

HIS
PLAN
OUR
PURPOSE

IS THERE MORE?

Understanding the Storyline of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation

THE STORIES OF FAITH + RENEWAL

TEACHER GUIDE

28
nineteen[™]

THE WHOLE STORY

Warren Weirsbe writes, “When He wrote the Bible, God didn’t give us a ponderous theology book divided into sections labeled God, Creation, Man, Sin, and so forth. Instead, He gave us a story, a narrative that begins in eternity past and ends in eternity future.”



THE STORY OF **GRACE**

> *January*



THE STORY OF **DELIVERANCE**

> *February*



THE STORY OF **PROMISE**

> *March*

FEATURED



THE STORY OF **FAITH**

> *April*



THE STORY OF **RENEWAL**

> *May*



THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**

> *June, July + August*



THE STORY OF **CHRIST: IN HIS OWN WORDS**

> *August + September*



THE STORY OF **POWER**

> *October*



THE STORY OF **CHANGE**

> *November*



THE STORY OF **HEAVEN**

> *December*

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IS THERE MORE?



GOD'S PROMISES FROM
GENESIS TO REVELATION
CAN BE TRUSTED.

THE STORY OF FAITH

In the last three months, we have studied the stories of Grace, Deliverance, and Promise. In each of those stories, we have seen the faithfulness of God to His people during times of difficulty and opposition. God paved the way for the story of faith in each context.

This month we celebrate the hallmark of our faith as Christians. Easter is the culmination of all that God had in mind from the very beginning, providing His grace in Jesus Christ; deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ; fulfilling His eternal promise through Jesus Christ.

The faith of God's people did not begin with a baby born in Bethlehem or wait for the Lamb of God to be crucified on a cross. The faith of God's people was a reality from the beginning and in the darkest times of history. This month we will see God's people in exile in Babylon, having been taken captive from their homes in Jerusalem and Judah. They would spend 70 years in a foreign land, with foreign leaders, in the midst of a culture that worshiped foreign gods. Their circumstances were dark and hopeless, yet somehow they had faith.

A biblical definition of faith is found in the book of Hebrews:

HEBREWS 11:1 *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

How do we have faith in what we cannot see and touch? How can we be confident in that which has not happened yet? These are questions that have been pondered for centuries, dating all the way back to the 6th century B.C. Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to wrestle with these questions as they lived in captivity. Jeremiah had to wrestle with these questions as he wrote to God's people in exile. Each of us has to wrestle with these questions in the context of our lives.

God's promises in His Word from Genesis to Revelation can be trusted. Look at the first stanza of the hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*, from 1787:

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

As we study God's Word during this Easter season, in the Spring of 2020, may we be reminded the crux of our Christian faith is our belief that the birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what gives us everlasting life. This is THE story, His story, told from the very beginning through the end, in God's Word. It is a story of faith.

Join us for the next 4 weeks as we embrace the story of Faith.

- Apr 4/5 Faith in Suffering - Daniel 3
- Apr 11/12 Easter Weekend (No Bible Study classes)
- Apr 18/19 Faith in God's Sovereignty - Daniel 7
- Apr 25/26 Faith in Seeking Him - Jeremiah 29

"IF IT BE SO, OUR GOD WHOM WE SERVE IS ABLE TO DELIVER US FROM THE FURNACE OF BLAZING FIRE; AND HE WILL DELIVER US OUT OF YOUR HAND, O KING. BUT EVEN IF HE DOES NOT, LET IT BE KNOWN TO YOU, O KING, THAT WE ARE NOT GOING TO SERVE YOUR GODS OR WORSHIP THE GOLDEN IMAGE THAT YOU HAVE SET UP."

DANIEL 3:17-18

FAITH

IN SUFFERING

DATE
April 4 & 5

WEEK
1 of 4

OVERVIEW
Daniel 3

KEY VERSES
Daniel 3:17-18

SETTING THE STAGE

Daniel has something for everyone. History. Prophecy. Politics. Friends. Prayers. Lions. Statues. Wild Animals. A fiery furnace. Dreams. Visions. A king who thought he was a cow. Adventure. Escapes. Angels. Demons. Detailed information about ancient history as well as prophecies about the end times. This is one of the most unique books in all of Scripture, not just because of the topics but also the fact that it was written in two languages. Daniel was written in both Aramaic and Hebrew; Chapters 2-7 are written in Aramaic, all the other chapters in Hebrew, thus showing the brilliance and education of Daniel.

Ultimately Daniel is a story of faith. The faith showed by God's people during a very difficult time in their history. Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was the leader of the Babylonian Empire which included the most powerful army on earth at the time. There were three deportations of God's people leading them into a period of exile which would last for 70 years.

Jews were driven away from their neighborhoods, homes and all with which they were familiar and taken into captivity. The book of Daniel begins with the overthrow of Jerusalem and spans the entire 70 years of exile. We need to remember that history is His Story. Dr. Thomas Constables says, "This was a time in Israel's history similar to the time just before the Exodus. Israel was in captivity. Daniel contains proof of God's sovereignty."¹

Continued on page 8 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Circumstances are Heating Up
2. The Choice is Made
3. "Even If" kind of Faith
4. Testimony of Faith

THINGS TO KNOW

- Daniel's Babylonian name was Belteshazzar but we know him by his Hebrew name, Daniel.
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given Babylonian names when taken into captivity. Their Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

FAITH IN SUFFERING

Setting the Stage, continued >

God is sovereign and always at work for our good and His glory. When all is said and done, it is about His Plan and Our Purpose. The book of Daniel shows the plan of God is not derailed even in the midst of captivity. Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego live out their purpose in the midst of cultural pressure, vulnerability, and suffering.

As we pick up the story today, Daniel and his friends have already proven their faith to God by making a stand on dietary issues as well as religious issues. Nebuchadnezzar was impressed with what he saw in these four young men, even stating they were 10 times better than all the magicians and conjurers at his disposal (*Daniel 1:20*). This was proven in chapter 2 when King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that no one could interpret; except for Daniel. The dream was kept a mystery from everyone, but Daniel was still able to interpret the dream, thus giving a witness for God (*Daniel 2:10-11, 20-23, 28*).

Introduction

We just completed five weeks in the Story of Promise; looking at how God fulfilled His promise to His people with Joshua and David. David knew personally about the far-reaching promises of God. Perhaps one of the greatest promises in all of Scripture is in Deuteronomy 31:6 “*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.*” David, the psalmist says it like this from a very personal perspective.

PSALM 139:8-12 *If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there. ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰ even there Your hand will guide me, Your right hand will hold me fast. ¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to You; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You. (NIV)*

God will always be with us, period. Isaiah 41:10 explains:

ISAIAH 41:10 *Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with My victorious right hand. (NLT)*

In the first chapters of Daniel, there is an uncompromising conviction of Daniel and his three friends that was established from the very beginning of their time in Babylon as young teenagers. Nebuchadnezzar was new in his position as king. The Jews were in exile in a foreign land, experiencing foreign food, foreign language, and foreign gods. Daniel and his friends took a stand for God. They determined early to set their hearts to follow God and God alone, without compromise.



¹ Dr. Thomas Constable, www.soniclight.com, *Daniel, Expository Notes*.

The Babylonians were a pluralistic society, which means they worshiped many gods and had many idols. They even worshiped the “heavens” but not to any “god in the heavens” in particular; just the “heavens.” In chapter 2, Daniel mentions the *God of Heaven* five times in this one chapter. And those who read it perhaps understood for the first time there was a *God of Heaven*. Not unlike the time in Acts 17 when Paul preached in Athens to all those who were worshipping the various idols/gods even having one labeled “to the unknown god.” Remember Paul said, “*what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.*” (Acts 17:23) Daniel, in essence, was saying, you have all these little “g” gods. But I believe in, trust in, and have faith in the One True God, the capital “G” God, the *God of Heaven*, who will never leave nor forsake me. Daniel knew the reality that the *God of Heaven* cared about His people on earth, even in the midst of suffering during the exile.

Daniel’s friends also believed in this One True God; the *God of Heaven* who would never leave nor forsake them. This belief is put to the test in chapter 3 for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

1. CIRCUMSTANCES ARE HEATING UP

We have all experienced times in our lives where it feels like the walls are closing in on us. Circumstances beyond our control become overwhelming. The culture of the day seems to be free-falling and spiraling downward. For those who choose to live a Christian lifestyle based on Judeo-Christian Biblical values, it is becoming much more challenging trying to sidestep the landmines. Some would even say the circumstances we are living in are heating up.

This is not unlike what three Jewish young men were facing in Babylon while in captivity.

The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar had built a massive statue of himself that was 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide, which would make it an odd shape that could not be ignored. However, the golden grand statue achieved its purpose in almost daring people not to look in its direction. The king wanted everyone to bow down and worship this statue of himself.

DANIEL 3:1-6 *Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon....³ Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces were assembled for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed: “To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language,⁵ that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up.⁶ But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.”*

The winds of leadership were shifting in such a way that everyone was being forced or threatened to stop thinking for themselves and do as told. The people were expected to blindly bow down and worship this grand golden 90-foot statue of King Nebuchadnezzar, or else. It was a blatant threat. There was no room for debate or questions.

The circumstances were heating up for all people, both Babylonians and Jews. It did not matter your background, race, education or socio-economic stature; the mandate and threat were the same. When these sorts of situations occur, there is a choice that has to be made. If you have not already pre-determined how you will respond when circumstances heat up, you are likely to get burned.

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Throughout history, people who believed in and trusted God had to make these pre-determined decisions. Joshua, who led God's people into the Promised Land, stood before all the people and said, "Choose for yourselves this day, whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15; Promise Committed lesson, March 7-8) Gideon had to make that decision when facing the Midianites. David had to make that decision when facing the Philistines, including the giant named Goliath. Daniel and his friends had to make that decision as young teenagers when they were taken from their homes in Jerusalem to live in Babylon.

The instructions were given in such a way that when the people heard music, they were to fall to their knees and bow down to this statue. This included people of all regions and languages.

The king did not care about their background, heritage or beliefs. The king wanted everyone to bow down and worship this statue that he had made of himself.

For those who believed in God, it was a very real test of their faith. What happens when the circumstances and culture are forcing you to choose whether or not you will bow down to something or someone other than God?

It was not easier back in the days of Daniel compared to the days of Paul, to the days of the Reformation, or even compared to today. Throughout history, over and over again, a choice had to be made to fully and completely trust God alone, or not. Each generation, collectively and individually, has to make a choice on what they will bow down to, or not.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to make a choice for themselves individually; not based on the culture or pressure from the political leadership of the day. These kinds of choices remind us that we are in a very real spiritual battle that goes beyond the temporary elements of the day. The devil tempts us to destroy our faith, but God tests us to develop our faith because a faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted.²

The devil tempts us to destroy our faith, but God tests us to develop our faith because a faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted.²

2. THE CHOICE IS MADE

The decree is passed that those who refuse to bow down and worship will be cast into a fiery furnace to their death. Everyone must make their own individual choice. Some made a choice based on their faith, and it was noticed by others that they refused to bow down and worship this statue.

DANIEL 3:12 *There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.*

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had administration positions in Babylon. They were respected enough by the king and the governing body based on their skill set to serve the kingdom of Babylon in a capacity of leadership. But now they had made a stand based on their faith in God. Would their choice to stand on their value and belief system cost them severely in suffering and then death? Their faith was being tested. These three men stood tall when everyone else bowed down.³ Although they were young when they were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon, they had a foundational belief system that persevered in the midst of a changing culture. They were not willing to compromise their faith out of convenience or peer pressure. They made a choice to stand up for God when everyone else was bowing down to a man-made statue.

² Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary; Complete Old Testament*, Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2007, p. 1352.

³ Ibid.

In our culture, few if any have had to face this threat of putting our lives on the line if we did not bow down to a statue. However, we have increasingly seen compromises of the Judeo-Christian value system. Whether it is television, movies, music, video games, internet or printed media; there is a distinct slant to having us “bow down” to that which is not based on biblical principles. We too have to make a choice to stand for God based on our faith, regardless of consequences.

Notice that nowhere does it say they had to reject God; they were just to bow down to “other gods.” Babylon was a pluralistic society as is America. They had several thoughts of belief that were connected with multiple false idols. It was not that they minded anyone believing in God; they just did not want you to believe exclusively in the One, true God. In situations like this, no crime is greater than nonconformity, yet that is exactly what God asks of us when the things of the world are arrayed against the things of God (*Romans 12:1-2*).⁴

Read Daniel 3:13-15:

DANIEL 3:13-15 *Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; then these men were brought before the king. ¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"*

The king gave them a second chance to do it the “right way;” more accurately “his way.” They stood their ground and made one of the greatest declarations of faith recorded.

The king gave them a second chance to do it the “right way;” more accurately “his way.” They stood their ground and made one of the greatest declarations of faith recorded. Obviously, King Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten about the *God of Heaven*. Though it was in chapter 2, years have passed by at this point. It is interesting to note that by his own admission at the end of verse 15, Nebuchadnezzar sees the limits of the “gods” he knows. There may be a “god of rain,” but he cannot deliver you. There may be a “god of nature,” but he cannot deliver you. There may be a “god of this or that,” but he cannot deliver you.

These three did not hesitate in their response to the king.

3. “EVEN IF” KIND OF FAITH

Read Daniel 3:16-18:

DANIEL 3:16-18 *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. ¹⁷ If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."*

In their response, we see maturity, wisdom, and humility. They did not get into a debate. They were not going to argue with the king, nor were they going to demean the people who had followed his orders and bowed down to worship the statue. They did not organize a picket line. They very simply, with humility, stood their ground as they made a stand for God. They showed great confidence and faith in the *God of Heaven* who promised to never leave nor forsake them.

⁴ Charles Lee Feinberg, *Daniel: The Kingdom of the Lord*. Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1981., p. 44.

Their statement of faith was not dependent on the outcome. Their faith was firm regardless of the outcome. They believed God “could” deliver them; it honestly did not matter to them whether or not God “did” deliver them.

Their statement of faith was not dependent on the outcome.

I love that “even if” statement in verse 18. That is where faith comes in to play. So often people will turn to God in times of trouble and try to bargain with God. “God I will do this for you if you do that for me.” We get caught up in a ‘what is in it for me’ kind of faith. The motivation for these three was not based on their safety, being delivered or even destroying the statue. Their motivation was simply to be obedient in their faith to the *God of Heaven*.

- EVEN IF - God does not give me a job; I will have Faith.
- EVEN IF - God does not give me physical healing; I will have Faith.
- EVEN IF - God does not give me ‘this or that;’ I will have Faith.

We need to have that “*Even If*” kind of faith in an ever-changing culture.

Nebuchadnezzar did not like the response, in fact, in verse 19 we are told: “*he was filled with wrath and his facial expression was altered.*” He was fuming! In fact, he was so outraged he ordered the furnace to be turned up seven times higher than normal. Verse 21 says the three were tied up, fully-clothed, and cast into the furnace to burn to death.

We do not know how many men threw them into the furnace; I would think a minimum of 3, one for each of them. Regardless of how many there were, the fire was so hot it killed them as they threw in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

DANIEL 3:22-23 *For this reason, because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew (killed) those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. ²³ But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire still tied up.*

Notice God’s protection started before they were thrown into the furnace. The fire was hotter than it had ever been by seven times. The fire was obviously hot enough to kill those trying to throw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fire. God’s protection began before they “*fell*” in the fire as it was hot enough to kill; but it did not burn the ropes, it did not burn their clothes, and we are told in verse 23 they were “*still tied up*” when they fell in.

