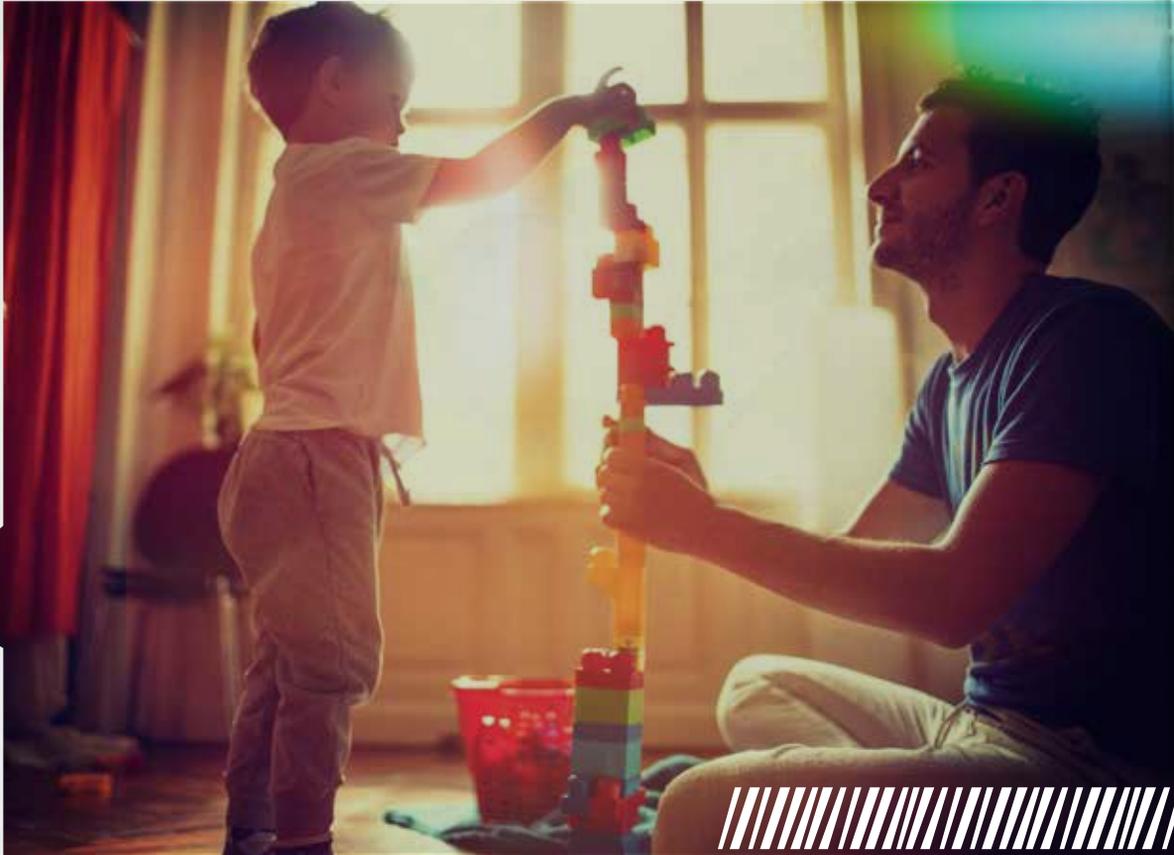


Nehemiah: Building a Life of Service



The call to follow Christ in a life of ministry is for all believers.

