#### NEHEMIAH: BUILDING A LIFE OF SERVICE



#### Anything worth doing is worth doing right.

Serving God is more than a Sunday morning activity; it's an all-encompassing lifestyle. But what exactly does that look like?

In the Old Testament, Nehemiah provides a great example of the struggles and rewards of serving God. He was called to lead the Jewish people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. They served together in this great task, even as they encountered opposition and ridicule from enemies. They did far more than build a wall. As they served and rebuilt the wall, God rebuilt them!

We can serve God and others in a variety of ways, but in Nehemiah we see the principles by which we can serve—no matter what our work entails. Our work for God will have its ups and downs, but we gain so much as we serve. A lifestyle of service includes the work of God in us. Read on and let the example of Nehemiah help you build a life of service.



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#### **Nehemiah: Building a Life of Service**

Session 1 **Pray** Nehemiah 1:1-11

Session 2 **Plan** Nehemiah 2:1-8,17-18

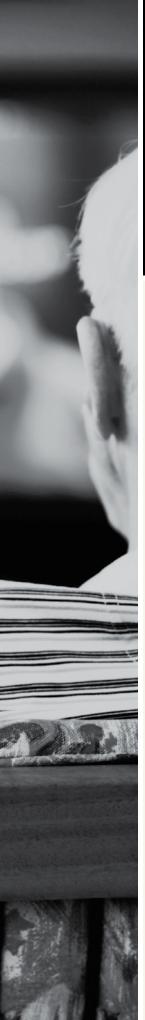
Session 3 **Persist** Nehemiah 4:1-3,6-9,14-18

Session 4 **Protect** Nehemiah 5:1-13

Session 5 **Prioritize** Nehemiah 6:1-3,15-16; 8:1-3,5-8

Session 6 **Praise** Nehemiah 8:9-12; 12:27-31a

Find additional tools and resources to support this study, all available online at BibleStudiesForLife.com/AdultExtra.



## SESSION 1 PRAY

#### ▶ The Point

Pour out your heart to God in prayer.

#### The Passage

Nehemiah 1:1-11

#### The Bible Meets Life

The phone that was previously in my office had a red light that blinked with every new voicemail. It was annoying, but I had no idea how to turn it off. My solution? I put a piece of tape over the light. That phone has long since been replaced with a cell phone, but now I'm bombarded with constant notifications about messages, texts, and tweets. Heaven doesn't have a message machine with a blinking red light. Sometimes we may wonder if God hears our prayers, but we have no "message read" notification on our phones when it comes to prayer. Neither does prayer usually offer the same "instant gratification" we often get from social media notifications—but what it accomplishes is phenomenal! Prayer can be a mysterious spiritual discipline, but God invites us to talk to Him! Nehemiah was a man who saw the need for prayer and realized its benefits. When Nehemiah received bad news, his first reaction was to pray. He knew prayer is more than just simply sending messages to God. Prayer is a spiritual endeavor that brings us into communion with God, focusing on His truth and leading us into action.

#### The Setting

Beginning around 537 BC many Jews who had been exiled to Babylon were allowed to return to Jerusalem to restore what the Babylonians had destroyed. Their plan was to rebuild the temple and the city. They eventually finished the temple but for decades the absence of walls and gates left Jerusalem not only defenseless but also the object of ridicule. Around 445 BC, when Nehemiah heard about the conditions in Jerusalem, he was greatly distressed and desired to change the situation.

#### What does the Bible say?

#### Month of Chislev (v. 1)— After the exile to Babylon the Jews began their calendar year in the spring. Chislev corresponds to our period of November/December.

**The exile** (v. 2)—While 10,000 Jews were relocated to Babylon beginning in 597 BC, this probably refers to Jews who returned to Jerusalem beginning in 538 BC to rebuild the city.

**Cupbearer** (v. 11)—This trusted servant chose and tasted the wine for a king to protect him from being poisoned. He was expected to be cheerful and encouraging in the king's presence.

#### Nehemiah 1:1-11

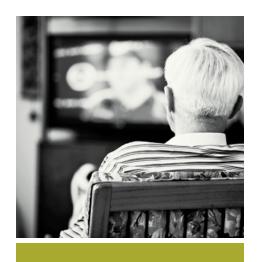
- <sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the fortress city of Susa,
- <sup>2</sup> Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah, and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile.
- <sup>3</sup> They said to me, "The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned." <sup>4</sup> When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens.
- <sup>5</sup> I said, LORD, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands, <sup>6</sup> let your eyes be open and your ears be attentive to hear your servant's prayer that I now pray to you day and night for your servants, the Israelites. I confess the sins we have committed against you. Both I and my father's family have sinned. <sup>7</sup> We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses.
- <sup>8</sup> Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.
- <sup>9</sup> But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell."
- <sup>10</sup> They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand. <sup>11</sup> Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man.