As the king looked into the furnace he saw not three, but four people; the fourth being either an angel or pre-incarnate Christ; the promise fulfilled. God is there in a changing culture, in the time of suffering and when the heat is being turned up in their lives and in ours.

DANIEL 3:24-25 *Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, “Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?” They replied to the king, “Certainly, O king.” ²⁵ He said, “Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!”*

We may not ever see a physical “fourth” person in our midst during times of trials and suffering. But we can be confident that God is present with us through the Holy Spirit (*John 14:16*). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were confident in the power, authority and protection of God; giving them faith to make a stand rather than bowing down. Their faith turned their test into a testimony.

4. TESTIMONY OF FAITH

Read Daniel 3:26-30:

DANIEL 3:26-30 *Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the midst of the fire.*

²⁷ *The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king's high officials gathered around and saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.*

²⁸ *Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.*

²⁹ *"Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."*

³⁰ *Then the king caused Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to prosper in the province of Babylon.*

Not only did God protect and save them, but their clothes were not burned, their hair was not singed, and they did not even smell like smoke. I smell like smoke when I simply grill in my backyard.

God wanted to make sure there was no doubt, no other explanation, nor any sort of coincidence involved with this scenario. It was God and God alone. Even the king acknowledged that truth when he called to them, "you servants of the Most High God."

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had an eternal perspective rather than a temporary perspective. Their "even if" kind of faith was not based on what God may or may not do in the temporary set of circumstances. Their faith was based solely on who God is, period. Often times we base our faith on immediate results, focusing on the actions of God, rather than the character of God. The faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was literally and figuratively tested by fire, resulting in praise, glory and honor to God. In the New Testament, Peter explains this kind of faith as follows:

1 PETER 1:6-9 *In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ⁸ and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.*

Often times we base our faith on immediate results, focusing on the actions of God, rather than the character of God.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

In her study on Daniel, Beth Moore writes this about the fiery furnace experience:

We can be delivered **from** the fire and our faith is **built**.

We can be delivered **through** the fire and our faith is **refined**.

We can be delivered **by** the fire and our faith is **perfected**. ⁵ *Continued on page 14 >*

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE *(Continued)*

Notice there is always going to be some sort of fire and it will directly impact our faith. There is never going to be a life with the absence of trials and sufferings. Our challenge is how we prepare for and persevere through those times of testing by fire.

We do not hear anything else about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego after chapter 3, but their faith through the fire has made a lasting impression on eternity. Even King Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the *God of Heaven*, the Most High God as the only One who could have done this miracle.

The contemporary Christian music group, Mercy Me, has a song called “Even If.” Part of the lyrics read:

It's easy to sing
When there's nothing to bring me down
But what will I say
When I'm held to the flame
Like I am right now

I know You're able and I know You can
Save through the fire with Your mighty hand
But even if You don't
My hope is You alone

Whether it is **from** the fire, **through** the fire, or **by** the fire; let our faith be **built, refined** and **perfected** as a witness and testimony to all who see. God's plan is to be with you every step of the way in every circumstance; Your purpose is to have that “*even if*” kind of faith, where your hope is in God alone, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

⁵ Beth Moore, *Daniel*, Lifeway Press, 2006.

FAITH

IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

DATE

April 18 & 19

WEEK

3 of 4

OVERVIEW

Daniel 7

KEY VERSE

Daniel 7:13

SETTING THE STAGE

In our last session we looked at the “even if” kind of faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were taken into exile along with Daniel. This week, God’s people are still in exile, having been taken out of Jerusalem and Judah into captivity in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar captured them and brought them back to Babylon. This exile would last for 70 years. Daniel continued to serve God faithfully throughout his life though living in exile. Even when Babylon was overthrown by Persia, the leaders of the new empire recognized Daniel for his integrity and valued him as an adviser. Daniel remained faithful to God even when faced with death, and God blessed him for it and rescued him. ¹

Throughout these 70 years of captivity, Daniel served four kings represented in the chart below:

KING	EMPIRE	STORY TOLD IN
Nebuchadnezzar	Babylon	Daniel 1-4
Belshazzar	Babylon	Daniel 5, 7-8
Darius	Medo-Persia	Daniel 6, 9
Cyrus	Medo-Persia	Daniel 10-12

Continued on page 16 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. 20/20 Foresight
2. The Ancient of Days
3. Keep Looking

THINGS TO KNOW

- The Book of Daniel was written in two languages - Hebrew and Aramaic.

FAITH

IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Setting the Stage, continued >

From the chart you can see that the book of Daniel was not written in a chronological fashion. The first 6 chapters deal with the biography of Daniel and his three friends while under three different kings. They began as teenagers in chapter 1 and by chapter 6, Daniel is facing the lions when 80+ years of age. Interestingly, the book was written in two different languages; chapter 1 was written in Hebrew, chapters 2-7 written in Aramaic geared for the Gentiles, and chapters 8-12 written in Hebrew geared for the Jews.

The powerful miracles recorded in Daniel chapters 1-6 show God's sovereignty at work for His people. The prophecies in chapters 7-12 show God's sovereignty over the Gentile nations and Israel by unveiling what He will do with them far into the future. ²

John MacArthur explains,

Chapter 7 of Daniel is pure future prophecy. It sweeps all the way from the life of Daniel to the return of Jesus Christ and touches the great epics of history in between. It is one of the chapters that lays out for us God's incredible, unchangeable, redemptive plan for human history. ³

Chapters 7 and 8 chronologically fit between chapters 4-5. It is after the death of Nebuchadnezzar and at the beginning of the reign of Belshazzar. It was a time of transition for the people of Babylon as well as a time of the unknown for God's people under the leadership of a new earthly king. God's message to Daniel via a dream, comes at a very critical time in the midst of their captivity, giving them a vision of the future.

Introduction

A few years ago I went to a leadership conference with one of the pastors at this church. The conference was at another local church and as the meeting started they had the PowerPoint presentation on the big screen in their worship center. I leaned over and whispered, "that would never happen at our church." And he whispered back, "what?" And I said, "the words on the screen not being sharp and focused, just a little fuzzy." He looked at me with his eyes glaring through his glasses and appropriately took his glasses off and offered them to me and said, "the screen isn't fuzzy, it's your eyes." Not long after - as I was a bit stubborn on the subject - I went to the eye doctor and got glasses.

¹ *Chronological Life Application Study Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois, 2012, p. 1135.

² Dr. Thomas Constable, www.soniclight.com, *Daniel*.

³ John MacArthur, www.gty.org, *The Coming of Christ Part 1*, sermon on Daniel 7, March 16, 1980.



I must admit, though I hate to admit, I can see better with the glasses. It did take some getting used to because mine have “progressive” lenses; helping me to see far away, mid-range and very near. So, it may look like I am always agreeing with you, but the truth is I am nodding my head trying to focus!

When dealing with prophecy in the Bible, we need to focus. Sometimes prophecy is to be seen near; what will happen very soon in the next few days, weeks, months, or years. Other times prophecy is mid-range; perhaps in the next several years or generations, and still other times it is far away in the distant future, time unknown.

Daniel 7 begins the prophetic part of the book. Although we will not be going through to the end of the book, this will provide a great picture of God’s faithfulness in His sovereignty. There are times when these chapters of Scripture look a bit fuzzy to us. We cannot quite focus on the trees for the forest, or the forest for the trees. And some of us are not even in the woods!

But, we should never shy away from a passage of Scripture because it is difficult to understand.

But, we should never shy away from a passage of Scripture because it is difficult to understand. In our Bible Study classes, we do not just hang out with the “feel good” passages, it is our goal to actually study the Bible in its entirety. With this year’s curriculum, we are asking the question “Is There More?” as we look at God’s plan and our purpose through the stories of Grace, Deliverance, Promise, and this month, Faith. And what better time to look at the faith and sovereignty of God than the week after Easter when Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of His death, burial and resurrection. Our goal this week is to put on spiritual glasses and get a clear picture or perhaps “less fuzzy” picture of what Daniel saw. Unbeknownst to Daniel, he had 20/20 foresight.

1. 20/20 FORESIGHT

Ironically in the year 2020, we have 20/20 hindsight that God gave Daniel a panoramic picture of the future of world history. Though Daniel did not see it come to pass and was literally physically sickened by what he saw (*Daniel 8:26, 27*), God provided him with 20/20 foresight into the political and spiritual world.

One thing for us to remember as we go along is what God says in Isaiah.

ISAIAH 46:9-10 *"I am God and there is none like me ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times, the things that are not yet done."*

Let us put on our spiritual glasses and see how the 20/20 foresight unfolds. Read the passage below:

DANIEL 7:1-8 *In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel saw a dream and visions in his mind as he lay on his bed; then he wrote the dream down and related the following summary of it. ² Daniel said, "I was looking in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. ³ And four great beasts were coming up from the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had the wings of an eagle. I kept looking until its wings were plucked, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man; a human mind also was given to it. ⁵ And behold, another beast, a second one, resembling a bear. And it was raised up on one side, and three ribs were in its mouth between its teeth; and thus they said to it, 'Arise, devour much meat!' ⁶ After this I kept looking, and behold, another one, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird; the beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it. ⁷ After this I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrifying and extremely strong; and it had large iron teeth. It devoured and crushed*

and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ While I was contemplating the horns, behold, another horn, a little one, came up among them, and three of the first horns were pulled out by the roots before it; and behold, this horn possessed eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth uttering great boasts.

Most scholars and theologians believe the dream Nebuchadnezzar had in chapter 2 which Daniel interpreted for him, and this vision in chapter 7 are similar. Compare:

Chapter 2 - The symbols were **inanimate objects**.

Chapter 7 - The symbols are **living and breathing animals**.

Chapter 2 - King Nebuchadnezzar saw the **world empires** in a **huge statue of a man**, while the **Kingdom of God** was symbolized by a **stone**, which a hand had not touched.

Chapter 7 - Daniel saw the **world empires** reflected in the **animalistic character** and the **Kingdom of God** is represented by the **Son of Man**.

Daniel's vision took place approximately 50 years after Nebuchadnezzar had his dream, so Daniel was in his late 60's at this point.

In Daniel 7, the four animals represent the four kingdoms. Look at the chart comparison.

Remember Daniel is still in the Babylonian part of the chart; Belshazzar was the last King of Babylon and this is the first year of his reign. So, it is the beginning of the end, if you will.

For Daniel, everything depicted in the vision was in the prophetic future having 20/20 foresight. For us, we see most of it as historical fact, most having already occurred and viewed as 20/20 hindsight.

What God began in chapter 2 with Nebuchadnezzar, He has fleshed out even more with Daniel. Whereas Nebuchadnezzar saw a great and impressive statue made with valuable metals; Daniel saw dangerous beasts that ruthlessly devoured peoples and nations. To human eyes, the nations of the world are like Nebuchadnezzar's great image, impressive and important; but from God's viewpoint, the nations are only ferocious beasts that attack and

seek to devour one another. ⁴ There was not a specific timeline given to Daniel, only that change was going to happen, and it was going to be aggressive, challenging, and messy at times.

The Lion with eagle's wings represents Babylon; both animals are powerful, one on land, one in the air and yet we see the changing of their power. The wings are plucked off, perhaps showing the humiliation of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar towards the end of his life and then his



⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary OT*, p. 1369.

change of heart toward God in the animal standing on two feet with the mind of a human. But we see the transition taking place.

The Bear represents the Medo-Persian Empire; also powerful. Notice it is lopsided; one side taller than the other, most scholars think that represents the Persian dominance in the empire. The explanation for the three ribs in the mouth is a toss-up depending on who you read. The disagreement is found primarily in what countries they represent, but most all agree it shows they have conquered other countries to achieve their present dominance.

The Leopard with four heads and four wings represents Greece; most believe it reflects the speed of Alexander the Great's conquest. The four heads may represent the division of Alexander's kingdom into four provinces after his death: Egypt, Syria, Macedonia, and Pergamum.

Now the Fourth Beast described as dreadful, terrifying and extremely strong, had large iron teeth, different from the others and ten horns. Many scholars believe this to be Rome and the Roman Empire which became the strongest, most powerful, and influential of all Empires up until that time.

As Daniel describes this fourth beast he says in verse 8, "*contemplating the horns, behold another horn, a little one, came up among them....*" Most scholars see this representing the "antichrist."

Often we think of the prefix "anti" as the "opposite of" something. However, the more appropriate meaning of it in this context is "against" or "instead of" as it pertains to Christ. Warren Wiersbe explains, "The final world ruler will be both a counterfeit Christ and an enemy who is against Christ."⁵ John gives us a representation of this in Revelation 13:1-10. In fact, each of the animals, lion, bear, and leopard are also represented in Revelation 13 as John tells us a bit more of this ruler.

Back to Daniel 7 and our next point.

2. THE ANCIENT OF DAYS

Continue reading starting in verse 9.

DANIEL 7:9-12 *"I kept looking Until thrones were set up, And the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture (clothing) was like white snow And the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, Its wheels were a burning fire. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; The court sat, And the books were opened. ¹¹ "Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time."*

In this midst of this dramatic prophecy, we see the good news that God is on the throne. Do not be distracted by the description, rather embrace the majesty and authority of the Ancient of Days. This gives us faith in His Sovereignty. The Ancient of Days, God Almighty, the Creator, the Alpha and Omega took His seat on the throne. If everything else has looked a little fuzzy, a little bit out of focus; put spiritual glasses on and see this truth, this promise, this hope that builds our faith!

In this midst of this dramatic prophecy, we see the good news that God is on the throne. Do not be distracted by the description, rather embrace the majesty and authority of the Ancient of Days.

⁵ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary OT*, p. 1370.

The Ancient of Days took His sovereign seat; He is beyond compare:

- The Lion with Eagle wings is powerful, but not Omnipotent.
- The Bear with the ribs in the mouth is strong, but not Omnipresent.
- The Leopard with four heads is fast, but not Omniscient.
- The Fourth Beast is terrifying and dreadful, but not the Creator who spoke the world into existence and is the beginning and the end.

In times of war and rumors of war, we have the promise that the Ancient of Days will take His seat with full authority and sovereignty. Our faith is based on what we know.

In times of war and rumors of war, we have the promise that the Ancient of Days will take His seat with full authority and sovereignty. Our faith is based on what we know. Let's review:

- We know that God is on His throne.
- We know that God is in control.
- We know with 20/20 hindsight that God gave Daniel 20/20 foresight.
- We know that in this year 2020, we can have faith in the sovereignty of God in our lives.

We can be sure of the future because God has been faithful in the past. It may sound like a cliché, but that does not diminish its truth. "I don't know what tomorrow holds, but I do know who holds tomorrow," the Ancient of Days! The same one who held yesterday is the same one who holds today and is the same one who holds all of our tomorrows.

And the Good News just keeps getting better; look at the next verses.

3. KEEP LOOKING

DANIEL 7:13-15 *"I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. ¹⁴ And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed. ¹⁵ As for me, Daniel, my spirit was distressed within me, and the visions in my mind kept alarming me."*

These verses show the humanity of Daniel and a glimpse of his faith. Notice what he does in verse 13, "I kept looking in the night visions." We know this was a troubling experience for Daniel, he admits it in verse 15, but in spite of his fear, his confusion, his distress, his alarm and perhaps even his doubt, he "kept looking."

That in itself is a lesson for each of us. If we are honest with ourselves there are times when we are afraid, confused, or are experiencing doubt because of the "unknown." Or sometimes it is because of the "known." But whatever we are experiencing in life, even when we want to look away, look in another direction, remember Daniel "kept looking."

