

## GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

**DISCUSS:** Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 112** and ask **Question #1: When have you enjoyed a once in a lifetime opportunity?**

**GUIDE:** Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 113** where the author described the once in a lifetime opportunity his family had of building a new house when he was in high school.

**SAY:** “Today, we will see how Nehemiah responded to a once in a lifetime opportunity God gave him to be a part of His work.”

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 113: Serving God requires intentionality.**

**PRAY:** Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to open our eyes to the ways He is at work so that we can be intentional in saying yes at just the right moment.

# SESSION 2 PLAN



## ***The Point***

Serving God requires intentionality.

## ***The Bible Meets Life***

Whether we attend to every detail of an assignment or prefer to “fly by the seat of our pants,” we would do well to evaluate our plans. Is this the most effective way I can carry out this task? After praying

about the situation in Jerusalem, Nehemiah devised a plan for accomplishing the work before him. And, as he planned, he bathed those plans in prayerful dependence on God. Nehemiah’s example gives us a strategy for our own acts of service.

## ***The Passage***

Nehemiah 2:1-8,17-18

## ***The Setting***

About the middle of the fifth century BC, a Jew named Nehemiah, who was a servant to the king of the Persian Empire, heard distressing news about the ruins in his ancestral homeland of Jerusalem. He spent many days mourning, praying, and fasting, seeking God’s guidance for how he should respond to the run down condition of the city’s walls and gates. After that time he stepped out in faith as prayer led to plans and then to action.

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## ***Nehemiah 2:1-5a***

**1** During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was set before him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had never been sad in his presence, **2** so the king said to me, “Why are you sad, when you aren’t sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was overwhelmed with fear

**3** and replied to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should I not be sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

**4** Then the king asked me, “What is your request?”

So I prayed to the God of the heavens

**5a** and answered the king,

**Verse 1.** Nehemiah had prayed and planned about how to address the state of the walls of Jerusalem. Then when God opened the door for his next step, Nehemiah was ready to take action. It was now **Nisan**, the first month of the Jewish calendar. About four months had passed since he first heard the disturbing news about Jerusalem. During that time he had diligently prayed and planned, asking God for favor with his master, King Artaxerxes, who was in his **twentieth year** of ruling the vast Persian Empire that included the land of Judah.

**1** ▶ Since Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king, he was responsible for verifying that the king’s wine had not been poisoned. This was an important position that carried a measure of influence with the king. When another servant brought wine and set the cup before the king, Nehemiah took the wine and, after tasting it, gave it to the king.

While Nehemiah mourned over the condition of Jerusalem for months, he apparently had masked his distress as he did his job: He had never been openly sad in the king’s presence.

**Verse 2.** On this day the king noted a change in Nehemiah’s countenance. This points to the special relationship Nehemiah had with the king that such a powerful man would recognize something was wrong with one of his servants. So the king asked Nehemiah why he was sad when he wasn’t sick.

## **STUDY THE BIBLE** ***Nehemiah 2:1-5a***



**10 minutes**

**SUMMARIZE:** Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 112.

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 2:1-5a.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 1** on this page and page 114 to remind group members that Nehemiah served as the cupbearer to the king. Share the significance of the countenance of the cupbearer, and why it was important for him to always keep his emotions under control.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use Bible

**Commentary 2** on this page and page 115 to show that Nehemiah had a plan in mind and was waiting for God to provide the right moment to make a request of the king regarding the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem.

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 115-116**, to three things Nehemiah shows us about our own service:

1. Rely on God in spite of fear.
2. Act on the opportunity God gives you.
3. Keep praying.

**DISCUSS: Question #2**

**(PSG, p. 116): When have you found yourself “in the right place at the right time”?**

*(Alternate: How can we recognize spiritual opportunities that come our way?)*

**TRANSITION:** “In the next verses we will see the clear, well-thought out plan that Nehemiah shared with the king.”

Nehemiah had done the right thing in hiding his sadness. Bringing personal problems into the presence of a Persian king could have cost him not only his job but also his life. Even showing evidence of a troubled spirit could have been taken as an indication of potential conspiracy, a nervousness over what was about to transpire. Nehemiah apparently sensed, however, that this was the right time to reveal his true feelings. As a servant he would never have initiated a conversation with the king about any personal matter. The king noticed his sad appearance and inquired about it.