At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.

#### **GET INTO THE STUDY**



Notes



the "Nehemiah" poster, to introduce the major theme of this study, along with the specific focus of each session.

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 81 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): "When have you been stopped in your tracks by a news story?" Allow time for each person to respond.

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to

"The Bible Meets Life" on page 82 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of prayer by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to **"The Point"** on page 82 of the PSG: **"Pour out your heart to God in prayer."** 

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, bring index cards to distribute to each participant. Instruct them to write on the card something for which they would like to ask for prayer. Inform participants you will share these requests with the class. After everyone has completed a card, collect the cards in a basket. Invite participants to reach in and draw a card (if an individual pulls his or her own card, tell the person to get a different card). Encourage participants to commit to pray for the person and for the request identified on their card throughout the week.

**PRAY:** Transition into the study by asking the Lord to teach us the importance of prayer and the strength to make it an ongoing discipline in our lives.

# NEHEMIAH: BUILDING A LIFE OF SERVICE PRAY Nehemiah 1:1-11 PLAN Nehemiah 2:1-8,17-18 PERSIST Nehemiah 4:1-3,6-9,14-18 PROTECT Nehemiah 5:1-13 PRIORITIZE Nehemiah 6:1-3,15-16; 8:1-3,5-8 PRAISE Nehemiah 8:9-12; 12:27-31a

#### LLUSTRATOR

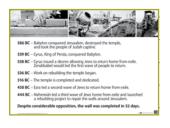
Want to know about biblical culture, people, archaeology, and history? *Biblical Illustrator* has articles that tie to each session in this study at *lifeway.com/Bl.* 

TIP: When helpful, use this "Notes" column to record additional discussion questions, concepts, and activities that connect the study content with your specific group.



#### **STUDY THE BIBLE**

# Notes



#### **ALTERNATE QUESTION:**

What obstacles hinder us from recognizing the needs of others?

#### Nehemiah 1:1-3

<sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the fortress city of Susa, <sup>2</sup> Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah, and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile. <sup>3</sup> They said to me, "The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned."

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Nehemiah 1:1-3 on page 83 of the PSG.

**RECAP:** The Book of Nehemiah begins with bad news. Hanani, either a close friend or likely Nehemiah's biological brother, brought Nehemiah a message he didn't want to hear. The few people left in Jerusalem were in trouble; the city was in ruins. This update was devastating because of the history leading up to this point.

**GUIDE:** Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help group members understand the events that had led the Jewish people to this terrible place in their history.

**LEADER PACK:** Display **Pack Item 7,** the "Timeline of the Jews' Return from Exile" poster, to provide context for when these historical events in the Book of Nehemiah took place.

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 84 of the PSG. How can we pray like Nehemiah? We should ask specific questions and listen carefully.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 83 of the PSG: "What helps you become aware of the needs around you?"

**TRANSITION:** The next verses show us the importance of confession and repentance once we are made aware.

#### **Nehemiah 1:1-3 Commentary**

[Verse 1] Everyday life has a way of creating routines that can insulate us from what's going on in our communities and beyond. We must determine to stay informed about the happenings and needs in our area and in our world. This was the pattern of **Nehemiah**. The Book of Nehemiah is a collection of the memoirs of Nehemiah. For about twenty years Artaxerxes I had been king of Persia, thus the date was approximately 446-445 BC. Chislev was the ninth month of the Jewish calendar by common reckoning, corresponding to our period of November/December. The opening chapter occurred in the fortress city of **Susa** in modern-day Iran about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf.

[Verse 2] At that time a man named **Hanani**, identified as Nehemiah's brother, came to Susa. While a Jew would have been considered family in a broad sense, Hanani could have been Nehemiah's actual blood brother. (See "my brother" in Neh. 7:2.) Since the men had just come from **Judah**, Nehemiah was eager to hear about his homeland, so he **questioned** them about the people and about **Jerusalem**. The Babylonians had taken roughly 10,000 prominent Jews captive and relocated them to Babylon. Beginning around 538 BC, the Persian king allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem to restore the temple and the city. The Book of Ezra details several trips in which about 50,000 Jews ultimately returned to their homeland. They finally rebuilt the temple but the city itself was not completely restored.

When Nehemiah inquired about the Jewish remnant that had survived the **exile**, he could have been referring to the poor people or their descendants who had remained in Judah. More likely, however, he was asking about the Jews and their descendants who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Though he had probably never visited, Nehemiah was concerned about the Jews' welfare and the condition of the land of his ancestors.