We can be sure of the future because God has been faithful in the past.

He did not ignore what was being revealed to him, though it obviously did not give him a good night's rest. He did not completely understand why he was being given this vision and what it fully meant, though God did interpret it for him to some degree.

Daniel kept looking and as he kept looking he finds the key to the entire vision; a new Kingdom! This is the heart and soul of the vision. There is coming a new King, establishing a new Kingdom that will be eternal, it will not pass away, and it will not be destroyed.

There is coming a final Monarch, a glorious King that will establish an eternal Kingdom. A Kingdom unlike anything the world has ever known. Every kind of kingdom and every kind of ruler has been temporary at best. But now there will be an Eternal King, an Eternal Kingdom; one that knows no boundaries or language barriers, known as the Son of Man.

Jesus used this title, Son of Man, to refer to Himself throughout the Gospels, 31 times in the Gospel of Matthew alone. Each time Jesus referred to Himself in this manner, it should have taken those who were listening back to Daniel 7:13. If they had been wearing their spiritual glasses, it should have been an “ah-ha” moment. But we know most people saw Jesus dimly, fuzzy, a bit out of focus. Let us not make that same mistake. For those of us who have eyes to see and ears to hear, let us take note and put on our spiritual glasses.

Daniel kept looking and as he kept looking he finds the key to the entire vision; a new Kingdom!

Now verses 16-27 are the interpretation of the vision, though most of it is focused on the fourth beast, which was the most unusual. There are thousands of pages of books and articles that deal with these verses. However, we do not want to overlook this completely. Let’s pick it up in verse 19.

DANIEL 7:19-20 *"Then I desired to know the exact meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others, exceedingly dreadful, with its teeth of iron and its claws of bronze, and which devoured, crushed and trampled down the remainder with its feet, ²⁰ and the meaning of the ten horns that were on its head and the other horn which came up, and before which three of them fell, namely, that horn which had eyes and a mouth uttering great boasts and which was larger in appearance than its associates."*

Even though this fourth beast is exceedingly dreadful, notice what Daniel does in verse 21.

DANIEL 7:21-22 *"I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them ²² until the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom."*

Do you get the impression that Daniel wanted to look away in a different direction? Probably trying to close his eyes, but the images were still there and yet he “kept looking.” And as he kept looking, he sees the Ancient of Days! When life is fuzzy and out of focus, we need to do exactly what Daniel did; we need to keep looking and the Ancient of Days will come into focus.

In verses 23-25, Daniel describes the kingdom which the world has never seen; this is one of the two kingdoms to come. Though this kingdom will still be temporary. It is the kingdom of the Antichrist, which is described in more detail in Revelation 13-19. Whereas the other previous kingdoms declared war on other earthly kingdoms, this kingdom will declare war on the God of Heaven. Let’s look at the outcome; Spoiler alert! Remember Daniel had 20/20 foresight.

DANIEL 7:26 *But the court will sit for judgment, and his dominion (the antichrist) will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever.*

Yet another “temporary” kingdom losing the biggest battle ever fought.

DANIEL 7:27 *Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him.*

This kingdom, the fifth and final kingdom, will be an everlasting Kingdom! The Ancient of Days, the Son of Man; victorious over all evil, over all earthly kingdoms, over all that is temporary. A reminder of what we celebrated last week during Easter, victory over the sting of death.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Two years later, Daniel had another vision with more detail about the “Little Horn” which is recorded in chapter 8. I think the last two verses of chapter 8 serve as a reminder of what we are to do with all this prophetic information.

DANIEL 8:26-27 *"The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future." 27 I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding. (NIV)*

Like Daniel, reading these words of prophecy can leave us feeling exhausted, sick and confused beyond understanding. Sometimes we allow the unknown, out of focus, fuzzy future of this world cause us to live in fear, doubt and not wanting to move forward.

Verse 27 says Daniel was exhausted and ill for several days. He could have easily lived in isolation or just focused on those prophetic visions and nothing else. But look at what he did in the second half of verse 27. Daniel got up and went about the king's business. Even though he was appalled by the vision, and it was beyond understanding, he did not let it get him down or distracted.

Daniel knew that even though the future was fuzzy and seemingly blurry and out of focus, God had it all in focus. The Ancient of Days, the Son of Man, will be victorious in the end for all eternity.

In the midst of this highly troubled and dangerous world, God is present, a God more powerful than all the beasts—a God who loves and nourishes rather than hates and devours. It is in this God we are given hope and meaning, life and salvation "forever and ever."

As we watch the news, hear about the wars and the various world leaders, let us look with spiritual glasses asking God for wisdom, discernment, courage and focus. But let us not be so distracted that we do not get up and go about the business of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man. May our faith be built upon the certainty of His sovereignty.

FAITH

IN SEEKING HIM

DATE

April 25 & 26

WEEK

4 of 4

OVERVIEW

Jeremiah 29

KEY VERSE

Jeremiah 29:13

SETTING THE STAGE

Jeremiah served God during the same time period as Daniel. Each had to rely on their faith during extraordinary circumstances that were beyond their control. However, Jeremiah was primarily serving with those who were still in Jerusalem, while Daniel was with those who were taken into exile in Babylon. Each were being used by God to encourage and minister to God's people in a very difficult environment. The last two weeks in the book of Daniel we have seen faith expressed by those living in Babylon. While they were there, Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem writing and ministering on behalf of God to those who had been taken into captivity. (*Daniel 9:2*)

The prophet Jeremiah must be one of the most courageous of all the prophets. Living through one of the darkest times in Israel's history, his enemies did not like his message nor did his family and friends who rejected him. He was beaten, ridiculed, rejected, thrown in a dungeon, tied up; yet, he did not give up. The Lord does not ask us to be successful, He asks us to be faithful to His call and obedient to His Word. Through it all, Jeremiah was faithful. He is known as the "weeping prophet," as he lived his life heartbroken for God's people. It was this compassion that allowed him to move forward in the midst of the sadness of the circumstances that were not going to change anytime soon.

The fact of the matter was that God's people were in exile which would last for 70 years. The reality was that people who were taken from Jerusalem and Judah *Continued on page 24 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Faith found in Exile
2. Faith found in God's Plan
3. Faith in Who He Says He Is

THINGS TO KNOW

- Jeremiah was a contemporary of Daniel and Ezekiel.
- Jeremiah's ministry was primarily in Jerusalem and Judah.
- Jeremiah wrote letters to those living in exile in Babylon.

FAITH

IN SEEKING HIM

Setting the Stage, continued >

may never return based on their age when they left. However, the fullness of God's plan is never limited to the timetable in which we exist on this earth. God's purpose and plan are based on the eternal, not the temporary and finite. Jeremiah recognized that truth and communicated it for the benefit of God's people, encouraging them not to give up, but to hold tightly to their faith as they would keep seeking God.

Despite their disobedience, our Heavenly Father who cares deeply for His people, desired their faith to be restored and provided assurance of His constant faithfulness through Jeremiah.

Introduction

This week as we look at Jeremiah 29, we find the key theme of faith found amid a tragic time in exile. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we see a prophet who continued to warn the Israelites about breaking their covenant with God. Jeremiah predicted that the empire of Babylon would bring forth judgment, destroying Jerusalem and taking God's people captive into exile; all of which happened.

We pick up where Jeremiah is writing to the captives in Babylon. Letter writing was a way for him to communicate to the Israelites that had been taken away. We know based on the book of Daniel that the letters were received (*Daniel 9:2*). There are several different letters involved in this chapter, two of which we will look at today: a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles (v. 1-14); a letter concerning Jewish false prophets in Babylon (v. 15-23).¹ Jeremiah constantly assures the people, reminding them to remain faithful to the hope of restoration within their own land even in the midst of persecution for their blatant disobedience. Despite their disobedience, our Heavenly Father who cares deeply for His people, desired their faith to be restored and provided assurance of His constant faithfulness through Jeremiah.

Many are familiar with the verse found in Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" declares the Lord, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.*" (NIV) Out of context, this verse can mislead us to find faith in the promised outcome instead of finding faith in the midst of our current circumstances.

How can we find faith in the midst of our struggles? By seeking Him. The God that came to restore their faith in the middle of a time of exile is the same God that will restore your faith no matter your current circumstance.

We might not be people that are physically living in exile but spiritually speaking we are living in a place that is not our home. The earth was made to be a temporary place of residence for the people of God. The promise for our future is found within the One in whom we put our faith. Let us be reminded that the Lord sees us and just like with the Israelites, He is reminding us to seek Him and take heart; even in the midst of an exile.



¹ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Commentary, OT*, David C. Cook, Colorado, 2007, p.1242.

1. FAITH FOUND IN EXILE

JEREMIAH 29:4-6 *This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those who I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there, do not decrease. (NIV)*

Notice who was responsible for the exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It was not King Nebuchadnezzar. It was part of God’s plan. These words were both harsh and comforting. The reality is the people of God had repeatedly ignored God and turned their backs on God. God had warned them this would happen. They did not believe that it would actually happen to them; that is the sort of thing that happens to someone else. For those living in exile it must have been overwhelming and heartbreaking; having to leave all that they had ever known. They had a choice to make on what they would do in the midst of their circumstances.

The first part of this chapter establishes the next steps for the people of God. Jeremiah is providing clear direction of what to do in their current situation of exile. They had been given false hope by false prophets that the exile would soon come to an end. The reality was that it was not going to come to an end quickly. That was the harsh reality, but God provides comfort through the words of Jeremiah. The Lord says LIVE in this season, produce in this season and establish your roots until your time is completed. He is encouraging them and us to have faith regardless of our current situation.

Their circumstances were about as bad as one could imagine. They could have given up on living. They could have sunk into a deep depression. They could have embraced a lifestyle of bitterness and anger. But God wanted them to live. Build houses, raise families, live a life of faith in the midst of the exile. Obviously, this would not be an easy task to do on their own.

However, they were not alone. God was a personal God, not a geographical God. Just because they were no longer living their familiar life in their familiar surroundings, they did not have to miss out on a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. All they had to do was to have enough faith to seek God in the midst of their circumstances.

Let’s continue with verses 7-9:

JEREMIAH 29:7-9 *Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” ⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD. (NIV)*

It was crucial for them to be reminded to seek peace in a place that was not their home. They were told to pray and go before the Lord on behalf of their enemies. They were asked to bear the weight of the city to which the Lord had brought them. The Gospel was ultimately being brought forth and the Lord was desiring His people to thrive and not lose faith in who He was (and who He still is). Through Babylon’s ultimate downfall, they would see God’s great timing.

Just like Babylon was a foreign place where the Israelites resided, as believers this world is not our home (*Hebrews 13:14*). We are patiently awaiting the Lord’s return, living in a fallen world as foreigners. Our faith is not to be grounded in worldly satisfaction, or in broken promises but in

**The Lord says
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what Christ accomplished here on earth for us. Our faith can only be grounded in the One who paid the price for us on the cross for our sins, buried in a tomb (which could be described as an exile) and three days later, resurrected from the grave and offered us the divine opportunity to become citizens of Heaven.

2. FAITH FOUND IN GOD'S PLAN

JEREMIAH 29:10 *This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place." (NIV)*

As we look at this verse it sounds like good news. God is going to fulfill His good promise. God is going to bring you back to this place, your home, to Jerusalem. But wait, it was going to take seventy years to complete? Hold everything.

The Israelites were no longer in Israel, no longer home, no longer near their ordinary and familiar. The weeks would turn into months. The months would turn into years. The years would turn into decades. But it was all part of God's plan. That is the good news and the bad news of this story. It was not part of the plan of those in exile, going through these extraordinary circumstances. Yes, God was going to fulfill His promise. Yes, it was going to take a lifetime.

If we examine this part of the text through the eyes of Jewish culture this plan is hard to hear. Why? During this time period, life expectancy was much shorter due to famine, disease, and war. The average male would not live past fifty years of age. This meant that if he was receiving this news, he most likely would not be able to see the end of their time in exile. But remember that God wanted them to continue to live, get married, have kids, establish families. God had a plan. In fact, part of God's plan was to have Daniel living in Babylon and given positions of authority under all four kings during the 70 years in exile.

With this context in mind, let us look at one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament.

JEREMIAH 29:11 *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord," plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. (NIV)*

It is in the difficult, challenging, overwhelming times in life that we find faith in God's plan.

God's people thought they would never end up in Babylon. Then once there, they thought they would never get out of Babylon. This is not unlike how we live our lives. We get caught up in circumstances that we never thought we would have to deal with; divorce, job loss, death of a loved one, illness. Sometimes we spiral downwards to where we feel we can never overcome or move beyond the present set of circumstances. But it is in those difficult, challenging, overwhelming times in life that we find faith in God's plan.

We often forget that God thinks about us. If God has plans for you and me, that means that He thinks about you and me. God takes time to not only think about us but to put together a plan for us. Ultimately God plans to prosper you, though that most likely will not be through financial riches. God does not plan to harm you; He loves you. God thinks about you so much, that He plans to give you a hope and a future.

Remember that His people are in exile in Babylon, a foreign land that they did not choose. But then they are given these words of faith, hope and love. God has a plan for you in whatever circumstance you are in today; God is thinking about you.

Jeremiah continues with the message from God to His people.

JEREMIAH 29:12 *"Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and I will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (NIV)*

God wants to have a relationship with you that goes both ways. When we call on God, come to God and pray to God; He will listen. Consider that truth. The God of the Universe. The God who spoke the world into existence. The God who thinks about you will listen to you.

This kind of relationship does not come haphazardly, it only happens with intentionality. Look again at verse 13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." It takes patience and diligence to seek God, especially in a place of exile. Notice that God puts a small parameter on this promise. We are to seek God with all our heart. It is not about changing the circumstances; it is about building the relationship.

We are to seek God with all our heart. It is not about changing the circumstances; it is about building the relationship.

We have the privilege just like the people who were in exile to patiently wait for God's timing and plan to come to fruition. God's timing is rarely our timing. God's plans are rarely our plans. Yet, God's timing and plan has been and will always be perfect.

DANIEL 7:22 *until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom. (NIV)*

LUKE 2:6 *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. (NIV)*

GALATIANS 4:4 *But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law. (NIV)*

As we live in this temporary world, in the midst of circumstances that are often out of our control, we need to have faith in God's plan; His eternal plan. We need to have faith in who He says He is. All of time is moving toward a moment in time when every eye will see Christ. Only the Father knows the time; we do not. The Lord wants us to seek Him no matter the circumstance, no matter how long we wait.

3. FAITH IN WHO HE SAYS HE IS

JEREMIAH 29:15-17 *You may say, "The Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon," ¹⁶ but this is what the Lord says about the King who sits on David's throne and all the people who remain in the city, your fellow citizens who did not go with you into exile— ¹⁷ yes, this is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten." (NIV)*

While in exile, the people of God looked for quick and convenient answers. They were being misled by false prophets. The Lord wanted to remind the people who was in control and that He was still God who was sovereign over all. Even though they had false hope, the Lord corrected all that had been communicated from the false prophets. Jeremiah gives a foretelling of the destruction that will take place within Jerusalem of the people who remain there. The grass was not necessarily greener back home. God was clearly showing the people that He was still God who remained true to His character. Their faith was being tested.

