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Godly Leadership

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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

LEADERS SERVE FAITHFULLY

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Bible Background



Meet Nehemiah

The prophet Nehemiah lived during a period of Jewish history to which we typically give little attention. The Babylonians had conquered and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC and carried many of its leading citizens into exile. Less than fifty years later, the Babylonians were replaced by the Persian Empire. The Persian ruler Cyrus allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland, and many did so. They emigrated to Judah and began to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, a process completed around 515 BC. Three-quarters of a century later, however, Jerusalem's population remained small. The city was vulnerable, opposition persisted, and the people remained clueless as to how to live out their unique identity under God's law.

During the reign of King Artaxerxes (464–424 BC), Ezra was sent to Jerusalem to reestablish God's teaching in the land. The news from Judah remained discouraging to those who remained behind in Babylonia. New leadership had to emerge if God's promises of full restoration were to be fulfilled.

Around 445 BC, Israel's next great leader emerged: Nehemiah. Nehemiah seems like an unlikely choice to lead. He was neither a priest nor a descendant of David's royal line. He was an ordinary lay

person leading a comfortable life in the Persian capital.

Nehemiah served as the “cupbearer to the king” (v. 11), a position of great prestige and importance. As a confidant of the king, Nehemiah wielded great influence. It was a role in which Nehemiah could have continued comfortably forever if visitors from Jerusalem had not come to town.

News from Home

Nehemiah was at the king's winter palace in Susa when his brother Hanani and some of his associates come to visit after a recent trip to Jerusalem. Nehemiah inquired about the well-being of his countrymen, both those who had recently returned from exile and those who had remained behind in the devastation of the Babylonian invasion.

The news Hanani and his friends brought from the homeland was troubling. The desolation the messengers reported was not simply the work of the Babylonians 150 years earlier, but also far more recent. Even amid efforts to rebuild and restore, Jerusalem's walls remained reduced to rubble and the city's gates were still burned to the ground.

In biblical times, a city's walls and gates defined it. A city without walls was a disgrace. Jerusalem, therefore, lay bare with no comfort or security for those dwelling there.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Upon hearing this news, Nehemiah mourned deeply. He had a secure life in the palace, but his people in Jerusalem did not. Though Nehemiah had likely never laid eyes on Jerusalem, Hanani's news caused him great grief. Devastated, he sought the presence of the "God of heaven," a phrase used often by Jews in conversation with the Persians to express Yahweh's status as the one and only God over all things. But Nehemiah did not merely offer a prayer under his breath and move on. Rather, he spent weeks intentionally beseeching God on behalf of his fellow Jews.

Nehemiah 1:5-11 describes Nehemiah's season of prayer and fasting. Though Nehemiah lived in a foreign land, he was well acquainted with the language and practice of Jewish prayer. Nearly every line of his petition resonates with words from Jewish Scripture. He echoed the prayers of heroes of the faith ranging from Moses (see Deut 7:9, 21; 10:17) to Solomon (see 1 Kings 8) to the psalmist (see Ps 130:2) and to Moses again in the recollection of God's great deeds in Nehemiah 1:9-10.

Although he drew on traditional themes and phrases, Nehemiah's prayers were far from impersonal. On the contrary, Nehemiah used his prayer not merely to confess the sins of his people, but also to place himself and his family in solidarity with the rest of the Jewish nation.

Nehemiah saw himself not as an outsider but as someone intimately connected with the fate of the people. Like Ezra and Daniel before him, he confessed that even he and his family had neglected God's laws and desires for covenant living. (Ezra 9:5-15 and Daniel 9:3-19 are similar in scope and nature to Nehemiah's prayer.) Even as he admitted his own complicity, however, Nehemiah acknowledged that God must play a role as well in the reversal of Jerusalem's fortunes. The people were trying to hold up their end of the bargain. Would God

prove faithful as in the past and hold up God's end of the covenant promise? Nehemiah asked God to act in two specific ways: first, by hearing the prayers of those who served God in Jerusalem; - and second, by granting success to

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. Historical background to Nehemiah's world
 - A. 587 BC: Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians; the temple was burned and city destroyed; leaders were sent into exile.
 - B. 539 BC: The Persians conquered Babylonia; King Cyrus issued a decree permitting exiled peoples to return to their homelands.
 - C. 515 BC: The temple was rebuilt and dedicated.
 - D. 458 BC: Ezra led a second wave of exiles to Judah and began a series of religious reforms.
 - E. 445 BC: Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem.
- II. Nehemiah receives news that the city of Jerusalem is in disrepair (Neh 1:1-4, 11b)
 - A. Nehemiah served as cupbearer to the king (vv. 1, 11).
 - B. Friends and family bring news of the dire situation in Jerusalem: no walls mean shame and no protection (vv. 2-3).
 - C. Nehemiah's reaction was heart-break, lament, and prayer (v. 4).
- III. Nehemiah prays for God to intervene (Neh 1:5-11a)
 - A. His prayer reveals deep respect for and knowledge of God (vv. 5, 8-9).
 - B. He repeatedly speaks of himself as a servant, expressing humility (vv. 6, 10-11).
 - C. He shows willingness to confess weakness and wrongdoing (vv. 6-7).
 - D. He calls on God to act (v. 6) and shows his own willingness to act, even at great personal risk (v. 11a).

