

e a s t s i d e CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

# UNFINISHED HOPE

OUR RUINS - HIS RESTORATION



## STUDY GUIDE

Part II of Ezra-Nehemiah Teaching Series

# INTRO | OUR RUINS – HIS RESTORATION

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By Dave Parker

Meet Nehemiah, a Jew born in Babylonian captivity and through unknown events, but definitely under the providential hand of God, is placed into a position of trust and credibility with the King of Babylon. Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the King! Whether it's through his time of quiet submission to the King or whether it is part of his God given gifts, we see a man who is prone to spend time in quiet reflection and a lot of prayer as he goes about his life. As God impresses upon him the need for resources and leadership in Jerusalem the burden is great. So, what does he do? He reflects and prays and then moves. A little context and history will help set the stage.

Jerusalem represented the Holy City for any Jewish person. It was the capital of Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Throughout the Bible, Jerusalem was the center of Jewish history. Solomon built the great Temple in Jerusalem and it became the center of Jewish worship and within its walls was the Holy of Holies, God's dwelling.

Since King David established the city as the capital of the Jewish state circa 1000 BCE, it has served as the symbol and most profound expression of the Jewish people's identity as a nation. The Jewish people are inextricably bound to the city of Jerusalem. No other city has played such a dominant role in the history, politics, culture, religion, national life and consciousness of a people as has Jerusalem in the life of Jewry and Judaism. Since the exile, Jerusalem has embodied the Jewish yearning for the return to Zion. In their daily prayers, Jews worship in the direction of Jerusalem, and prayers for Jerusalem are incorporated throughout.

## A History Lesson

Let me briefly set the historical context. In Genesis 12, God called Abram to leave his country and to follow Him to another land. As Abraham obeyed, his descendants multiplied. The Israelites were later enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years until God called them out under the leadership of Moses.

Eventually they were allowed to enter the land God had promised them, Canaan. Hundreds of years passed during which the nation experienced struggles, faithlessness, and wrestling with God. The high point of Israel's history came when David, a godly king, was called to sit on the throne. For forty years David expanded the nation in both breadth of influence and knowledge of God. It was David's dream to build a temple in Jerusalem, a temple that would honor God and one in which God would dwell. David's dream was fulfilled by Solomon and in 959 BC the beautiful temple was finished. (approx. 40 yrs. after the city of Peking was built and about 180 yrs. before the first Olympics were held in Greece). But things went downhill from there. After his son, King Solomon died; Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom had ten tribes and was referred to as Israel.

The Southern Kingdom had two tribes and was referred to as Judah. Because of their disobedience, the Assyrians conquered Israel and the ten tribes were scattered and became known as the "ten lost tribes of Israel."

Even though the southern tribes saw all this happen, they, too, continued to rebel against God. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were knocked down, and the temple was burned. The people were deported and were forced into slavery again. Their history had come full circle. The city was left in ruins.

It must have been a traumatic thing for the Jews to see death and destruction and then be forced to leave their homeland and travel about 1,000 miles to a foreign country. Many of God's prophets predicted that this captivity would not destroy the nation; it would eventually end and the people would be allowed to go back home.

God did not forsake His people. He allowed the Persians to take over the Babylonians and he moved King Cyrus to make a decree to let some of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished and desolate. Living there was dangerous and difficult and sorrowful.

The first stage of returning exiles was led by Zerubbabel who were to rebuild the temple. He succeeded after several decades to finish but not without a lot of conflict, strife and complacency along the way.

Ezra led the second stage and concentrated on rebuilding a love, respect and obedience to the word of God, the Torah. He also came to establish a strength in the community of faith with God's Word as their guide.

Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the King of Persia, a Jew born in Babylonian captivity follows the leading of God to return to Jerusalem along with workers to direct the rebuilding of the walls of this great city and to hopefully restore it to the status and wonder that it once was.

Nehemiah is third of three movements where Israelites returned to rebuild the walls and bring order to the city. These three movements have the same pattern which you will want to look for in Nehemiah. In each of the movements we see:

1. A Pagan King moved by the providential hand of God to encourage a number of Jewish exiles to "return and rebuild" Jerusalem.
2. All three leaders, Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah encounter opposition, overcome the opposition and experience a rather anti-climactic resolution to all their work.
3. All three movements end in a rather anticlimactic resolution.

## “Returning to Rebuild Under a New Champion”

### BIG IDEA

What do you do with unfinished hope? We find the Perfect Champion and follow HIM into our Finished Hope!

### ILLUSTRATION

When Suzette and I were approached to come and be a part of Eastside Christian Fellowship in the middle of 2001, my answer was a respectful but firm “NO”. An outcrop of many events over the next 30 days began to stir our hearts and after much prayer, thought, wise counsel and sleepless nights, the burden that God placed on our hearts became too much to ignore. The more we sought Him, the more he made it clear that my emphatic “NO” was returned with an emphatic “GO” from the Lord. It was un-nerving, inconvenient, difficult, and honestly made no sense practically in our flesh. I could go on and on, but suffice it to say, four months after saying “no” we pulled into the area and on Nov 4, 2001 we committed ourselves to do life with people, some who we knew and others we had never met. The rest is merely God’s history unfolding. It takes trust to follow where you believe the Lord is leading.