JEREMIAH 29:19-20 *"For they have not listened to my words," declares the Lord, "words that I sent them again and again by my servants and prophets. And you exiles have not listened either,"*

declares the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore, hear the word of the Lord, all you exiles whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon.” (NIV)

The Lord called them out. They had not listened to His words. Verse 19 hits close to home for all of us if we are honest with ourselves. We have access to God’s Word like no other time in history. And yet, how often could those words be said of us, “*they have not listened.*” Distraction is easy, listening is not. We live in a world of distractions and excuses. It takes faith to listen to God; faith to realize that He is who He says He is. We might say it with our words, but do we live it in our lives? Do we listen to the truth of the Word of God?

1 JOHN 2:1 says that Christ is our Advocate, “*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*” (NIV)

JOHN 6:35 says that Christ is our Bread of Life, *Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (NIV)

PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11 says that He is Lord of All, *For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* (NIV)

All throughout Scripture the Lord reminds us of His character from beginning to end. These verses do not even scratch the surface of who our God is. Let us learn from those who have gone ahead. Let us remember in Whom to put our faith on a daily basis, regardless of circumstances. We are to have faith while in exile, faith in God’s plan and faith in who He says He is. It is that kind of faith that changes lives and generations.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Since the beginning of time, God had a plan. His timing is perfect and purposeful. However, that does not mean that His timing is easy to understand or comfortable to embrace. There are times that circumstances challenge us in ways we do not want to be challenged. We experience things we do not want to experience. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, *There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.* Jeremiah realized this truth. Daniel realized this truth. The question is, do we realize this truth?

God wants to teach us, grow us, challenge us, and love us in all circumstances. In the days of Jeremiah, God wanted their faith to be found in Him alone not in temporary security given by false prophets. In their current circumstance of living in captivity, the Lord wanted their faith to take root. Living in constant faith takes time in the mundane, longing, and waiting for the outcome that is only held in our Creator’s hands.

God wants nothing less for us today. God has a plan and a purpose for each one of us. Our challenge is to seek Him with all our heart, call out to Him, knowing He will listen. And then, it becomes our turn to listen to Him, as our faith is enriched.

THE STORY OF **FAITH**

FAITH IN SUFFERING

FAITH IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

FAITH IN SEEKING HIM



COMING UP NEXT:

THE STORY OF **RENEWAL**



FAILURE IS NOT FINAL.
EXILE IS NOT THE END.
GOD NEVER LEAVES
HIS PEOPLE.

THE STORY OF RENEWAL

The city of your forefathers is more than a thousand miles from where you now live. You have never seen it with your own eyes because you were born to a captive people in a foreign land, but you have heard endless accounts of its former beauty, glory, and fame. Now new reports have surfaced: the walls of this once-lovely city are broken down, the gates are burned and the people living there are in distress.¹ Time had not stood still. Time had taken its toll on the people and the city. When God's people returned to the land they had been exiled from, the people and the city were in desperate need of restoration. They would find that the grass was not greener, nor were the circumstances sweeter. There would be challenges, obstacles and opposition from all directions; but they would be home. Home is where the heart is, and it would be where the work began; the work of renewal for both the people and the city.

The book of Nehemiah is a story of Renewal. The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God. The people of Israel have been exiled in Babylon for seventy years, suffering the consequences of their moral and religious failure. Treated as second class citizens of Babylon they lived as slaves to a foreign power experiencing oppression, unable to worship God freely. As the book opens, one generation has passed away and a new generation that has never seen the Promised Land is free to return home. The story of Nehemiah encourages us that failure is not final. Exile is not the end. God never leaves His people. There is always room for renewal with God.

The Story of Renewal begins with brokenness. The people of Israel are returning to a broken Jerusalem. There are no walls or gates. The altar of God is decimated. The temple is destroyed. The people of Israel arrive in Jerusalem exposed to enemies and without a place to worship. They are in desperate need of renewal. While our circumstances are different than the people of Israel were in those times, we share a similar need for renewal in our life!

In Nehemiah, "there is something for virtually everyone – a general's diary, a governor's report, a civil record, a management handbook and a memoir – all in one short book."² It is filled with suspense, heroism, hope, and a renewing of the covenant between Israel and God. Over the next five weeks, we will discover how we can experience renewal in our own lives. Broken walls and broken hearts can be renewed. Dissipated passion for God can be restored. The book of Nehemiah unpacks five principles that will lead to renewal in your life.

May 2/3	Renewal Through Prayer - Nehemiah 1
May 9/10	Renewal Through New Beginnings - Nehemiah 3-4
May 16/17	Renewal Through Leadership - Nehemiah 5-6
May 23/24	Renewal Through God's Revelation - Nehemiah 8-9
May 30/31	Renewal Through Commitment - Nehemiah 10

¹ *The Jeremiah Study Bible*, Worthy Publishing, 2013, p. 619

² *ESV Study Bible* p. 822

"O LORD, LET YOUR EAR BE ATTENTIVE TO THE PRAYER OF YOUR SERVANT, AND TO THE PRAYER OF YOUR SERVANTS WHO DELIGHT TO FEAR YOUR NAME, AND GIVE SUCCESS TO YOUR SERVANT TODAY, AND GRANT HIM MERCY IN THE SIGHT OF THIS MAN." NOW I WAS CUPBEARER TO THE KING.

NEHEMIAH 1:11 (ESV)

RENEWAL

THROUGH PRAYER

DATE
May 2 & 3

WEEK
1 of 5

OVERVIEW
Nehemiah 1

KEY VERSE
Nehemiah 1:11 (ESV)

SETTING THE STAGE

At this point in our study, the Babylonian Empire has conquered Israel and destroyed Jerusalem, exiling the Israelite people out of their homeland and scattering them all over the known world. The Israelites' exile and their nation's destruction came as a result of their rebellion against God. However, as we studied in Jeremiah 29 last week, God promises to bring them back to Jerusalem and their homeland after 70 years of exile.¹

The book of Nehemiah picks up where the book of Jeremiah leaves off. While Jeremiah pleads with the Israelites to turn to God and rely upon His promises while in exile, Nehemiah shows how God fulfills His promise of renewing Israel from its plight and suffering.

Historically, the Babylonian Empire ruled the known world in the 6th century BC until the Persian Empire gained prominence in the 5th century BC; and the book of Nehemiah specifically takes place during the relatively early stages of the Persian domain. In fact, Nehemiah, after whom the book receives its name, is a Jewish layman who serves as the cupbearer for the King of Persia at the time, "Artaxerxes Longimanus," in the empire's capital city of Susa.

During Nehemiah's time of service for the king, the people of Israel continue to wade through the rippling effects of their national downfall. They are scattered and unsettled, destitute and hopeless. They even attempt several rebuilding efforts of Jerusalem, but their work falters and fails each time because of varying obstacles and threats from other nations.

Continued on page 34 >

LESSON OUTLINE

3 Dimensions of Prayer:

1. Positional
2. Propositional
3. Personal

THINGS TO KNOW

- A cupbearer was a high-ranking official in charge of serving the king who had to be trustworthy and loyal. Because of his character, Nehemiah had the king's confidence and was able to exert influence in the royal court.

RENEWAL

THROUGH PRAYER

Setting the Stage, continued >

The book of Ezra (the book right before Nehemiah), records two expeditions to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra, documenting the oppositions they face each time.

The process remains difficult without the protection of a national wall.

Nehemiah prays and pleads to God on behalf of his people. In the process, Nehemiah shows us two remarkable truths: our place in God's story, and that exile is never the end for God's chosen people.²

One day while Nehemiah is serving in the royal palace, some of his friends relay to him that an Israelite remnant still in Jerusalem is under great danger and duress. There is no protection for them, and it seems as if it is only a matter of time before they lose their lives. Moved by both grief and compassion, Nehemiah prays and pleads to God on behalf of his people. In the process, Nehemiah shows us two remarkable truths: our place in God's story, and that exile is never the end for God's chosen people.²

In Nehemiah 1, we will look at Nehemiah's prayer after hearing of the Israelites' suffering and danger. In his prayer, we will see three different dimensions of prayer and why they are important: positional, propositional, and personal. By looking at Nehemiah's prayer of renewal, we can find renewal for our daily lives.

Let's start reading in chapter 1:

NEHEMIAH 1:1-11 *The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.*

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel,² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.⁵ And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments,⁶ let Your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of Your servant that I now pray before You day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Even I and my father's house have sinned.⁷ We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that You commanded Your servant Moses.

⁸ Remember the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,⁹ but if you return to Me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather

¹ See Jeremiah 25:1-38, where God promises only 70 years of exile, and then Babylon's punishment and desolation.

² The Bible Project, "Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah." via youtube.com.



them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make My name dwell there.’¹⁰ They are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.¹¹ O Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name, and give success to Your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

1. THE POSITIONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER

In chapter 1, we see that Nehemiah receives word from his brother that the remnant of Israelites were in grave danger and suffering greatly (v. 1-3). Their last strongholds of support and refuge had been demolished, and they were vulnerable to attack. In addition, their national identity as God’s chosen people looked gloomy and hopeless. The Israelites were wading through disarray and distress, wondering from where God’s protection and provision would come.

The news of the Israelites’ suffering and sadness shakes Nehemiah to his core. By rejecting God’s good authority, the nation of Israelites plummeted into darkness, injustice, and chaos, resulting in being conquered by the Babylonian Empire. To be sure, not all suffering comes as a result of sin. Jesus was perfect, yet suffered greatly. However, in this situation, Jerusalem’s demise and their plight came as a result of their willful rebellion against God.

And so, Nehemiah comes to God in prayer, expressing his grief for Israel, uttering his brokenness over the situation, and confessing his sin in repentance. Interestingly, even though Nehemiah is not ‘present’ in Jerusalem, is not ‘broken’ like they are, and is not even ‘guilty’ in the same way as his Israelite kin, he nevertheless acquaints himself with them deeply in every way.

Nehemiah associates himself with them to such a degree that he feels the depth of their own emotional sorrow; he wrestles with the complexity of their own societal stresses, and he even assesses himself as just as guilty for their sin. This is a grand picture of what a covenant community looks like. When one part suffers, the whole entity suffers and longs for restoration. And as a Jew himself, Nehemiah cannot help but feel the pain and estrangement of his people and plead with God for restoration because their restoration is his, and his is theirs.

Nehemiah knows, however, that God *keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments* (v. 5), and God never turns His face away from those who come to Him. In fact, as we saw in last week’s lesson, God gave Israel this beautiful promise through the prophet Jeremiah just years earlier.

JEREMIAH 29:10-14 *This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My good promise to bring you back to this place.¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.¹² Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (NIV)*

As believers, we also have inherited this promise of repentance. Whenever we turn to God in repentance, He will never turn us away, no matter what we have done or where we have gone.

Psalm 9:10 tells us: *Those who know Your name trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You. (NIV)*

In these two passages, we see something foundational about the nature of prayer. All true, restorative and effective prayer begins on the bedrock of God's promise of our repentance. Prayer first and foremost begins as recognition of our position and God's position. Namely, that God is holy and we are not.

Nehemiah realizes his own spiritual position and the spiritual position of his people. They are broken and sinful. He also recognizes the gap that stands between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. The only opportunity for sinful man to have a relationship with a holy God is through the position of repentance, and trust in His grace.

What is interesting is that we can see glimpses of Jesus Christ and His salvation for us in the person of Nehemiah and in his intercession for the Israelites. For instance, as Nehemiah inhabited the world's greatest palace nearly a thousand miles away from his people, so also did Jesus occupy the greatest courts and highest grandeurs of heaven, millions of miles away from us. Nehemiah heard the cries and felt the pains of his people from far away, and he associated himself with them in every degree. Similarly, Jesus heard our cries and sensed our distress on earth and acquainted Himself with us in every way, even to the point of bearing our own sin (*Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:8*).

In Nehemiah 1:5, we see that God *keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments*. But interestingly, Nehemiah has not kept God's commandments, nor have any of the Israelites. So, what is their hope of reconciliation; and likewise, what is ours? It is the promise of One who would come and fulfill the Law perfectly, Jesus. Therefore, it is only by faith in Him and repentance from sin that God will, in fact, never forsake us, regardless of any exile we shall walk through, whether spiritual or circumstantial.

The Israelites' salvation and their pleas for help could be traced back to the one interceding on their behalf. Likewise, our salvation and pleas come to God solely because of our connection in repentance and faith to the One interceding on our behalf.

Prayer begins with an understanding of our position before God and His heart towards us.

How would you describe your own prayer life? Would you say that you approach God with your pleas and requests upon your own terms and conditions? Or do you approach God on His terms and conditions, in light of His holiness and our sinfulness and His grace in Christ?

Understanding our position before Him changes us so that we do not approach God with our own terms and conditions attached. Rather, we approach Him with deep surrender and humility in light of who He is and what He has done for us in Jesus. Instead of being people whose prayer is characterized by self-entitlement and brashness; the Gospel changes us to be people whose prayer is characterized by humility and dependence.

Praying in line with the holiness of God, the grace of Christ, and your dependence upon Him will not only usher spiritual renewal into your soul personally, but it will also usher renewal into the lives for whom you are interceding. Prayer begins with an understanding of our position before God and His heart towards us.

2. THE PROPOSITIONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER

Through the first seven verses, we observed the foundation of prayer (our position in light of God's holiness) and the bedrock of God's promise to us in prayer (that He will hear us if we repent from

sin and depend on His grace). Because of Jesus' saving work on our behalf, we are redeemed from sin and brought in as children who have access to a relationship with God. Through Nehemiah's prayer, we can see the **positional** dimension of prayer, in general, for how to approach God.

In the latter half of the passage (verses 8-11), we can begin to see the **propositional** dimension of prayer. In other words, through Nehemiah's prayer, what do we see about how Nehemiah approaches God with his petitions, pleas, and supplications?

One clue is by looking at the repetitive statements, phrases, and words in his prayer. If you read closely, there is one recurring word over and over and over again in the prayer. What is it?

The words 'You' and 'Your' as referents to God and His ownership appear a total of 20 different times in Nehemiah's prayer. When Nehemiah prays, he is stamping his petitions and concerns with the seal of God's authority and ownership, not his own.

Nehemiah ascribes authority, ownership, and kingship solely to God as he looks out over the domain of his perspective and experience. Look at the following verses:

Your ear attentive ... Your eyes open (v. 6)

Your servant [Nehemiah] ... (v. 6)

Your servant Moses ... (v. 7)

Your people whom You have redeemed ... (v. 10)

Nehemiah is already praying for the right things and in the right way because he is finally seeing reality rightly. Nehemiah realizes that Israel is not primarily his own people; the Israelites sin is not simply their own problem; and Jerusalem is not their rightful inheritance, city, or home. Nehemiah recognizes that the ownership belongs to God because He is the King and because it is His people to whom He has covenanted Himself.

As such, Nehemiah's prayer filled with the words 'You' and 'Your,' ascribing responsibility to God, and therefore, putting his concerns, his pleas, and his anxieties into God's hands.

What about you? In your prayers, what word is repeated most?

If we are honest, most of us would probably admit that the predominant word in our prayers is not 'You' and 'Your' referring to God and His kingdom, but rather, 'me' and 'my' referring to ourselves.

How we 'label' and 'tag' our prayer requests with the pronoun of ownership says more about our hearts than it does about the prayer request itself.

Labeling and tagging our prayer requests appropriately with the ownership of God can change everything. Why? Because we are finally surrendering them into God's hands for Him to help us.

When we put our requests into the domain of *Your great power and by Your strong hand* (v. 10) instead of our own, we will finally start experiencing relief and renewal in our prayer life and in our relationship with God.

