehemiah appeal when he sought to motivate the people in Jerusalem to join him in rebuilding the walls? How might his approach serve as an example for us?

COMMENTARY

After Nehemiah's trip had been approved, he dared to ask the king to fund the rebuilding with resources from the Persian treasury. By God's grace, the request was approved (2:8). Forests were carefully guarded, and written permission from the king would assure Nehemiah of the lumber he would need to build the citadel, wall reinforcements, and his own residence from which he would administrate region. Also, a military guard was assembled to accompany Nehemiah on the 1100-mile journey.

Among the officials around Jerusalem who were informed of Artaxerxes' decrees were Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. These men were probably also behind the opposition described in Ezra 4:7-23 which stopped the work in Jerusalem. Sanballat served as governor of Samaria and Tobiah controlled the region east of the Jordan River. Now, they had lost any recourse to prevent Judah from rebuilding. To overtly attack or oppose the Jews would be to oppose the Persian king.

Note that Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for an escort (Ezra 8:22). But Nehemiah came straight from the court, where he had been a favorite servant of the king, and he was now made an official governor of Jerusalem. It was likely in accordance with custom that he should have an escort assigned to him. Both men were trusting God, but their trust was expressed in different ways. Application point – We must be careful if we choose Ezra's path not to judge those who take Nehemiah's path and vice versa.

Nehemiah's first move upon arrival was to take an initial, secret inspection by night of the city. During his reconnaissance, he kept to himself what God had "put into his heart" to do for Jerusalem. The phrase "what God put in my heart" provides insight for us on the relationship between Nehemiah's prayers and his plans. Nehemiah's careful planning, in light of his time alone with God, serves as a model for leaders today.

Nehemiah then met with the religious and political leaders of the city. He began by reminding them of the devastating condition of Jerusalem's walls. As a result, the city was in a state of shame and disgrace. He then explained how God had inspired him to lead in rebuilding the wall and how God had led Artaxerxes to finance the task from the Persian treasury. From a leadership standpoint: (1) he used the existing chain of command; (2) he invited the officials to join him in the rebuilding effort (note the use of the words "us" and "we" as he spoke); (3) he expressed the need for a team effort; (4) he got the people to take ownership of the project; and (5) he provided proper motivation by expressing the "why" and "who" behind the project. "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore, we His servants will arise and build!"

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE #4

NEHEMIAH (WEEK 4)
NEHEMIAH 4
10/1/2017

MAIN POINT

External opposition to the work of God intensified, but the work continued in His name!

INTRODUCTION

The efforts of Nehemiah and the people were again met with ridicule by Sanballat, Tobiah, and others. Although these external enemies made efforts to thwart the work in Jerusalem, the Jews took their discouragement to God and guarded the city while they built. The work continued under the diligent and capable leadership of Nehemiah as he pointed the people to the greatness of God! The following themes and concepts from the book of Nehemiah are further developed in chapter four: (1) effective prayer, (2) the connection between prayer and action, (3) Nehemiah's character traits, (4) responding to fear by trusting God, and (5) principles for effective leadership.

OPENING QUESTIONS

What stood out to you most from our Life Group study of Nehemiah Chapter 2:9-20 last week or from Pastor Heath's sermon covering Chapter 4 this week?

What fears do you have about laboring for God? What do you think is the best way for you to handle those fears? *(revisit these questions after completing the study)*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READ NEHEMIAH 4

The enemies' first attempt to discourage the builders had failed (see 2:19-20). Now, in chapter 4, we see another attempt at discouragement. Summarize the faults that Sanballat and Tobiah found with the building project (4:2-3).

In responding to this new threat, Nehemiah apparently took no action against his opponents except in prayer. In 4:4-5, what did he ask God to do?

What do you think of Nehemiah's strong language in his prayer in 4:4-5? Compare Matthew 5:43-48; was Nehemiah failing to love his enemies?

What new threat arises in 4:7-8, and how did Nehemiah respond to it?

