

THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 18

GOD IN THE RETURN



NEHEMIAH; MALACHI; LUKE



MEMORY VERSES

“Look, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them,’ says the LORD of Armies, ‘not leaving them root or branches. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall.’”

—Malachi 4:1-2



THE WALL REBUILT

CORE PASSAGE: NEHEMIAH 1:5-11; 6:2-9,15-16

CONTEXT

The book of Nehemiah opens in late fall, early winter of 446 or 445 BC. Nehemiah was an Israelite living in exile who had been appointed to be the king's cupbearer, a highly honored role that allowed him close access to the king. Nehemiah was in Susa, a royal fortress city of the Medo-Persian Empire, located in modern-day Iran. There, Nehemiah received a troubling report from the Israelites who had returned to the land as God promised, and he prayed for the opportunity to do something about it.

KEY CONCEPT

God restores His people when they repent so that the world would know He is God.

As you examine Nehemiah 1:5-11; 6:2-9,15-16:

- Highlight that the restoration of God's people began with confession and repentance.
- Receive encouragement that even God's enemies recognize His powerful work in the lives of His people.



TIMELINE

The First Group of Jews Returns
and Rebuilds the Temple (Ezra 1-6)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and
Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law
in Celebration (Nehemiah 8)

Esther and Mordecai Rescue God's
People from Destruction (Esther 1-10)

**SESSION STUDY: Nehemiah Returns
and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem
(Nehemiah 1-6)**

Daily Readings

☐ **Day 1:** Ezra 4:6-23

☐ **Day 2:** Ezra 7:1-8:36

☐ **Day 3:** Ezra 9:1-10:44

☐ **Day 4:** Nehemiah 1:1-3:32

☐ **Day 5:** Nehemiah 4:1-6:19

☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 41



Scan this QR code
to access this session's
Scripture passages.

PERSONAL PREPARATION

NEHEMIAH 1:5-11

WITH REPENTANCE COMES RESTORATION.

Underline any words or phrases relating to God's covenant with His people.

5 I said, LORD, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands, **6** let your eyes be open and your ears be attentive to hear your servant's prayer that I now pray to you day and night for your servants, the Israelites. I confess the sins we have committed against you. Both I and my father's family have sinned. **7** We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses. **8** Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. **9** But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell." **10** They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand. **11** Please, LORD, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man. At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

REPENTANCE: Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Psalm 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration, in other words, the human side of our conversion.



After hearing about the distressing condition of the returned exiles and Jerusalem itself, Nehemiah turned to prayer. He did not suppress his emotions; he wept and mourned “for a number of days” (v. 4), but he also fasted and prayed for God’s forgiveness and favor.

What is your first reaction when you hear distressing news?

Nehemiah’s prayer was based on the covenant God made with the Israelites, and Nehemiah’s hope was founded on God’s character. On multiple occasions during their forty-year trek through the desert, God reminded the Israelites that one of the consequences for not upholding their part of the covenant would be exile from the promised land (Leviticus 26:27-33; Deuteronomy 28:58-68). At the time of Nehemiah’s prayer, this had already happened. Nehemiah acknowledged the people’s sins (Nehemiah 1:6-7), but he also recalled the redemption promised when the people repented (v. 9). Though God had restored the people to their land, the restoration wasn’t yet complete.

While we might not ever be exiled from our physical homes, our disobedience to God will bring consequences. But He doesn’t leave us without hope! Deuteronomy 28 contains intense curses for the Israelites’ disobedience, but Deuteronomy 30:1-10 shows God’s heart behind the punishment: to bring His people back to Him and bless them. Nehemiah knew this, and his prayer reflected his trust in God’s faithfulness.

Nehemiah prayed this prayer about a thousand years after the establishment of God’s covenant with Israel, yet he spoke of God’s promises like they were personal and active. They were! Nehemiah lived under the old covenant, and believers today live under the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 9:15), but God’s character and plan for the world remain the same. Just as Nehemiah descended from Abraham’s line, we too are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-7). We can rest on God’s faithfulness just like Nehemiah did.

When have you faced consequences for your sin, and how did the Lord lead you back to Him?



PERSONAL PREPARATION

NEHEMIAH 6:2-9,15-16

GOD WILL RESTORE HIS PEOPLE TO REVEAL HIS GLORY AND SOVEREIGNTY.

Underline the dialogue in this passage, noting the motivation of each person speaking.

2 Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message: “Come, let’s meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.” They were planning to harm me. **3** So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing important work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” **4** Four times they sent me the same proposal, and I gave them the same reply. **5** Sanballat sent me this same message a fifth time by his aide, who had an open letter in his hand. **6** In it was written: It is reported among the nations—and Geshem agrees—that you and the Jews plan to rebel. This is the reason you are building the wall. According to these reports, you are to become their king **7** and have even set up the prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf, “There is a king in Judah.” These rumors will be heard by the king. So come, let’s confer together. **8** Then I replied to him, “There is nothing to these rumors you are spreading; you are inventing them in your own mind.” **9** For they were all trying to intimidate us, saying, “They will drop their hands from the work, and it will never be finished.” But now, my God, strengthen my hands. . . . **15** The wall was completed in fifty-two days, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul. **16** When all our enemies heard this, all the surrounding nations were intimidated and lost their confidence, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God.