### COMMENTARY

Nehemiah was a normal everyday guy born a Jew in Babylonian captivity. Employed as a trusted cupbearer to a pagan king, who didn’t worship God, the creator of the universe. Nehemiah surprised himself and all those around him and became a leader of leaders as God’s providential hand moved once again on the heart of. This unmarked and “unimportant” became a rallying point and cheerleader for the rebuilding of the famed wall in Jerusalem.

### Nehemiah is often compared to Joshua.

- Nehemiah means “God Comforts”. Joshua means “Lord Saves”.
- Like Joshua in Deut. 30:1-6, Nehemiah is a student of the Torah, and activates Moses’ promise of restoration on the other side of exile: Neh 1:4-11
- Opposition reports in Nehemiah are modeled after those in Joshua.
- Nehemiah standing on the wall declaring “Our God will fight for us” reflects Joshua after Jericho fell saying “Our God fought for us”.
- Nehemiah 4:14 “Do not be afraid of them” reflects Joshua 10:25 & Deut 7:19, 21

Obviously impacted by Joshua as an earlier leader of his people there are common attributes that great leaders like Joshua, Moses, David and others share.

### The 5 C’s of Godly Leaders Seen In Neh. 1:1-11:

1. **CONCERN** about the Problem. (1:1-4)
  - Nehemiah could have insulated himself from the problem 1,000 miles away but he chose not to. Instead, he wept, prayed and fasted to see if he would be shown direction from the Lord
2. **CONVICTION** about God’s Character. (1:5)
  - Notice the character traits that Nehemiah recognizes in God.
3. **CONFESSION** of Sin. (1:6-7)
  - Nehemiah’s prayer of confession was intense, honest and had a sense of urgency. He made no attempt to excuse himself nor the Israelites.
4. **CONFIDENCE** in God’s Promises. 1:8-10
  - Nehemiah doesn’t wallow in a prolonged examination of the failures. He owns it and moves on in God’s mercy and gets going.
5. **COMMITMENT** to get involved. (1:11)
  - Nehemiah didn’t pray for God to send someone else — he simply said, “Here am I, send me!”

### APPLICATION

Whether we aspire to lead or follow an effective leader, who wouldn’t want to be a leader or follow a leader who was prayerful, courageous, broken over their own shortcomings, willing to fight for what is right, wise in dealing with opposition and tenacious in pursuing the goal. Humanity is still broken however and ultimately there is only one leader to follow. We cannot ever lead like a Nehemiah until we are ready to be led by Jesus.

Jesus is the only one that any of us can follow that will provide the ultimate renewal of our life and redemption to the Father. Jesus, the Perfect Champion that we follow into our “unfinished hope”.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can you prepare yourself for God to use you?
2. Which of the 5 C’s of leadership can you see yourself really aspiring to and growing in?
3. Nehemiah was burdened with the renewal and rebuilding that needed to happen in Jerusalem. What renewal do you need to lead or contribute to?
4. What area of your life are you ready to make a change in?
5. What are the leadership qualities that you admire and have no hesitancy in following?
6. As the plight of Jerusalem burned on Nehemiah’s heart, what is it that burns on your heart today? Brainstorm with your group ways to take action.

### “Nobody From Nowhere”

#### BIG IDEA

God will work through anyone who comes to Him with humility, honesty, and faithfulness.

#### ILLUSTRATION

Some years ago, I (John) was asked to be the committee chair for Young Life on Bainbridge Island and Poulsbo. I had never been to a Young Life committee meeting; in fact the only involvement I had had with YL to that point was to drive a group of kids to an event or two. Additionally, I was just negotiating to start a new job and questioned my ability to take on added responsibilities at the same time. I prayed about it and asked for a clear sign, since I really didn't think it was something I wanted to do, but there was a small part of me that thought I should do it. It turns out the YL office and the company I was joining were both in the same building in Poulsbo. I saw that as a pretty clear sign. I went on to be the committee chair for 6 years and in that time we had some of the most active participation and also opened YL in Bremerton.

#### COMMENTARY

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes living in Susa, about 1000 miles from Jerusalem when he learns that the walls of Jerusalem are in shambles. He mourned like we did for the Twin Towers on 9/11. He prays to God, confessing the sins of the Israelites and also calling out that God promised to bring the Israelites back together if they repented and obeyed.

Later, the King noticed that Nehemiah was sad and asked why. Nehemiah gulped, prayed that God would give him the right words, and shared with the King that he was sad for Jerusalem. The King asked how he could help and Nehemiah asked to be sent to rebuild the walls, and for safe passage and for the timber and materials to complete the task, which the King granted.

Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem, telling no one his intent. He went with a few close allies to view the destruction himself, after which he finally felt the confidence to express the vision of rebuilding the walls. Friends rallied to the cause, while enemies derided. Nehemiah responded to them saying “The

God of heaven will prosper us. We will begin the rebuilding. And you have no claim to Jerusalem”. Neh. 2:20

#### APPLICATION

Most of us are really “nobody from nowhere”. We aren't kings or princes, queens or princesses (although some of our children may act as if they are). We have a daily job, which is mostly trivial in the grand scheme of things. Masses don't dwell on our every word. In fact, many of us might relate to the cupbearer, Nehemiah, “getting the king his coffee”. God has people he wants to reach and purposes he wants to fulfill. He puts those things on our hearts. We have a choice; we can either lie down until the feeling goes away, or we can join God in what he wants done. The entire Old and New Testaments contain these stories where God used “nobody from nowhere” to accomplish everything we read about. And today, he wants to use you and me “nobody from nowhere” to do amazing things for his kingdom.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is God putting on your heart to accomplish? What is the self-talk that may be holding you back? How might you think about that differently to encourage moving forward?
2. Who is your “King Artaxerxes”?
3. How do you gain the confidence you need to stand up to those who would mock your efforts?
4. How do we muster the faithfulness to overcome our shortcomings and self-doubt?

**“One Goal, One Team”****BIG IDEA**

Jesus has chosen to work through His church, His team with a single goal of bringing glory to God as we all join Him in His work.

**ILLUSTRATION**

We live in what seems a much fractured world today. Just a few minutes of news confirms it. Yet in times of great stress or upheaval, individuals and groups shine forth in their willingness to rescue and save that which is lost. Samaritan's Purse and Compassion International are just two of the many Christian groups that are comprised of individuals working in unity to further a Kingdom agenda. Locally, churches comprised of many different types of saints carry on similar work, they work to make a difference and bring glory to God in their local communities.

**COMMENTARY**

Chapter 3 runs like a Who's Who of the building world, the best Fixer Upper episode ever! This chapter reveals a remarkable display of unity. The reconstruction of the walls was a tremendous challenge. On the eastern and southern sides a whole new wall had to be built, and on the northwest and southwest the older wall needed to be repaired. Archaeologists have found remains of the new wall, which was eight feet thick.

Starting counterclockwise, beginning and ending at the Sheep Gate, some 40 different groups worked simultaneously. The variety of builders working side-by-side was striking. Sometimes they were identified by family, other times by profession or place of residence. Some were priests others were laypeople. In general, everyone has a vested interest in the work that was done in unity. The term 'repaired' shows up about 34 times in this chapter. Its frequent repetition stresses the solidarity of the community as they worked together on this difficult task. The Hebrew word is a general term meaning 'to make firm or strong', but within this unity of purpose there was room for diversity. Nehemiah's intention to unify the people shines through as he was convinced of the necessity of participation of those who lived outside the walls also, so that they could feel that they played an important part in the rebuilding the walls of the Holy City. Taking one last look at all these individuals, their great zeal for God and country, and their industry to complete the task set before them stands as a testimony to them and an encouragement

to all who can follow their example.

**APPLICATION**

The successful rebuilding demonstrates Nehemiah's great ability to lead and organize. It also foreshadows unity of purpose and work that is to characterize the church, (Phil. 1:27, 28). One of the lasting principles that stands out in Nehemiah is that cooperation with others is required to carry out God's will. Everyone in a Christian community (i.e. church) has an important and valuable part to play in building the Kingdom. Our gifts and skills are to be harmoniously used for the purposes of God. Psalm 133:1 tells us "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" In the New Testament, brethren is extended to mean not just family related by blood but brothers and sisters in Christ. Just before His death, Jesus prayed fervently that His followers would be brought to complete unity - like the relationship He had with the Father. It is comforting to know that Jesus desires such unity for us. True spiritual unity flows from the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. The term repaired shows up about 34 times in this chapter. Its frequent repetition stresses the solidarity of the community as they work together on this difficult task. How has unity with others eased the burden of completing important tasks for you?
2. Why do we find it more difficult to rebuild or restore than it is to create from scratch? When have you experienced this?
3. Reflect on Philippians 1:27, 28. What connections can you draw between these two verses and Nehemiah chapter three?
4. What do you think Chapter 3:5 is trying to say about the Tekoite nobles? Why do you think that it is even mentioned?
5. The kingdom of God is made up of many diverse peoples, what part can you play in advancing unity in the kingdom?
6. What has helped you get through a situation where unity could be improved?

### “Conflict From Outsiders”

#### BIG IDEA

When we as Christ followers are faced with opposition, what do we do, and what is our response?

