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THE LOOKOUT

FEBRUARY 2023

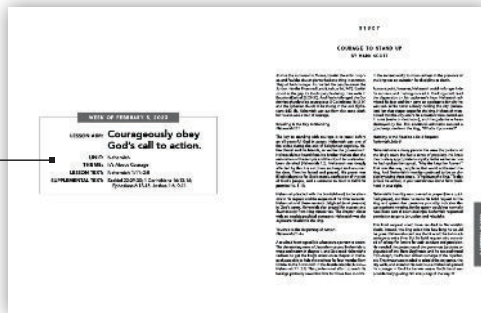
Unit: Nehemiah

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.

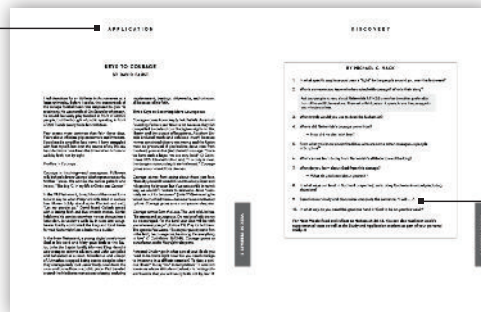
HOW TO USE

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 19, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Courageously surrender
your right if it
benefits others.**

UNIT: Nehemiah

THEME: It's About Courage

LESSON TEXT: Nehemiah 5:1-19

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Exodus 22:25-27; 1 Corinthians 9:13-18;
Matthew 16:24-26; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

COURAGE TO DENY ONESELF

BY MARK SCOTT

The problem in the Garden of Eden was that Adam and Eve refused to deny themselves and follow God, as Jesus later instructed his followers to do in Matthew 16:24. Seth Wilson used to say, “We have to go back to Eden and put that apple back on the tree.” Adam and Eve failed to trust the goodness of God and in the end did things their way. Only Jesus could reverse the curse. But we can learn the wonderful truth of Matthew 16:24 and be delivered from the cancer of self.

In chapter 5 of his book, Nehemiah lived out the truth of Matthew 16:24. Post-exilic Israel had returned home. The people had learned their lesson about idolatry following their 70-year spanking in Babylon. But they had fallen prey to other nuances of selfishness and would need to learn again the benefit of self-denial.

The Problem

Nehemiah 5:1-5

The precious land flowing with milk and honey had been decimated and needed tender loving care to produce grain and wine. But some of the Jews who had returned in the three waves began taking undue advantage of other Jews. Israel essentially faced four challenges: a famine, mortgages to pay for the food, high interest loans, and repayment of those loans.

Some of the disadvantaged Jews *raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews*. The sons and daughters outnumbered the food supply. When the reclaimed land did not produce sufficient food, they mortgaged their fields, vineyards, and homes. Others complained that *the king’s tax* was so high that the people had to borrow money to pay it. They felt that they were again in *slavery*—not geographical slavery (as was the case in Egypt), but financial slavery in their own land. When their crops failed and they were forced into foreclosure, they had to give up their land. It made them feel *powerless*. Remember, if the land is not secured, the Messiah is at risk for coming.

The Rebuke

Nehemiah 5:6-13

Nehemiah was steamed about this, and he allowed his emotions to show. He gave himself a sanity check (*pondered them in my mind*), and then acted boldly. He rebuked the *nobles and officials* for charging their own *people interest*. Of course, this violated Levitical law

(Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20). Nehemiah reminded the people that they were enslaving their own people much like the Egyptians (*Gentiles*) had done to them. The people’s silence was indicative of their guilt. They *could find nothing to say*.

Nehemiah called the people back to the fear of God. He reminded them that if they did not stop this terrible practice, they would fall into the *reproach* (taunting or scorn) of the *Gentiles*. He admitted that loaning money was not wrong, but that charging usury (especially high interest) was wrong. Then Nehemiah announced what amounted to his own year of Jubilee where fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses would be given back to the people who had owned them.

The people were persuaded and agreed to submit to the rebuke. To ensure follow-through, Nehemiah had *priests, nobles, and officials take an oath* to fulfill their promise. Nehemiah gave an object lesson to drive home the point. He *shook out the folds of his robe*, an action similar to shaking the dust from one’s feet (Matthew 10:14; Acts 13:51). If they did not keep their promise, God would shake and empty them out—and therefore Nehemiah would be guiltless in his rebuke. They affirmed this action with an “Amen,” and they praised the Lord and followed through on their commitment.