What fears on the part of the Jews are mentioned in 4:10-12? In the face of these fears, how did Nehemiah encourage the people in verses 13-14? (*Optional: On the topic of fear versus trusting God, describe what you can learn from Deuteronomy 3:22; 20:3; 31:6; Psalm 33:16-19; Isaiah 31:1; 51:12-13*)

In 4:15, Nehemiah gave two reasons for the plot's failure – what were they?

What further tactics did Nehemiah use in 4:16-23 to keep the people working and maintain progress on the wall?

What leadership principles are displayed in Nehemiah's actions at this point?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

In your God-given tasks in life, how true is it that you have a "heart to work" as the people did in Nehemiah 4:6? How can you develop such a work ethic for the Lord?

How does defense based on trust in God differ from defense based on fear? What does it mean for us today to trust God for our defense?

Recall how the builders responded to their fears (see 4:13-23) and revisit the Opening Discussion Questions: What fears do you have about laboring for God? What do you think is the best way for you to handle those fears?

COMMENTARY

Organized opposition to the Jews increased when it became clear that they would carry out their intentions to rebuild Jerusalem's defenses. Sanballat called the Jews feeble and asked a series of questions to undermine their confidence and progression. Tobiah joined in the ridicule, suggesting that the weight of even a small fox walking on the wall would cause it to fall. Sanballat was a Horonite. Tobiah was an Ammonite. And Geshem the Arab was also mentioned in 2:19 as an enemy of the Jews. Nehemiah presents the nations as gathered together against God and his people.

Nehemiah responded to the insults by praying to God rather than lashing out at his detractors (4:1-4). He recognized that there could be no reconciliation between God's agenda and the agenda that Sanballat and Tobiah were pursuing. Nehemiah's prayer was like similar prayers for deliverance from enemies recorded in the Psalms (see Psalm 74, 79, and others). His motive is best read not as a call for revenge, but rather as desiring that God avenge His own name and honor. To understand such violent language, we need to appreciate fully his sense of God's divine purpose at work, so that the opposition is not seen in human terms but as opposition to God himself.

The ridicule did not stop Nehemiah and the Jews from building. The people prayed to God and set a guard for protection day and night (4:9) – demonstrating again the relationship between faith and readiness. But the added stress of the plot against Jerusalem combined with the backbreaking labor every day from dawn until dusk began to overwhelm the Jewish laborers. Additionally, Jews living near the opposition repeatedly warned the workers of the seriousness of the threats (4:10-12).

But Nehemiah inspired the people by appealing to their faith in God and their desire to protect their families (4:14). His strategic use of heavily armed guards around the work site frustrated the plans of the enemies. And Nehemiah then strengthened the city's defenses by permanently assigning 50 percent of the work force to military duty with weapons and armor. He also made all those involved in carrying materials and doing the building carry weapons (4:17-18). Finally, Nehemiah established an emergency response procedure in the event of an attack. The routine was so demanding and the people so committed that no one took time to even change their clothes (4:21-23).

Nehemiah demonstrated strong leadership throughout the effort. He was willing to lay down his life for a cause larger than his own reputation. He motivated the people with the greatness of God. And he always led by example: working alongside the people, ensuring readiness, and planning to be on the front line – at the scene of any crisis (see 4:18-20; *"The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me...rally to us there"*).

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE #5

NEHEMIAH (WEEK 5)
NEHEMIAH 5:1-13
10/8/2017

MAIN POINT

External opposition was not the only threat to God's work in Jerusalem; material circumstances and selfishness within the community also threatened the work until Nehemiah intervened to stop oppression of the poor.

INTRODUCTION

Threats to the rebuilding project did not only come from outside enemies. Some of the most serious troubles resulted from Jewish nobles taking advantage of their less privileged brothers. The people brought their complaints to Nehemiah: (1) they lacked food – many did not even have enough grain to feed their children; (2) in order to purchase food they were forced to mortgage their houses, fields, and vineyards; (3) the taxes imposed by the Persian government on all the landowners had forced the people to borrow money to pay their taxes; and (4) to raise the money to pay their debts, many had been forced to sell their sons and daughters into slavery to other Jews.