#### ILLUSTRATION

The day I bought the wedding ring for my soon to be wife was terrifying. It was expensive, and all the employees at Shane-Co kept giving me weird looks probably because I was a 19 year old. However, I felt like the Lord gave me His blessing to ask Brie for her hand in marriage. So, I asked, and she said yes! We got engaged and everything was going great, until it wasn't so great. Some friends from high school heard that we were getting engaged and began to create rumors about us; people kept coming up to us and telling us that what we were doing was wrong. People felt as if they could give us counsel when really they wanted to share their opinion that was not from the Lord. We knew that God was giving us His blessing but there was some serious opposition that took place. These people did not know our story, they were outsiders from the situation, and yet they still created a lot of conflict.

*Nehemiah 2:19-20*

*“But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”*

#### COMMENTARY

*Read Nehemiah 2:10,19-20;4:1-23; 6:1-14*

Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls (Ch. 1:1-2:20). As this takes place, people begin to bring opposition to Nehemiah and the plans that he has. The wall is eventually built even though people were against the plans of the Lord. There were a few key culprits giving Nehemiah resistance. Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite continued to spoil the plans that Nehemiah had for the walls, and more importantly Jerusalem as a whole. We see that in Nehemiah 4:1-23 Sanballat and his allies resort to direct action in order to stop the wall from being built, but their plot is foiled.

Eventually by the grace of God and the constant obedience from Nehemiah, the wall is built.

Nehemiah persevered regardless of what conflict was in front of him. It is so easy for us to get offended and to feel as if everyone is out to get us, and Nehemiah could have easily gone this route, however he continues to push back on what man wanted in order to fulfill the will of God for Jerusalem.

#### APPLICATION

What do you do when you are faced with opposition in your life? Do you persevere to overcome it like Nehemiah?

Throughout the book, when Nehemiah is confronted with conflict from outsiders he does two things: He “fasts and prays”. When he did these things he was able to continue the plan that God had for Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the wall. When Brie and I were faced with opposition, we prayed together, fasted together, and through that were given the strength to push through the opposition that was in front of us.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Was there ever a time in your life that you knew what God was telling you to do, but people from the outside gave opposition?
2. How can we use Nehemiah as an example when dealing with conflict from those around us?
3. What is the first thing you do when you face opposition in your life?
4. Zac and Brie disregarded unsound counsel; they knew God was blessing their marriage because they pursued it in the right way [1 Cor 10:31]. How can wise counsel be discerned? How can it be distinguished from unwise/unsound/unscriptural counsel?
5. What responsibility do we have as Christians to have to approach conflict in a healthy manner? When in conflict with those who are not Christians, how can our witness have a direct affect (possibly eternal) on those we are dealing with?

## “Wealth, Conflict & Hospitality”

### BIG IDEA

When the people of God seek to honor Him, opposition will need to be overcome. When opposition or material distraction results from the People of God turning away from honoring Him, it is necessary to act to help His people return to following Him.

### ILLUSTRATION

“Money ain’t everything. It’s paper with ink on it; that’s all it is.

“Money ain’t bad, ain’t good. (What’s bad about it is most people don’t have any of it.)

“Money don’t do good works or bad works until it gets into the hands of a good-working or bad-working heart. And if you have a good-working heart you’re going to do good works with it; if you have a bad-working heart you’re going to do bad works with it.

Simple as that.

--Jim Brooks 1997 [Vietnam vet, logger, entrepreneur, businessman, ‘self-made’ millionaire, motivational speaker, championship youth coach, truck driver, thoroughbred stable owner]

### COMMENTARY

We have previously seen how Nehemiah was devastated by the shameful condition of Jerusalem, the stalled rebuilding, and the dishonor this brought to God. So he had undertaken to finish Jerusalem’s rebuilding in order to honor God.

Opposition from pagan and half-Jewish people in Jerusalem and Judea had stalled the rebuilding of the city and walls. After Nehemiah had successfully rallied the faithful Jews against this external opposition, he then had to deal with internal division due to material hardship from famine and from the diversion of workers from fields and orchards to working on the wall. Hardship led to exploitation, usury and slavery that were so severe that even the women protested along with the distressed men. Like Jim Brooks’ comment above, Nehemiah understood that material goods and means are not good or bad in themselves. He clearly saw the destructive impact on the rebuilding by the misuse of money. Nehemiah indicted the financial practices of the nobles and officials.

They were buying fields, orchards and houses at distressed prices from those who simply needed money to pay taxes and buy food. They were charging interest on loans. The nobles and officials were profiting from selling Jews into slavery, even to Gentiles! Nehemiah then had a “Great Assembly” of the priests and all the Jews. He reminded them that God said not to charge interest, and said to help the poor and hungry. Nehemiah then called on them to pledge to return to honoring God with their money and other means. When they all pledged to change, to return to God’s ways, Nehemiah sealed their pledge before the priests with a visual symbol of the curse that would fall on those who broke their pledge. He, with his whole household, then set the right example by continuing to lend money without interest to the needy, by ceasing to buy property, by daily feeding 150 Jews and many others (honoring God’s call to help the poor, the hungry and the foreigner) and by physically working on the wall himself. Nehemiah understood that the restoration of the city to flourishing would be required for God to be properly honored; and that the unity this required would only happen when the people of God remembered and followed His call to support their brothers and sisters. (Having dealt with opposition from pagans, then Samaritans [ch.4], then selfish Jewish nobles and officials [ch.5], Nehemiah will next have to deal with false religious direction, in the form of false prophecy [ch.6].)

