

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.

Notes

WITH REPENTANCE COMES RESTORATION (NEHEMIAH 1:5-11).



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to see how God sometimes allows His people to find favor with non-believers in order to do His will.

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.

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 (Lev. 26:27-33; Deut. 28:58-68). At the time of Nehemiah's prayer, this had already happened. Nehemiah acknowledged the people's sins (Neh. 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.

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 (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration, in other words, the human side of our conversion.

LEADER NOTE: Nehemiah's prayed (1) acknowledging God's character (v. 5); (2) confessing personal and corporate sin (vv. 6-7); (3) recalling God's promises (vv. 8-10); and (4) petitioning God to act (v. 11). Often our prayers focus on petition, asking God for something. In Nehemiah's prayer, however, his petition almost sounds like an afterthought of his praise for God and His faithfulness. This structure is a verbal picture of Nehemiah's humility and familiarity with God's covenant and an excellent model for us to follow.

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 contain 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 (Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; Heb. 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 (Gal. 3:6-7). We can rest on God's faithfulness just like Nehemiah did.

LEADER NOTE: God's discipline can be a hard concept to grasp. First, not every bad thing that happens is a direct consequence of personal sin (see Job 1-2). Second, for God's children, discipline is different than condemnation; it is sanctification. God disciplines His beloved children like a good parent (Prov. 3:12). This is God's way of bringing us back to Him, just as He did with the Israelites.

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

GOD WILL RESTORE HIS PEOPLE TO REVEAL HIS GLORY AND SOVEREIGNTY (NEHEMIAH 6:2-9,15-16).

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.

LEADER NOTE: In Nehemiah 2–5, King Artaxerxes allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to help his people, but some surrounding leaders became angry. Nehemiah and a team of Israelite families began rebuilding the wall, but they were halted for a time by opposition before they could resume building. Nehemiah 5 paints a picture of Nehemiah’s servant leadership and his efforts to end the oppression of the poor in Jerusalem. Nehemiah 6 then addresses more of the opposition and Nehemiah’s response.

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).

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

LEADER NOTE: In 6:10-14, another opponent, Shemaiah, tried to lure Nehemiah to the temple to “protect” him from his adversaries. Nehemiah recognized that entering the temple to hide from his enemies would be sinful, and as a result he would be discredited (v. 13). Nehemiah was not a priest, so to enter the temple would go against God’s commands (Num. 18:7). Additionally, to enter the temple as a hiding place would demonstrate lack of faith in God’s protection against Nehemiah’s enemies.

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 (Neh. 6:15-16). 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.

ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, encourage them to list on a board their favorite renovation and restoration TV shows, websites, and social media content. As they write their answers, ask: “Why do you like this content?” Point out any similarities in their responses.

CONTEXT

SAY: In previous weeks, we discovered God’s hand at work even as the people of Israel lived through exile as a result of their disobedience to God. Most recently we saw God work through His people as they rebuilt the temple. We all love a good restoration story. Nehemiah had the task of restoring the wall of Jerusalem, and he did it successfully because God was on his side.

TRANSITION: So today, we begin a new unit that focuses on the Israelites’ return home from exile. For the next several weeks, we will discover God’s desire for His people to return to Him, seek Him, worship Him, obey Him, and enjoy the fruit of a covenant relationship with Him. We will also see God’s prophecy and promise of the coming Messiah who would create lasting peace.

RECAP

ASK: Which verses impacted you the most in your personal preparation this week?

SAY: The personal preparation for this week gave us a glimpse into the leadership of Nehemiah as he confessed the sins of his people and asked God to bless the work of the people as they sought to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah asked for God’s blessing not because of the people’s goodness or faithfulness but based on God’s covenant with them. We also saw God’s favor on the people as they built the wall despite serious opposition from neighboring rulers: Sanballat, who lived to the north; Tobiah, who governed east of the Jordan River; and Geshem, who ruled south of Judah. As a result, the surrounding nations saw God’s glory and sovereign care over Israel.

TRANSITION: Let’s compare the story in Nehemiah to Jesus’s interaction with someone in the New Testament to see God’s heart for people to return to Him.



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

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Direct your group to page 92 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “God’s Desire for Restoration.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

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		

READ: Enlist four volunteers to read passages. Start with Nehemiah 1:5-11. Direct the group to point out the sins Nehemiah mentioned and elements of repentance in his prayer. Instruct them to record answers in their PSG as you record responses on the chart. Then call on the second volunteer to read 6:2-9,15-16. Direct the group to identify how God restored the Israelites.

ANALYZE: Review Nehemiah’s experience by asking: “What does Nehemiah’s prayer tell us about repentance? How is repentance countercultural?” (*culture tells us repentance is unnecessary; people today don’t believe in personal sin; some think good actions can outweigh bad ones*) “What does Nehemiah’s prayer tell us about the character of God?” (*God restored His people by blessing their efforts to rebuild the wall*) “How did God receive glory in this story?”

TRANSITION: Briefly summarize the group’s findings in the story of Nehemiah.

READ: Call on the remaining volunteers to read John 18:15-17,25-27 and 21:15-19. As a group, note Peter’s sin and find elements of repentance, restoration, and

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praise of God in the exchange between Jesus and Peter. Invite them to write down their responses in the PSG as you fill in the chart on the board.

ANALYZE: Discuss Peter's restoration by asking: "In John 21:15-17, how did Peter demonstrate repentance, and how did Jesus restore Peter? How might Jesus's repeated questions have been an act of love toward Peter? What glimpse of Peter's future do verses 18-19 offer? Based on what you know about Peter's story in the New Testament, how did Peter's repentance and restoration bring God glory?" (reference Acts 2:41 and 10:44-45 if needed) Fill in the rest of the chart with your answers where appropriate.

DEBRIEF

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?

SUMMARIZE

When God's people sin and stray from Him, He still wants to be with His people and maintain that relationship, so He uses discipline and consequences. He did that with the Israelites after their exile, returning them to the land and rebuilding and restoring the temple and Jerusalem's city wall. God wants to restore our lives as a demonstration to the world that He is sovereign, at work, and desires all people to come to Him.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 93). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Today, we constantly face individualism, tribalism, difficult personal decisions, and distressing world events. We know God's character from Scripture, but we're so quick to forget His faithfulness. One of the most notable things about Nehemiah is how many times he turned to prayer before speaking, acting, or making decisions, even when his life was threatened.

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



HEART: Nehemiah's opponents tried to intimidate the Jews to thwart their plans. Their dislike became anger and then threats. Nehemiah was unshaken, not by his own power but by constantly remembering the Lord's faithfulness. Nehemiah's heart, words, and actions reflected his trust in God's character. And the Lord rewarded his efforts by protecting the Jews and letting the wall be completed, resulting in His own glory.

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

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HANDS: Because of Nehemiah's humility, faithfulness, and leadership, some consider him a type of Christ. Both were in the work of restoration; both exemplified humility and faithfulness. Both confronted opposition. Jesus, however, is our ultimate restorer, foregoing His rights as God and dying a humiliating death for our redemption and restoration (Phil. 2:5-11).

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Read Psalm 51, David's prayer of repentance for his sin with Bathsheba. Use his prayer to confess sins in your life for which you need to repent.
- Reflect on times in your life when you repented of sin and experienced God's loving restoration.
- Intentionally look for ways God is glorified in others' lives because they chose to repent and return to Him.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 93 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 41 with your group, focusing on verses 11-12. Thank the Lord that though we may be threatened by those who oppose the gospel, we find comfort and security in God's presence.

References

1. Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ne 2:10–19.

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 and children the Israelite men and leaders had taken (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 Cor. 6:14,16)

Ezra is a beautiful example of humility in leadership. . . . He knew that he couldn't and shouldn't do this task alone.

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 (Neh. 8).

Ezra the priest modeled being a selfless servant-leader and thereby foreshadowed the perfect great high priest to come—Jesus Christ.

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; Heb. 4:15), and taught the fullness of God's meaning and intent behind His law (Matt. 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 Pet. 2:22-25). Ezra the priest modeled being a selfless servant-leader and thereby foreshadowed the perfect great high priest to come—Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:14-16).

Caroline Chong, previously a nurse, Caroline graduated from Beeson Divinity School in 2024 with her Master of Arts 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.