The Hebrew words translated as **sadness of heart** can be translated to indicate a sense of depression. Because of the king’s awareness in the change to Nehemiah’s disposition, he was overwhelmed with fear. He could also have been nervous and afraid because he was about to make a bold request to possibly the most powerful man in the world. ◀

**Verse 3.** Having courage does not mean living without fear. Rather it means moving ahead despite the fear. The time had come for Nehemiah to speak since the king initiated a conversation. Nehemiah began by asserting his loyalty to the king with the phrase, “**May the king live forever,**” which is the same way the king of Babylon was addressed in Daniel 2:4.

**2 ▶** Nehemiah wasted no time in responding. He was skillful and diplomatic in his response. He answered the king’s question with a question of his own. He did not initially mention Jerusalem, perhaps because of its previous reputation as a rebellious city (Ezra 4:11-22). Nor did he say anything about the city walls that had been destroyed many years earlier. Instead, Nehemiah spoke vaguely of the ruined state of the city where his ancestors were buried; he particularly noted the condition of its gates. Most ancient cultures and especially monarchs had a high regard for the burial places of their ancestors so Nehemiah likely was hoping the king would be concerned about such desecration.

**Verses 4-5a.** The king must have sensed Nehemiah had more he wanted to say, so he asked his servant directly what request he wished to make of the king. This was the opening Nehemiah prayed for over the course of several months, but he didn’t walk through it immediately. Instead, perhaps instinctively, he prayed to the God of heaven. This was not an extended time of prayer. Rather, it was a silent, lightning prayer like most of us have prayed when something unexpected happens. Nehemiah surely believed God could

direct the king's heart (Prov. 21:1), so perhaps his short prayer was for God to take control and guide the king's heart in order that Nehemiah might accomplish God's will.

Short prayers to God are effective when they are coupled with ongoing communion with Him. Continual dependence on and fellowship with God was Nehemiah's pattern, and it should be ours as well. Jesus noted that only the one who remains or abides in Him would be fruitful and that apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Not only was Nehemiah's pattern to continually depend on and fellowship with God, but he had made this particular matter and opportunity the subject of consistent prayer over a period of several months. Now, only after calling out to the Almighty God once again did Nehemiah respond to the powerful king. Nehemiah had a plan in mind but knew it was useless apart from God's direction and participation, including giving him and his plan favor in the eyes of the king. ◀

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## ***Nehemiah 2:5b-8***

**5b** "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah and to the city where my ancestors are buried, so that I may rebuild it."

**6** The king, with the queen seated beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you return?" So I gave him a definite time, and it pleased the king to send me.

**7** I also said to the king: "If it pleases the king, let me have letters written to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates River, so that they will grant me safe passage until I reach Judah.

**8** And let me have a letter written to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so that he will give me timber to rebuild the gates of the temple's fortress, the city wall, and the home where I will live." The king granted my requests, for the gracious hand of my God was on me.

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Go to [BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra) and click on the Leader Extra for today's session. Show the scene from the movie *Apollo 13* where the engineers had to come up with a different plan after a malfunction on the ship made it impossible to achieve the first mission. Ask:

- *Can you share a time when your life took an unexpected turn and you were forced to come up with a different plan?*
- *How important was your determination in achieving this new plan?*

Read the following quote from the flight director of the Apollo 13 Mission: "It isn't equipment that wins the battles; it is the quality and the determination of the people fighting for a cause in which they believe." (Gene Kranz, *Failure Is Not an Option: Mission Control from Mercury to Apollo 13 and Beyond* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000])

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### Nehemiah 2:5b-8



10 minutes

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 2:5b-8.

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 117**, and point out Nehemiah's request of the king. The goal was simple but bold—rebuild the walls of Jerusalem—and toward that end, he needed three specific things:

1. **Time.** *Nehemiah gave the king a definitive timeline of how long the work would take.*
2. **Permission.** *He requested letters from the king to ensure safe passage.*
3. **Resources.** *He requested a letter to get timber and raw materials to complete the project.*

**3** ▶ **Verse 5b.** Nehemiah had a vision of what needed to be done in Jerusalem and realized a prompting from God to give leadership to the project. He had prayed and waited for the Lord's timing. He did not wait passively, however; during the previous four months he had been actively planning for the work to which God had called him.