### APPLICATION

We sometimes think that “Old Testament” teaching is only indirectly applicable to the people of Jesus today. For today’s application of Nehemiah 5, we can review paired Scriptures showing the continuing application to our lives, for example: John 12:8/Deuteronomy 15:11 (Neh. 5:11); 1 Peter 5:1,2/Proverbs 27:23 (Nehemiah 5:7,8); 1 Cor. 9/Nehemiah 5:18.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the “people of God” today?
2. Why was it important for Nehemiah to stop buying property?
3. Why was it important to stop charging interest, since the interest being charged was only 1% (v.11)?
4. What was significant about Nehemiah’s daily provision of massive amounts of food and drink to Jerusalem’s residents and workers?
5. What do Nehemiah’s decisions about real estate, mortgage lending/interest charges, and hospitality tell us as today’s people of God?
6. How are today’s people of God dishonoring Him?
7. Is the “house for God’s name” bringing honor or dishonor to Him today?

**“Press On”****BIG IDEA**

Many times people place their fears and actions on the wrong thing. When the fear of God’s authority stays in your heart and mind you shall never stray nor falter.

**ILLUSTRATION**

When Sarah and I (Cameron) were dating and building our relationship; there was great opposition. Family, friends, and pastors had opinions regarding our relationship much like Sanballat’s open letter that tore at us. Before we were married we had been disowned, verbally and spiritually attacked from multiple angles. The opposition was greater than either of us could bear. We had committed to prayer and reading one chapter of the New Testament daily, seeking God’s direction for our relationship. Much like Nehemiah 6:16 when we were married our enemies lost confidence. The time we spent in prayer with God gave us discernment to sort out the fields of opinions that weighted so heavily on us to see the good seeds from the weeds. The mix of emotions experienced in any task, of which we have experienced many have never lasted when we set our eyes on our God. His authority and love covers all things.

**COMMENTARY**

Nehemiah feared God as the covenantal Father of his chosen people Israel. His heart for the ruin of the city of Jerusalem’s walls and the separation of God’s people led him to plead with God to remember the covenant relationship he had made with his people. Nehemiah gave all authority to God in his actions from his interactions with King Artaxerxes to his interactions with Sanballat and Tobiah and the people of Israel who were working on the wall.

In Chapter 6 Nehemiah is faced with the accusations that he desires to become the King of Jerusalem and rebel against King Artaxerxes. These accusations are publically announced by Sanballat after Nehemiah refuses to meet with him declaring that the importance of his work for God is too great to stop. Sanballat then hires a priest to incite Nehemiah to sin against his God by urging him to take shelter in the temple to save his own life. Nehemiah, knowing God’s law, refuses. Through all of these trials and fears, Nehemiah fervently prays that God will remember the actions of his enemies and diligently focuses on the task he was given to do.

Nehemiah’s perseverance and adherence to the authority God and King Artaxerxes gave him to finish the wall comes to a close as he completes the wall in only 52 days. Verse 16 truly outlines the authority of God when all the surrounding nations lose confidence for they recognize that God has been with Nehemiah and the builders of the wall all along.

Chapter 7 again outlines the authority of God having chosen his people when Nehemiah calls for a census to be taken according to Israel’s genealogies of the people in the city. Those who could not prove their lineage to Israel were considered unclean and were not allowed to serve as priest. Chapter 7 closes with an account of all the people and all the financial gifts given to the city and finishes with the people of Israel’s return to Jerusalem at last.

**APPLICATION**

Remember the authority of the One who commissioned you to the task; He believes in you. Others will be envious, scared and angered at times when they see the good work that you are doing with a generous heart. Press on towards the goal.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What does Sanballat’s open letter mean for Nehemiah? How have you experienced this same type of open letter in your own life? How did you handle it?
2. Can you think of a passage where someone accepts the risk of losing their life to keep God’s commands? Everyone must give a different example.
3. Everyone holds something precious close to their heart. What are you afraid of losing? Is there a way to overcome that fear? How?
4. If God loves Jew and Gentile alike, why did Nehemiah claim the Gentiles as unclean for the priesthood? Does it matter? Why or why not? (Exodus 4:14 & 28:1-3, 40-41)

## “Open the Book”

### BIG IDEA

The Word of God rebuilds and nourishes the community, while in turn, the community proclaims the Word of God and embodies its Gospel centered teachings.

### ILLUSTRATION

Imagine a group of children that are excited to go to an amusement park with inflatable bounce houses and other exhilarating rides and activities. The father of some of the children greets the children outside of the amusement park and explains the rules of the amusement park to the children.