Nehemiah as he prepared to use his influence with the king to bring about change for the sake of Jerusalem. Nehemiah had no illusions that he was going to swoop in and “save the world” by his own power. Nor did he believe the people could bring about change on their own. He recognized that a turnaround in Jerusalem could only be accomplished by God’s might and God’s gracious choice to remain in a covenantal relationship with the people.

Nehemiah risked a great deal by asking the king for permission to return to Jerusalem to oversee the reconstruction of the city walls and the repopulation of the city. Not only would he have to be released from his position of privilege and comfort, but the king would have to retract an earlier decree that the city walls were not to be rebuilt (see Ezra 4:17-22). Nehemiah’s compassion for the people led him not only to prayer, but to risky action that charted a totally different direction for his life.

A Way to Begin

Humility and servanthood are not often listed as important characteristics of those called to lead. Nehemiah’s contemporaries had seen many “great leaders” topple one another with shows of force and military prowess. By contrast, Nehemiah leads not with boasting but with tears; not by building an army but by fasting and praying. Begin the session by discussing the qualities we look for in our leaders.

○ Who Said It?

Distribute copies of the resource page “Who Said It?” (p. 23). Have participants match each quotation with the person who is reported to have said it. (The answers are as follows: 1. Frank Lloyd Wright, 2. Jesus, 3. Ted Turner, 4. Abraham Lincoln, 5. Writer of Proverbs, 6. Jack Kerouac, 7. Writer of James, 8. Mahatma Gandhi.)

Questions

- Do the quotations from Scripture seem to have anything in common? What about the quotes from outside the Bible? Do any of the extrabiblical quotations sound like they could have come from Scripture?
- What sorts of contrasts do these quotations highlight with respect to humility?
- How do these quotes challenge your definition of what it means to be humble, especially as a leader?

For the next four weeks we will study Nehemiah’s godly leadership. The first thing we will explore is how godly leaders humbly serve others.

○ What Makes a Leader?

As a class, brainstorm qualities you see most frequently in people who rise to leadership. List responses on the board.

Lead participants to rank these characteristics in order of importance.

Questions

- Which of these qualities are absolutely essential for a leader?
- Which qualities would some people look for in a leader, but not everyone?
- Where do humility and servanthood rank on the scale of importance for leaders?

Let’s look at how Nehemiah demonstrated humility and servanthood.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

For over a hundred years, the Israelites had lived under varying degrees of oppressive leadership: first with native-born kings and then foreign oppressors.

*What sort of person could lead them after so much abusive and controlling leadership? **Nehemiah provides a new and different model of leadership.** He grieves for the people, makes sacrifices for them, and demonstrates humility.*

○ **Discussing the Text**

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11. Discuss the following questions.

Questions

- Imagine you are Nehemiah, hearing for the first time news of relatives suffering in a distant country. What might your response have been?
- With which portion of Nehemiah's prayer do you most relate?
- Nehemiah used his position as cupbearer to address his people's plight with the king. What positions do you hold that might enable you to be a blessing to others?
- Think of a time when you had to show humility. Why is it difficult for many of us to display humility?
- How do we avoid crossing the line from honest humility to harmful self-deprecation?

○ **Prayerful Leaders**

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How would you describe Nehemiah's life before he heard from Hanani?
- What emotions does Nehemiah feel upon hearing about his people's "great trouble and shame" (v. 3)? When have you felt similar emotions?
- What did Nehemiah do in response to what he heard?

Divide the class into three groups.

Assign each group one of the following passages: Ezra 9:5-15, Daniel 9:3-19, and Esther 4:9-17. Have each group discuss how these leaders' prayers or actions were like those of Nehemiah.

Have each group share their insights with the class. Discuss how we also sometimes hear of troubled situations and feel called by God to respond. What is the role of prayer and humility when we sense such a call? How can Nehemiah and the others guide us in responding appropriately?

○ **Life-Changing Calls**

Remind the class of recent figures who, like Nehemiah, received a life-altering call to leadership. In addition to famous examples such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr., note members of your own community or congregation.

Questions

- What did these leaders have to lay aside to follow their callings?
- Where was humility required?

C A Way to End

Humble servant leadership is a dangerous proposition in this world. It requires being vulnerable, confessing our lack of control, and opening ourselves to the presence of God and to the pain of the world. Nehemiah's willingness to risk these things made him a vital leader for his people in a time of need. How might we, too, live vulnerably as servants who humbly display God's love and grace?

○ Jesus, Our Example

Invite a volunteer to read John 13:3-17, followed by a moment of silent reflection. Remark that this story is one of the great biblical examples of servant leadership. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Why do you think Jesus calls us to exhibit such humble leadership?
- What might be the particular "foot-washing" you are metaphorically called to today?
- In what ways are you called to humble yourself in service and leadership?

Place a bowl of water and a towel by the door, and as each person exits, offer to wash their hands, just as Jesus washed the disciples' feet, as a reminder that Christ also has called them to go forth to lead with humility and grace.

○ Bold Humility

Nehemiah was a humble and faithful servant both of God and of the king. He devised an audacious plan to help restore Judah's fortunes. This plan required him to take bold action in approaching the king and requesting his help. Discuss how bold plans sometimes call for humility in their execution. Conversely, how does humility sometimes result in unpredicted boldness?

○ A Closing Hymn

Provide hymnals for each participant. Have them search for favorite hymns about service and humility such as "The Servant Song," "Let Your Heart Be Broken," or "We Are Called to Be God's People." Discuss how the lyrics of these hymns reflect the characteristics we have seen in Nehemiah.

Close the session by singing this hymn together.

