

The image features a large, circular pattern of concentric rings of dark brown bricks, set against a reddish-brown background. The bricks are arranged in a regular, repeating pattern, creating a sense of depth and texture. The overall composition is centered and balanced, with the text 'Nehemiah' placed within the innermost circle of the brick pattern.

Nehemiah

Nehemiah

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INTRODUCTION

Title: The title of Nehemiah derives from the central figure of the narrative.

Author: The author of Ezra probably wrote Nehemiah. The book contains personal records of Nehemiah, but he probably did not author the entire work. Some scholars believe that this same anonymous author also recorded 1-2 Chronicles. Though we do not formally know who authored the work, we can be confident that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Date: The events in this book occur over a period of around 20 years, from 445-423 B.C.

Theme: The theme of Nehemiah is the LORD's providential protection of His people and the expected response of obedience and faithfulness in prayer and praise.

BACKGROUND

To comprehend the context of Nehemiah, we must understand Old Testament redemptive history. While a proper background could start with the triune God's eternal love or in the account of divine creation, we will start with the calling of Abraham for the sake of time and space.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1–3).

The LORD calls Abraham to proclaim His name among all nations. As the father of a future nation, a holy assembly dedicated to the LORD, Abraham is blessed with these great promises to be inherited by grace through faith. The promises are to pass from generation to generation for all who truly worship the God of Abraham, eventually to be inherited by the true heir to whom they point.

This family of blessing grows as the promise passes from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and to his 12 sons. When famine strikes the earth, God protects His people by sheltering them in the land of Egypt, a land previously prepared by God's wise providence. The people of Israel settle in the land and enjoy a period of peace and prosperity, but eventually outgrow their welcome and become enslaved by the Egyptians. But God is faithful.

As the nation cries out for deliverance, the LORD hears their cries. In faithful compassion, He ordains Moses to go and work wonder upon wonder to perplex and overthrow the wicked rule of Pharaoh. The people are ransomed from slavery and pass over dry land through a parted sea which subsequently swallows their enemies.

The LORD brings Israel to a mountain, on the cusp of the Promised Land, the edge of the inheritance. He tells them of His expectations and makes a covenant. They will be His people; He will be their God.

If His people keep the provisions of the covenant, they will be blessed; if not, curses await. The blessings are plenteous – joy, abundance and God’s presence with the people. The curses are severe – famine, plague and eventual exile. He warns them. Israel is called to put away her idols and turn again to the one true God.

Rather than trust, the people mumble, grumble, groan and moan in the midst of miraculous manna and water-shedding rock. They rebel against the righteous rule of the God of their fathers. They crave what they don’t have, ungrateful for what they do have. They fail to trust, fail to believe, fail to worship. It won’t be the last time. But God is faithful.

After 40 years of wandering, the people enter the land as the LORD drives out their enemies through Joshua and the judges. God rules in their midst, but the nation called to be distinct from all other nations wants to be like all the others. They reject the reign of the LORD in favor of a human king. They are given Saul, a man big, strong and beautiful, but lacking the wisdom and grace to lead this nation. He is rejected. But God is faithful.

God gives the people a new king with a poet’s heart and shepherd’s staff, a man after God’s own heart. Under David, the kingdom is united and secured. David proves faithful, but flawed. His son, Solomon, inherits a realm of relative peace and harmony and builds the temple, the place in which God’s presence dwells among His own.

After Solomon’s reign, the people are torn into two nations. The Northern Kingdom, often referred to as Israel, is ruled by wicked king after wicked king, and the people follow their leaders until they are swept away into Assyrian exile around 722 B.C. The Southern Kingdom, often referred to as Judah, fares somewhat better. They alternate between faithful and unfaithful kings and, thus, linger longer in the land of their fathers. But they too face exile for their disobedience through three periods of deportation. In 586 B.C. Jerusalem is ravaged, the temple destroyed and the nation carried off into this final Babylonian captivity.

The LORD judges the two kingdoms for their unfaithfulness, but He remains faithful and merciful and waits patiently to again pour out His grace upon His people.

The book of 2 Chronicles ends with this bright light of hope:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and

also put it in writing: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.' " 2 Chronicles 36:22–23

The book of Ezra picks up where Chronicles concludes. Ezra tells of the rebuilding of the temple – the place where God’s presence manifests among His people. The temple, completed in 516 B.C., a significant 70 years after the fall of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:21), will stand until the day a new temple takes its place, a temple made without human hands, a temple that is the body of Christ.