The rules include the fact that the amusement park is a members-only private park and that socks are required to play on many of the rides, such as the inflatable bounce houses. The children are not wearing socks and they are not members of private amusement park. However, the father did not tell the children about the things they are missing in order to make them feel bad about the fact that they did wear socks or that they could not afford the membership cost of the amusement park. Instead, the father told the children about the things they are missing in order to point out that he had socks for everyone and that he was a member and could extend his membership to include all of the children. They simply had to ask him for the socks and to be added to his membership list.

The children accepted the free socks and membership. They then had a wonderful community play experience within the members-only amusement park due to the generosity of the father.

### COMMENTARY

Nehemiah Chapter 8 is a wonderful passage of celebration placed between some more difficult chapters that described various trial and tribulations of the returned Israelite exiles. Nehemiah Chapter 8 tells the story of the people abiding by God’s rule for observing certain events, graciously listening to the reading of the Law, being convicted by hearing the Law, and experiencing joyous celebration through the knowledge and acceptance of God’s strength and grace that salvages our weaknesses and failings.

### The Religious Manner Of Reading And Hearing The Law (Neh. 8:1-8)

This passage begins with all of the people gathering themselves together as one. The occasion was the celebration of the feast of the seventh month. The public reading of the Scriptures was required by the law to be made every seventh year, but during the long period of the captivity this important and cherished practice had been abandoned. This holy practice was revived on this occasion by Ezra’s reading of the scripture.

### The People Comforted By Nehemiah and Ezra (Neh. 8:9-15)

All the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law that Ezra read to them because they were convicted by hearing the Law, which they had not been obeying. But Nehemiah said to the people, “This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” The words of the Law being read by Ezra did highlight the weaknesses and failures of the people, which led to the crumbling of the community. However, the reading of the Scripture is meant to inspire the people through the knowledge that the Lord is their strength. Their weaknesses are the reason that they (and we) need the Lord and cannot make it through life on our own. The Lord’s strength is readily available to the people so they do not need to feel broken because of their failures, but instead rejoice that their failures point out to them their need for the Lord. The instruction from Nehemiah and Ezra was to celebrate the feast, and indeed, to share the feast with others in the community who have no food.

### The People Keep The Feast Of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:16-18)

The whole community that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them for the eight days of the feast of tabernacles. In this manner the community of God remained in close proximity to each other for the entire celebration. Verse 17 states that since the days of Jeshua the children of Israel had not celebrated in this manner. This does not mean that the children of Israel had not celebrated the feast of tabernacles for this period of time. Rather, the celebration of the tabernacle feast had never reached this height of enthusiastic joy since the time of the Israelites entrance into Canaan until their return from captivity.

### APPLICATION

Scripture plays a vital role in forming and strengthening our covenant community. It reveals our weaknesses and failures, and clarifies our need for the Lord’s strength, forgiveness, and grace.

The Word of God convicts us of our weaknesses and brokenness, not to generate our guilt, but instead to empower us by his Spirit and strength, which we clearly need, and to love and serve others, thus rebuilding community.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has society shaped your beliefs about authority?
2. In what ways has the individualism of our culture hindered your commitment to community under God’s authority?
3. Are there ways in which your community has ignored the authority of scripture in your life and practices?
4. To what extent is your life based on God's word versus other worldly things?
5. As you realize ways in which you as an individual or community have rejected or ignored the authority of the Scriptures, what does repentance look like?

**“We Fail, Jesus Fulfills, the Spirit Empowers”****BIG IDEA**

Jesus has obeyed where we and Israel have failed and because of his presence in us we can now walk in obedience. Godly sorrow brings about repentance.

**ILLUSTRATION**

When I (Sarrie) bought my first car, I told myself I wouldn't eat or drink anything besides water in the car, to keep it feeling fresh and new. For a while I followed these rules, but eventually I caved in and went to a drive through. When I made the exception that one time, it became easier to keep making that choice until one day I got into my car and all I could smell were French fries and all I could see were the soda stains on the seat cushions. I was living in a dirty car and I was sad because I knew I was responsible for what had happened.

It's interesting that nowadays I can lease a car and drive it around, as long as I follow the rules signed and agreed upon by both me and the dealership. If I fail to comply, then the car could be taken away or I could be fined. It is also set to a time limit so I have to continually review the terms and recommit to them. Making a commitment helps me be more conscious of my decisions and help hold me accountable so I don't fall back into the mistakes of my past.

**COMMENTARY**

When I didn't take care of my car, I saw and felt the effects of my choices. Similarly, in Nehemiah 9, the Israelites acknowledged their consequences of repeatedly disobeying God's commands, even after He was so faithful in keeping His promises to them. Then they recalled the pain they caused themselves as they fell under the control of their enemies when they chose not to follow the peaceful rule of their Lord. In worship, they acknowledged God's grace and compassion, as He repeatedly forgave them and helped them start anew.

Like a new lease on a car, the Israelites had a fresh lease on life with God's gift of returning them to their homeland and empowering them to rebuild its walls. In Nehemiah 10, they respond by writing a binding agreement to demonstrate their commitment in following God's laws.

