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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.

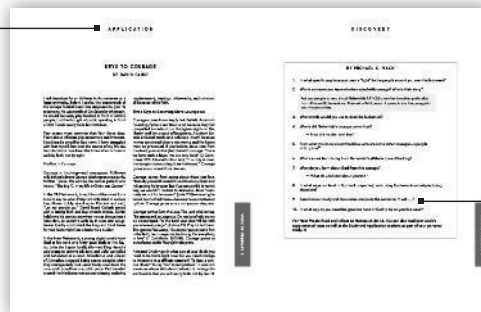
HOW TO USE

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 26, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Courageously restore
righteousness lost.**

UNIT: Nehemiah

THEME: It's About Courage

LESSON TEXT: Nehemiah 10:28-39

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Nehemiah 8:8-18; 12:43-47; Colossians 3:12-17;
Numbers 18:8-32; Leviticus 23:33-36;
Malachi 3:8-12

COURAGE TO RESTORE

BY MARK SCOTT

Nehemiah conducted his own “restoration movement.” Rebuilding walls can take people only so far. At some point a love for the Word of God must be restored for genuine revival to take place. Nehemiah knew that, and so he enlisted Ezra to teach the Scriptures (Nehemiah 8:8). The revival of Nehemiah 8 led to the prayer of contrition in Nehemiah 9, which in turn led to the commitment of the people in Nehemiah 10.

Restoration of the Separation*Nehemiah 10:28-31*

When Ezra and his helpers exposed the written word, it did not take the people long to realize they were way wide of God’s mark for their lives. They had not celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles “completely” since the days of Joshua the son of Nun (Nehemiah 8:13-18). And they realized that by intermarrying with peoples from other nations they had run the risk of syncretism of their faith.

This was serious on several fronts. First, their faith would be diluted. Second, their witness to the watching world would be compromised. Third, they would be misrepresenting God in the world. Fourth, they would fail to be God’s peculiar people. Fifth, they would even forget the language of their forefathers (i.e., Hebrew). Sixth—and most significant—the promise of God to save the world through Christ could be derailed.

The time had not yet come for the kingdom of this world to be assumed into the larger kingdom of Christ (Revelation 11:15). For now, separation was still needed to ensure a pure messianic line. There was a grassroots movement to *obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord*. It came from *priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, and temple servants*. These had *separated* (divided or made a distinction between) themselves from the *neighboring peoples* (people of the land; ragamuffins of other faith traditions).

Two areas of obedience were promised. The first was purity of marriage. The family was in crisis in post-exilic Israel. Intermarriage—which God can still work through (e.g., Ruth and Boaz)—ran the risk of causing God’s person in the marriage to cave into idolatry. The Israelites committed to having pure blood lines.

The second was keeping the Sabbath. That also was a huge problem in post-exilic times. The latter sections

of Nehemiah showed how severe that was (Nehemiah 13:19-22). Ezra pulled his hair out with the obstinacies of the people of God (Ezra 9:3), but Nehemiah pulled other peoples’ hair out (Nehemiah 13:25). Israel had allowed the *neighboring peoples* to bring their goods to sell on the Sabbath. With Nehemiah’s admonition, they committed not to do that anymore. Nehemiah led the people into allowing every seventh year to be a “do over” (like Jubilee).

Restoration of the Sanctuary*Nehemiah 10:32-39*

One problem of post-exilic Israel was the neglect of the temple. People cared more about their own houses (see Haggai and Zechariah). Nehemiah challenged the people to make the *house of our God* a priority again. This demanded resourcing it with money. The people agreed on the price of a *third of a shekel each year*. They started bringing the firstfruits of crops and fruit trees. They also resourced the Table of Shewbread by setting out fresh bread on it regularly. Offerings, sacrifices, and observing special festival days were also enjoined. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) was reinstated.

The right people were also put in the right places. Priests and Levites prepared to butcher animals and teach the people. They cast lots to determine which families would supply the temple with wood *to burn on the altar of the Lord*. (It would require lots of wood for the sacrifices and offerings that were to be made.) They also honored the commandment of the “firstborn.” Sons, cattle, herds, and flocks were brought to the priests so that the firstborn commandment could be honored.

The storerooms of the temple (which both Ezra and Nehemiah had a perpetual problem keeping clean and in order) were restored for their rightful purposes of housing grain, fruit, wine, and olive oil. The bringing of the tithes was a big step toward restoring things (Malachi 3:10). This would provide for the workers of the temple. A similar principle was espoused by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9. God’s kingdom advances when certain workers are freed from other job constraints.