Originally joined as one book in various Hebrew manuscripts, Ezra passes the narrative torch to Nehemiah. Around 445 B.C. Nehemiah, the cupbearer of the king of Babylon, travels over 800 miles (500 as the crow flies) to return to the land of his forefathers and rebuild the wall for the security and peace of Jerusalem, the “city of peace.”

MESSAGE

Nehemiah functions as a sequel to the events described in Ezra. The book is an account of God's faithfulness to His promises and thus foreshadows the gospel reality of a merciful and gracious God who provides for His people even in the midst of their infidelity.

The book opens with a group of exiles from Babylon who return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall around the city. Though the people are hard pressed by opposition, the Lord strengthens His people for His work, and they are able to rebuild the wall. From there, the narrative describes the recommitment of the people to the provisions of God's covenant.

There are a variety of complementary ways to read Nehemiah. The title character himself provides helpful snapshots into the affections and integrity of a leader, and the book overviews an important development in the history of God's redemptive plan. These are helpful ways to read the book and provide beneficial insight for our edification, but they are not ultimate.

Nehemiah is ultimately about the promises, providence, provision and protection of the LORD, as well as the prayers of His people. As we read the book, we see the faithfulness of our God and His steadfast love toward His own, a love that eventually and fully manifests in the giving of His Son to be the better temple and to establish the better city prepared for those who love Him and joyfully submit to His good rule.

As you read Nehemiah and work through this study, take special note of a few theological themes:

1. The returning from exile as a "second" Exodus experience.
2. The temple and city of Jerusalem for the people.
3. The Scripture as central to the community's identity and worship.
4. The prayer and praise as the natural responses of the people of the LORD.
5. The providence and protection of the LORD.

TIMELINE

While some dates are certain, others are approximated based upon contextual evidence.

All dates are B.C.

722-721	Northern Kingdom exiled Isaiah prophesies Micah prophesies Jeremiah prophesies
605	First deportation of the Southern Kingdom
597	Second deportation of the Southern Kingdom
586	Third and final deportation of the Southern Kingdom <i>(Solomon's temple destroyed)</i> Ezekiel prophesies
538	Cyrus issues a decree for the rebuilding of the temple First return from exile
520	Haggai prophesies
520-515	Zechariah prophesies
516	The rebuilding of the temple is completed
483-465	The events of Esther's narrative unfold
458	Second return of the people led by Ezra Malachi prophesies
444	Third return of the people led by Nehemiah
426	Nehemiah's second return and final reforms of the people
331	The Persians are supplanted by the Greeks under Alexander's rule
164	Maccabean rebellion
63	Palestine submits to Roman rule

USING THE STUDY

This study is divided into 10 weeks. Each week includes a personal study and a group study. Though the material can be completed individually, doing so will greatly dilute the benefit to be gleaned from it. God intends for His people to be edified, exhorted and sanctified within the context of gospel-centered community.

Each week we encourage you to read the appropriate biblical text and work through the questions from the personal study in preparation for the group study. Do so slowly and prayerfully. This is not a mere task to be checked off; it is an opportunity to engage the living God who delights in meeting with His people through His Word. Begin and end each study by worshiping the Lord for who He is and what He has done.

After working through the material, come prepared each week to discuss what the Lord has revealed to you of Himself and your own heart. We also encourage you to spend time praying for your group leader and other group members, asking the Spirit to grant you unity, sympathy, brotherly love, tenderness and humility toward one another (1 Pet. 2:8).

HOME GROUP LEADER INSTRUCTIONS

In preparation for each study, take a few moments to read through the instructions below.

before the Group meeting

1. Spend time engaging the personal study with prayer.
2. As you prepare for the group study, read over the questions and think through how you might answer them personally. We have provided a Leader Guide in the back of the book to help facilitate discussion.
3. Think through ways you can help your group apply what is being taught instead of simply knowing what's been taught. Write down two or three ideas that might be helpful.
4. Ask the Lord to move powerfully in the personal studies of each member and also in your time of gathering together.

at the Group Meeting

1. Begin with prayer. Confess your need for the Spirit's illuminating help.
2. Attempt to summarize the week's lesson in a few quick thoughts. Spend some time asking your group about the personal study and what they found interesting, convicting or encouraging.
3. Assign readers for the sections of Nehemiah and supplemental passages that week.
4. Walk your group through the questions. Use the Leader Guide to help facilitate the discussion. Don't feel obligated to cover every single question. At times, there will be healthy digression. At other times, you will need to keep the group on track. Be sensitive to the flow of conversation and keep it moving in a healthy direction.
5. Share your thoughts on how you and your group can apply the lesson. Help the group formulate ideas for reading, studying and meditating on the Scriptures.
6. End in a time of prayer. Ask God to strengthen you to obedience, increasing your depth of life, experience and enjoyment of Him.