They detailed the specific names of those who signed the agreement or affixed a seal to it, which included 84 people total. The rest of God's people also vowed to follow all the commitments written in their agreement, which included obeying all of God's commands and decrees and making specific contributions such as offerings and first-fruits of their crops and cattle. Just like maintaining the quality of a car, they recognized they couldn't neglect God's home or His rules in order to maintain the great life He planned for them.

**APPLICATION**

We are just like the Israelites. We want the nice car with the new smell and look, but we repeatedly disobey the rules by making choices that mess it up. It's not easy to acknowledge our sin, but we can't have a clean car until we first admit the disaster it's become. Similarly, if we don't recognize what led us down the road to destruction and problem-solve how to avoid making those choices again, we'll continue to make the same mistakes. We can't rely on our personal understanding/wisdom as we keep failing on our own (Rom 3:23). Thankfully, God promises to be our strength and help in trouble (Psalm 46:1), and Jesus has experienced similar temptations that we face and can empower us to overcome as He did (Hebrews 4:15-16). Just like the Israelites, we can reflect upon God's commandments and make commitments to Him, renewing our faith walk and feeling fresh and clean again.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Think about the last contract that you signed or commitment you made with someone. How do you make sure you uphold your part of the agreement?
2. In Nehemiah 9, the people mourned and repented as a collective. How do you see this manifesting in today's world? Is confession and prayer more individual, corporate, or a mix of both? What benefits can you see from collective repentance?
3. When did the Israelites have trouble with disobedience and what happened as a result (9:15-29)? How can we apply that lesson to our lives?
4. In Nehemiah 10, the people made commitments to follow God's laws. What commitments are you working on as you seek to faithfully follow Jesus?

**“Faithful for the Long Haul”****BIG IDEA**

Our world is full on “unfinished hope”. Only Jesus gives true “life” so don’t do life without Him. Don’t lose faith nor the longing you have to see all the broken things of life made right. Let’s follow Jesus together into our “Finished Hope”.

**ILLUSTRATION**

The illustration this week is YOU! Think of something in your life that was going great and then for some reason, possibly out of your control, took a nose dive and crash landed. It could have been a relationship, major project, a job or possibly great health. How did that feel and how did you react when the crash landing happened. Where did you turn for hope? Now, with that in mind, let’s jump into the last chapters of Nehemiah.

**COMMENTARY**

It’s been exciting to see the revival that’s occurred in Jerusalem under Nehemiah’s leadership. Neh. 12 ends with a celebration of celebrations as the wall is dedicated. It seems as if nothing could go wrong, but it does. Here in the end of the story we have an unexpected crash landing. When Nehemiah comes back after spending time (unknown but at least a year) with King Artaxerxes he comes back to Jerusalem only to find that many of the areas which had once experienced revival are now in shambles.

In the Temple we learn that Eliashib has done an “evil deed” (Nehemiah 13:7) and allowed Tobiah (yes, that same Tobiah) to move in and start living at the Temple. Now he is living in God’s house! This is surely a crash landing.

In regards to the Priesthood we learn that God’s people have stopped giving their tithes and offerings. As a result the Levites have stopped leading worship and they have returned to work in their fields.

We also learn that God’s people are working on the Sabbath and merchants from all around the area are coming in from far and wide to buy and sell on God’s holy day. Progress has ground to a halt and people seem to have reverted back to their old ways. Something is crystal clear. As wonderful as Ezra and Nehemiah both were, as leaders of prayer and action, neither one is the ultimate savior God’s people have been waiting for.

This ending leaves the reader looking for a better priest, a better solution, a better revival.

**APPLICATION**

Think back to the story of yourself at the beginning of this study. Life in a fallen world leaves us looking for a better solution, a more permanent positive outcome. The process and plans we put in place aren’t nearly as tidy as we may like. Often the most well intentioned plans only end up as a perceived failure. Are leaders like Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah failures, or is it simply another longing that we have to see all the wrongs somehow made right?

As Tim Mackie said when he taught this to the area pastors: “Engage with the Spirit as you prepare. Find Jesus in the text and don't stop until you find Him. All Scripture points to the Gospel. Only Jesus gives life so look for the longing in the story and discover what Jesus can do about the same longing in our broken lives.”

We can either ignore or embrace the human element -- the heart -- that tends to keep getting in the way and hijacking our well-intentioned efforts. Our mess is never too big for Jesus’ healing restorative power. Don’t let your story stop until you have found Jesus and have trusted him in your own “Unfinished Hope”.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Tell of a time when you experienced Christian community that did not live up to its potential.
2. When fellow Christians compromise and let you down, how would you typically respond?
  - a. Embrace the individualism of our culture and forsake being in community with them?
  - b. Follow them in their compromise and accept their sin as simply being “real” and “transparent”?
  - c. Work to improve things seeking to restore others in a spirit of gentleness?
3. In these moments of letdown, how does it help you to hold on to the promise of Jesus when he said “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)?
4. All of Scripture points us to Jesus and our need for a Savior. Where in your life do you need the restoration and revival that only Jesus brings? As a group, identify some Bible references related to restoration and revival in our lives.