Resources

Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

Ralph W. Klein, "Nehemiah," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1999).

H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Nelson, 1985).

2

LEADERS BUILD A TEAM

Nehemiah 2:11-18

Bible Background



Nehemiah's Commission

After receiving news of Jerusalem's shameful situation, four months pass before Nehemiah is able to act to help rebuild the city's walls. When Nehemiah brings wine to the king's banquet—a time when Persian royalty were more likely to grant favors—the king notices that Nehemiah does not wear his typically cheerful expression (2:1-2). When he asks why, Nehemiah was rightfully afraid. It would be a great risk to broach the subject of Jerusalem and its walls with the king. The last time the citizens of Jerusalem had attempted to rebuild, they were accused of rebellion and sedition (Ezra 4:12-17). At that time, the king issued a decree to halt construction on the walls (Ezra 4:21). To accept Nehemiah's petition would mean reversing his own royal decree.

Yet when the king shows willingness to listen, Nehemiah boldly asks for what he needs. He has, no doubt, spent the past four months thinking about what the rebuilding project would require, so he asks the king for letters of permission for his travel and for the materials needed to carry out the construction (Neh 2:7-8). He moves with swift confidence to lay out the timetable for his work and to procure what he needs.

Once he is granted both royal and divine blessing, Nehemiah embarks on

his journey. Almost immediately, however, we learn that not everyone is supportive of Nehemiah's intentions. Two adversaries introduced in 2:10—Sanballat the Horonite, who was perhaps the Persian governor of Samaria, and Tobiah the Ammonite, presumably a vassal king—prove to be opponents to reckon with throughout Nehemiah's efforts (see Neh 2:19-20; 4:1-9; 6:1-14).

Into the Unknown

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he makes a series of critical, intentional choices about how to carry out his plan for the city's restoration. His style shifts as the boldness with which he implemented his plans at the palace is replaced by a sense of caution upon entering unknown territory.

We have already seen Nehemiah's patience and a sense of good timing. He continues to demonstrate these traits as he does nothing during his first three days in the city. The journey from Susa to Jerusalem would have required four months of travel, often across rugged terrain. Nehemiah shows wisdom by resting before acting, just as the great leader Ezra had done before him (see Ezra 8:32).

When Nehemiah is ready to act, he continues to demonstrate restraint. He was, after all, an outsider with strong connections to the Persian court. The locals may not have responded positively

to someone like him coming on the scene with an audacious plan to save their city.

Rather than immediately announcing his plan, Nehemiah first meets with a few carefully chosen individuals (Neh 2:12).

Most likely, these were reliable locals familiar with the customs, geography, and people of Jerusalem. Nehemiah does not divulge his plan to these people, but rather simply invites them to join him on a midnight expedition to examine the perimeter of the city and become familiar with its terrain.

Nehemiah is intentional about every detail of this nighttime inspection, from the people who accompany him to the type of animal he rode (most likely a humble and sure-footed donkey or a mule) to the route taken.

The biblical writer carefully notes the locations Nehemiah inspects: the Valley Gate, the Dragon's Spring, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, and the King's Pool. Archeologists cannot identify all these sites with complete confidence, but it is believed that this methodical route gives special attention to the parts of the wall that would have been hardest to examine during the day without being noticed: the badly damaged terracing along the crucial east side.

Nehemiah apparently concludes that parts of the wall are so badly damaged that it would be best to rebuild in a different location. (See Neh 3:16-31 for details of this controversial decision.) He is careful and thorough as he gathers information.

Invitation to Join the Team

Once Nehemiah has a grasp of the scope, challenges, and needs of the situation, he gathers together “the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest” (v. 16). This broad coalition represents people from the population at large, central figures in religious and economic leadership, local administrators, and those dispatched from Persia to oversee operations. Having done his homework, Nehemiah is ready to reveal his plan and

invite others to work together with him on his God-given mission.

Once again, Nehemiah is intentional with his words as he lays out his vision. He begins by telling his potential allies

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. Nehemiah's Commission (Neh 2:1-10)
 - A. Nehemiah waits for right opportunity to approach the king (vv. 1-2).
 - B. He boldly makes his desires known and receives the king's permission (vv. 5-8).
 - C. He begins his journey toward Jerusalem and is confronted with opposition (vv. 9-10).
- II. Into the Unknown (Neh 2:11-15)
 - A. When Nehemiah finally arrives in Jerusalem, the first thing he does is take a break to regroup (v. 11).
 - B. His second action is to gather a small community around him to help him gather information (v. 12).
 - C. Nehemiah inspects the city walls secretly and thoroughly by night, getting a feel for the job before him and what it will require (vv. 13-15).
- III. Invitation to Join the Team (Neh 2:16-18)
 - A. Nehemiah gathers a broad cross-section of people from different areas of Jerusalem life and influence (v. 16).
 - B. He lays out his vision (vv. 17-18a).
 1. He shares his own story.
 2. He invites the people to participate.
 3. He explains why this work is needed.
 4. He points beyond himself to the blessings of both God and the king.
 - C. Nehemiah is persuasive. The people agree to take the risk of partnering in this work for the sake of the common good (v. 18b).

the same news that had so touched him when uttered by his brother Hanani—and which they knew full well from personal experience: Jerusalem is in disgrace.