Nehemiah was humble and respectful in his response. He did not assume anything, but began with the first element of a conditional statement. **If it pleases the king** refers to the project Nehemiah was about to reveal, which would only happen with the king's approval and support. Nehemiah added a second condition before laying out either the big picture or the details of his plan—if Nehemiah as the king's servant had found favor with the king. This refers to Nehemiah's history of faithful service to the king. The king certainly knew of Nehemiah's loyalty and admired his service—as a servant he wouldn't have remained in his position had he not been trustworthy and dependable. Now Nehemiah was hoping the king would also have the same admiration for the task he wanted to undertake.

Next came the second part of Nehemiah's conditional statement (which assumes an understood "then" in the sentence). Rather than simply asking for the king to let him go, Nehemiah spoke in terms of a mission authorized by the king: **Send me.** Nehemiah could not leave his position without the king's permission. What better way to carry out his calling than on an assignment from the king?

Nehemiah then revealed the general area that was the object of his concern: Judah. He still did not mention Jerusalem directly, but again referred to it only as the city where his ancestors were buried. It was to that specific but yet unnamed place that Nehemiah wanted to return and rebuild with the king's authorization.

**Verse 6.** Like any good leader, King Artaxerxes wanted more information about the proposal, especially the cost. In this case, his greatest cost concern was apparently relational, not financial. Nehemiah was one of his most trusted servants, which is probably why his first questions dealt with the length of Nehemiah's proposed absence from his court. In asking when Nehemiah would return, the king anticipated a short-term assignment, but he wanted to know the specifics.

This is the first mention of a **queen** in the Book of Nehemiah. It is uncertain why Nehemiah called attention to her at this time. Her presence with the king suggests this was

not a typical Persian celebration but rather an informal time, perhaps more of a normal day in the palace. It could have been that time had passed since Nehemiah made his initial request to the king and the king was following up at a more appropriate time for doing business than during a festival.

While Nehemiah gave the king a definite time he would be away, we do not know how long he expected to be gone. Later in his memoirs he noted serving for twelve years as governor of Judah (Neh. 5:14), which likely was not what King Artaxerxes originally anticipated. Even so, the noted time frame pleased the king, thus Nehemiah was allowed to undertake the mission.

**Verse 7.** Nehemiah wasn't quite ready to go, however. For months he had planned his anticipated needs for the project so he boldly yet politely petitioned the king for those crucial resources. He asked for official letters (which carried the king's signature and stamp to authenticate they carried his authority) written directly to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates River. In the outlying regions of the Persian Empire, governors and other administrators were appointed by the king to oversee official matters of the kingdom. Sometimes, however, such officials exerted great authority as they also looked after their own personal projects and interests. Certainly Nehemiah knew similar leaders in and around Jerusalem had been able to stop previous rebuilding efforts by the Jews. Thus, the letters Nehemiah requested would prove his mission was from the king and would assure him safe passage until he reached Judah.

**Verse 8.** The requests continued as Nehemiah also asked for a letter written to **Asaph**, the **keeper of the king's forest**. This detail shows Nehemiah had been thorough in his planning since he knew the name of the king's timber manager in that region. The location of this forest is unknown. Some scholars think it might have been in Lebanon, which was the source of the wood used to build the temple (Ezra 3:7) and other Old Testament building projects. It is possible this forest was somewhere in the land of Judah.

Nehemiah would need wood for three projects. First, he planned to rebuild the gates of the temple's fortress. This was a military post on the vulnerable north side of the temple and the city where troops and their commander (Neh. 7:2) would be stationed for protection. The north side of the city was consistently the most difficult to defend, perhaps explaining why it was chosen as the location for the fortress. Second, Nehemiah also briefly mentioned his plans to rebuild **the city wall**. This was the first time he had mentioned

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 3** on pages

116-118 to provide further explanation to Nehemiah's master plan that he presented to the king.