When we trust that God truly reigns with complete wisdom, ultimate power, and absolute love, we can cast our cares upon Him, and rest in His care for us. (*1 Peter 5:7*)

I have once heard it said, "The prayers that start in heaven are heard by heaven." God is incredibly and eagerly willing to take our requests when we have finally surrendered our requests to Him. When we play tug-of-war with God by giving Him partial ownership, we get in the way of His work.

When Nehemiah prays, he is stamping his petitions and concerns with the seal of God's authority and ownership, not his own.

When we trust that God truly reigns with complete wisdom, ultimate power, and absolute love, we can cast our cares upon Him, and rest in His care for us.

When we affirm by faith God's heart and God's authority over every area in our life, God will bring spiritual renewal and restoration into the spaces that have been broken and are weak. He did this for Nehemiah and the Israelites; and as His children, God will do the same for us.

Prayer is **positional** in the sense that it orients us correctly with God, and prayer is **propositional** in the sense that God seeks to hear our prayers and answer them. But prayer is also highly **personal** as well.

3. THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER ---

At the very end of the chapter, we see something significant about the personal dimension of prayer. Look closely at the very end of chapter 1, the last line of verse 11:

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah recognizes that God had placed him in a strategic place for a specific purpose in light of his prayers and others' needs. God had sovereignly placed Nehemiah in a position with proximity and relationship to the King of Persia. As the cupbearer, Nehemiah was perhaps one of the few in the entire kingdom, who resided with the king for hours a day. Ironically, Nehemiah as a foreigner had greater access to the king than even the citizens in the king's own kingdom.

Nehemiah acknowledges that God has placed him, of all people, in a specific place at a specific time with specific connections in order to bring the goodness of God into the plight of others. By virtue of his job, he occupies a strategic position to be a personal influence towards the king and a political advocate for his own people.

In fact, Nehemiah is not unlike other characters of the Bible:

- Joseph was sold into slavery to Egypt's Captain of the Guard, which specifically placed him in the King's prison when he was accused, which then led him to the King's circle of influence—to serve as the second in command in the whole land.
- Moses grew up in the Egyptian palace and wandered the wilderness, which specifically equipped him with leverage in the Egyptian palace and wisdom in the wilderness to lead his people to the Promised Land.
- David learned the sling and staff and tended sheep, which equipped him to take down Goliath and then to shepherd God's people well.
- Esther was given favor by another King of Persia and lived in his palace, which strategically positioned her to appeal to the king for the salvation of God's people from a mass genocide.
- Our ultimate example, Jesus, descended into our worldly context, spoke our language, suffered our plight so that He might be able to save those who trust in Him (*Hebrews 7:25; Philippians 2:5-8*).

As Warren Wiersbe writes, "God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time."³

In all these stories, and in many more, God sovereignly leads His people into specific places for

³ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete Old Testament in One Volume* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), p. 752.

specific reasons to carry out specific callings for the good of others and the glory of God.

Gospel ministry is ultimately recognizing your place in God's world with the unique resources, status, talents, and personality that God has endowed upon you that perhaps no one else may have and leveraging them for the welfare of others and the sake of God's Kingdom.

Gospel ministry is certainly not less than sharing the Gospel with others. But it is ultimately more than that, too. It is a fundamental realigning of your entire life under the authority of God, with the mission of God, and for the glory of God.

Take a moment and evaluate your place in God's world. Reflect and think deeply about how God has blessed you, where He has placed you, and what He has brought you through. Where has God specifically and strategically positioned you so that you can make a difference in the lives of others that perhaps no one else can do? Where is your place in God's mission?

A pastor once told me that you can find your calling at the intersection of two main questions: **“What do you do best for the glory of God?”** and **“Where is the most strategic place for you to do that for the mission of God?”**

Consider these two questions and ask God to give you clarity about how they overlap in your life, and how that specifically empowers you to make a difference in the lives of others and in the Kingdom of God. Just like Nehemiah did for the people of Israel in their time of grave need.

“God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.”³

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Where do you find yourself right now? Are you in need of God to renew your heart and life? Maybe you need a renewed sense of urgency to impact those around you. What are the unique giftings, seasons, and relationships God has given you right now to make a difference in the lives of others?

Renewal begins in our life through prayer. We pray, acknowledging God's position as holy and righteous. We pray, acknowledging our position as sinful and broken. We experience the renewing work of God in our lives when we come to God submitting to His lordship over our lives. Renewal occurs in our lives when we pray “Your will be done” and not “My will be done.”

When we are renewed through the power of prayer, we can spread that renewal to others in our sphere of influence. Imagine living a life where you constantly feel renewed through prayer. You find a renewed sense of God's love and grace in your life. You live a life that is renewed in the power of submitting to the Lordship of God. Imagine living a life with a renewed sense of purpose. The renewed life is deeply interested in renewing the lives of everyone around them.

A life that is committed to personal renewal and renewing the world, is a life that pleases God.

AND I LOOKED AND AROSE
AND SAID TO THE NOBLES
AND TO THE OFFICIALS AND
TO THE REST OF THE PEOPLE,
"DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEM.
REMEMBER THE LORD, WHO
IS GREAT AND AWESOME,
AND FIGHT FOR YOUR
BROTHERS, YOUR SONS, YOUR
DAUGHTERS, YOUR WIVES,
AND YOUR HOMES."

NEHEMIAH 4:14 (ESV)

RENEWAL

THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

DATE
May 9 & 10

WEEK
2 of 5

OVERVIEW
Nehemiah 3-4

KEY VERSE
Nehemiah 4:14

SETTING THE STAGE

The Babylonian Empire has conquered the nation of Israel and its capital city, Jerusalem, along with its crowned jewel, the temple. As a result, the Israelites became scattered, exiled people without shelter or protection. Last week, we looked at Nehemiah chapter 1, which introduces Nehemiah, a Jewish man who serves as cupbearer for the King of Persia. One day while working in the king's courts, he learns that a group of Israelites are experiencing great distress and danger in Jerusalem.

Moved deeply by compassion over the grave situation of his people nearly one thousand miles away in Jerusalem, Nehemiah intercedes for his people to God and then makes a plea to the King of Persia on their behalf. As the story unfolds, God softens the king's heart who accepts Nehemiah's appeal with favor, and even sends him to Jerusalem with blessing to begin construction and restoration.

When Nehemiah arrives to Jerusalem with his crew, he first assesses the city's damage, particularly the condition of its gates and walls. He develops a citywide restoration plan, mobilizes his people into varying roles, and encourages them that God will give them success as they rebuild and fortify their city of old. In fact, Nehemiah 3 essentially outlines the Israelites' great 'assembly line structure' with much detail, showing how they organized themselves to work together efficiently and productively.

Nehemiah 3 shows the importance of planning, structure, and preparation. However, Nehemiah 4 takes a turn, revealing obstacles and oppositions the Israelites face *Continued on page 42 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Nature of Opposition
2. The Experience of Opposition
3. The Call to True Faith

THINGS TO KNOW

- Nehemiah met opposition with two things: prayer and action.

RENEWAL

THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

While we might not be rebuilding a city like the Israelites or fending off national enemies, the very experience of opposition, transition, and the battle of faith are relevant to our day-to-day experience as Christians.

Setting the Stage, continued >

both externally and internally, foreign and native, as they strive to carry out God's calling and plan. As the leader of the expedition, Nehemiah identifies the nature of the opposition and then encourages his people to continue with faith towards the new beginning God has in store for them.

In our text, we will see three things the Israelites encounter, and how God meets with them through it: 1) the nature of opposition, 2) the experience of opposition, and 3) the call to faith in God's character and plan.

While we might not be rebuilding a city like the Israelites or fending off national enemies, the very experience of opposition, transition, and the battle of faith are relevant to our day-to-day experience as Christians. As we look into the story of Nehemiah 4, we find immense hope and encouragement for our own lives.

1. THE NATURE OF OPPOSITION

NEHEMIAH 4:1-3 *When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews,² and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"*

³ *Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!" (NIV)*

As soon as Nehemiah and the Israelites assemble and begin the work of rebuilding the gates and walls, they are immediately hit with opposition and trial. The first three verses feature two powerful individuals, Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite, both who accompanied Nehemiah and his crew from the Persian palace to Jerusalem.

We are not told much about these two individuals in the text, but history reveals that Sanballat served as a powerful governing official of the Samaritan district inside the Persian Empire. Historians also believe that his title 'the Horonite' likely comes from the small town, Horonaim, which is a constituent of Moab, a historical archenemy to the nation of Israel.¹

In addition, Tobiah seemed to serve as the governing official of Ammon, underneath Sanballat's jurisdiction. However, scholars pinpoint something very fascinating about Tobiah and his family history. The name 'Tobiah' is actually a Jewish name, not an Ammonite name; and scholars believe



¹ Mervin Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. (Nashville, B&H Publishing: 2003). iBooks p. 433-434.

that it is likely **this Tobiah** from the family origin of Tobiad that was expelled from the Israel community when they could not prove their family lineage descended from Israel (Ezra 2:60). If so, this would certainly explain Tobiah's enmity towards the Jewish people. ²

And so, even though Sanballat and Tobiah both knew the king had approved and blessed Nehemiah's mission, they did not like it; they resisted it; and as such, they began to mock and ridicule the Israelites as they worked. They started using psychological warfare first to stifle their morale and target them emotionally.

Sanballat provokes them with the following mockery:

"What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?" (v. 2-3) (NIV)

Commentators point out that these targeted statements are not just general bullying, but specific and targeted psychological warfare.

When he says "*feeble Jews*," Sanballat targets their insecurity in strength. Not only were the Jews small in stature as individuals, but they also were relatively small as a cooperative group, too. When he says, "*will they restore their wall*" and "*finish in a day*," he targets their inexperience or lack of wisdom in order to complete the project. And he states, "*Will they offer sacrifices*," as a religious jab, mocking the very idea that prayer and sacrifice could make the wall grow. ³

Mervin Breneman says:

"[Sanballat's] final question, "Can they bring the stones back to life ... burned as they are?" uses wrong information to discourage the builders. Most of the stones were still in good condition. They had not all disintegrated from the fire as he suggested. Psychological warfare can use truths to which people are sensitive or half-truths or falsehoods to intimidate the enemy." ⁴

In other words, Sanballat and Tobiah strive to break the spirits of the Israelites first. As soon as they tried to move in a certain direction of obedience, opposition came. Beau Hughes defines this opposition as, "anything or anyone that threatens your perseverance in the faith or in the work of ministry." ⁵

It is important to note that the first two chapters of the book are about Nehemiah's prayer and the initial call of Nehemiah (chapters 1-2). Then, there is one chapter on preparing to do the work, (chapter 3). Followed by three-and-a-half chapters on the opposition that the Israelites face (chapters 4-7) ⁶. The ratio of text regarding calling and opposition should encourage and sober us to the reality of what it means to trust God and follow His calling. Obedience does not guarantee smoothness, for it is often the path of great inconvenience and sacrifice.

Obedience does not guarantee smoothness, for it is often the path of great inconvenience and sacrifice.

What about you? Are you in a place of transition and hopefulness in God? Given your circumstances, does obedience feel difficult, or nearly impossible? It did for the Israelites. Their calling was not easy, and their task was steep.

² Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, iBooks p. 469.

³ Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, iBooks p. 471.

⁴ *The New American Commentary*, p. 471.

⁵ Beau Hughes, "Nehemiah: The Reality of Opposition." March 3, 2013. <https://www.tvresources.net>.

⁶ *Ibid*.

In our culture today, we face philosophical opposition when it comes to following Christ. Our culture disregards the Christian view on life, salvation, society, gender, sexuality, and money. We often stand in direct contrast to the philosophical convictions of our day. Many times, being a Christian can feel like swimming against the current of modernity's values and beliefs.

But sometimes we face another kind of opposition, and that is circumstantial opposition. The obstacles and trials seem confusing and too difficult given what you can see directly in front of you. For Nehemiah, this could be how big the job was, and how few people he had to staff it. It could have been an issue of supplies and resources.

Perhaps for you, a circumstantial opposition might consist of relationship conflict, a new job opportunity, your limited budget, or an inability; yet, God's call remains constant upon your life in that very area. And so, obstacles hinder you from walking forward in obedience, simply because you cannot see what the future will hold.

Opposition can be philosophical or circumstantial, but regardless it makes obedience more difficult. It could come directly from the mouth of the enemy. Or it could simply come from living by sight and not faith, looking at circumstances more keenly than looking to God.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF OPPOSITION

NEHEMIAH 4:4-12 *Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵ Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from Your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.*

⁶ *So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.*

⁷ *But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. ⁸ They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. ⁹ But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*

¹⁰ *Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."*

¹¹ *Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."*

¹² *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." (NIV)*

In response to Sanballat and Tobiah's mockery and ridicule, Nehemiah prayed for relief and then got back to business (4:4-6). Prayer is an excellent, initial response to opposition because it is the purest act of humble dependence upon God, no matter the circumstance.

However, what happens next is something we might not expect. Instead of Nehemiah and his people receiving 'answered prayer' for an easier situation, the opposite actually happens. Sanballat and Tobiah's mocking and ridiculing in word now turns into plotting against them in deed. In other words, their opposition gets dialed up to a more intense degree. Look at Nehemiah 4:8:

⁸ *They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.*

And so, Sanballat and Tobiah began to plot with their own people about how they could destroy Israel and prevent Jerusalem from gaining power. It is shocking that Sanballat and Tobiah moved

forward with terrorizing the Israelites, likely knowing full well that they would have to stand before the King of Persia for their actions that clearly violated the King's edict of protection over Israel.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah confronts the greater opposition again with both prayer and action in verse 9:

⁹ *But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. (NIV)*

Unfortunately, the opposition does not die down. This time, it does not simply increase amongst their foes, from outside their walls. It also begins to develop in their own community, from inside their walls as we see in verses 10-12:

¹⁰ *the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." (NIV)*

¹² *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." (NIV)*

Hearing plots from their neighbors, the Jews themselves started spreading disbelief among their people and entertaining the idea of compromise as well.

Here we learn not simply about the nature of opposition, but also, the very experience of it, and how we cope with it ourselves. By looking at the response of the Jews, we can find many similarities to our own experiences.

Opposition came and came and came. But Nehemiah and the Jews kept on praying and praying and praying. And even more than that, they kept on working and working and working. Yet, the opposition would not decrease; it only got worse. And so, it seems the workers and the inhabitants in Jerusalem became worn down by the opposition, and functionally surrendered. Perhaps they started thinking, "Maybe prayer does not work." Or, "Maybe God is not listening. If He really heard our prayers, wouldn't He make the situation easier?" Or, "If we are being obedient, shouldn't the process be easier than it is?" We have all interacted with these thoughts in the midst of trial and opposition.

But God is not cruel, nor is He making it harder on us for the sake of it. Rather, He wants us to dig deep, and so, expose in what our true hope lies. Were the Israelites hoping most in a new set of circumstances, such as a better life, a rebuilt city or a restored political state? Or was their greatest hope God Himself?

When the fire of opposition gets hotter and hotter, the refining becomes stronger and the debris becomes clearer. The Israelites might have been hoping in God for something. And when that 'thing' did not happen as easily or as immediately as they would have liked or thought, they began to compromise under the opposition to secure their livelihood (as far as they could see it).

How many of us do the same thing? We might be hoping in God for something, and that is fine. But the deeper question is, what is our deepest hope in life? A certain circumstance for life and happiness, other than God Himself and His promise of love for us? Sometimes God will lovingly dial up the opposition to help us see in what we are truly trusting.

