

UNDER 
RECONSTRUCTION
RENEWAL AFTER RUIN

NEHEMIAH

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, editor

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Contents



| | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----|
| Lesson 1 | Broken Leader | 7 |
| Lesson 2 | Praying for Restoration | 15 |
| Lesson 3 | Boldly Follow God | 25 |
| Lesson 4 | Assess the Task | 33 |
| Lesson 5 | Get to Work! | 41 |
| Lesson 6 | Delegate! | 49 |
| Lesson 7 | Facing Opposition | 57 |
| Lesson 8 | Give God the Glory | 67 |
| Lesson 9 | Act Wisely! | 75 |
| Lesson 10 | God's Word Is Powerful | 83 |
| Lesson 11 | Set the Example | 93 |
| Lesson 12 | Trust and Obey | 101 |
| Lesson 13 | Compromising Again | 109 |

Preface

What does it take to become a spiritual leader? Is there a course we can take? Is there a degree we can get? Are there certain requirements we need to meet? A checklist to check off?

Nehemiah teaches us that leadership begins not with a course or a degree but with brokenness. He humbly recognized that he fell short of God's standard for His people and confessed his sin to God. That humble act opened the way for Nehemiah to become God's leader in post-exilic Jerusalem.

The book of Nehemiah records God's process of rebuilding the wall and city of Jerusalem through Nehemiah, a rebuilt spiritual leader. Nehemiah's leadership through Jerusalem's years of struggle and triumph provides an excellent example for us to follow, beginning with his brokenness.

God doesn't want us to offer ourselves to Him as a polished, self-prepared person He could use to do great things. He wants us first of all to come to Him in humility with an honest understanding of who we are and an honest dependence on Him. God is not interested in self-made leaders. He is interested in broken servants ready to be built by Him. God uses the leaders He builds as the builders in His work.

All adults are spiritual leaders to some degree. Children, young people, new believers all look to established believers for leadership. You influence people whether they realize it or not. This course is important for everyone.

Let God use the book of Nehemiah to build you into a godly leader and prepare you for the leadership roles He has for you.

Broken Leader

▶ Scripture Focus

Nehemiah 1:1–3

Theme

A spiritual leader shows concern for people and God's name.

Memory Verse

*“From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee,
when my heart is overwhelmed:
lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (Psalm 61:2).*

GETTING STARTED

“Don’t do anything to wreck the family name!” Many a father has said that to his children. A good family name is valuable and worthy of protecting.

1. Whose family name do you highly respect? Why?
2. For whose family name do you have little or no respect? Why?
3. In what sense do you represent God’s “family name”?

Nehemiah felt responsible for God's family name. He wanted it to shine for all the world to see. For that to happen, he knew God's people needed to turn to God and then rely on Him to work through them. This lesson gives us a glimpse into Nehemiah's heart for God and challenges us to share Nehemiah's concern for God's "family name."

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Repatriated Jews living in the Promised Land followed Nehemiah's leadership to reconstruct both their walls and their lives. His skills in leading God's people provide us with an example of strong Biblical leadership. This study on the book of Nehemiah will help you hone your leadership skills and will challenge you to renew your relationship with God. This first lesson presents the Nehemiah's background and the backdrop to his story.

Historical Background

Nehemiah, a Jew, served in the court of king Artaxerxes I in the Medo-Persian Empire. The Babylonian/Medo-Persian captivity had originally come upon Judah as a chastisement from God due in part to her violation of the law of the seventh-year Sabbath (Lev. 25:1-7). God warned that there would be one year of captivity for every year of failure to institute this law (2 Chron. 36:20, 21; Jer. 25:11, 12; 29:10; cf. Lev. 26:33-35). God carried out Judah's captivity in accordance with the "blessings and cursings" sections in the Mosaic Law (Lev. 26; Deut. 28) and Isaiah's prophesy to King Hezekiah (Isa. 39:7).

God used king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to take Judah captive. When the king first came to Jerusalem in 605 BC, it appears the Jews submitted to him without a battle (2 Chron. 36:6, 7). Thus began the first of three waves of captivity and destruction. Nebuchadnezzar returned in 597 and 586 BC to complete the captivity of Judah.