# EZRA | Timelines & Support

**King David: 1000BC**

## THE BOOK OF EZRA

Ezra 1: Cyrus 536-530BC (7yrs)

Ezra 4:6: Ahasuerus 529-522BC (8yrs)

Ezra 4:7: Artaxerxes (Bardis) 522BC (.0558yrs)

Ezra 6:1; 6:14: Darius 521-485 BC (36yrs)

## THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

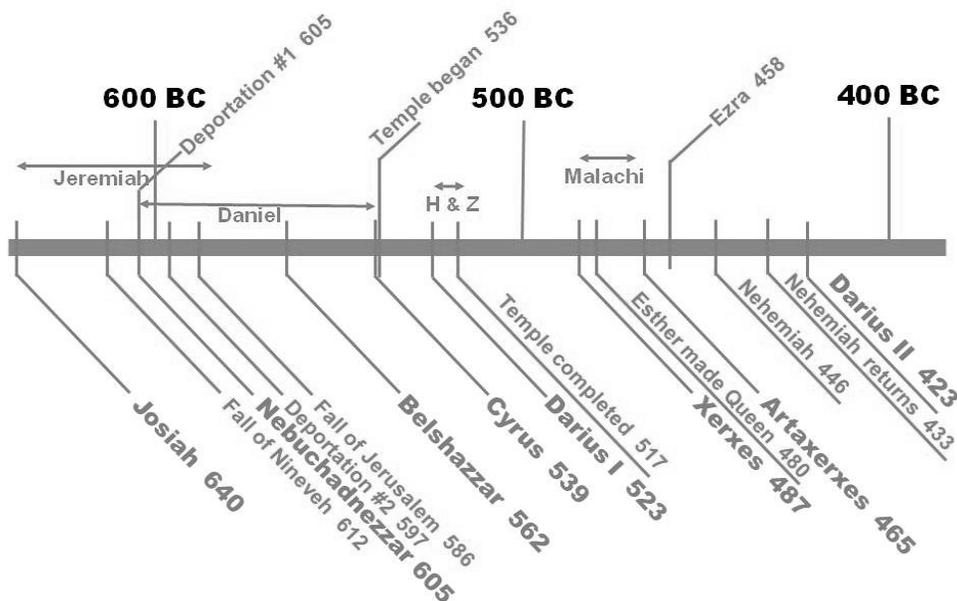
Nehemiah 2:1: Artaxerxes 522BC

**Esther: 483BC**

NOT MENTIONED: Darius II (423-404)

NOT MENTIONED: Artaxerxes II (404-358)

NOT MENTIONED: Artaxerxes III (358-338)



## Hebrew Bible

**TORAH** = Law of Moses {Teaching, Instruction}

Genesis—Exodus—Leviticus—Numbers—Deuteronomy

## PROPHETS

Joshua—Judges—Samuel—Kings

Isaiah—Jeremiah—Ezekiel

The book of the 12 {Hosea—Malachi}

## WRITINGS (Psalms)

Psalms—Job—Proverbs

Ruth—Song of Songs—Ecclesiastes—Lamentations—Esther

Daniel—Ezra—Nehemiah—Chronicles

3 MOVEMENTS	Ezra 1-6	Ezra 7-10	Neh 1-7
<b>Leading the People</b>	Zerubbabel	Ezra	Nehemiah
<i>God providentially leads a Persian king to allow the Israelites to return and rebuild</i>	Cyrus commissions the rebuilding of the temple: Ezra 1:1-11, 6:1-5	Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to establish the "law of God": Ezr 7:1-26	Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah permission to rebuild Jerusalem: Neh 1-2
<i>Returned Israelites face opposition</i>	"the enemies of Judah" approach: Ezra 4:1-24	Ezra discovers the mixed-marriages: Ezra 9	Sanballat and Tobiah oppose the rebuilding: Neh 2-6
<i>Opposition overcome</i>	Darius restarts the rebuilding: Ezra 5-6	Proposal to divorce all non-Israelite wives: Ezra 10	Nehemiah arms the building parties: Neh 3-6
<i>Anti-climactic resolution</i>	Mixed response to temple: Ezra 3:12-13; rejection of local support: Ezra 4:1-3	Non-Israelite women and children sent away: Ezra 10	Nehemiah rejects any local assistance in rebuilding the city

## RESOURCES & CREDITS



[www.thebibleproject.com](http://www.thebibleproject.com)

SEATTLE AREA  
PASTORS NETWORK

[www.seattlepastors.org](http://www.seattlepastors.org)

*"Thank you to our in-house collaborators for researching, enlightening and sharing with us their unique perspectives on their assigned text. May your experience and takeaway be just as rewarding as the challenges and insight you have laid before us all."*



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