Rather than focusing on Jerusalem's physical vulnerability, though, Nehemiah discusses how the city brings dishonor to God in its present state. Then he issues an invitation: "Come, let us rebuild the wall" (v. 17). These are inviting words that encourage cooperation and collaboration. As Williamson points out, Nehemiah "does not simply announce what he is doing, nor force his own will on the audience" (193). Instead, sharing his own testimony of his experience of God, Nehemiah seeks to create a partnership, to invite people into a vision that is not his own but belongs to God.

The people can sense the presence of God in what Nehemiah has experienced and now suggests. Miraculously, they are able to lay aside their diverse personal interests in order to pursue "the common good" (v. 18). Nehemiah now has a team of passionate, committed people from all walks of life to help him carry out his monumental task.

A Way to Begin

The task of rebuilding a city's walls is too great for one person to attempt alone. Yet bringing other people on board can be one of the riskiest and most challenging aspects of a leader's task. How did Nehemiah select his "partners" and convey his sense of vision to them? What can we learn from Nehemiah's story about how we are called to work with others to do God's work?

○ **The First Ninety Days**

List on the board advice participants would give to someone just starting out in a new leadership position. According to Michael Watkins, some of the most important things to undertake in the first ninety days on the job are: "Promote Yourself," "Accelerate Learning," "Match Strategy to Situation," "Secure Early Wins," "Build My Team," and "Create Coalitions."

Let people react to this list and compare it to the one they made.

In today's lesson, we will see Nehemiah do many of these things, particularly in building a team to help him accomplish his vision.

○ **Group Dynamics**

Cut the resource page "Group Dynamics" (p. 24) into strips, one for each role. Distribute a strip to each willing volunteer. (It is okay not to distribute all of them, but make sure you assign someone to be the Facilitator.)

Read aloud the scenario from the top of the handout, then encourage participants to sit in a circle as they each play their assigned role in the group discussion.

After 5 to 10 minutes, allow group members to comment on how the others behaved.

Questions

- Have you ever tried to offer leadership in a group composed of many diverse personalities? What were the joys and struggles of leading such a group?
- How do you handle leadership in a group situation?
- What was difficult about playing your assigned role?

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, one of his first tasks was to bring together a team to help him with the work. Let's look at how he handled this task.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Nehemiah left his life as the royal cupbearer to accept leadership in the unfamiliar city of Jerusalem. His first acts involve rest, gathering information, and assembling a team to help him do the work. The intentional aspect of Nehemiah's actions show awareness that a challenging task lies before him. **He must work carefully to build trust and relationships in this new community.***

○ **Discussing the Text**

Read Nehemiah 2:11-18. Discuss the following questions.

Questions

- Why do you think Nehemiah initially told no one of his plans to rebuild the wall?
- How do you think Nehemiah chose the people to join him on his nighttime mission to examine the walls?
- Does anything stand out to you about how Nehemiah addressed his potential recruits to help with the work? How did he communicate his ideas to them?
- What do you think inspired the crowd to respond positively to Nehemiah's vision?
- What obstacles keep us from wanting to commit to "the common good" (v. 18)?

○ **A Dream Team**

Read Nehemiah 2:11-18. Invite the class to imagine that, like Nehemiah, they have been called to lead a monumental task. Either let the group decide on the nature of this task or be ready to suggest one (such as getting a new playground at your church, starting a community homeless shelter, etc.). The group may recruit anyone they want to be part of their "dream team" to accomplish this task.

Questions

- How might you begin putting your team together?
- What sorts of people would you want to include in your team?
- What attributes would you look for in group members? What sorts of people might you avoid?
- How would you unite your team to accomplish the work?

○ **Starting Small**

Read Luke 6:12-15. Like Nehemiah, Jesus began his ministry with a small group of companions. Though multitudes followed him, only a few were privy to his most intimate thoughts.

Questions

- How did Jesus go about choosing his apostles?
- What attributes did he seem to be looking for—or not looking for?
- How is Jesus' process similar or dissimilar to how Nehemiah built his team?
- How is working together as Christians easier or more difficult than working with others in a secular setting?

C A Way to End

Working as part of a team can be one of the greatest joys of leadership. It can also, however, be one of the greatest challenges. It was one thing for Nehemiah to have a vision for what he needed to do, but how could he communicate his vision and his passion to others? Leaders today face similar challenges. **How might we move beyond solo efforts to motivating others to act together on behalf of the “common good”?**

○ **Passer or Scorer?**

Dean Smith, coach of the University of North Carolina men’s basketball team, is reported to have told future NBA legend Michael Jordan in his freshman year, “Michael, if you can’t pass, you can’t play.”

Discuss this saying as a metaphor for teamwork in all aspects of life.

Questions

- Do you consider yourself a good “passer”—that is, a good team player?
- Where do you work well in a group?
- Where do you struggle in working with others?
- How does Nehemiah’s example challenge you to work better as part of a team?

○ **What Makes a Team Successful?**

What makes teams successful? A survey of American workers returned the following answers (“Teamwork in the American Workplace”):

- Getting along (33%)
- Listening (29%)
- Setting priorities (21%)
- Feeling recognized (6%)
- Having everyone agree (6%)
- Deciding who’s in charge (4%)

Discuss participants’ experiences working in teams. Do they agree or disagree with these answers? Are there any they would add?

Lead participants to think about places they exercise leadership—at home, church, work, community groups, etc. How can we foster these attributes?

Resources

Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

Ralph W. Klein, “Nehemiah,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1999).

“Teamwork in the American Workplace,” http://www.brightquotes.com/team_fr.html

Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2003).

H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Nelson, 1985).