Those taken captive in 605 BC included Daniel and his three friends (Dan. 1). Those taken captive in 597 BC included Ezekiel (2 Kings 24:14-16). The final round of captivity in 586 BC affected Jeremiah who was forced to go to Egypt where he prophesied further regarding Babylon (Jer. 43; 44; 52:31-34). Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple in the third wave of captivity (2 Kings 25:1-21).

Daniel 5 tells the story of the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians on Oct. 12, 539 BC. The Medo-Persian empire assumed control of the captive Jewish people. Truly God is in sovereign control of the nations (Jer. 18:7–10).

The Man Nehemiah

Just as there had been three waves of captivity, so there would be three waves of return. In 538 BC, Zerubbabel led the first return of roughly 50,000 Jews after the decree of Cyrus (2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1–4), which had earlier been prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 44:28–45:7).

The group that returned with Zerubbabel was significant primarily for its ultimate rebuilding of the temple in 516 BC, as prompted by the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah.

In 458 BC, Ezra led 7,000 to 8,000 Jews in the second return to the land (Ezra 7:1–10). Despite its small size, this group took part in a great spiritual revival under Ezra’s leadership (Ezra 9, 10).

Nehemiah led the third wave back from captivity in 445 BC (Neh. 2). His small group was a catalyst in the enormous task of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls.

Scripture tells us nothing about the man Nehemiah outside of the book that bears his name. Surprisingly, there are no direct references to this great leader in the New Testament.

It must have been difficult for Nehemiah’s parents to raise their family in a strange land. Judging by the name they gave him—“the comfort of Jehovah”—and the character traits they instilled in him, it seems evident that they were a godly couple. We know nothing of them except the testimony of their son. Effective spiritual leaders are often the product of a godly home (Ps. 127; Prov. 22:6).

4. Why would the name “the comfort of Jehovah” be a reminder of the need to show concern for others?

History can rightly be called “His story,” meaning God’s story. God is in control of times, events, and people. Although it seems strange that a Jew served in the court of a Persian king, it was by no means an accident.

God had Nehemiah right where He wanted him.

Nehemiah was living in the Persian king's winter palace in Shushan (Dan. 8:2; Esth. 1:2) during the month of Chislev (November/December) (Neh. 1:1). That Nehemiah was in the winter palace and close to the king indicates that Nehemiah had an important position in Persia. Just as God had put Esther on a queen's throne in Persia to deliver the Jews from wicked Haman's plot (Esther 8), so He put Nehemiah in the royal court of a Persian king to accomplish His next major step in Israel's history.

5. Knowing that God controlled key people and events in Bible history, can you safely say that He controls key people and events in your life today? Explain.

6. Why is a belief that God is sovereign such a key conviction for a spiritual leader?

7. Share an example of God's obvious working in your life.

The Setting

Nehemiah's inquiry into the state of the people in Jerusalem (Neh. 1:2) came ninety-two years after Zerubbabel first led a return of captives back to Jerusalem. During those years, God used Persian kings to accomplish His plan to repopulate and restore Judah. God's pattern continued in Nehemiah's day. He planned to use Artaxerxes I to further His plans to strengthen Judah.

Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, and others from Judah visited Nehemiah in the king's palace. Some commentators believe that Hanani, meaning "the grace of the Lord," came from Jerusalem on business unrelated

to Jerusalem's condition. The text explains neither the timing nor the nature of his trip, so we don't know for sure why he went to Jerusalem or why he came back to see Nehemiah.

Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem and its residents (1:2). His questions reveal his genuine interest in and concern for God's people. His concern was driven by his desire to see God's people glorify God's name once again. Nehemiah could have been proudly content with his noble position in Persia and disinterested in Jerusalem and the needs of those less fortunate. This was not in his character, however. God's glory was at the forefront of his mind.

8. Put yourself in Nehemiah's place. What thoughts and feelings would you have in your comfortable situation upon learning about the plight of your fellow Jews in Jerusalem?

9. What might happen to the ministry of a spiritual leader who does not have the qualities of genuine interest and concern for others?