Commitments are sometimes short-lived. But it is still healthy to make them because we do not have restoration without them. The people (with a shout?) said, “We will not neglect the house of God.” The second temple would pave the way for the third one (John 2:21). ■

APPLICATION

PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT MATTERS MOST

BY DAVID FAUST

My high school English teacher wanted her students to read Shakespeare and novels by Thomas Wolfe. Back then, though, I mainly read the sports page and the comics in the daily newspaper. On the basketball court I shot 100 free throws every day and carefully tracked the percentage of shots I made, but would I spend even five minutes reading a dusty old book? No way! The teacher gave a surprise test on Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, and I received a grade of 40 because my attention had been focused on other things.

Priorities matter. Neglect your car, and it will break down. Fall behind on your bills, and financial problems result. Ignore your body, and your health will decline. Neglect basic maintenance on your house, and it will lose value. Society pays a heavy price when parents neglect their children.

Jesus warned about the folly of neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). Do we pay attention to the things that matter most?

Don't Neglect Your Salvation

What could be more important than God's gift of salvation—to be forgiven, rescued from Hell, and unafraid to die? The Hebrews writer asked, "How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?" and declared, "We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Hebrews 2:1-3).

"Drift away" is an accurate description of what happens when God is neglected. Most backslidden believers don't suddenly wake up one day and reject Christ. Usually, disengagement is a gradual process—a slow drift from the Lord and his church.

The river's current will pull your boat downstream unless you keep rowing. Likewise, it takes intentional steps to stay connected with other believers so we don't drift away.

Don't Neglect God's House

To renew their commitment to God, the Jews prayed, confessed their sin, and signed an agreement pledging their faithfulness. Governor Nehemiah was the first person to sign (Nehemiah 10:1). They promised to observe the Sabbath, support the temple, and avoid intermarriage with idolatrous nations. They summarized their commitment with a solemn promise: "We will not neglect the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:39).

In the New Testament, God's house doesn't mean a physical structure. It's the church—God's redeemed sons and daughters in whom his Spirit dwells. Sitting in a church building doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a chicken house makes you a chicken. Faithfulness to God is not mainly about attending worship services . . . but that's not a bad place to start!

God's household should be a priority. If you own a car or a house, you tend to be more careful with the property than you would be if you were merely renting it. Likewise, we shouldn't treat the church as if we're consumers or renters. Members of God's family should "buy in" and be fully engaged.

If God's kingdom is your top priority (Matthew 6:33), don't neglect to connect! Show up for worship because you love the Lord your God. Get involved in service. Support the family of believers and love your neighbors well. Give generously to spread the gospel.

The promise of Nehemiah and his contemporaries should be ours as well: "We will not neglect the house of our God."

Personal Challenge: Are you ever tempted to neglect the Lord and the family of believers? How does your investment of time, money, and effort demonstrate that God's kingdom and his righteousness truly come first in your life? ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. In what ways did you honor others above yourself last week?
2. Have you ever neglected something or someone? (Examples include a lawn mower, car, garden, or friendship, but there are many more.) What happened?

Ask two people to read aloud **Nehemiah 10:28-39** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in two minutes or less.

3. In general, what were the Israelites committing to do?
4. What do you learn about God from this passage?
5. What do you learn about people?
6. The reading of God's Word in Nehemiah 8-9 led the people to confess and repent from their sins in Nehemiah 9, which led to a renewed commitment to God's priorities in Nehemiah 10. How have you seen a dedication to reading God's Word have a similar effect today?
7. Using the following prompts, how can we apply the lessons of Nehemiah 10 in today's church? (Look up the passages as needed.)
 - What should we commit ("devote") ourselves to today? (See Acts 2:42.)
 - What are our highest priorities? (See Matthew 6:33; 22:36-40.)
 - How specifically can we "not neglect the house of our God" today? (See Hebrews 3:6; 10:21-25; 1 Peter 2:5; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 5:1.)
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
9. The Israelites listened to God's Word being taught, and then they acted on what they heard. They promised as a community to "obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord" (Nehemiah 10:29). What do you need from your church community to obey God's Word, especially this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Hosea 11:1-7; 14:1-9;** and **Psalms 32:1-7** as we begin a new unit on three Minor Prophets: Amos, Hosea, and Micah. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■