**[Verse 3]** The news Nehemiah heard about **the province** (the land of Judah) was not good. A **remnant** is something leftover—the remains. Perhaps many of the Jews who had willingly returned to Jerusalem had given up and returned to Babylon, leaving few, a *remnant*, in the area. Nehemiah heard that the Jewish people still in the region were experiencing **great trouble and disgrace**. Life was difficult for the early Jews who went to Jerusalem to help restore the city. Their trouble came largely from the people who had been living in the land for decades, many of whom had been relocated there by the Assyrians after they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. These "enemies" (Ezra 4:1) saw the Jewish people as a threat to their influence and control of the area, thus they opposed the rebuilding of the temple and the city. The enemies of the Jews forcibly stopped the building and may have destructed anything that had previously been done.

The bad news continued as Nehemiah heard about **Jerusalem's wall**, which was **broken down** and the city's **gates**, which had been burned down. The temple eventually had been rebuilt, but the degraded condition of the wall and its gates was a disgrace to the Jews and a dishonor to the Lord.



#### 10 minutes STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes	Nehemiah 1:4-7
	<sup>4</sup> When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens. <sup>5</sup> I said, LORD, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands, <sup>6</sup> let your eyes be open and your ears be attentive to hear your servant's prayer that I now prato you day and night for your servants, the Israelites. I confess the sins we have committed against you. Both I and my father's family have sinned. <sup>7</sup> We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes and ordinances you gave your servant Moses.
	READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Nehemiah 1:4-7 on page 84 of the PSC
	<b>GUIDE:</b> Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help grou members understand the passion with which Nehemiah prayed to the "God of the heavens."
	SUMMARIZE: Highlight the main points from page 85 of the PSG. Nehemiah's prayer speaks to our own approach to prayer.
ALTERNATE QUESTION:	Prayer is all about God, not us.
What captures your attention	Confession realigns our priorities.
about Nehemiah's	Life should be an ongoing conversation with God.
prayer?	DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 84 of the PSG: "What do we learn about Nehemiah from his prayer?"
	TRANSITION: The next verses show us how we are to look to God for guidance.

#### **Nehemiah 1:4-7 Commentary**

[Verse 4] Bad news has a way of moving us—often, however, we are tempted to move away from God. Nehemiah moved toward God. When he heard about the wall and gates at Jerusalem, Nehemiah sat down and wept. Since the situation of Jerusalem had apparently been a reality for many years, we might wonder why Nehemiah responded as he did. Had he not known about the condition of the city's walls and gates? Perhaps God at that time had pricked Nehemiah's heart to the condition of his homeland because the Lord planned to use him to rectify the situation. Whatever the case Nehemiah mourned for a number of days to the Lord, the God of the heavens. Though Jews were only required to fast one day a year by the Mosaic law, Nehemiah either did not want to eat or he intentionally refused food so he could seek God's will.

[Verse 5] Nehemiah prayed to the **God of the heavens.** Nehemiah recognized God as **great and awe-inspiring.** Nehemiah evidently knew about God's power and the fear or respect He was to be shown. These were genuine words of praise and worship to the God whom Nehemiah likely had worshiped throughout his whole life. Nehemiah then acknowledged the **covenant** nature of God. A *covenant* was an agreement or bond between two parties. God's special relationship with His people, the Jews, was defined by graciousness. The Hebrew word used to describe this graciousness is *chesed*, which in the Old Testament is often translated mercy, kindness, steadfast love, or lovingkindness. This word emphasizes God's faithfulness and devotion to those in covenant with Him despite the fact they did nothing to deserve His love and favor. God's requirement in this covenant was that His people would **love Him** and would **keep his commands**—His law—that He gave for the good of His people.

[Verse 6] Nehemiah asked God to be open and attentive to his request. He had no doubt God knew of him and the distressing situation. Still he presented himself as God's servant coming to his Master on behalf of the Israelites, who were also God's servants. While God had been faithful in keeping His responsibility in the covenant, the people had not done what was required of them. They had broken the covenant when they disobeyed God's commands. Their sins were the reason God removed them from the promised land, and the reason they had been exiles in a foreign land. While his ancestors committed these sins over one hundred years before, Nehemiah identified with them and confessed his own sins as well as those of his family (his father's family).

[Verse 7] Nehemiah noted he and his fellow Jews had themselves acted corruptly toward God. It was what the Jewish people had done throughout their history as they disobeyed God's commands, statutes, and ordinances, referring to the laws God **gave** to **Moses** found in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These laws gave instruction for how God's people were to live in relationship to Him and other people.



#### **STUDY THE BIBLE**

### Notes **ALTERNATE QUESTION:** What are the benefits of focusing on the attributes of God when we pray?

#### Nehemiah 1:8-11

<sup>8</sup> Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. <sup>9</sup> But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell." <sup>10</sup> They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand. <sup>11</sup> Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man. At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Nehemiah 1:8-11 on page 85 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 86 of the PSG: "When has prayer prepared you for something important in your life?"