Challenge 1: Affliction

Hanani did not merely say the Jews back home were afflicted, he reported that they were "in great affliction" (1:3). Hanani used a term with the root idea of "evil." In other passages the term conveys physical pain (Num. 16:15; Ps. 105:15). Sometimes it bears the idea of emotional pain (Gen 43:6; 1 Kings 17:20). In Ruth 1:21, the word describes the physical and emotional pain Naomi experienced in losing her family.

Nehemiah's kindred in Judah wrestled against discouragement and danger. Their enemies hassled them relentlessly, using political and military pressure to crush their rebuilding efforts. In addition, their disobedience to God caused them discomfort too.

Challenge 2: Reproach

The Jews in their homeland were also in “reproach” (Neh. 1:3). To be in reproach means to be disgraced. The Jews boasted of their glorious and faithful God, but their land still lay in ruin. Their apathy and neglect gave God a bad name. It appeared to the Jews’ enemies that God was a rather pathetic, anemic God. If their God was so great, why didn’t they rebuild their city? Why was God’s temple still surrounded by ruins left from an invasion that happened decades earlier? Hanani understandably felt embarrassed by the lack of progress in Judah. We know from the prophet Haggai that the repatriated Jews wouldn’t have even built the temple if it weren’t for Haggai’s preaching (Hag. 1:2–5).

10. Read Haggai 1:3–15. Summarize Haggai’s message to the remnant of Jews living in the land.

11. What was the result of his message?

12. Why is a desire to glorify God such a necessary quality in a spiritual leader?

Challenge 3: Disrepair

Hanani’s report included a reference to Jerusalem being “broken down” (Neh. 1:3). Was Hanani’s report just a rehearsal of what happened to Jerusalem in 586 BC when the walls and gates were breached and the temple burned by the Babylonians? Most likely not, for Nehemiah had a strong response to Hanani’s report, suggesting he hadn’t heard the news before (1:4).

From the book of Ezra, we can conclude that Hanani’s report refer-

enced a more recent breaking down of Jerusalem's walls. Ezra wrote a list of oppositions to the rebuilding progress in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6–23). The opposition under Artaxerxes I king of Persia is most likely the news that discouraged Nehemiah (4:7–23). Artaxerxes I reigned from 465-425 BC.

During Artaxerxes' reign, the repatriated Jews in Jerusalem went further than the edict of Cyrus (538 BC) had allowed and began rebuilding the city walls instead of just the temple. When their enemies, Samaritans named Rehum and Shimshai, came to realize this, they alerted king Artaxerxes I. They wrote a letter to the king warning him that a rebuilt Jerusalem would doubtless be a threat to his power (Ezra 4:12–16). Artaxerxes sent a letter in reply, forcing the Jews to stop rebuilding until he issued any additional directions (4:21). Emboldened, the Samaritans went beyond the intentions of the king's letter and mounted an attack upon the Jews, destroying the newly rebuilt sections of the Jerusalem wall (4:23). The loss likely drained the Jewish settlers of all hope and robbed them of a significant portion of their resources.

The news of this more recent devastation in Jerusalem moved Nehemiah to tears and prayer for his people. He certainly encountered “troublesome times” as Daniel predicted (Dan 9:25). God's temple and people were left seemingly defenseless.

13. Of what did the broken walls remind the Jews?

14. In what way were the broken walls a symbol of what needed to happen to Jerusalem's leaders and people? What “walls” in their lives needed to be broken down for the rebuilding of the physical walls to begin?

Nehemiah could have easily ignored his homeland. After all, he enjoyed the comforts of palace life in Persia. His love for God and God's people, however, prevented him adopting such an insensitive response. His heart ached for God's people and God's name. In the coming accounts,

we will learn that he risked his life to restore both to their former glory. Of course, God proved faithful once again as He responded to Nehemiah's deep faith.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

15. Name some people who look to you as a spiritual leader.

16. What do your efforts as a spiritual leader say about the level of concern you have for those following you?

17. How do your efforts as a spiritual leader reflect on God's name? Do your actions glorify God? In what ways?

18. What are some ways you could increase your concern for those you are responsible for leading?

19. What are some ways you could increase your concern for God's name and reputation?