When the fire of opposition gets hotter and hotter, the refining becomes stronger and the debris becomes clearer.

Beau Hughes remarks that some people fall not because they do not expect opposition to come, but because they expect it will come and then go away on their own timeline. It is not actually opposition coming against us that threatens our faith; it is opposition that stays against us that

threatens our faith. Why? This is because it reveals what our faith is truly built upon.⁷

Ironically, the threats and assaults on Jerusalem's walls also serve as a brilliant illustration about the spiritual threats and assaults upon the fortitude and strength of Israel's own faith. What is, truly, their greatest defense against the enemy? Is it their circumstances (or lack thereof), or is it a God who fights for them no matter what their circumstances may suggest? (*Deuteronomy 3:22*).

While the nature of opposition is generally acknowledged in its varying forms, the experience of opposition comes more difficult for most people. It becomes more than just a coping of circumstances, but also a deep dive into our heart behind it.

But there is one place we can find hope in any degree of trial and opposition, and it is not more planning or more striving or more praying necessarily. It is the right kind of faith behind any praying, planning, and action.

3. THE CALL TO TRUE FAITH

Pressed in on every side with opposition from both his enemies and his own people, Nehemiah looks Godward with a heart full of faith, eyes full of anticipation and exhorts his people to do the same.

NEHEMIAH 4:13-14 *Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows.¹⁴ After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." (NIV)*

There are a couple of things to note about the kind of faith Nehemiah displays. First, it is a faith rooted ultimately in the character and plan of God. Secondly, it is a faith that is paired with action.

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Nehemiah pointed them toward God, not toward their circumstance. He pointed them primarily not to what they could or could not see, but rather, who they could trust. In other words, Nehemiah shifted the attention of his people away from their circumstances, away from their enemies, and away from their progress and places their attention primarily on who God is.

This is the essence of what it means to walk by faith, and not by sight. Faith means moving forward in obedience regardless of what may stand in the way, precisely because your view of God is bigger than the odds stacked against you, the obstacles riddled before you, and the opposition pressing down upon you.

Successful obedience is always motivated by faith in God's good character and good plan, even when you cannot see it. And so, especially when you cannot see, the call to faith becomes even more important. It becomes a call to preach to yourself who

God is and not to listen to yourself. It becomes a call to believe the goodness and sovereignty of God, not giving more weight to what circumstances might suggest. This is the battle of faith, and Nehemiah leads the charge. True faith is always paired to the truth of who God is.

We also see how true faith is paired with action. In fact, all throughout the Bible, the word used for faith is rarely a noun, but a verb. Faith is not merely something you have; rather, it is something that is evident in your life based on what you do.

⁷ Beau Hughes, "Nehemiah: The Reality of Opposition." March 3, 2013. <https://www.tvresources.net>.

If belief is simply assenting to the notion that a parachute can transport one from an airplane to the ground safely, then faith means actually jumping out of the airplane with a parachute.

All throughout the chapter, there is no dichotomy of faith and action. Nehemiah never simply just prays. He prays and prepares. He prays and guards. He prays and reorganizes. He prays and gets ready to fight.⁸

Likewise, for the many trials and oppositions we face every day, the purest demonstration of faith is not simply believing something in your head, but acting upon it from the heart. Once we reaffirm who God is, only then will we have the peace of mind and strength of heart to move forward in obedience.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Where are you in life? Are you in the middle of a transition or is a new season unfolding? God is calling you forward in obedience in everyday living; however, sometimes He calls us forward along a path. Perhaps that is you right now. This text teaches us that no matter where we find ourselves on the path of obedience, we should expect opposition, but that we should also find deep confidence knowing that God is with us. And along that path, we should constantly evaluate our own hearts, asking, “Where is my hope?” Is your hope in a certain circumstance coming to fruition, or is it in God Himself? Is it in what God gives to you, or is it in who God is to you?⁹

Opposition, perhaps more than anything else, will reveal the bedrock of your hope. The Israelites were likely confronted with a conflict of hope. Their hope was grounded in a city coming together, and the opposition seemed so overwhelming that it made them despair. Only until they hoped primarily in God’s character and promise did they finally find peace and the strength to persevere. The same will be true of us as well in whatever calling or new beginning we are walking towards.

John Piper has once said, “Stop defining your future in terms of your past, and start defining it in terms of your God.”¹⁰ As we move forward in obedience, may we pray and ask God to give us faith-filled hearts in who He is to us and in what He has in store for us.

⁸ Beau Hughes, *The Reality of Opposition*.

⁹ John Piper, www.desiringgod.com.

¹⁰ John Piper, Desiring God Instagram account, [instagram.com](https://www.instagram.com/desiringgod).

SO THE WALL WAS COMPLETED
ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH OF
THE MONTH ELUL, IN FIFTY-
TWO DAYS. WHEN ALL OUR
ENEMIES HEARD OF IT, AND ALL
THE NATIONS SURROUNDING
US SAW IT, THEY LOST THEIR
CONFIDENCE; FOR THEY
RECOGNIZED THAT THIS WORK
HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED
WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD.

NEHEMIAH 6:15-16

RENEWAL

THROUGH LEADERSHIP

DATE
May 16 & 17

WEEK
3 of 5

OVERVIEW
Nehemiah 5-6

KEY VERSES
Nehemiah 6:15-16

SETTING THE STAGE

The book of Nehemiah is often viewed as a manual on biblical leadership. Essential elements of biblical leadership like prayer, faith, vision, planning, organization, team building, and perseverance are vividly displayed in Nehemiah's life. He was a man of God who could weep over the condition of God's people and city yet be proactive and decisive in responsive action. Nehemiah provides a model for God's servants of every age.

The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God. From both the divine and the human viewpoints, the wall around Jerusalem was essential to the restoration and establishment of Judah in the land.

Jerusalem would always remain vulnerable to attack and Yahweh's name seemingly discredited until the wall was restored (1:1-3). Prayer was Nehemiah's first approach to solving the problem (1:4-11), but prayer and action go hand in hand, so Nehemiah approached the Persian king with a plan and secured the support needed to do God's work (2:1-9). Opposition is immediate and plays a major role in what follows (2:10).¹

No test of leadership is more revealing than the test of opposition. Christian leaders can go to pieces under such pressure. Some grow too discouraged to continue. Others build walls around themselves, shoot from behind, and become embattled, *Continued on page 50 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Leading Through Internal Opposition
2. Leading Through Internal Disobedience
3. Leading Through Subtle Opposition

THINGS TO KNOW

- The book of Ezra details how the House of God was rebuilt in the City of Jerusalem but the temple was without protection for 90 years until God commissioned Nehemiah to lead a team to build the wall.
- The wall was built in 52 days.

RENEWAL

THROUGH LEADERSHIP

Setting the Stage, continued >

embittered and vindictive. Not so with Nehemiah. Nowhere does his leadership shine more brilliantly than in his handling of opposition.²

The circumstances Nehemiah faced in chapter 4 were common forms of opposition: ridicule and the threat of violence. Suddenly in chapter 5, a new form of opposition erupts from an unexpected source. The first had been from without, from Israel's enemies. This new form was from within. This opposition arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves.

Just when the work on the wall was coming to completion, another phase of opposition against Nehemiah appeared from his enemies: intrigue, innuendo, and intimidation. Nehemiah's challenge was to see the situation clearly and to discern how to face the changing circumstances presented by the opposition.

1. LEADING THROUGH INTERNAL OPPOSITION

In chapter 4 Nehemiah faced two common forms of opposition: ridicule and the threat of violence. Violence is the path often taken by the enemy when ridicule fails. Nehemiah overcame the ridicule by recognizing what it was, a weak attempt to get him to stop the building. He followed up in two ways. First, he took the matter to God in prayer, looking to Him for vindication, and he kept building. Nehemiah overcame the second attack by such practical means as arming his workers, posting guards, keeping the people in the city at night where they would be safe, and establishing procedures for unexpected attacks. These devices were successful. His enemies were frustrated, and the work advanced relentlessly. (Nehemiah 4:15-23).

Suddenly, to judge from the tone of chapter 5, a new form of opposition erupted and from an unexpected source. The first two forms of opposition had been from without, from Israel's enemies. The oppression of the poor was from within. It arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves.

Does it not always seem to be that way? You are engaged in some important work. You have been opposed by people who are not Christians and do not share the vision. You have overcome that form of opposition and are pressing on, when suddenly there is a problem within the church or Christian community itself. During the days of the monarchy, the Jewish states had been opposed by their pagan neighbors, and Israel had fought many wars. When God sent prophets to recall the

¹ Kenneth G. Hanna. *From Moses to Malachi : Surveying the Old Testament* (Kindle Locations 5124-5127). CrossBooks. Kindle Edition.

² John White. *Excellence in Leadership: Reaching Goals with Prayer, Courage and Determination*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, p. 66.



people to righteousness, it was not the pagans who killed God's messengers but the Jews themselves. In the same way, an examination of church history will show that the most successful attacks upon the church have come not from unbelievers but from those within, from people who have professed to know God and Jesus Christ. Often, the greatest opposition to Christian work today is from those within the church who want a form of godliness but who reject genuine Christianity.³

Look at the first verses of Nehemiah chapter 5:

NEHEMIAH 5:1-6 *Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.² For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live."*

³ There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."⁴ Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.⁵ Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."⁶ Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.

These verses describe a classic example of the gap between rich and poor. It was a case of pure exploitation, and what made it worse was that it occurred within the Jewish community among those who should have been helping one another.

Originally the Jews who returned to Israel from Babylon were well off. Ezra 1:9-11 lets us know that those who had come back from the exile returned with significant resources. Additionally, King Cyrus opened his treasury and contributed. The people were well enough off to contribute to the temple when it was built, and they also paneled their homes. Before Nehemiah's time in Babylon exiles had returned and brought freewill offerings from those still in Babylon, (Ezra 7:16).

So, what happened? Why were some people so poor in Nehemiah 5? Famine is mentioned in verse 3 and the king's tax on their fields and vineyards are mentioned in verse 4. The result of the burden was leaving the poor open to the exploitation of the wealthy and in some cases even to the point of slavery.

Look at verse 7:

⁷ I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.

Nehemiah was angry when he heard of this injustice with his own people. The reaction was different than the reaction he had against Sanballat and Tobiah in chapter 4. He expected wrong behavior from outsiders, so he was not angry with them. Righteous anger should be felt for those who profess to walk by God's standard and yet compromise those high standards by their actions. The exploitation of Jews by Jews was not right, and he was angry enough to confront it. However, Nehemiah did not let the circumstances control him. As a leader, he considered the situation before he contended with the nobles and rulers.

The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God.

³ J. M. Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expositional Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2005, p. 59-60.

2. LEADING THROUGH INTERNAL DISOBEDIENCE

Nehemiah could have backed up his charge by showing them what they were doing was wrong according to God's Word. Let's take a look:

EXODUS 22:25 *If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest.*

LEVITICUS 25:35-37, 39-41 *Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you.³⁶ Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you.³⁷ You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain...³⁹ If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave's service.⁴⁰ He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee.⁴¹ He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and shall go back to his family, that he may return to the property of his forefathers.*

Nehemiah was close to God, had his priorities right and was faithful. He was a leader who served as an example in any circumstance.

Nehemiah addressed the sin and the issue of not walking in the fear of God. Oppressing their own people provided a wrong view of God and His Word not only to their brethren but also to their enemies. He continues in Nehemiah 5:9:

Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

The nobles of Nehemiah's day were disobeying the teachings of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Why is it that so many within the church take the revealed Law of God so casually? It is no surprise that the world does this. The world does not receive the Bible as God's Book. But we do. We even maintain that it is inerrant "in the whole and in its parts." How then can we take it so lightly? We play loose with the Scriptures, and we need to repent of it. We need to become people of the Book—in fact, and not just in our profession.⁴

Nehemiah was close to God, had his priorities right and was faithful. He was a leader who served as an example in any circumstance. You see a contrast in verses 15 and 16 between former governors who had come before and Nehemiah.

Nehemiah led differently because of his fear of the Lord.

NEHEMIAH 5:15-16 *But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.¹⁶ I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.*

Nehemiah led differently because of his fear of the Lord. He applied himself to the work on the wall, he did not try to increase his possessions and all his servants were gathered there for work. The internal opposition did not deter Nehemiah from moving forward with the task at hand. Warren Wiersbe writes,

"The fear of our God" is not the servile dread of a slave toward a master but the loving respect of a child toward a parent. To fear the Lord means to seek to glorify God in everything we do. It means listening to His Word, honoring it, and obeying it. "The remarkable thing about fearing God," wrote Oswald Chambers, "is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas

⁴ Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*, p. 64-65.

if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.” Because Nehemiah’s life was motivated by the fear of the Lord (*Nehemiah 5:15*), he did not fear what the enemy might do (vv. 14, 19). The fear of the Lord moved Nehemiah to be a faithful servant of the Lord. ⁵

If you are in a position of spiritual leadership, Nehemiah chapter 5 has some important lessons for you:

- **Expect problems to arise among your people.** Wherever you have people, you have the potential for problems. Whenever God’s work is prospering, the enemy sees to it that trouble begins. Do not be surprised when your people cannot always get along with each other.
- **Confront the problems courageously.** “There is no problem so great that you cannot ignore it” might be a good philosophy for a character in a comic strip, but it will not work in the Lord’s service. Every problem that you ignore will only go underground, grow deeper roots, and bear bitter fruits. Pray for God’s help and tackle the problem as soon as possible.
- **Be sure that your own integrity is intact.** A guilty conscience will rob you of the spiritual authority you need to give proper leadership, but every sacrifice you have made will give you the extra strength you need to defeat the enemy.
- **See in every problem an opportunity for the Lord to work.** Solving problems in ministry is not an intellectual exercise but a spiritual experience. If we depend on the wisdom of the world, we will get what the world can do; but if we depend on the wisdom of God, we will get what God can do. All that we say and do must be motivated by love, controlled by truth, and done to the glory of God. ⁶

3. LEADING THROUGH SUBTLE OPPOSITION

Nehemiah once again returned the workers to the wall and made such progress that within a short time the entire wall was finished. Only the gates needed to be completed. Just when the work seemed to be done, more opposition appeared from his enemies. This time, the attacks from the enemy were aimed at Nehemiah personally. Cyril Barber says, “When Sanballat had his co-conspirators realize that they have been outmaneuvered, outgeneraled, and outwitted by Nehemiah, they decided to attack him personally.... Their wounded pride will not be appeased until Nehemiah has been humiliated.” ⁷

Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to Nehemiah asking for a meeting but Nehemiah knew they were planning to harm him. Being a discerning leader, he knew when to say no. They continued to send messages four times and he continued to tell them he could not meet with them because of the work he was doing. The reason this communication was subtle and therefore dangerous was that on the surface it sounded quite plausible. What is more, it was attractive. If the invitation had come earlier, it obviously would have been a scheme to keep Nehemiah from working. But, now that the wall was completed and only the gates needed to be secured, this could appear to be a reasonable request.

The problem was that the wall was not completely finished. It was almost finished. The walls were at their full height but until the gates were completed the entire project was in jeopardy.

⁵ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined* Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996, p. 64.

⁶ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 68–69.

⁷ Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976, p. 50.

Not only did Nehemiah say no but he knew these governors were scheming to harm him. He was determined to finish the job.