- *Note the humble and respectful tone of Nehemiah's request ("If it pleases the king").*
- *Nehemiah's personal request: send me ... so I can rebuild the wall.*
- *Nehemiah asked for official letters from the king that carried the king's signature and stamp, to authenticate they carried the king's authority, to ensure Nehemiah and his entourage safe passage from Susa to Jerusalem.*
- *Nehemiah petitioned the king for a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, for timber for the project.*

**DISCUSS: Question #3**

**(PSG, p. 118): When has a God-given task required you to plan and prepare?**

*(Alternate: How can you tell that Nehemiah had thought about his plan before presenting it to the king?)*

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary** **4** to discuss Nehemiah's conclusion, "the king granted my requests, for the gracious hand of my God was on me."

**TRANSITION:** "In the next verses we will see Nehemiah's challenge to the people."

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### *Nehemiah 2:17-18*



15 minutes

**READ:** Read Nehemiah 2:17-18.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary** **5** to provide background information for what transpired when Nehemiah arrived to inspect the situation in Jerusalem.

**GUIDE:** Refer members to **PSG page 118** to the bad news and the good news.

- **Bad News:** *The physical ruins were a disgrace.*
- **Good News:** *God had not abandoned them!*

anything to the king about the protective wall, which the Jews' enemies had earlier destroyed after the king's decree to cease the rebuilding. The ruined condition of these walls was one of the causes of Nehemiah's initial distress over his homeland. While it may seem odd to us that the walls would have been made of wood, research has confirmed it was used for this purpose in combination with stone (4:2-3). The third building project would be Nehemiah's own house where he would live while he was in Jerusalem. ◀

**4** ▶ Nehemiah prayed and planned so he would be ready when God's timing was right. When it was, he stepped through the door God opened. As a result, the king granted each of his requests. Despite the king's earlier prohibition against rebuilding in Jerusalem, Nehemiah received not only the king's approval but also the supplies he needed for the work. He didn't claim any of this was his own doing, however. Only God could have prompted such support from a foreign, pagan king to accomplish His purposes in restoring the holy city of Jerusalem. Thus Nehemiah gave glory to the One who graciously strengthened him. This Hebrew phrase pictures the hand of God not only supporting but also guiding all of Nehemiah's efforts up to that point. ◀

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## *Nehemiah 2:17-18*

**17** So I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in.

Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned.

Come, let's rebuild Jerusalem's wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace."

**18** I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me, and what the king had said to me.

**5** ▶ **Verse 17.** Like any good leader, Nehemiah knew that a great project would require the support and assistance of other people to bring it to completion. After making the trip from Susa and resting for a few days, Nehemiah surveyed the city by night to know exactly what was needed (2:11-15). As a leader with a vision, he needed to know the present reality before guiding people toward the preferred future. ◀

**6** ▶ After seeing the city’s true condition he gathered the Jews, priests, nobles, officials, and others (v. 16) who already lived in Jerusalem to share his vision and enlist their help. Nehemiah considered himself one of them, as noted in the fact he mentioned the **trouble we are in**. Undoubtedly the people had seen the ruins of the city and knew, maybe better than Nehemiah, the challenges to the city. Perhaps without official approval they had been afraid to do anything about it, or possibly the task was so overwhelming they didn’t know where to begin. Possibly they had lived with the deteriorated condition so long they had learned to ignore the need. Whatever the case, Nehemiah first called attention to the deplorable conditions of the walls and gates that left the people defenseless. He then challenged them to join him in changing the situation so they would no longer be a disgrace. In a very real sense the state of the city was a reflection of the Jewish religion, so to outsiders it must have looked very unappealing and the God of the Jews must have seemed either unconcerned about them or incompetent to help them. Nehemiah wanted to change this reality and its accompanying perceptions. He included himself when he spoke of the work they should do together and the resulting respect they could share together.

**Verse 18.** Nehemiah then shared a testimony of the key events that had brought him to Jerusalem. He assured those gathered of God’s involvement in the mission, noting how the Lord’s gracious hand had supported and guided him. This was seen in the detailed planning he had carried out and the incredible opening he had experienced when he approached the king with his requests. Nehemiah also confirmed the king’s support for the project, noting what the king said to him and likely mentioning the resources Artaxerxes authorized.