Key Concept: God restores His people when they repent so that the world would know He is God.



Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem appear in 2:19 and chapter 4. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, Tobiah was an Ammonite and possibly the governor east of the Jordan River, and Geshem was an Arab, one of those who had settled in the Negev and trans-Jordan area.¹ These foreign leaders opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild Jerusalem's wall from the beginning and are mentioned together in 6:1. When Sanballat and Geshem approached Nehemiah in this passage, the wall almost entirely finished, but they still tried to thwart Nehemiah's plans.

Nehemiah easily recognized their deceit and refused to be intimidated (vv. 2,10-13). Rather than engaging in their false accusations or halting his work (vv. 6-7), Nehemiah responded firmly and truthfully (v. 8). Instead of entering into a debate or attempting to prove the men wrong, he prayed to the Lord: "But now, my God, strengthen my hands" (v. 9).

What are some ways Christians can respond confidently and graciously to intimidation or false accusations?

Nehemiah remained faithful to the task God set before him, unshaken by repeated obstacles and opposition. Because of this, the wall was finished, and God blessed Nehemiah's efforts and glorified His own name (vv. 15-16). Because of it, the surrounding nations recognized Jerusalem's success as the work of God.

How can you be faithful to God's call in this season, even if someone or something opposes you?

GOSPEL CONNECTION

Restoring and returning the Israelites back to Jerusalem reflects God's heart in wanting to be with His people. God also is in the work of restoration in our lives today as we choose to repent and believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. And when we sin and repent, He restores our fellowship with Him.

GOD'S DESIRE FOR RESTORATION

Read the Scripture passages below. Fill in the chart comparing the various aspects of the Israelites' story in Nehemiah with Peter's story in John.

	THE ISRAELITES Nehemiah 1:5-11; 6:2-9,15-16	PETER John 18:15-17,25-27; 21:15-19
How They Sinned		
How They Reacted		
How God Restored Them		

How does Nehemiah's prayer and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall reveal God's character and commitment to restore His people?

How might repenting from sin and turning to Jesus bring honor and glory to Him?

Key Concept: God restores His people when they repent so that the world would know He is God.



HEAD

Why is it important that we turn to God before acting or reacting to troubling events?

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

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Read Psalm 41, noting how Nehemiah's experience relates to David's experience. Pray that the Lord will shape your heart in such a way to put faithfulness to Him above all earthly concerns.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



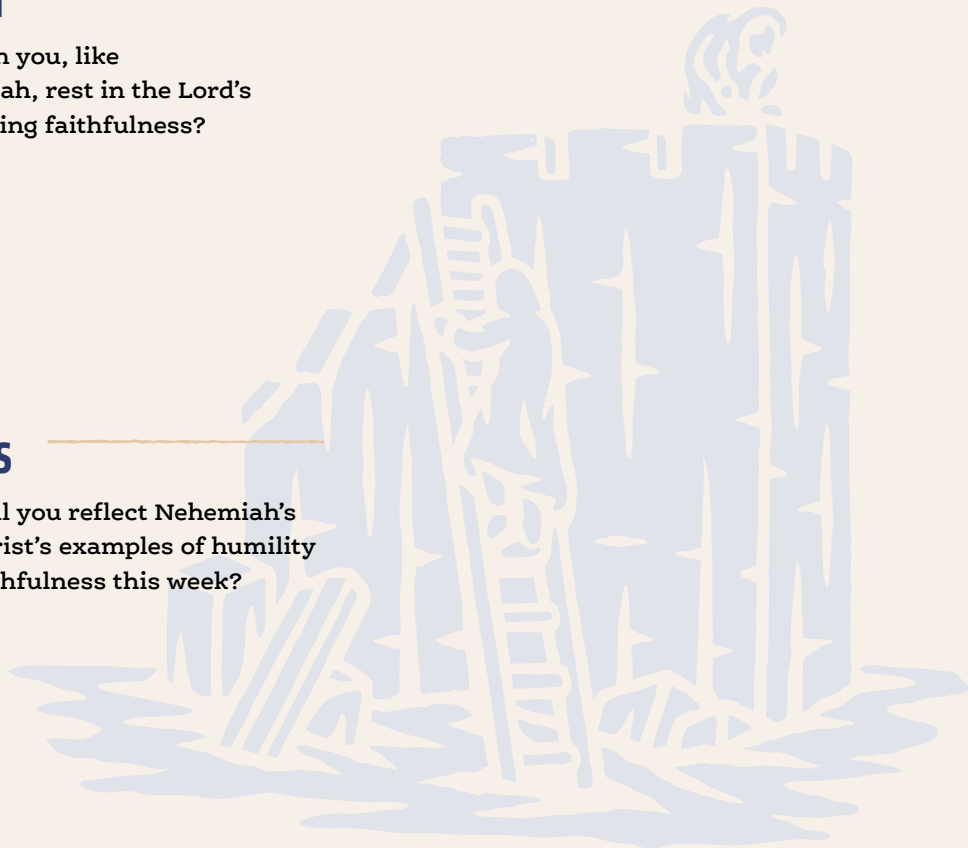
HEART

How can you, like Nehemiah, rest in the Lord's continuing faithfulness?



HANDS

How will you reflect Nehemiah's and Christ's examples of humility and faithfulness this week?



EZRA THE PRIEST

By Caroline Chong

As a man with a book of the Bible bearing his name, Ezra may be one of the least well-known figures on the historical timeline of Scripture, yet he was instrumental in the spiritual health and well-being of the Jews who returned home after their exile to Babylon. Ezra was a priest descended directly from the high priest Aaron, Moses's brother (Ezra 7:1-5), and he was a scribe, "an expert in matters of the LORD's commands and statutes for Israel" (v. 11).

RETURN FROM EXILE

In 538 BC, King Cyrus of Persia allowed Israelites to return to their homeland after several decades of living as exiles in the Babylonian Empire (1:1-4). Zerubbabel led the first major group of returnees, who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and reinstated the worship of the Lord (Ezra 1-6).

Ezra led the second major wave of exiles returning to Judah in 458 BC, about eighty years after Cyrus's initial decree (7:1-9). King Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission, protection, and provisions to return to Jerusalem with any Israelites who wished to go; he also gave Ezra authority over anyone "west of the Euphrates" to teach them God's law for the good of the Persian Kingdom (vv. 12-26)!

Ezra is a beautiful example of humility in leadership. He took time gathering people to return to Jerusalem with him, seeking qualified and willing Levites to serve in the temple, even though he himself was a priest (8:1-20). He knew that he couldn't and shouldn't do this task alone. Furthermore, Ezra proclaimed a fast among the returnees before their journey to humble themselves and ask for God's protection for their travels (vv. 21-23). And once they arrived safely, Ezra led them in three days of rest before beginning their work (v. 32).

PURIFICATION OF THE PEOPLE

Soon after arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra was informed of a grave situation that had developed among the first group of returnees—many had intermarried with those from the surrounding peoples, pagans with detestable practices (9:1-2). Devastated, Ezra offered a prayer of corporate confession for this sin of the people (vv. 3-15), and then he began the messy but necessary work of sending away the foreign wives that the Israelite men and leaders had taken and their children (Ezra 10).

This purification of the community was less about racial differences and more about religious ones, seeing as intermarriage and idolatry had previously led the Israelites to imitate the pagan nations around them and thereby earn their exile in the first place. The New Testament would address this same problem by saying:

Do not be yoked together with those who do not believe. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? . . . And what agreement does the temple of God have with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. (2 Corinthians 6:14,16)

Ezra didn't assume a self-righteous attitude over the people in this matter but led with conviction and humility, grieving their sins. For their own good, he sought the Israelites' faithful obedience to God's law, no matter how difficult the process.

About twelve years later, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 BC, and he and Ezra served alongside one another in the leadership of the people. After Nehemiah rebuilt the city wall, an assembly was called in which Ezra read aloud the book of the Law to all the people who were gathered. Making sure the people understood what was read, he led them in renewing their joyful obedience to the Lord, who had rescued them from their exile (Nehemiah 8).

FORESHADOW OF CHRIST

In the person of Ezra we see a type, or foreshadow, of Christ. The main purpose of Ezra's return to the land was to study God's law, obey it, and teach it to the returned exiles in Israel (Ezra 7:10). Almost five

centuries later, young Jesus astounded the teachers in the temple with His understanding and answers (Luke 2:46-47), obeyed God's law perfectly in the wilderness and throughout His life (Luke 4:1-13; Hebrews 4:15), and taught the fullness of God's meaning and intent behind His law (Matthew 5-7; Luke 6:20-49).

Ezra lamented the Israelites' unfaithfulness to God (Ezra 9:3-5); Jesus wept over Jerusalem just days before being crucified by His own people (Luke 19:41-44). Ezra assumed the people's sins and confessed them to God, despite having played no part in them (Ezra 9:6-15). The sinless Christ humbly bore our guilt and shame on the cross that we might have a relationship with Him and be pardoned from God's just judgment of our sins (1 Peter 2:22-25). Ezra the priest modeled being a selfless servant-leader and thereby foreshadowed the perfect great high priest to come—Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Caroline Chong, previously a nurse, graduated from Beeson Divinity School in 2024 with her MA in Theological Studies. She is passionate about teaching biblical theology for the average churchgoer and loves church history. She and her husband, Marn, live in Birmingham, Alabama, with their baby, Phoebe, and dog, Penny.