Sanballat's next tactic is to send an open letter throughout the entire territory for everyone to read, accusing Nehemiah and his fellow Judeans of plotting a revolt against the Persians (*Nehemiah* 6:5–9). The letter claims that the wall is being built to fortify the city of Jerusalem in defiance of King Artaxerxes. The letter even impugns Nehemiah's intentions, saying he wants to be a king. Obviously, the letter is not true, and Nehemiah replies by declaring their charge to be nothing more than lies.⁸

NEHEMIAH 6:5-9 *Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. ⁶ In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. ⁷ You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together." ⁸ Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." ⁹ For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.*

The letter was an obvious lie and was spreading a rumor intended to hurt Nehemiah and keep the work from being completed. Once again, we see the source of Nehemiah's strength and discernment when he prays, "O God, strengthen my hands." He prayed because the true source of his strength was the Lord. His relationship with the Lord gave him strength. Cyril Barber cites Maurice E. Wagner as having said it this way:

Once again, we see the source of Nehemiah's strength and discernment when he prays, "O God, strengthen my hands." He prayed because the true source of his strength was the Lord.

"Personal security ... comes from our relationship to the three Persons of the Godhead. Our relationship to God the Father gives us a sense of **belonging**. We are members of his family and are secure in our Father-child relationship. Our union with Christ the Son gives us a sense of **worth**. God loved us so much that he sent his son to die for our sins. With our redemption accomplished, God has made us joint-heirs with Christ. This shows our value. Finally, the Holy Spirit's indwelling empowers us. We are made equal to every task (i.e., we are **competent**)."⁹

Finally, Shemaiah tried to get Nehemiah to be disobedient and hide in the temple of God so he could, "save his life" (*Nehemiah* 6:10). Enemies were trying to intimidate Nehemiah saying they were coming to kill him. Once again Nehemiah demonstrated discernment when *he perceived that surely God had not sent him*. Exercising the strength, only the Lord could provide, Nehemiah refused to flee and go into the temple to save his life. He was obedient and said, "I will not go in." (*Nehemiah* 6:11-12)

NEHEMIAH 6:15-16 *So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*

In spite of the opposition from without and within, subtle and not so subtle, the work that God had ordained was accomplished for His glory and purpose. The faithfulness of Nehemiah's leadership paved the way for the wall and gates to be complete and the name of the Lord to be praised.

⁸ L. Goldberg, *Nehemiah. Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995, Vol. 3, p. 317

⁹ Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, p. 50.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Lord commissioned Nehemiah and gave him one task – lead the people to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem. As the leader, opposition was inevitable. We all lead in some way and are called to be men and women of God who, like Nehemiah, can lead through the circumstances of life. Consider these character traits of Nehemiah:

1. **Nehemiah’s closeness to God and his prayerfulness.** Nothing is more characteristic of Nehemiah than his closeness to God, expressed most often by his praying to God on all occasions. Nehemiah saw everything that happened to him within a spiritual framework.
2. **Nehemiah’s sense of calling to a task.** Nehemiah had a strong sense of his one great objective, which was to rebuild the wall, but it went beyond that. Above all, he knew himself to be God’s man and to have a call to God’s service.
3. **Nehemiah’s self-awareness and knowledge of his own worth.** This was not a vain self-assessment. The gifts Nehemiah had were from God; he would not have had them otherwise. He knew that he had these gifts and was not the least bit overwhelmed by the task he was given or intimidated by his adversaries. We should have an equally strong sense of personal value. We should know that we are equipped by God for whatever task He has for us.
4. **Nehemiah’s extraordinary discernment.** Nehemiah also showed great discernment. He was able to detect in every subterfuge of the enemy exactly what was going on. Where did he get such discernment? Some of it may have been a natural gift, of course, but a large part of it must have come from his spiritual experience and understanding. Nehemiah was not beguiled even by the most subtle devices of his enemies. He was able to focus on real issues and priorities.
5. **Nehemiah’s great courage.** We must not forget this element, for many people have had other important gifts and yet have failed in times of testing because of a lack of courage. “Should a man like me run away?” Who is not afraid at times? Who is not disturbed? Who is not hurt? We all are. Yet it is precisely when we yield those fears to God and press on that we show leadership.¹⁰

How has the Lord called you to lead? In your family? In your church? At your workplace? In your home? Inevitably, you will face opposition. Like Nehemiah, look to the Lord to strengthen and lead you through the opposition toward completion of the task.

¹⁰ Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*, p. 74–75.

THEN EZRA BLESSED
THE LORD THE GREAT
GOD. AND ALL THE
PEOPLE ANSWERED,
"AMEN, AMEN!" WHILE
LIFTING UP THEIR HANDS;
THEN THEY BOWED LOW
AND WORSHIPED THE
LORD WITH THEIR FACES
TO THE GROUND.

NEHEMIAH 8:6

RENEWAL

THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

DATE
May 23 & 24

WEEK
4 of 5

OVERVIEW
Nehemiah 8-9

KEY VERSE
Nehemiah 8:6

SETTING THE STAGE

We have the innate desire to be renewed in every arena of life. We desire for our relationships to be renewed, so we subscribe to blogs and read books on marriage that can help develop a new sense of renewal with our significant other. We desire for our bodies to be renewed, so we commit to contracts at the gym and diets in the New Year. Come February, we are left wondering why we are doing hot yoga and eating tree bark and grass (but only between noon and 7pm because of intermittent fasting). We desire for our purpose to be renewed so we volunteer at local charities or serve on a board for a while. It is not surprising to want renewal. It is a longing all of us possess to return to the zest and freshness of the Garden.

If we are honest, renewal is desired throughout our Christian life. We find ourselves in a place of staleness and stagnancy that pervades our relationship with God. We feel as if we are not getting anything out of the pastor's message. Worship feels dull and has lost its potency. Times of prayer are plagued with distraction and feel sluggish and dry. What is the solution? Do we need a new routine, a new devotional, a new study Bible or a new small group? While those things can be of value, the truth is we need personal renewal in our relationship with God. Renewal in our relationship with God comes through Revelation.

Theologians have broken down Revelation into two categories: 1) General Revelation 2) Special Revelation. *Continued on page 58 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Renewal Comes through Reverence to God's Revelation
2. Renewal Comes through Responding to God's Revelation
3. Renewal Comes through Our Repentance

THINGS TO KNOW

- Revelation means "an unveiling."
- General Revelation: General truth about God communicated in a general way to all mankind.
- Special Revelation: Specific truths that can be known about God through personal relationship.

RENEWAL

THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

Setting the Stage, continued >

Renewal in our relationship with God comes through Revelation.

General Revelation - Through general revelation, God has communicated truth to every person in a general way concerning His existence, power, goodness, and supremacy. There is plenty of evidence of God's existence in the universe around us. We experience general revelation in the beauty of the sunrise, the power of a thunderstorm, and the majesty of a mountain. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:20 *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

However, general revelation is limited. It does not reveal the depths of the love, grace, and mercy of God. General revelation does not communicate the significance of the death of Jesus; or how to receive forgiveness through a personal relationship with God. For that, we need special revelation.

Special Revelation - Special revelation involves clearer communication of God's attributes and His redemptive plan for mankind. Special revelation helps us reach beyond knowing about God and allows us to know God, personally. Throughout the storyline of the Bible, we see God using various methods of special revelation to communicate with His people. He uses angels, prophets, dreams and visions to directly communicate His will and His character to specific people. The revelation of God's character and plan for us is found in the Word of God. God ultimately reveals Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we behold God in the flesh. God revealed Himself to us directly and clearly through the Person and finished work of Jesus.

In the book of Nehemiah, we see that the people of God are experiencing a lot of external renewal in their lives. They have renewed leadership in Ezra and Nehemiah. They have a renewed homeland with renewed walls and gates. They have a renewed sense of excitement and fervency as they were brought back from 70 plus years of exile in Babylon. Even though all those things are good and meaningful, God's plan for the people of Israel was for them to experience internal renewal through revelation.¹

Introduction

In the original Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra were one unit. What we see in both books is the story of God aiding the people of Israel to renew their city and their life. Ezra was a scribe, which meant that he had access to Persian archives and important historical documents, most importantly, the Law. Nehemiah was a strong godly leader among the people. Tradition holds that he was the founder of the Great Synagogue, where the complete Old Testament Canon was recognized.



¹ John MacArthur. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997. p. 638-639;656-657.

At the center of the book of Nehemiah, we find that the people have finished rebuilding the walls and the gates of the city, at an astonishing pace, fifty-two days! They are gathered in the courtyard in front of the Water Gate. Nehemiah 8:1 tells us: "they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel." The people of Israel were desperate to be renewed through the revelation of Scripture. This account in the book of Nehemiah gives us three great principles for experiencing renewal in our life.

1. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH REVERENCE TO GOD'S REVELATION

NEHEMIAH 8:5 *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. (ESV)*

Standing is an ancient way of showing honor and reverence toward an individual. We stand when a judge enters the room. We stand at a wedding when a bride enters the Chapel doors. We stand from where we are sitting to shake another person's hand. Standing is an outward symbol of inward reverence. The people realized that when the book of the Law was opened that God was present. It was God's Word to the people that would be heard, and if there was anybody ever worth standing for it is God. Jesus Himself gives us a New Testament example of standing up in reverence for the Word as He reads the Scriptures in the Synagogue. When He was finished reading and ready to preach, Jesus sat down. (Luke 4:16-20) If the immortal Son of God stood to read and show reverence for the Word of God how much more do we need to revere the Scriptures?

J.I. Packer brilliantly wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, "What is a Christian?... True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the Word of God."² Just as the people of Israel stood, to show reverence and submission to the authority of the Word of God, we also should show reverence toward the Word of God.

We show reverence for God's Word as we seek to read and understand it. Recently Lifeway Research polled Americans on their views of the Bible and their daily intake of Scripture. The results are staggering. In general, Americans have a good disposition toward Scripture, but few read it. Almost 9 out of 10 people own a Bible. According to the American Bible Society the average household has three Bibles laying around their home. Yet, Bible reading remains spotty. Only 22% of Americans read Scripture daily. 35% of people never pick up a Bible and an additional 30% of people only look up things in the Bible when needed. Most of our culture acknowledges the Bible as being good – but not good enough to take seriously.³

J.I. Packer brilliantly wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, "What is a Christian?... True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the Word of God."²

The question a lot of people ask is: How often should we read it? British minister John Blanchard wrote in his book, *How to Enjoy Your Bible*:

Surely, we only have to be realistic and honest with ourselves to know how regularly we need to turn to the Bible. How often do we face problems, temptations, and pressure? **Every day!** Then how often do we need instruction guidance and greater encouragement? **Every day!** ... As the American evangelist D.L. Moody put it, "A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 116.

³ <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/>

lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it. ⁴

Solomon gives us wise counsel in the book of Proverbs regarding the Word of God. He tells us,

PROVERBS 2:2-5 *Making your ear attentive to wisdom, and inclining your heart to understanding; ³ yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as hidden treasures, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (ESV)*

**When we truly
revere the Word of
God, we will read it.**

When we truly revere the Word of God, we will read it. We will desire to seek out the wisdom given in its pages. We will search for pearls of grace and gems of mercy as if they were hidden treasure.

The Bible is not just treasure to be sought, the Word of God is life. In Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (ESV) We receive our daily sustenance from the nourishment that the Word of God provides. The church is comprised of people whose lives have been changed by the Revelation of Jesus in the Scriptures and their submission to His leading in their life.

When we read the Bible, the Bible reads us. It discerns our intentions, weighs our motivations and pierces into the deepest recesses of our soul. As the author of Hebrews writes,

HEBREWS 4:12 *For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

2. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH RESPONDING TO GOD'S REVELATION _____

It is not enough to just read the Scriptures. We must respond to them. Charles Spurgeon has famously said, "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to somebody who's not." When we look at the response of the people in the Book of Nehemiah as the Word of God was opened, we see they responded with worship.

NEHEMIAH 8:6 *Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

When the people of Israel heard about all that God had done in the Law they could not help but respond to God in worship. They heard how Adam and Eve were covered by the skins of the animals in the Garden. They heard about Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh. They heard about God's guidance with the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They heard about God dwelling amongst His people in the Tabernacle. They heard about the Day of Atonement. They heard about all these things in the Law and they were consumed with worship for God.

We can read of Jesus' birth. We can read of His miracles. We can read of His love for His disciples. We can read of His compassion. We can read of His tears at Lazarus' tomb. We can read of His battle in the Garden of Gethsemane where He sweat drops of blood. We can read of the cross where He cried "it is finished." We can read of His resurrection. We can read of His Spirit active in the church. We can read of His return. We can read of His glory extolled throughout eternity.

⁴ John Blanchard, *How to Enjoy Your Bible* Colchester, England: Evangelical Press, 1984, p. 104.

And that should produce a response of worship, lifted hands and bowed knees.

A rebuilt city with new walls and gates signified that Israel had returned to their land. But, what signified that Israel had returned to their God was their response to His Word. The people of Israel responded with bowed knees. They had a posture of humility. They also lifted their hands symbolizing a posture of surrender and praise.

Billy Graham has said, “To get nations back on their feet, we must first get down on our knees.”⁵ If you want renewal in your relationship with God there must be a reading of God’s Word and a response to God’s Word in your life. Renewal will not come apart from reading and responding to God’s voice in the Scriptures as truth is unveiled.

A rebuilt city with new walls and gates signified that Israel had returned to their land. But, what signified that Israel had returned to their God was their response to His Word.

3. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH OUR REPENTANCE

As Ezra read the Law to the people of Israel they began to be convicted.

Nehemiah tells us in chapter 8, verse 9, *all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the Law*. The Law produced deep conviction in the hearts of the people. That is how the Law functions. The New Testament informs us that, the Law provides an impossible standard that we cannot live up to. Paul would write in the book of Romans, *for by the Law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20)*. The Law does not impart saving grace. Instead, it convicts people and points them to their need for a Savior. (*Galatians 3:24*) When we read Scripture, it exposes and unveils our deepest sins. It presses against our heart to push out all that is poisoning our relationship with God.

Reading Scripture is like visiting the doctor. When you are in the doctor’s office he pushes on certain parts of your body to see if anything hurts. It is not his goal to hurt you in the process. Instead, he is determining if anything unusual is happening. Checking to see if anything is out of place or not functioning properly. He applies pressure to examine what is happening below the surface. God’s Word acts in the same way. The Scriptures apply pressure to our lives exposing our illnesses of the heart, and toxins in our souls. The gnawing we feel in our heart when we read the Bible is not to hurt us but to lead us toward healing. The goal of conviction is correction and wellness, not pain and heartache.

The people of Israel wept because their sin was exposed in the light of God’s Word. But Nehemiah urged the people to take the next step. Repentance is not complete with conviction alone. There must also be rejoicing over our forgiveness. Nehemiah and Ezra urged the people, *“do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10b)*.

The Scriptures apply pressure to our lives exposing our illnesses of the heart, and toxins in our souls.

If you look at the Jewish Calendar, Ezra’s reading of the Law was in between the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Booths (*see Nehemiah 8:9-18*). This gives God’s people an entire week of happy celebration for the atonement of their sin. This is not merely happenstance. God’s divine order for our lives when facing sin is conviction, cleansing, and then celebration. The people of Israel were struck with conviction but they were cleansed by the atoning sacrifice the High Priest had made. Now it was time to celebrate. Warren Wiersbe writes, “It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.”⁶

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Daniel*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2017.

⁶ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 113.

As believers in Christ, it is appropriate for us to be convicted by sin. As Believers in Christ, it is inappropriate for us to wallow in that state when Jesus has provided us joy in reconciliation. (*Psalm 32:1*) Repentance involves conviction, cleansing, and celebration. The joy of the Lord is our strength! We celebrate God's presence and His renewing work in us!