3

LEADERS OVERCOME
OBSTACLES*Nehemiah 4:10-20***Bible Background****Starting the Work**

Having successfully presented his plan to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, Nehemiah begins to organize his team. People are spread out and organized to work simultaneously on more than forty different sections of the wall. The workers are of every conceivable religious, political, and economic background, but all are organized toward a common end: restoring the honor and safety of Jerusalem.

Workers come from within the city as well as from the surrounding area. Some join the effort out of family loyalty, some because of their professional roles or positions in society, and some because of personal interest in the project. Nehemiah organizes this diverse workforce by assigning them according to family groups to work on the sections of the wall in which they have greatest personal investment.

Soon, however, the work becomes so intimidating to Judah's neighbors that they begin to mock the builders and insult their work, hoping to break their morale (Neh 4:1-3). Nehemiah responds with strong words of his own. For their part, the workers respond to the mockery by working even harder. Soon they have the wall halfway completed!

Such a milestone should be cause for celebration, but the halfway point also

brings the workers to a crossroads. In all undertakings, the midpoint "is often a point for critical reflection. Initial enthusiasm has worn thin and the end is not yet sufficiently within sight to encourage a final effort" (Williamson, 229). When their opponents threaten them again, the people begin to wilt. Despite Nehemiah's continued prayers—as well as posting a guard over the city (see Neh 4:7)—the people's resolve begins to waver.

Cacophony of Chaos

The external threat that the wall-builders perceive results in escalating fear and chaos in their ranks. With the speed of a rampant rumor, a lament spreads among the people. Soon it's bursting from everyone's lips as a sort of poem: "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall" (v. 10). In Hebrew the words take the form of a rhyming couplet. The sentiment spreads among the people like a virus, filling them with doubt and disillusionment at the immensity of the task before them.

The people of Jerusalem are not only threatened internally by despair; they are also disheartened by the taunts of their enemies that they are vulnerable to a sneak attack (v. 11). If their external opponents burst in upon them, would the wall-weary Jews even see them coming?

Outline

FOR TEACHING

As if these two threats weren't enough, another problem arises: many of the workers hear the cries of their families back home. Those living on the outskirts of Jerusalem—in the areas most vulnerable to attack—beg the workers to come home and protect them from the impending invasion. These families plead time and time again with Nehemiah's forces to make the security of the people on the city's outer edges a priority—even if it means abandoning their work on the wall.

Suddenly Nehemiah's impressive, unified team seems in danger of dissolving under the pressure of competing interests and priorities. How will he adjust his leadership in response to such obstacles?

Nehemiah's New Plan

Nehemiah moves with decisive speed and wisdom to reorganize and reenergize his workforce. His efforts to counter low morale and external threat are both varied and creative. On the logistical side, Nehemiah posts armed guards at the lowest points on the wall. He uses the organizational system he already put in place in chapter 3, continuing to assign guards to areas according to their families and local connections. He hopes placing guards in visible places will lead Judah's enemies to think that greater numbers of armed forces are lurking behind the walls. This plan proves successful: the enemies hesitate to attack once their plot becomes known.

Even after their enemies withdraw, however, Nehemiah continues to reorganize his forces so they can better defend his workers. In some cases, this means workers take on additional responsibilities: the already weary burden-bearers now have to carry their loads with one arm's strength while carrying a weapon in the other. Since those doing construction needed both of their hands to work, they had swords strapped at their sides and were surrounded by some of Nehemiah's personal forces for added protection.

- I. Starting the Work (Neh 3:1–4:1-9)
 - A. Nehemiah organizes families from all over Judah to work side by side on different sections of the wall (3:1-32).
 - B. Judah's enemies mock the work of the wall-builders. Nehemiah responds with strong prayers (4:1-5).
 - C. External opposition escalates to physical threats. Nehemiah responds with both prayer and increased defensive strategies (4:6-9).
- II. Cacophony of Chaos (4:10-12)
 - A. Low morale begins to spread among the people (v. 10).
 - B. Jerusalem's enemies question their readiness to defend themselves (v. 11).
 - C. Jews living on the city's edges beg the wall-workers to come home and protect them (v. 12).
- III. Nehemiah's New Plan (4:13-20)
 - A. Physical Actions
 1. Nehemiah stations guards along walls as deterrents (v. 13).
 2. He deploys half his personal troops to defend the workers (v. 16).
 3. He equips the burden-bearers and wall-builders with weapons (v. 17-18).
 4. He devises a plan to bring the spread-out workers together in case of danger (v. 18-19).
 - B. Intangible and Spiritual Actions
 1. Nehemiah appeals to family ties (v. 14).
 2. He uses "holy war" language to remind the people of God's presence (v. 14, 20).
 3. He attributes victory to God's intervention (v. 15).

Finally, a system is put in place to keep the people in contact with each other even as they are widely spread out on the wall. In case of an attack, word would reach Nehemiah and a trumpet would summon everyone together and find strength in numbers.

Nehemiah's plan includes not only these physical components, but also intangible and spiritual components. Nehemiah appeals to the people's loyalty to one another. He encourages them to fight for the people nearest and dearest to their hearts: their kin, children, spouses, and homes (v. 14). In addition to stationing warriors in defensive positions, Nehemiah challenges the people with language that would be familiar to their ears from holy war traditions (v. 14). He reminds them that they are not left to rely on their power alone, but that "our God will fight for us" (v. 20).