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*

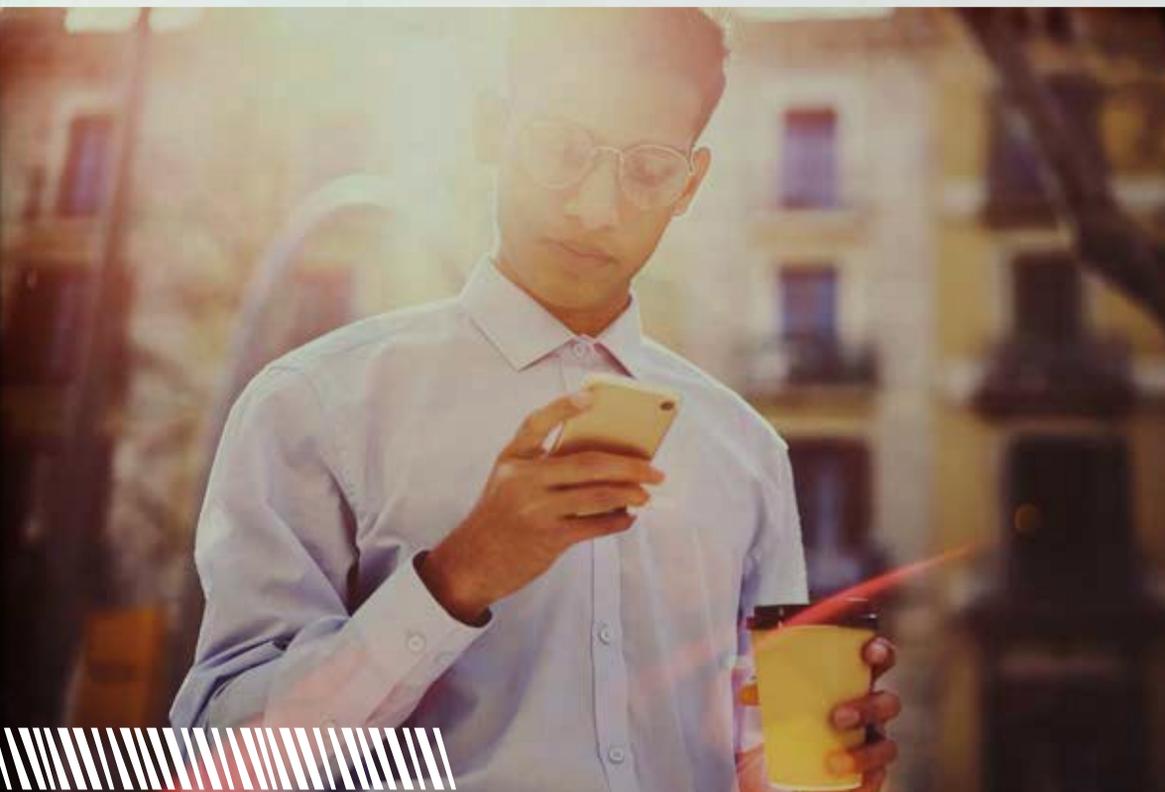
Session 4 **Protect** *Nehemiah 5:1-13*

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

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

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Pray



When have you been stopped in your tracks by a news story?

QUESTION 1

Pour out your heart to God in prayer.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The phone that used to be 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 blinking light. That phone has long since been replaced with a cell phone, but now I am 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. However, 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.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Nehemiah 1:1-3 (CSB)

¹ 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, ² 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. ³ 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.”

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, and the city was in ruins. This update was devastating because of the history leading up to this point.

About three hundred years earlier, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported the Jewish people to various areas all over their empire. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was spared conquest by the Assyrians, but because of their own disobedience, God allowed the Babylonians to invade and conquer Judah in 586 BC. Thus, the great empires of David and Solomon crumbled. The people of the Northern Kingdom had disappeared as they were scattered everywhere, but the people of the Southern Kingdom were exiled as a group. They were not in their homeland, but they were still together.

Babylon eventually fell to the Persians, and a new ruler emerged who was more benevolent to the Jews. The new Persian king, Cyrus, issued a decree in 538 BC that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. A relatively small band of people returned and began to work, but opposition caused the initial work of rebuilding to be halted. The hope of rebuilding the city faded, and the ruins remained.

The news consumed Nehemiah. He was living in relative comfort in “the fortress city of Susa” (v. 1), a place of safety and comfort. It was the winter residence of Persian kings, and Nehemiah was there personally serving King Artaxerxes. In contrast to Nehemiah’s daily life, the remnant of people in Jerusalem was in

What helps you become aware of the needs around you?

QUESTION 2

trouble. The city was devastated, like a scene out of an apocalyptic movie. Buildings and homes were abandoned, but worse, the city wall had been broken down and its gates had been burned. Furthermore, over the years, looters had surely taken what few valuables may have been left by the Babylonians.

But what could Nehemiah do? He was living hundreds of miles away. He visualized the damage, and then he internalized it. Surely the words in verse 3 echoed as he heard them: “Great trouble and disgrace . . . broken down . . . burned.” In the next verses, we’ll see how this news moved Nehemiah to pray.