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Story of Renewal for Israel began with revelation. The people of God revered God's Word. They responded to God's Word with worship. Then Israel repented with conviction and celebration. God's plan for our lives is no different. Our lives as Christians are to be marked by reverence for God's Word, a constant response of worship, and the discipline of repentance. As we seek to be renewed in our relationship with God let us remember that renewal does not come apart from God's revelation. The book of Nehemiah is a story about broken people in a broken city made whole by the power and love of God.

As the plan of God unfolded for the people of Israel to be restored and renewed, God's revelation was at its core. As the people of God began to know God and respond to Him, renewal began to take place. Broken walls and broken hearts were rebuilt. Revelation of God's character and His Plan always shapes Our Purpose. Can you imagine your life if every day you stopped in awe, humility, and surrender over who God is? Can you imagine your life if you celebrated the forgiveness found in Jesus? That is the life God wants you to live. That is a life of purpose shaped by God's plan.

RENEWAL

THROUGH COMMITMENT

DATE

May 30 & 31

WEEK

5 of 5

OVERVIEW

Nehemiah 10

KEY VERSES

Nehemiah 10:28-29

SETTING THE STAGE

Throughout the book of Nehemiah, we have seen the faithfulness of a man who wanted to serve God and His people. It was a season of renewal for the Israelites. God had made a commitment to them to bring them out of Babylon, back to their homeland. God fulfilled His commitment. There was opposition externally and internally in this season of renewal. But God never wavered from His commitment. Nehemiah never wavered from his commitment to God going from cupbearer to leader.

Now it is time for God's people to make their commitment and not waver. They had heard the reading of the Torah; the Law, the stories of old. The people had stood in reverence to the revelation of God's Word. But there had to come a time to put action to what you believe. To make a commitment based on your values. If your values are based on the Scripture; then the goal is to embrace the Laws and ordinances of God found in His Word. We are to take the statutes of Scripture and commit to living them out even today, in a culture that has compromised and ignored the truths of God.

Today's lesson will challenge us to separate ourselves without isolating ourselves. It begins and ends with commitment to God to live in this world but not of this world. Jesus would put it like this as He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane the night before He was crucified.

Continued on page 64 >

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Commitment to Separate
2. Commitment to the Sabbath
3. Commitment to Support

THINGS TO KNOW

- The people of God are free to choose whether to be committed to God or not.
- God has already chosen to be committed to His people forever.

RENEWAL

THROUGH COMMITMENT

Setting the Stage, continued >

JOHN 17:14 *I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to this world any more than I do. ¹⁷ Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. ¹⁸ Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. (NLT)*

Jesus realized how important the Word of God was for His disciples to make a commitment for their lives to be committed to the truth of God.

Introduction

It is a familiar story on the dating scene. You have been dating for a while now. You have good chemistry and you cannot believe that they even laugh at your corny jokes. Your friends think there is potential for your relationship. But, when you start to have a conversation about defining the relationship, investigating what the future might hold, things suddenly feel uncomfortable. The person you are going out with starts to become indirect and dodgy. You are confused and feel rejected. Things were going so well. “What changed?” you ask.

They respond, “I have commitment issues.”

The term “commitment issues” gets thrown around a lot. For some, it is an easy way to get out of a relationship that you did not think was going anywhere. For others, it is a serious battle with committing to someone for a long-term relationship that will require fidelity and honesty. Whether it is a genuine reason or a cop-out; the person does not want to proceed in the relationship.

But commitment issues do not just dwell in the relationship realm. If we are honest, we live in a consumer mentality, month to month, subscription service culture that does not lend itself to commitment.

For the most part, we can have what we want when we want it and try something new with the click of a keyboard. Instead of a yearly contract with a gym we can fast pass our way to an assortment of gyms and fitness classes. Instead of one kind of razor, we can have a different fancy razor mailed to our house every month, or any time we would like. If you do not like the local coffee shop just keep driving, there are 10 more options in town. Brand loyalty is rare.

The attitude of consumerism slips into our spiritual life as well. When we feel like the church is not meeting our needs we are inclined to try something different. We have seen a drastic decline in those who are committed to the church in the past twenty years. America has seen almost a 20% drop in those who are committed to a local church. ¹ When God seems unfair to us or we become



¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>

disgruntled with God's people, we walk away from Jesus and His church.

Historically, anytime the people of God walk away from their commitment to God it never goes well with them. While we think if we shed our commitment, we will be free; the Bible teaches us that when we are unfaithful to God we choose to be "cursed and overtaken." Consumerism has no place in Christianity, commitment is the key.

DEUTERONOMY 28:1; 15 *And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth....¹⁵ "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (ESV)*

God never honors disobedience, unfaithfulness, or a cavalier disposition toward Him. But when we live a lifestyle committed to God we experience spiritual renewal in our life. Commitment and renewal go hand-in-hand.

This month as we have been studying the book of Nehemiah we have been tracing the story of renewal. We have seen renewal occur through prayer. We have seen how renewal can occur in our lives through new beginnings. We have discovered that renewal through leadership can occur in our lives through opposition and difficult circumstances. Last week, we looked at how renewal comes in our lives through revelation from God's Word. Today, we will look at how renewal can occur in our hearts through commitment.

In Nehemiah chapter 10 the people of God recommit themselves to the covenant their forefathers failed to uphold. The people of Israel show us three important principles to which we can commit in order to experience spiritual renewal in our own lives.

God never honors disobedience, unfaithfulness, or a cavalier disposition toward Him. But when we live a lifestyle committed to God we experience spiritual renewal in our life. Commitment and renewal go hand-in-hand.

1. COMMITMENT TO SEPARATE

NEHEMIAH 10:28-30 *Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding,²⁹ are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes;³⁰ and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.*

Nehemiah recounts Israel committing to be separate from the peoples around them. After they had heard God's Law read to them by Ezra, they realized that they were to be distinguished from among the other nations of the world. Moses wrote in Exodus 19 that the people of Israel were to be a treasured possession among all peoples for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6). (ESV)

God's people have always been called to separation. This is a difficult concept for us to grasp because Christianity does not operate in a vacuum. We may go to work with people who are not Christians. We do business with non-Christian mechanics, shop at supermarkets filled with non-Christians and send our children to non-Christian schools. We are surrounded by non-Christian culture every day. The church is called to be like a boat. A boat is in the water but does not let water inside. We are called to be in the culture, but we must not let the culture in, or we sink.

Separation always involves a **from** and **to**.

Nehemiah 10:28 tells us that the people of Israel *separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God*. Separation involves leaving the former things and clinging to the better things. We see this in every area of life. If you are committed to running a marathon you separate yourself from comfort and cling to the training regimen. When you commit to a diet you separate yourself from eating whatever you want and cling to your meal plan. Commitment involves separating yourself from the former things and clinging to the better things.

The Israelites separated themselves. They made a commitment to be markedly different from those around them by clinging to God's Word.

The Israelites separated themselves. They made a commitment to be markedly different from those around them by clinging to God's Word.

The best way to illustrate this is through the picture of separation that we see through marriage. When a man and a woman stand before God and their family on their wedding day it is an act of union but also an act of separation. They are separating themselves from all possible mates and devoting themselves to one another for the rest of their lives.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "Separation is simply total devotion to God no matter the cost."²

Our separation from the world is the distinguishing factor of our faith. At the end of the age, Jesus Himself will come to separate the church from the rest of the world. He will separate the wheat from the tares and the sheep from the goats. (*Matthew 13:24-30; 25:31-33*)

We are called to separation, but we are not called to isolation. Christianity is not an individual sport, it takes a team. Separation only works with a congregation, not in isolation. Separation that ignores the strength and accountability of the community leads to sin and self-destruction. Lone Ranger Christianity never pans out well.

Solomon so wisely wrote in Proverbs 18:1, *Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire, he breaks out against all sound judgment.* (ESV)

We are called to commit ourselves to a lifestyle of separation but that does not mean we have to do it alone. The church is a place where you can be encouraged, strengthened, and spurred on toward living a life of separation. The church is oxygen to a dwindling flame that a dark world tries to extinguish. (*Hebrews 10:23-25*)

2. COMMITMENT TO THE SABBATH

NEHEMIAH 10:31 *As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego the crops the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.*

One of the ways in which we commit ourselves to a lifestyle of separation is by committing ourselves to Sabbath. For the Gentile culture, the idea of Sabbath was absurd. The Sabbath was just another day on the calendar without any significance. However, for the Jews—the Sabbath was a day that was to be devoted to rest and contemplation on spiritual things.

Since the Garden of Eden, the LORD instituted a rhythm of Sabbath into the fabric of human existence. Six days of work and a day of rest.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined* Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996, p. 135.

The Sabbath was a reminder to the Jewish people that their success was predicated on their relationship with God. It was truly an act of faith to believe that God would take care of their needs as they honored the Sabbath.

The Gentiles did not rest. They had seven days of open markets. They had seven days to make money. They had seven days to work their fields to get ready for the harvest. When we honor the Sabbath in our own life we confess to the world that less is more when God is honored. With God, six can be greater than seven.

But to honor the Sabbath was not just to adopt the weekly rhythm of rest and contemplation. There is more. By committing to honor the Sabbath the Israelites were agreeing to honor the whole scope of the Sabbath.

Every seventh year they were to let the land rest so that it might regenerate itself. This would require a great amount of faith, as they had to trust God would provide for their food for two years. They also agreed to the Year of Jubilee (*Leviticus 25:8-22*) and that meant trusting the LORD to provide for them for three years every fiftieth year.

What an audacious and bold commitment. Committing to Sabbath means that we come to the acknowledgment that God is sovereign over all time and all resources. After all, time belongs to God and He is the owner of all resources. It is a commitment to rest and reflect. When we neglect the Sabbath, we are essentially saying that God cannot provide for us. Committing to the Sabbath is to recognize that less is more when God is honored.

For so many of us, the idea of Sabbath in our culture seems so archaic. With a world that is more connected than ever before with more activity and more opportunity for busyness; it seems crazy to think we could push pause on the unnecessary and to pursue the divine.

We live in a world where we are already committed to so many things – there does not seem like there is enough time to rest and reflect on spiritual things. For a lot of us, Sunday is not sacred. We forfeit our commitment to church because our other commitments take priority on our calendar. Other activities move to the forefront and the Sabbath gets put on the back burner. As Christians, we do not follow God because of convenience, we follow God because of commitment. God has always called His people to honor the Sabbath. We are to be committed to live a Christian lifestyle. Saying yes to rest and reflection means saying no to other things.

God is calling us to commit to Sabbath; resting in the presence of God with the people of God dwelling on the works of God.

Since the Garden of Eden, the LORD instituted a rhythm of Sabbath into the fabric of human existence. Six days of work and a day of rest.

As Christians, we do not follow God because of convenience, we follow God because of commitment.

3. COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT

NEHEMIAH 10:32-33; 39B *We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God... ³⁹ Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.*

For the Israelites, there was a temple tax that was instituted back in Exodus (*Exodus 30:11-16*). This tax helped to support the work that was done in the temple. Wiersbe writes, “The tax was a reminder that God had redeemed them and paid a price to set them free, and that they should

behave like people who belonged to God.”³ Here in the book of Nehemiah, the people did not see the tax as a burden. They were not giving to the work of the Temple in a state of drudgery. Giving went further than duty, it was a delight. They obligated themselves to contribute and support the work of the House of God.

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7 ESV)

The way in which we give tells more about our hearts’ commitment to God than it does about our financial portfolio. First, we must acknowledge that God does not need our gifts. All things belong to Him. He is the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills (*Psalms 50:10*).

What God desires is not the gift, but the giver. In the New Testament we read, *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7 ESV)* God is more interested in the state of our heart as we give than He is in the size of our gift. Giving can become a challenge because our possessions start to possess us. We think possessions will bring us security and happiness.

The average American will interact with 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements for products every day.⁴ The advertisements are constantly sending a message that what you have is outdated, you need something new, life will not be fulfilling without a certain product. But the volume of advertisements that we are exposed to daily should make us keenly aware that our hearts are perpetually discontent with the things we have in life. The Creator of our soul knows this. He knows things become outdated and we become discontent. But through giving, he has provided a solution. Winston Churchill has said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

One of the most fulfilling things we will ever do is give to the work of God. The Gospel calls us to forsake a lifestyle that is defined by accruing possessions and to venture into a partnership with God. Through giving, we can participate in the work of God. When we give financially to the work of the church, we send the Gospel to the deepest darkest places in the world. When we commit to supporting the House of God, we commit to advancing the Kingdom of God.

When we commit to supporting the House of God, we commit to advancing the Kingdom of God.

We will experience the thrill of renewal as we commit to supporting the work of the church. Through our generous and cheerful giving, God will begin to renew calloused parts of our hearts. Where we are hard-hearted, God will bring tenderness. Generosity is a recognition of God’s ownership over our lives.

One of the most refreshing things about reading this passage was the liberty that God gave in generosity. Everybody can bring something. In Nehemiah 10:34 we read:

Likewise, we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers’ households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.

Since the fire on the altar had to continually burn it took a steady supply of wood. The leadership cast lots and called on different families and clans to bring wood to the altar. When you think about the total operation of the Temple, collecting wood would appear to be such a small task that many would think was insignificant. But it was necessary. In the House of God, no work is small

³ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 138.

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/#30cece91626e>

and no amount of support is insignificant. There were no prescriptions given in the Law as to how many times a year this was to take place, nor was a specific method given. There was a need and the people could fulfill it. Tradition tells us that several times a year people would stop what they were doing, and they would collect firewood for the altar. Everybody could bring something. Everybody could participate in worship by supporting the work of God.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Few people in the world know commitment like a Navy SEAL. Their training is rigorous and gruesome. The few men who are Navy SEALs have a resolve that is atypical of most men. They are committed to the honor and rich heritage that comes with being a SEAL. They are committed to responsibility, humility and their Country. They are committed to the safety and well-being of others above themselves. They are committed to leadership and authority. The Navy SEALs are committed to upholding the Constitution and protecting freedom at all costs. We respect them and honor them for upholding their commitment.

As God's people should not our commitment to God be significantly stronger than a Navy SEAL?

Spiritual Renewal enters our life when we renew our commitment to God. A renewed commitment to separate ourselves from the world produces a holy zeal. A renewed commitment to Sabbath produces a renewed confidence in the replenishing work of God in our hearts. A commitment to support the House of God reaffirms where our treasure really is. God has designed us to be people of commitment. We are made in His image and our commitment to Him is in response to His commitment to us.

Some of us have a commitment issue. But God does not. God has always been committed to our good. In the Garden, He warned us of the impending death that would occur if we ate of the tree. But He was committed to covering us and forgiving us by dying on His own Tree, the cross. God's commitment to us today is evident as He has placed His Spirit in us to convict us of sin, lead us in truth, and instruct us in righteousness.

He has always shown His commitment to us freely and His commitment moves us to live a life committed to Him.

THE STORY OF **RENEWAL**

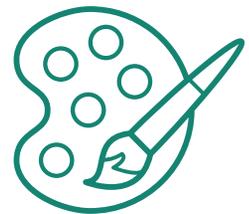
RENEWAL THROUGH PRAYER

RENEWAL THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

RENEWAL THROUGH LEADERSHIP

RENEWAL THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

RENEWAL THROUGH COMMITMENT



COMING UP NEXT:

THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**