SESSION 1

INTERCESSION

Nehemiah 1 / Personal study

Opening Prayer

Gracious Father, incline my heart to Your testimonies. Open my eyes that I might behold wonderful things in Your Word. Unite my heart to fear Your name and satisfy me with Your steadfast love. I ask this by Your Spirit and through Your Son.

Introduction

Moses, descending from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Law, takes in a terrible sight: the chosen people of God in revelry and worship around a golden calf of their own making. His response? The words of Deuteronomy 9 tell us the story:

Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke him to anger...And I prayed to the LORD, 'O Lord GOD, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin...For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.' Deuteronomy 9:18, 26-29

Standing in the breach for his people, Moses pleads with God to fulfill His promise to bring his people to the land of their inheritance. And the Lord hears his plea.

A thousand years later, in the wake of another great disobedience, another righteous leader prostrates himself on behalf of this broken and disobedient people, offering a plea for their restoration. His name is Nehemiah. Dwelling in exile as the cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah learns of an inheritance in ruins, and his heart breaks with the news. His response is as astonishing as it is instructive.

Read Nehemiah 1 and answer the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of the opening verses? What important details are we given?
2. Who brings news to Nehemiah about the state of Jerusalem? What news do these men give to Nehemiah?
3. How does Nehemiah respond to the news (1:4)?
4. What does Nehemiah's grief over the state of Jerusalem reveal about his character? His affection for the Lord? His affection for his people?
5. In his great distress, Nehemiah approaches God with an orderly appeal. What do you notice about the structure and content of the prayer (1:5-11)? Next to each heading below, note the corresponding verse:

Adoration

Opening Petition

Confession (corporate)

Confession (personal)

Petition (corporate)

Petition (personal)

6. When you are deeply sad or frustrated over a difficult situation, how do you begin your prayers to the Lord? How is the opening to Nehemiah's prayer an example to you?

7. What petition does Nehemiah repeat like a bookend to his prayer (1:6, 11)? What do you think this repetition should communicate to us? To God?

8. After calling God "the great and awesome God who keeps covenant...with those who love him," Nehemiah reminds God of His covenant promise. What, specifically, does Nehemiah want God to do for His chosen people (1:9b)?

9. What does Nehemiah want God to do on his own behalf, with regard to the Persian king he serves (1:11b)?

10. In the first 11 verses of this book, what have Nehemiah's actions and words illustrated about his character? List some character traits below. Which ones do you wish described you more?

Closing Prayer

Pray through the beautiful prayer in Nehemiah 1. What elements of Nehemiah's prayer do you need to employ more faithfully? To close your time, write a prayer that models his.

SESSION 1

INTERCESSION

Nehemiah 1 / Group Study

Answer the following questions:

1. What thoughts do you have based upon this week's personal study?
2. What stood out to you? What challenged you? What prompted questions?

Read Nehemiah 1 and answer the following questions:

3. When you receive bad news about someone or something you care deeply about, is your first response like Nehemiah's? Why or why not?
4. Why does Nehemiah fast as part of seeking the will of the Lord? What does fasting teach us?
5. Nehemiah's prayer indicates a right understanding of the character of God and a working knowledge of the promises of God. Though he lives in exile among people of pagan beliefs, Nehemiah knows and clings to the character and promises of Elohim (a Hebrew word for "God"). How is he an example for us?
6. Nehemiah confesses the sins of his people, the sins of his family and his own sin. What are they (1:7)?

Do you practice corporate confession when you pray? Following the pattern of Nehemiah's prayer, to whom might you ask forgiveness?