Nehemiah 1:4-7 (CSB)

⁴ 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. ⁵ 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, ⁶ 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. ⁷ We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses.

Unexpected news—especially bad news—has a way of hitting us hard. When Nehemiah heard the report about Jerusalem, he “sat down and wept” (v. 4). Psalm 137 was written sometime during this same time period when many of the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile. The psalm is a lament of the exiles, and its opening words remind us of Nehemiah: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1).

Nehemiah’s mourning was not momentary; it led him to fast and pray “for a number of days” (v. 4). His grief over Jerusalem led him to the right place: he went to God in prayer. Nehemiah’s prayer speaks to our own approach to prayer:

- » **Prayer is all about God, not us.** Nehemiah began his prayer in the same way Jesus taught us to begin our prayers: looking to the Father in heaven. (See Matthew 6:9.) Nehemiah’s prayer was

Why is confession of sin an important part of prayer?

QUESTION 3

saturated with the character and nature of God. Effective prayer focuses on our Father in heaven: His name, His kingdom, and His will.

In a world of brokenness, only God perfectly keeps His promises. Nehemiah obviously knew that because he prayed, "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" (v. 5). Prayer must begin with God because He alone is the source of strength we need.

- » **Confession realigns our priorities.** Nehemiah was hundreds of miles from the problem, but he did not distance himself from it. In fact, he included himself in the confession. Rather than lament about what others had done wrong, he recognized, "Both I and my father's family have sinned. *We* have acted corruptly" (vv. 6-7, emphasis added). Nehemiah associated with his people, making confession his priority. Nehemiah understood that for Jerusalem to be restored as a city, the heart of the people first must be restored. Nothing would be rebuilt physically until the people were rebuilt spiritually.
- » **Life should be an ongoing conversation with God.** In order to pursue what is right and good, we must pray continually. Nehemiah didn't pray once and move on; he prayed for days. The Book of Nehemiah records nine different prayers Nehemiah prayed.



Nehemiah 1:8-11 (CSB)

⁸ Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand. ¹¹ 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.

In his prayer, Nehemiah included a commitment to God’s Word and reassurance of God’s promises. “But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, . . . I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell” (v. 9). Nehemiah recognized that 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. Nehemiah remembered God’s promise to gather His people, and it gave him assurance.

One of the most disheartening trips I’ve taken is through several cathedrals in Europe. They are beautiful, massive structures, precisely constructed as monuments of architectural genius. Most of them, however, are in spiritual ruins. Few contain vibrant congregations. Most welcome only tourists. These cathedrals are testaments to faith once held, but now absent.

Let’s keep our lives from becoming monuments that merely give lip service to what we believe; instead, let’s be people who reside actively in faith, a faith that is lived out in prayer—a conscious, moment-by-moment dependence on God that seeks His guidance.

When has prayer prepared you for something important in your life?

QUESTION 4

What can we learn from Nehemiah about making requests of God?

"Do not work so hard for Christ that you have no strength to pray, for prayer requires strength!"

HUDSON TAYLOR

QUESTION 5

PRAYER PRACTICES



Nehemiah's prayer in today's passage of study addressed several areas of need. Evaluate your own prayer life by considering the following statements. Then, rate yourself on each scale.

I pray for the needs of others.



I confess personal sin that I've been struggling with.



I ask for God's guidance when facing specific decisions.



LIVE IT OUT

How can you strengthen your prayer habits?

- » **Vary your prayer routine.** Make it your goal to change up when you pray this week. Pray each day for at least five minutes, but mix it up to see which time of day works best for you: morning, during lunch, evenings, before bed, while driving, and so on.
- » **Infuse your prayer time with Scripture.** Prayer is never detached from God's Word. You cannot pray well without reading the Bible. You cannot read the Bible well without praying. 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.
- » **Involve others in your prayers.** Pray with or for someone each day this week. We're called to intercede for others' needs, so commit to pray for someone else each day. When an opportunity arises, pray with someone.



God does not 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 cannot tire God with your prayers. **In fact, He wants you to pour out yourself to Him.**

My thoughts