OPENING QUESTIONS

Review: What would you select as the key verse or passage in Nehemiah 1 & 2 that best captures or reflects the dynamics of what the chapters are all about?

Why is external opposition to God's work in our lives sometimes easier to deal with than internal opposition from family, friends, and even Christian brothers and sisters?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READ NEHEMIAH 5:1-13

In terms of severity, how would you rank the various problems mentioned in 5:1-7? Do any of the problems stand out to you as primary?

What is “exacting usury” or “exacting interest” as used in verse 7 (see Exodus 22:25-26 and Leviticus 25:35-37)? How did it differ from lawful lending?

Review the laws of slavery in Exodus 21:2-11 and Leviticus 25:39-55. What background or insights do the passages provide for Nehemiah’s actions in 5:1-13?

What was Nehemiah’s response to the reports (5:6-7)? What do we learn about him?

In 5:9, what reason did Nehemiah give to the rich for practicing charity rather than strict legality (*compare* Deuteronomy 15:10-11 and Luke 6:34, 38)?

Think of the expense the rich would have to incur (5:11), yet Nehemiah condemned anyone who would not do so (5:13). Why do you think he spoke so strongly?

What do you think about what Nehemiah made the rich promise to do in 5:11?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Do you think 5:1-13 offers any principles for financial interactions between Christians today? In what specific situations would these principles apply?

Do your children, relatives, friends, or neighbors perceive that you are pursuing God or pursuing gold? What might make them think that money is too important to you? What principles can we learn and apply from 1 Timothy 6:17-19 this week?

COMMENTARY

The food supply during the time that the rebuilding effort began was scarce, and money to buy food was even more scarce. The added stress of finishing the wall under the duress of enemy threats drove the already oppressed, poorer Jews to the point of rebellion. They brought their complaints to Nehemiah: (1) they lacked food – many did not even have enough grain to feed their children; (2) in order to purchase food they were forced to mortgage their houses, fields, and vineyards; (3) the taxes imposed by the Persian government on all the landowners had forced the people to borrow money to pay their taxes; and (4) to raise the money to pay their debts, many had been forced to sell their sons and daughters into slavery to other Jews.

The phrase “Jewish brothers” (5:1) showed the strong bond among all Israelites, such that by Mosaic law, none should permanently enslave or exploit another (Deut. 15:1-18). But these rich Jews would not help those less fortunate than them and were exploiting them for gain. People were forced to sell their homes and children while having no ability to redeem them back. Under normal conditions, the law offered hope of releasing these young people through the remission of debts with occurred every 7 years or in the 50th year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25). The custom of redemption made it possible to “buy back” the enslaved individual at almost any time, but the desperate financial situation made that seem impossible. And the nobles and officials were also accused of “exacting usury or interest.” While property could be taken in pledge, pending repayment of a loan, taking interest from a fellow Israelite who borrowed money out of poverty and need was forbidden (Deuteronomy 23:19-20).

Nehemiah was outraged at what he heard – but he took some time to “consult with himself” and then met with the individuals responsible for the added hardships. The officials’ and nobles’ oppression of their own people demonstrated that danger to the community could come not only from the outside but also from within. Using his Persian authority, Nehemiah ordered the greedy nobles and officials to stop their usury, return the property that they had confiscated, and return the interest. He set the example by making loans, but not exacting interest. He presented his moral challenge to the nobles as something to which he also must respond (5:10).

Nehemiah also made the men take a solemn oath before the Lord to bind them to their agreement. And he placed a curse on the wealth of anyone who broke his word, symbolized by the “shaking out” of the folds of his robe (5:13). The people who witnessed the public proceedings voiced their approval and joyously praised the Lord!