7. Why is it important to keep personal confession as part of a prayer offered on behalf of others?
8. Nehemiah asks God to remember His promises to His people. Since God does not need to be reminded of His promises, why does Nehemiah remind Him?
9. In the book of Nehemiah, the steadfast love of the Lord God will be shown to His covenant people despite their past, present and future disobedience. How have you witnessed the steadfast love of the Lord in your own life?

Guide to prayer

- *Thank the Father for His faithfulness to His promises. Thank Him for the steadfast love He has shown you.*
- *Ask the Lord to forgive the disobedience of His chosen people, of your family and of you.*
- *Ask the Lord to remind you of your deliverance from the bondage of sin for His name's sake. Ask Him to give you a heart that cries out for the restoration of all things. Ask Him for favor with those who do not believe. Plead as Nehemiah pled, as the Church pleads through the ages, "Lord, hear our prayer."*

SESSION 2

RETURN **Nehemiah 2** / Personal study

Opening Prayer

Gracious Father, incline my heart to Your testimonies. Open my eyes that I might behold wonderful things in Your Word. Unite my heart to fear Your name and satisfy me with Your steadfast love. I ask this by Your Spirit and through Your Son.

Introduction

Four months pass since Nehemiah hears of his people's ruined inheritance and makes his appeal to the Lord. Though his life as the king's cupbearer proceeds as normal, his burden for the "city of his father's graves" increases.

As the royal cupbearer, a person of rank and influence, Nehemiah acts as a bodyguard and adviser to the king. It is his job to taste the king's food to be certain that it is safe to eat. He is also expected to maintain a pleasant countenance at all times in the presence of the king. To show sadness or any other negative emotion risks suspicion of displeasure and disloyalty from the king, a dangerous thing. For months, Nehemiah keeps up the appearance of contentment, but finally his composure breaks. Knowing that the moment he has prayed for is upon him, he boldly makes his request of the king.

Read Nehemiah 2 and answer the following questions.

1. What can we learn about Nehemiah from the fact that he rose to the role of cupbearer in the court of a foreign king?
2. How do you think Nehemiah spent the four months between learning of Jerusalem's ruin and making his request of the king? How does the text support your thinking?
3. What is Nehemiah's response when the king notices his sadness (2:2b)?

Is his answer direct or evasive (2:3)? How might you have been tempted to answer?

4. What does Nehemiah ask of the king? Summarize his requests and objectives below:

verse	request	objective
2:5		
2:6		
2:7		

5. To what does Nehemiah attribute the success of his petitions (2:8b)?

Think of a time when you risked rejection or failure to pursue the will of the Lord.

How did the good hand of God grant you favour?

6. With a well-provisioned, well-armed group of fellow travelers, Nehemiah makes the 800-mile journey to Jerusalem. Assuming a conservative travel rate of 10 miles a day, approximately how many months did the trip take?

7. Summarize Nehemiah's activities and observations in 2:11-16.

8. How would you explain the timing and purpose of Nehemiah's inspection (2:12)?

9. Upon completing his inspection, what challenge does Nehemiah give to the people? How do the people respond (2:17-18)?

10. How do the regional governing officials react (2:19)? Does Nehemiah's response to them address their questions or their motives? Explain.

11. By the end of this chapter, we have been introduced to three opponents to Nehemiah's vision:
 - Sanballat the Horonite governed Samaria, to the north of Judah.
 - Tobiah the Ammonite governed Ammon, to the east of Judah.
 - Geshem the Arab governed the area south of Judah.

In chapter 4 a fourth opponent will be introduced: the Ashdodites, who dwelt to the west of Judah. What does Nehemiah want us to understand about the nature and degree of the opposition he faces?

12. In chapter 2 we see Nehemiah's boldness. Are you bold like Nehemiah? What relationship or situation needs you to be bolder?

Closing prayer

Heavenly Father, You are the King of Kings. To be the recipient of Your favour is an unspeakable gift. Thank You for the example of Your servant Nehemiah. As You did for him, instruct my heart to deeper prayerfulness, greater longing for Your kingdom to be established and less regard for my own personal comfort. Strengthen my hands for the work You would have me to do. Amen.

SESSION 2

RETURN **Nehemiah 2** / Group Study

Answer the following questions:

1. What thoughts do you have based upon this week's personal study?
2. What stood out to you? What challenged you? What prompted questions?