Finally, when their enemies turn back from their plans, Nehemiah does not credit his clever pragmatism and organization. Rather, he declares that their victory was because God had frustrated their enemies. Nehemiah credits not his abilities in dealing with the potential invasion and division, but above all the work of a God constantly looking out for them.

A Way to Begin

Nehemiah's plan was progressing smoothly: he had secured the king's blessing, journeyed to Jerusalem, and assembled a massive support team. About halfway through the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, however, obstacles began to spring up from both without and within. How would Nehemiah respond to challenges to his leadership and vision?

○ **Common Challenges**

Harvard University's Bok Center for Teaching and Learning has identified the most common obstacles faced by a group seeking to work together. Name these or list them on the board:

- Floundering (struggling to figure out roles)
- Dominating or reluctant participants
- Digressions and tangents
- Feuds
- Ignoring or ridiculing others

Have participants add to the list based on their own experience. Discuss whether each obstacle comes from an internal or an external source.

Nehemiah faced both internal and external obstacles in his effort to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. In this lesson we'll learn how he led the people to overcome these obstacles.

○ **Obstacle Course**

Distribute blank pieces of paper and pens or pencils. Have participants draw a map of their life as if it were an obstacle course. Ask them to include the major challenges they have faced, both those within or those coming from other people or external circumstances. Ask them to consider how they overcame those obstacles.

Invite any who are willing to share their maps with the class.

Question

- How would your life be different if you had not managed to get past these obstacles?

Let's explore how Nehemiah led the people to overcome their obstacles.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Nehemiah's community was beset by many of the same forces that threaten our efforts to work together in a group: fear, jealousy, exhaustion, panic, and insecurity. All of their hard work could be quickly derailed. How did Nehemiah keep everything from falling apart? How did God intervene? Explore how Nehemiah's story gives hope to us when obstacles threaten our plans and goals.

○ **Discussing the Text**

Using the “Outline for Teaching” and information in the “Bible Background” section, summarize the events leading up to today’s passage. Read Nehemiah 4:10-20. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What were the primary fears and worries that threatened to tear the people apart?
- How does Nehemiah respond when he first realizes how deep the problems are?
- What motivates the people to resume work despite the threats of their enemies?
- How might you have felt if you were a weary burden-bearer who now had to carry not only materials but also a weapon?
- Nehemiah tells the people to “remember the Lord...and fight for your kin” (v. 14). Which of these commands would most motivate you? Why?
- When have you seen divine favor and human leadership work together to overcome obstacles?

○ **In Good Company**

Read Nehemiah 4:10-20. Discuss the seriousness of Nehemiah’s situation and the steps he takes to overcome internal and external obstacles.

Have volunteers read Exodus 14:10-25, Joshua 6:1-16, and Judges 7:9-21. Compare and contrast the story of Nehemiah with those of Moses, Joshua, and Gideon.

Questions

- How do godly leaders respond in the face of threat and opposition?
- What role does God’s action play and what role do human leaders play in overcoming difficulties?

○ **Pray and Work**

Read Nehemiah 4:10-20. Share the following quotation:

“Pray and work” (*ora et labora*) is the Benedictine motto. Work is not less holy than prayer...work and prayer are partners. We need both contemplation and action. They complement each other by keeping our feet firmly rooted in the soil of life and our hearts strongly fixed in the love of God. (Pratt and Homan, 47)

Discuss: Where in Nehemiah’s responses to obstacles do you see prayer and work going hand in hand? Does Nehemiah seem to value one more than the other? Which do you tend to value more, especially when facing difficulty?

C A Way to End

How can we keep our heads in contentious situations? Nehemiah used both his practical intelligence and his supernatural dependence on God to help his people find their way through a rocky patch. Explore how believers today can strive to do the same.

○ My Response

Distribute copies of the resource page “My Response” (p. 25). Have participants answer the questions on the worksheet in private.

Invite those who are willing to share any insights they received as they completed this assignment.

○ Danger: Obstacles Ahead!

Invite participants to reflect on their work, church participation, parenting, marriage, or any other aspect of life in which they have some responsibility. Discuss the following questions.

Questions

- What obstacles do you currently have in your life?
- What obstacles may lie in the near future?
- Do you feel more pressed upon by internal or external obstacles at this time as you strive to accomplish your goals?
- What does today’s passage say to you about how to face these obstacles?
- What practical steps could you take to address these issues?
- How might you envision God intervening to bless your efforts?
- How can we support each other as we face these obstacles?

○ Operating as One

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Encourage listeners to visualize what unity among challenges might look like for those with whom they are working toward a common goal.

Resources

Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

Ralph W. Klein, “Nehemiah,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1999).

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<<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/wigintro.html#wig6>>.

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4

LEADERS CHAMPION THE POWERLESS

Nehemiah 5:1-13

Bible Background



Deteriorating Conditions

Serious threats from opponents and crashing morale among his workers notwithstanding, Nehemiah successfully brought his wall-building project back on track (ch. 4). Soon, though, another serious challenge arose. The citizens of Jerusalem—Nehemiah included—were so absorbed in their work that they missed an approaching economic crisis.

It is possible that desperate conditions had been brewing for some time. It seems, however, that Nehemiah's project may have stretched the people's resources to the breaking point. As people left their homes, vineyards, and land to work on the wall, crops went untended. Meager crops meant meager income. Such neglect of agricultural productivity threatened starvation and financial ruin. To make matters worse, the time when the wall was nearing completion, August or September, was also a critical moment in the harvest when taxes came due (usually paid in produce in the Persian Empire) and creditors came to collect interest on loans (Williamson, 236). What would the people do when their decision to work on the wall left them with nothing to live on and no resources with which to pay their debts?