NEHEMIAH: VISION BEYOND WALLS

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE #6

NEHEMIAH (WEEK 6)
NEHEMIAH 5:14-19
10/15/2017

MAIN POINT

Nehemiah was a man of compassion, and he renounced his own privileges because of his reverence for God and his love for God's people.

INTRODUCTION

In 5:14-19, Nehemiah interrupted his account of rebuilding the wall to discuss further efforts that he had made during his first 12-year tenure as governor to make conditions more tolerable for the citizens of the region. Nehemiah's predecessors had used the people to enrich themselves. But Nehemiah did not use his position as governor to gain wealth or favor from others. He provides us with a worthy example of leadership because he sought to help his fellow Jews and looked to God alone for his reward.

OPENING QUESTIONS

Review: What were some of the main things that we learned during last week's study and discussion of Nehemiah 5:1-13?

What stood out from Pastor Heath's sermon on Nehemiah 5:14-19 this week?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READ NEHEMIAH 5:14-19

How did Nehemiah's behavior as governor differ from earlier governors' behavior?

What two reasons did Nehemiah give for his choices (5:15, 18)?

List some of the specific ways that Nehemiah served the people (5:16-18)?

Imagine that during these challenging times in Jerusalem you were able to catch Nehemiah in a rare moment of personal reflection and ask him how he was doing. How do you think he would answer? Was he worn down by all that was demanded of him? Was his tank empty or full? Why do you think that? Any lessons for us?

Rebuilding Jerusalem's wall and helping its people were more important to Nehemiah than getting his "rightful" compensation. What kind of "rights" do you think Christians today may need to sacrifice to work for the building of God's kingdom?

List any other principles for Christian living that you find in 5:1-19.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Because of his practices, Nehemiah actually lost money as governor of Judah. Obeying God and serving His people cost him. Might this attitude apply to you in any way? If you think so, explain how?

Has God called you to sacrifice any personal "rights" in order to live out the gospel? If so, in what ways?

COMMENTARY

Nehemiah interrupted his account of rebuilding the wall to discuss further efforts that he had made at making conditions more tolerable for the Jewish citizens of the region. During his first term as governor of the district, a period of 12 years from 444-432 B.C., Nehemiah did not make the people provide food supplies for the administrative center. Also, he did not require the people to pay an additional tax to support the local government office. His behavior contrasted sharply with that of the previous Jewish governors. They had required the people to supply their households with food and wine, but they also forced the people to pay forty shekels of silver for the benefit of the governor as well. Nehemiah did none of this because of his reverence for God and his belief that this was too heavy a burden for the people to bear (5:15, 18).

Nehemiah's statement in 5:15, that he did take provisions from the people, is testimony to the wealth that he gained as cupbearer to the king in Persia. Also, the fact that he supported over 150 men and their families who ruled with him demonstrates the personal wealth that he had brought from Babylon. Over a twelve-year period, it appears that he provided around 4,380 oxen and 26,280 sheep as well as birds and wine in abundance for the food provisions, while taking nothing from the locals. And even though the time to purchase property from those forced to sell could not have been better, Nehemiah maintained a consistent personal policy not to take advantage of those in distress. While Nehemiah was in a position of power, he did not use it to manipulate or take advantage of others. He was willing to use his position to serve people. Optional Application: What leadership positions do you hold? Do you use them to give or to get? Is there anything in Nehemiah's example that speaks to you?

Nehemiah stepped into a position where there was an established practice of the governor having great privileges. But he broke the pattern. His love for the people and faith in God provided something better to live for than money, food, and power. Bigger to him than his prestige and privileges as governor was the good that would come to the people as God's name was exalted through building the walls and reestablishing peace, security, and worship in Jerusalem. In 5:19, Nehemiah prays the first of four prayers where he asks that God remember him for good (see 13:14, 22, 31). The prayers reflect his awareness of an eternal reward and demonstrate his sincere faith, while the schemes of his opponents show their opposition to the well-being of God's people. Nehemiah trusted God, and he loved God's people!