The Example

Nehemiah 5:14-19

Nehemiah reversed the “show and tell” to “tell and show.” He laid his own life on the line for what he had called the people to do. He led forth with a powerful example of self-denial. For *twelve years* under the reign of Artaxerxes he did not use his rightful allotment of food. Previous governors did take advantage of their food allowance, which ended up placing a *burden on the people*. *Forty shekels of silver* was about one pound. In addition to this was *food and wine*. And it was not just the governors who were involved in such abuse. It was also *their assistants*. They *lorded it over the people*. Nehemiah’s example, and that of his closest men, was *reverent and pure*.

Nehemiah did not burden his people, and he also provided for 150 *Jews and officials* out of his own pocket. This consisted of one ox, six sheep, and some poultry each day (not counting the wine). His only request? To be remembered by God for his self-denial. ■

APPLICATION

PUTTING OTHERS FIRST

BY DAVID FAUST

Self-centeredness weakens leadership, but unselfishness amplifies it. Effective leaders genuinely care about those they lead. Their goal is to serve, not to have others serve them. Jesus set the example. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Immediate Needs

Nehemiah went to Jerusalem to rebuild the city wall. That was his “what,” but he had a greater “why”—to glorify God by protecting the people. When an outcry arose because the poor were being neglected and abused, Nehemiah could have said, “Look, I didn’t come here to solve your financial problems. I came here to build the wall! You figure out how to distribute grain and feed the hungry. That’s not my problem!” But instead, Nehemiah stepped into the situation with emotion, careful thought, and decisive action. He said, “When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind. . . . I called together a large meeting to deal with them” (Nehemiah 5:6-7).

Leaders can’t always choose their battles. Sometimes unexpected challenges arise, though they’re not the primary work leaders are called to do. Nehemiah remained focused on building the wall, but he made sure the poor were treated fairly and their immediate needs were met.

Previous officials in Jerusalem laid heavy burdens on the people, but Nehemiah put others first and declared, “out of reverence for God I did not act like that” (Nehemiah 5:15). For 12 years, Nehemiah and his brothers refused to demand the food and other supplies allotted to him as governor, “because the demands were heavy on these people” (5:14, 18). Effective leaders make personal sacrifices for the greater good.

Future Needs

It’s important to keep the big picture in mind. Beyond our own lifetimes, God cares about future generations as

well. The end-goal of Nehemiah’s work was not merely to build a wall; it was to equip and preserve a faithful remnant of God’s covenant people through whom the Messiah would come.

Decades ago, Russ Blowers, longtime senior minister of East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, wrote the following piece called “Who Will Be Here When You Are Gone?”

When you come to church, you sit in your favorite seat and look around at the faces of friends you’ve grown to love over the years. They have become your church family. Do you ever look ahead 50 or 100 years, and see who will be here in your church?

The lost will be here. And so will those hurt by life. And the ones for whom our church is their last hope! And the children will be here—beautiful, amazing children whose minds and hearts are open to the Word of God.

Hopefully, some will find peace here, and many will find refuge. There’s something else that all will find—and that is love. This is God’s house, and it has been built on love. It will be here for them because of our legacy.

Where else can we do so much for so many for tomorrow? The Lord’s work through our church—today as well as tomorrow—it depends on each of us. Who will be here when we’re gone? God will be here—using our legacy to accomplish great things in his name.

Personal Challenge: Do some honest self-examination and ask yourself these questions: Am I a selfish leader or a sacrificial one? Do I demand that others serve me, or do I look for opportunities to serve? What sacrifices am I willing to make for the benefit of others—now and in the future? ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. How did you handle a difficult situation over the last week with both prayer and with godly action?
2. In your opinion, what makes someone a truly great leader?

Ask two people to read aloud **Nehemiah 5:1-19** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in two minutes or less.

3. With what specific problems were the people struggling?
4. In what ways did Nehemiah display leadership in dealing with the problems?
5. Looking especially at verses 6 and 7, how did Nehemiah lead with his heart? With his mind? With his actions?
6. What do you learn about God from this passage?
 - What do you learn about yourself?
7. Pretend like an internal issue is occurring in your church, class, group, or family. Without being specific about any real problem, how would you use the following leadership qualities exhibited by Nehemiah to resolve it?
 - Listening
 - Evaluation
 - Speaking the truth in love
 - Modeling (being a positive example)
 - Humility
 - Integrity
 - Service (putting others first)
8. In what specific way will you value others above yourself, not looking to your own interests but to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4) this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. We are all called to live lives of surrender, denying ourselves for the good of others. What is one of the biggest things in your life that you want to surrender to God?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Nehemiah 10:28-39**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. 📖