As in most crises, the poorest were hit hardest. Nehemiah 5:2 records their cries

of despair. Those who owned no land, dependent on their wages from labor to live, were in danger of starving to death. They were being forced to pledge the labor of their children—their only resource—in order to survive.

Verse 3 memorializes the cry of a second group, those who did own property but had to mortgage their land or face foreclosure in order to get money for food. With a famine deepening their crisis, their situation was becoming desperate. These people feared they would also become part of the landless poor.

Finally, verses 4-5 describe a group not struggling to eat, but struggling under the threat of crippling debt. Taxes on their properties had come due, a royal tribute owed to Persia each year, and they were borrowing escalating sums of money to meet their obligations. Even more horrifying, some of these people's daughters had been exploited in sex trafficking to pay off their parents' debts to neighbors. To add to their plight, it was their own kinfolk—fellow Jews—from whom they had to borrow money and who now threatened to foreclose on their property and force their children into debt slavery.

Nehemiah's Reaction

Just as God heard and acted upon the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt (Ex 2:23-25), Nehemiah hears the cries of his fellow Jews. And not only does he hear, he responds with deep emotion.

He is enraged by the reports of suffering among his people and, even more tragically, by the fact that this suffering was not inflicted by foreign oppressors but by Jews on one another. But he doesn't lash out reactively. Rather, in typically thoughtful Nehemiah style, only "after thinking it over" (v. 7) does he act. He seeks to lead not from anger but from a careful discernment of what is best.

After thoughtfully considering the situation, however, Nehemiah does not hesitate to exercise his authority. It is clear to him that Jerusalem's leaders have forsaken the commitment to "the common good" they made in 2:18. They had chosen instead to profit at the expense of their fellow workers. In response, Nehemiah calls together "a great assembly" (v. 7) to hear his words against the powerful of Jerusalem society and to hold them accountable for their actions.

In front of the whole community, Nehemiah points out what Williamson calls the "moral absurdity" and "self-contradictory nature" of the actions of the nobles and officials (Williamson, 239). In a twist of irony, the Jews, who had returned to Jerusalem not long ago, had spent great sums of money buying back their kinfolk from Gentiles to whom they had sold themselves in debt slavery. Apparently they had done this only to turn around and make their neighbors slaves once again, undoing their own humanitarian efforts.

Nehemiah next appeals to their religious heritage. If common sense could not lead them to act justly, then perhaps the God they confess would. In Jewish law and history, the fear of God (v. 9) is often mentioned as a motivator toward financial justice. Echoes of Levitical law are heard in verse 9: "If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them.... Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God" (Lev 25:35-36).

Outline

FOR TEACHING

I. Deteriorating Conditions (Neh 5:1-5)

A. An Economic Crisis

1. Working on the wall led to neglect of agricultural activities.
2. People now struggled to eat, pay debts, and pay taxes.

B. Desperate People

1. The landless poor were at risk of starvation (v. 2).
2. Some offered their land as collateral to get food, stripping them of their ability to earn money (v. 3).
3. Others were forced to sell their children as debt slaves and had their daughters sexually exploited to pay off money borrowed from neighbors (v. 4-5).

II. Nehemiah's Reaction (Neh 5:6-11)

A. Stating the Problem (vv. 6-7)

1. Nehemiah is angry, but he thinks before acting (vv. 6-7).
2. He calls out the powerful leaders, even though this risks alienating allies he needs in the wall-building project (v. 7).
3. He gathers an assembly to be witnesses for accountability (v. 7).

B. Making an Appeal (vv. 8-9)

1. To logic: why put people back in slavery whom you recently freed from such bondage (v. 8)?
2. To faith: the fear of God should lead to justice (v. 9).
3. To pride: this behavior leaves us open to the taunts of our enemies (v. 9).

C. A Twofold Solution (vv. 10-11)

1. Restore the people's land.
2. Stop charging interest on loans.

III. The People's Response (Neh 5:12-13).

The nobles and officials swear a public oath to change their ways (v. 12-13)

After pointing this out, Nehemiah decides that if God will not compel them, perhaps pride will: If you cheat one another, Nehemiah concludes, you leave yourselves open to the taunts of Judah's enemies. In effect, Nehemiah asks, "What will the neighbors say?"

Finally, Nehemiah once again proves himself to be a leader who stands with his people. He admits that he, too, has engaged in this unfair lending to his neighbors. He vows that he and his brothers will be the first to return land they have confiscated and to forgive the debts and interest owed on them. Nehemiah acts for justice not only with his words, but with his own confession and change of behavior.

The Community's Response

Nehemiah's appeal is effective. The nobles and officials, chastened and convicted, vow to restore the people's property and demand no more interest on loans owed. In an effort to ensure the seriousness of the people's response and safeguard against falling back into a repeat of these disastrous practices, Nehemiah has them swear an oath in public under the direction of the priest.

Nehemiah also carries out the symbolic act of shaking his robes—the equivalent of emptying his pockets—to further mark the seriousness of this change in the people's direction and to point out the dire consequences of straying again. It is only after dealing with the problem in such a public and direct way that the community can be restored and resume its work on the wall.

A Way to Begin

The leadership crisis faced here by Nehemiah is a familiar one: how do you lead faithfully in the face of crippling economic conditions? Today, many people live on the edge, and how to help those facing debt and poverty remains a critical question.