Nehemiah’s motivating words were right on target. The people responded with a resounding, **“Let’s start rebuilding.”** They didn’t have to think about it or gain a group consensus. They were not going to settle for the status quo nor were they going to let the past failures of rebuilding attempts derail the future possibility of restoration. They were ready to get going immediately and were encouraged to do the **good work** Nehemiah had challenged them to join him in doing. Just like the events of months earlier in the king’s palace, the people’s response was also evidence of God’s involvement in the mission to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s intentionality and his dependence on God had been rewarded with the approval and support of both the king and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ◀

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 6** to provide explanation to verses 17-18.

**GUIDE:** Refer members to **PSG page 119** to the following conclusions:

- *God calls ordinary people to an extraordinary work.*
- *God is glorified when ordinary people come together for His work.*

**DISCUSS: Question #4 (PSG, p. 119):** What are some ways God uses average people to carry out His plans?

**DISCUSS: Question #5 (PSG, p. 120):** When have you recognized God’s hand on you in what you were doing?

*(Alternate: What often holds us back from asking others to help?)*

**DO:** Encourage group members to share responses to the activity **“Change of Plans”** on **PSG page 120**.

## LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

**GUIDE:** Emphasize **The Point: Serving God requires intentionality.**

**REVIEW:** Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 121)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

## WRAP IT UP

**GUIDE:** Encourage group members to be intentional in observing needs around them and to consider how God may be preparing to use us to meet those needs. Remind them that God uses ordinary people just like us to do extraordinary things for His honor and glory.

**PRAY:** "Father, help us to be aware of actions You want us to take for You. Please place Your gracious hand on us as we serve You."

## LIVE IT OUT

God has a plan for all believers. He desires to accomplish His work through you. Like the stone-by-stone construction of Jerusalem's wall, God's plan for you is accomplished one step at a time. How will you join Him this week in His plan?

- ▶ **Set goals.** Develop a plan for your spiritual growth. Set some goals and include dates by which you would like to achieve them.
- ▶ **Set a time.** Commit a specific time of day to pray for a month. Pray God would reveal opportunities to serve and do His work in the routine of your normal days.
- ▶ **Set an appointment.** Talk to your pastor or group leader to discuss opportunities to serve. Discuss ways you can work with other people in order to see God do extraordinary work. Your group may also want to discuss this, planning ways to serve together.

My parents built a house with intentionality. God has a plan for your spiritual development and service. Be intentional in following His gracious plan for you.



BIBLICAL  
**ILLUSTRATOR**



The Golden, or Eastern Gate, on the eastern side of the Old City of Jerusalem, was constructed in the post-Byzantine period. To prevent the Messiah from entering Jerusalem through this gate, Muslims sealed the gate during the mid-1500s. Jesus entered the city from the east through a Herodian gate over which this present gate is probably built.

In order to repair the wall and reconstruct the gates, Nehemiah divided the wall into sections, from one gate to another, and delegated each section to a particular group.

Because the gate was the most vulnerable part of the wall, the gate had to be well fortified and designed to restrict access. The doors were made of wood and iron nails. To reduce the chance of fire, some doors were plated with bronze. Double doors were necessary because the gate had to be wide enough to allow a chariot through. When the doors were closed they were “barred” from the inside with a wooden, bronze, or iron-plated bar.

While some gates only had two chambers, one on each side of the entrance, the classic Israelite gate was either four- or six-chambered. Each pair of chambers had their own doors, which attackers had to breach successively. Towers usually flanked each side of the gate and watchmen stood on the roof of the gate. All of this made the gate complex a veritable fortress.

The gates were only as secure as the gatekeepers were courageous and trustworthy. They served as watchmen and reported news and potential danger. They guarded nearby storehouses, opened and shut the gates each day, kept the city gates shut during the Sabbath, and defended the gates during assault. As far back as the time of the tabernacle, the gatekeepers were a special class of Levites. As such, they enjoyed the Levitical privileges such as receiving support from the tithes imposed on Israelites from taxes.

The gatekeepers were organized into a hierarchical structure with a chief gatekeeper and a captain in charge of each gate. The divisions of gatekeepers were assigned to specific gates, sometimes by casting lots and sometimes by royal appointment. The number of gatekeepers is recorded as high as 4,000, but during Nehemiah’s time only 172 served. In times of emergency, non-Levitical gatekeepers could be assigned to guard the city gates as Nehemiah did when threatened by the Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites.

The excerpt above is from the article “Gates and Gatekeepers” (Winter 2014-2015), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

**GROUPS  
MATTER.**

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