Read Nehemiah 2 and answer the following questions:

3. Nehemiah secures the trust and respect of a pagan king without compromising his commitment to God. How can we do the same today with those in positions of authority over us?
4. Nehemiah uses his position of authority for the benefit of his people and the accomplishment of God's will, even at great personal risk. What wrong thinking causes us to protect ourselves rather than risk like Nehemiah?
5. Do Nehemiah's requests of the king seem deliberate or spontaneous?
How is his readiness to speak an example to us? What does it indicate about his state of mind in the midst of difficulty?

6. The route from Susa to Jerusalem covered terrain that was both harsh and treacherous, yet Nehemiah does not mention the length or difficulty of the trip. Why do you think this is so?
7. Are there any kingdom-building goals that you might hesitate to commit to because of difficulty or danger? What are they?
8. How is Nehemiah's decision to tour the city at night wise? When is it wise to do things on your own and when is it wise to seek the help of others?
9. On finding the situation in Jerusalem to be as dire as he heard, Nehemiah chooses hope over discouragement, issuing a call to rebuild. What does the people's response teach about how contagious a leader's attitude can be?
10. How does Nehemiah's example challenge you to think and act as a member of your gospel-centered community?
11. What good work would the Lord have you strengthen your hands to build?
Where
has He given you a vision to build His kingdom right now?

Guide to prayer

- *Thank the Father for granting favour to His people. Thank Him for specific times He has shown you favour.*
- *Ask the Lord to strengthen the hands of His servants. Pray specifically for your church leaders, your Home Group leaders and your Home Group members.*
- *Ask the Lord to grant you wisdom in your relationships with those in authority over you. Ask Him to incline the hearts of our leaders to show favour to the people of God as they pursue His will, on earth as it is in heaven.*

LEADER GUIDE

LEADER GUIDE

SESSION 1

Intercession / Nehemiah 1

1. Personal response
2. Personal response
3. Personal response
4. Fasting teaches us dependence on God. It teaches us to deny our own will, thus helping us to more clearly perceive the will of the Lord.
5. Like Nehemiah, we dwell as aliens and strangers among people of unbelief (1 Pet. 2:11). We, too, are called to know, serve and cling to the character and promises of God rather than be absorbed into the culture and beliefs of those around us.
6. “We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses” (Neh. 1:7). Nehemiah confesses the reason that the Jews were sent into exile. We might ask forgiveness for our government leaders, our church leaders, our boss or co-workers, our parents or children or ourselves. Corporate confession softens our hearts toward those for whom we ask forgiveness. It helps us to view them out of compassion rather than judgment. By confessing on their behalf, we love them as we love ourselves. Note also that this seemed to be a common practice in the Old Testament (Job 1).
7. A person who is mindful of his own sin is less likely to practice corporate confession out of a prideful motive. We must see ourselves as sinners before we can safely ask for forgiveness for others.
8. God does not need to be reminded of His promises. His people do. This is the basis for the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper – that we would regularly remember the Lord’s provision for sin. In reminding God, Nehemiah demonstrates that he himself remembers the faithfulness of the Lord to his people, the very thing his people forgot.
9. Personal response

LEADER GUIDE

SESSION 2

Return / Nehemiah 2

1. Personal response
2. Personal response
3. Most people serve those in authority over them out of a desire to gain favor or influence. We must serve them as if we were serving the Lord (Eph. 6:7; Col. 3:23).
We must be above reproach and demonstrate that we are people of integrity.
4. We believe that our position is ours to use for personal advancement rather than for kingdom advancement. We believe that we have earned it by our own effort and that we are entitled to the security it provides us.
5. His requests are the product of months of prayer and thought. He has not merely waited for an opportunity to speak; he has thought carefully about what to say and how to say it. He displays great presence of mind, no doubt born out of months of prayer and fasting.
6. Nehemiah is single-minded in his purpose. He counts the difficulty of the trip as not worth mentioning in light of the great task ahead.
7. Personal response
8. It is wise because he gets to survey the situation firsthand without interruption or opinions from others. He can speak with authority of what he has witnessed with his own eyes. As a newcomer to Jerusalem, he may not have known whom to trust yet. It is certainly wise to seek the help of trusted advisors. In their absence, it is wise to gather your own information.
9. They made both a verbal and a physical demonstration of their unified support for Nehemiah's plan.
10. If those who lead my community are wise and accurately informed, then they deserve my verbal and physical support. This does not imply that we always support leadership without question. Nehemiah's example is an obvious need requiring immediate attention.
11. Personal response



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