○ Startling Statistics

Distribute copies of the resource page "Startling Statistics" (p. 26). Have participants read the statistics provided and share their responses.

Note that these sorts of struggles are not new. In biblical times, the situation of people who fell into financial crisis—in particular, debt—was even more dire.

Today we will learn how Nehemiah worked to look out for those who faced economic peril.

○ Photo Reflection

Display the photo "Migrant Mother" by Dorothea Lange. (The image can be obtained at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29516/>.) Ask participants to reflect silently on this photo. Then ask the following questions.

Questions

- Under what circumstances do you imagine this picture was taken?
- What body language do you see in this image?
- What emotions or thoughts does it conjure up in you?

The Library of Congress caption on this photo reads: "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California." Discuss: if you were to meet this woman, what would you say to her or try to do for her—if anything?

Although she lived in 1930s America, this woman could also have lived in fifth-century Jerusalem. The plight faced by the people there was very similar.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The economic crisis brewing in Jerusalem left huge sections of the population vulnerable. Sadly, many of the rich taking advantage of the poor were fellow members of the faith community. This angered Nehemiah deeply. It couldn't have been easy for Nehemiah to publicly confront the "nobles" and "officials" of Judah—people he no doubt wanted on his side to complete the rebuilding project—but he was motivated by the fear of God to put a stop to their abusive practices.

○ **Discussing the Text**

Read Nehemiah 5:1-13. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Imagine being so hungry and financially destitute that you had to sell your land—or even your children—to pay your debts. How would this make you feel?
- What would be your mental state in the face of such options?
- Nehemiah grew angry when he heard the cries of the oppressed. When you hear of people in need, what are your first reactions?
- Do you tend to translate your emotional responses into concrete action? Why or why not?
- What do you think of Nehemiah's move to call out the nobles and officials on their behavior in a public setting?
- Which of the things Nehemiah appeals to in verses 8-10 do you find most compelling: logic and moral reasoning, the fear of God, or pride?
- Why did Nehemiah admit his own wrongdoing and change his ways?
- What do you think of the way forward Nehemiah suggests in verses 10-11?

○ **Old Testament Examples**

Read Nehemiah 5:1-13. Describe the desperate conditions the people faced as described in the "Bible Background" section.

When God led the Hebrews out of slavery, God gave them laws to ensure economic justice. God hoped the memory of their own enslavement and powerlessness would lead the people to act more justly towards those in need in the future.

Invite volunteers to read Exodus 22:25-26, Leviticus 25:35-42, and Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-11. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Where in these guidelines do you hear echoes of the suggestions Nehemiah made?
- In what ways did the people of Jerusalem stray from these mandates?
- Where is the challenge in these passages for us today?

○ **New Testament Examples**

Invite volunteers to read one or more of the following parables of Jesus: Matthew 18:21-35, Matthew 25:31-40, or Luke 7:41-43. Discuss how Jesus' teachings about economic fairness compare with the ideas Nehemiah proposed to the people. How can we show compassion to those in need?

C A Way to End

Nehemiah heard the cries of the powerless and took decisive action to defend their cause. How might Nehemiah's bold call for justice compel us to love in truth and action today?

○ **In the News**

Just as some were vulnerable in Nehemiah's day, some people are especially at risk in our time.

Provide copies of a recent newspaper's world news, local news, and financial sections. Have participants skim the stories and headlines to find groups or individuals they perceive as being in particular need or as being most vulnerable to exploitation or poverty. List these on the board.

Questions

- In our community, who do you think is most vulnerable?
- What is our obligation and call to these people as a community of faith?

End with prayer asking for God's wisdom to help you address these matters as followers of Christ.

○ **Insiders and Outsiders**

Nehemiah seemed to uphold a high standard for how people should support each other within the community of faith. Do you feel a greater sense of obligation to help your own group than to help strangers? Why?

○ **Caring for "the Least of These"**

Discuss ways your congregation cares for those in need. If you have a missions or social justice team, invite a member of this group to share with the class about the efforts, projects, and initiatives in which your congregation participates to help those locally and globally in need.

Challenge participants to look for ways they might get involved individually or as a group in a mission that reflects the sort of caring community Nehemiah called for.

Resources

Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

Ralph W. Klein, "Nehemiah," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1999).

H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Nelson, 1985).



MY RESPONSE

How does Nehemiah's story of leadership amidst trials intersect with your own story of being a leader? Reflect on and respond to the following questions:

What fears and worries most threaten your community at this time (either internal or external challenges)? How do these things threaten to sidetrack your community from working toward common goals?

When you are in a position of leadership, what are your first responses when people come to you with words of panic and fear? What do you wish your first responses were?

What sorts of things motivate you to stick with a task when they grow increasingly difficult and opposition increases? What have you seen motivate those around you?



STARTLING STATISTICS

- In 2012, the average American household with at least one credit card had nearly \$15,950 in credit-card debt.
- An average of one child in every classroom in America is at risk of losing his or her home because their parents are unable to pay their mortgage.
- 43% of American households spend more than they earn each year.
- 52% of employees live paycheck to paycheck.
- Nearly 42% of all American households do not have enough in liquid financial assets to support themselves for at least three months.

Sources

“Controlling Your Debt,” CNN.com <<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/money101/lesson9/index.htm>>.

“Foreclosure Statistics,” NeighborWorks America <http://www.fdic.gov/about/comein/files/foreclosure_statistics.pdf>.