**RECAP:** In his prayer, Nehemiah included a commitment to God's Word and reassurance of God's promises. Nehemiah recognized people cannot follow God without carefully observing His commands in Scripture. In order for God to guide us, we must consistently immerse ourselves in His Word, and when we're committed to God's Word, we also have an assurance of His promises.

**DISCUSS:** Question #5 on page 86 of the PSG: "What principles can we learn from Nehemiah about making requests of God?"

**DO:** Direct group members to complete the activity "A-C-T-S" on page 87 of the PSG to help them understand the importance of prayer.



Sometimes having a guide to prayer can be helpful. The A-C-T-S acrostic is a simple way to guide your prayer time. For each of the headings, write one or two sentences of a prayer. [PSG lists Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.]

#### **Nehemiah 1:8-11 Commentary**

[Verse 8] After declaring God's sovereignty and confessing his (and his people's) sin, Nehemiah requested God's guidance. He recalled words God gave to **Moses** centuries earlier and asked God to **remember** those words. Nehemiah first rehearsed the warning God **commanded** Moses (see Deut. 4:25-27; 28:64) of what would happen if the Israelites were unfaithful to Him. God had been faithful but the people had not. Thus God had been just and faithful to His word to **scatter** the people among the nations over a century earlier when the Jews went into exile in Babylon.

[Verse 9] Disobedience did not necessarily spell the end of the Jews' relationship with God. Because of His merciful and forgiving nature, God also promised restoration and blessing if the people would return to Him. This involved turning away from their sin and turning back to God—the essence of New Testament repentance. Returning to God meant more than just saying they were sorry. It was essential they carefully observe and obey God's commands. The conditional nature of God's promise is emphasized in the word if. If they repented and obeyed God once again, then He would restore them. God promised to gather them and bring them back to Judah and Jerusalem—the place that had been synonymous with God's presence (and His name) on earth.

[Verse 10] Just as Moses interceded to God on behalf of the Hebrew people when they sinned, so Nehemiah interceded now. He used similar words to those of Moses (see Deut. 9:25-29), referring to the Jews as God's **servants** and **people** whom He had **redeemed** by His **great power** and **strong hand.** Certainly this referred to the exodus from Egypt. Nehemiah may have also considered the deliverance God brought when Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem many years earlier.

[Verse 11] Nehemiah's words reflected a humble servant who recognized his unworthiness to approach his Master. Perhaps during his days of mourning and prayer, Nehemiah learned of other Jews who were also praying for God to work in Jerusalem, others described as God's **servants** who **delight** to revere or fear His **name**.

As he had been grieving and praying, Nehemiah must have been considering what he might do about the condition of Jerusalem. He obviously had devised a plan and asked God for **success today.** Nehemiah sought God's **compassion**, a word picturing a mother's loving encouragement and nurture, as he was about to enter **the presence of** a very influential person, **this man**, referring to King Artaxerxes. While perhaps the most powerful man in the world at the time, still the king was just a man subject to the God of creation. Nehemiah had access to the ruler because he was the king's **cupbearer.** To serve in this somewhat hazardous position was a high honor. He protected the king by tasting his wine to ensure it hadn't been poisoned. He also served as an unofficial confidante to the king, perhaps even offering advice to the monarch.

When Nehemiah didn't know what to do, he poured out his heart to God and waited for God's guidance. After receiving God's direction, he continued to pray for God's support as he stepped out to put God's plan into action.

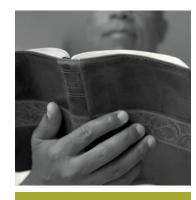


#### **LIVE IT OUT**

Notes

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to page 88 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following activities this week:

Pray. Follow Nehemiah's example in your prayers. Surrender to Christ's lordship and in obedience to His will. Confess your sin. Ask God to give you the guidance to do His will.



- **Read.** Prayer is never detached from God's Word. You can't pray well without reading the Word. You can't read the Bible well without praying. Pray about what you read. Ask God to open your eyes to the wonderful truths in His Word. Then commit in prayer to follow what He shows you in His Word.
- **Write.** Write a handwritten encouraging note to someone after praying for him or her. Ask God to make His name great through this prayerful interaction.

#### Wrap It Up

**TRANSITION:** Read or restate the final paragraph from page 88 of the PSG:

God doesn't have an in-box that gets full. Your prayers do not annoy Him the way a phone's blinking red message light might annoy us. You can't tire God with your prayers. He is always there for you.

**PRAY:** Conclude by praising God for His faithfulness in our lives. Thank Him for the wonderful gift of prayer He has given us.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at
BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra