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# THE LOOKOUT

FEBRUARY 2023

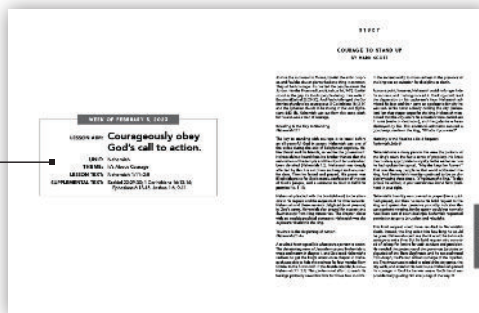
## Unit: Nehemiah

## Theme: It's About Courage

**Overview:** The root of the word *courage* comes from the Latin *cor*, which is the word for “heart.” So, courage is strength of heart. *Courage* is formally defined as “the strength to do something that frightens you; bravery; strength in the face of pain or grief.” If Nehemiah—the cupbearer of king Artaxerxes and later governor of Judea—was anything, he was courageous. During February, students will learn from the book of Nehemiah about the courage to stand up against all odds, take appropriate risks, deny one’s own amenities, and restore righteousness.

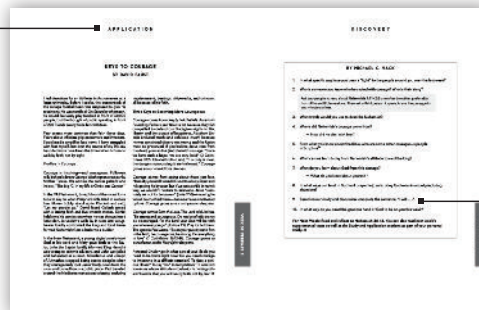
## HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



**Tabs** indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

**WEEK OF FEBRUARY 12, 2023**

**LESSON AIM:** **Courageously defend  
God's work in the  
face of danger.**

**UNIT:** Nehemiah

**THEME:** It's About Courage

**LESSON TEXT:** Nehemiah 4:1-18

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Nehemiah 6:9-16; Psalm 27; 2 Corinthians 11:23-30;  
Judges 7:2-7, 16, 20-23

## COURAGE TO TAKE A RISK

BY MARK SCOTT

Risk-taking can be evidence of strong faith, and risk-taking can be pure foolishness. Where is the line between faith and foolishness? Perhaps it lies with whose work is being defended. If we are defending our own pride, it will be foolishness; but if we are defending God's honor and work, it will be an appropriate and well-calculated risk.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he set right to work inspecting the city walls (2:9-16), challenging the people, facing off against enemies (2:17-20), and enlisting everyone to rebuild the gates and walls (3:1-32). But great projects are often met with great opposition. Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod stood opposed to Nehemiah and the people of God. Nehemiah was willing to risk it all to ensure that Jerusalem would be rebuilt so that one day the good news would come out of Zion (i.e., Christ and the message of the gospel).

### **God's Work Would Be Defended Against Mockery** *Nehemiah 4:1-5*

Nehemiah's enemies were *angry* and *greatly incensed*. The Hebrew words used here indicate they were red hot with wrath. The mockery took the form of *ridicule* (jeering or laughter). Five questions were used to undercut the efforts of God's people. The questions implied that God's people were *feeble*. The enemies wanted the Jews to doubt their ability to rebuild the wall. The enemies mocked the Jews' ability to sacrifice again and caused them to doubt the time it would take to complete the wall project. Even the building materials (i.e., *heaps of rubble*) were mocked. Tobiah even chided them by saying a *fox* would cause the wall to cave in.

The mockery was met by imprecatory remarks (these are like imprecatory psalms, where God's wrath is called down on God's enemies). These remarks reflected the "emotion" of Nehemiah's people. They might not have reflected the literal desire of God's people, but they captured how they felt. They knew the mockers were despising and insulting them (treating them with contempt), so they prayed for their insults to be turned back on them, for them to be turned over to plunder, and for their guilt and sin not to be forgiven.

### **God's Work Would Be Defended Against Murder** *Nehemiah 4:6-12*

Verbal threats and mockery gave way to threats of murder. The enemies of Nehemiah remained *very angry*

(incensed). They wanted to *stir up trouble* (cause confusion or hinder), plague God's people by just hanging around (be right there with them—i.e., intimidation by presence), *attack* them, and ultimately *kill* (murder) them.

The Jews realized the threat was real as the enemies repeated their threats *ten times over*. The threats evidently even persuaded some of the Jews to concentrate on the *rubble* (dust or powder) more than on God's power.

But the threats were met by even more courage from Nehemiah. He had inspired the *hearts* of his people. When the wall reached half its height, the people did not stop, they just kept on working *with all their heart* (some versions say because "they had a mind to work"). They also prayed, which is always a key for courage. Finally, they *posted a guard day and night to meet this threat*. The formula for a believer seems to be: Prayer + Work = Courage.

### **God's Work Would Go Forward with Wisdom and Skill** *Nehemiah 4:13-18*

Nehemiah put his military prowess to work and challenged the people to go forward in wisdom and skill. He stationed some of the people in *exposed* (lower) parts of the wall. He divided them into family groups.

Nehemiah 3 says the family units worked on the portions of the wall closest to their homes, which provided motivation to defend their property. Nehemiah encouraged the people to *remember the Lord* and *fight for their families*.

Word got back to the enemies that their evil plot had been uncovered and that God had *frustrated* it (broken it or made it void). This also emboldened the people to continue the work. Nehemiah divided the workers into two parts—some were ready to fight and the others continued with the work. Much like the minutemen in the American Revolutionary War, the builders had a sword in one hand and a tool in the other. The man who sounded the trumpet (shofar) stood by Nehemiah in case there was trouble.

The tenacious work was carried on with great risk because the salvation of the world hung in the balance. It was not unlike the challenges faced by America's 16th president, whose birthday we celebrate today (Sunday, February 12). Abraham Lincoln took great risk to save the country, but the risk was worth it. ■

## LIVING IN TENSE TIMES

BY DAVID FAUST

Cigar-smoking comedian George Burns continued performing into his 90s. He said, "If you ask what is the single most important key to longevity, I would have to say it is avoiding worry, stress and tension." Negative stress is hard to avoid, though, when political, racial, and interpersonal tensions fill the daily news, and strained relationships are common at home, work, and church.

Our word *tension* comes from the Latin *tendere*, which means to stretch (like a tendon in the body). Tension occurs when something is stretched physically (like pulling on a rubber band) or emotionally (by pushing us outside our comfort zones). The dictionary defines *tension* as an emotional state characterized by "inner striving or unrest" or "a state of latent hostility or opposition between individuals or groups."

When you feel stressed out, it helps to recognize that some tensions are externally generated, some are internally generated, and some are actually healthy and lead to personal growth.

### Tension from the Outside

Anytime you undertake a great project for the Lord, you will face opposition, and Nehemiah and the Jews were no exception. Mockers named Sanballat and Tobiah ridiculed their efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and scoffed, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!" (Nehemiah 4:3).

Mean-spirited criticism is common today, and it's hard to endure. Bob Russell observes, "I think a lot of American people, if they had been present at the feeding of the 5,000, would have criticized Jesus for not providing lemon for the fish or enough butter for the bread. Bible-believing Christians are probably going to be criticized more and more as our pagan society becomes worse, so we need to be prepared for it."

Soon Nehemiah's critics changed from verbal ridicule to violent threats. Sanballat and Tobiah rallied nearby tribes to stop the wall-building project by force. "The Jews

who lived near them came and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us'" (Nehemiah 4:12).

### Tension on the Inside

The workers grew discouraged. They must have wondered, "Are we kidding ourselves to think we can build the wall? Maybe it won't work. It's too risky. It's not worth the effort." Morale was fading. "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'" (Nehemiah 4:10).

Sometimes the biggest threat to success comes from our own minds. Have you ever become discouraged and felt like your strength was giving out?

### The Upside of Tension

It's good to be stretched! Guitar strings won't produce pure notes unless the strings are pulled tight. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The world is all gates, all opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck." For Nehemiah and his team of workers, tense times created:

- opportunities to rely on God and pray (Nehemiah 4:4-5).
- opportunities to work "with all their heart" (4:6).
- opportunities to combine faith with wise precautions. Nehemiah and his team "prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat," continuing to build the wall while guarding against attack (4:9; 16-18).

Here is Nehemiah's formula for handling tense situations: pray, plan, take proper precautions, and persevere. Some tension is inescapable, but when hardships come, remember, "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

**Personal Challenge:** What circumstances are creating tension for you right now? Try following Nehemiah's formula and respond with prayer, planning, precautions, and perseverance. ■

## DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. In what way did you trust God and obey him even in an ordinarily anxiety-inducing situation over the last week?
2. When have you faced ridicule or even threats because of your faith? How did you respond?

Ask two people to read aloud **Nehemiah 4:1-18** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in two minutes or less.

3. What tactics did the Jews' enemies use to try to stop the rebuilding of the wall?
4. How did Nehemiah and the people respond? What tactics did they use to keep building the wall?
  - What part did prayer play in their response?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
  - What do you learn about yourself?
6. Which do you think is more serious and damaging: threats from the outside or internal threats (see vv. 10, 12)? Why?
7. Look again at verses 9 and 14, paying attention to the word *and*. How is faith often a both-and rather than an either-or way of life (that is, we pray to God and work rather than doing only one or the other)?
8. Our greatest enemy is the one who "comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10), that is, Satan. How can you apply what you are learning from Nehemiah to any spiritual warfare you are facing?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. Consider a difficult situation with which you are dealing right now. It may involve ridicule or persecution for your faith, a physical, emotional, or relational issue, or something else. How will you use Nehemiah's "formula" this week and respond with prayer? With planning? With precautions? With perseverance?

**For Next Week:** Read and reflect on **Nehemiah 5:1-19**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■