



# 1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

## OVERVIEW

### Study: 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.

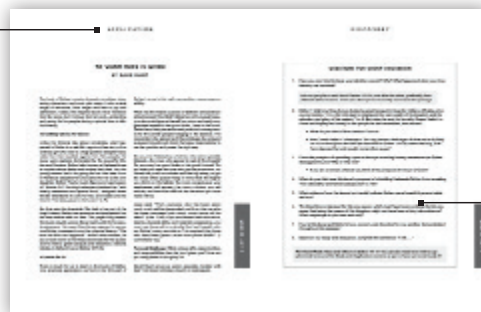
## HOW TO USE

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



**Tab**s 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.

# INTRODUCTION

## Author

Jewish tradition ascribes the authorship of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah to the priest Ezra. It seems more likely, however, that Nehemiah wrote the book that bears his name and Ezra may have edited and added to it. The Book of Nehemiah was written from Nehemiah's first-person perspective, so it's very likely that Nehemiah was the author.

## Audience

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written to the people of Israel who had returned from their Babylonian Captivity. Zerubbabel led the first group out of captivity and back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1-6). About 60 years afterward, Ezra led a group of exiles back to reinstate Jewish worship (Ezra 7-10). Then Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem around 13 years after Ezra to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

## Date

Nehemiah lived during the reign of Persian Emperor Artaxerxes I (475-424 BC). He was a contemporary of the priest Ezra and the prophet Malachi. The precise date for this book's authorship is unknown, but it was likely to have been written between 445 and 420 BC.

## Setting

While serving as the cupbearer for the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes in Susa, the capital of Persia, Nehemiah learned that the walls surrounding Jerusalem were in

ruin and the remnant that had returned from captivity were threatened. With the blessings of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah went to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall amid ridicule, threats, and difficulties.

Upon Nehemiah's completion of the construction of the walls around Jerusalem, the people are gathered as Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the people and reinstates the temple worship. In response, the people vow to be faithful to God.

After the dedication of the wall and the great celebrations that accompanied it, Nehemiah returned to Babylon for a time. Upon returning to Jerusalem and finding that the people had not been faithful, Nehemiah instituted several religious reforms.

## Theme

The theme of Nehemiah is centered upon Nehemiah's undaunted commitment to building the wall around Jerusalem and reinstating the Mosaic law so God's people could worship properly and without fear.

## Why Study Nehemiah?

Nehemiah is a book about courageous faithfulness amid difficulties and challenges. In the process of building the wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah demonstrates both leadership and an unwavering commitment to the Lord. His efforts, along with those of Ezra, reinstated the Jewish temple worship and brought about needed religious reforms. Nehemiah concluded his book by writing, "Remember me with favor, my God."

## STUDY CONTENT

**WEEK 1:** Nehemiah 1:11-2:8

**WEEK 2:** Nehemiah 4:1-18

**WEEK 3:** Nehemiah 5:1-19

**WEEK 4:** Nehemiah 10:28-39

## WEEK ONE

**LESSON AIM:** **Courageously obey  
God's call to action.**

**STUDY:** Nehemiah

**THEME:** It's About Courage

**LESSON TEXT:** Nehemiah 1:11-2:8

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Ezekiel 22:29-30; 1 Corinthians 16:13-14; Ephesians 6:13-15; Joshua 1:6, 9-11

## STUDY

# COURAGE TO STAND UP

BY MARK SCOTT

Joshua the successor to Moses, Ezekiel the exilic prophet, and Paul the church planter had one thing in common. They all had courage. Joshua led the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land (Joshua 1:6, 9-11). Ezekiel stood in the gap for God's people during their exile in Babylon (Ezekiel 22:29-30). And Paul challenged the Corinthian church to be courageous (1 Corinthians 16:13-14) and the Ephesian church to be strong in the Lord (Ephesians 6:13-15). Nehemiah was cut from this same cloth, for he also was a man of courage.

### Kneeling Is the Key to Standing

*Nehemiah 1:11*

The key to standing with courage is to kneel before an all-powerful God in prayer. Nehemiah was one of the exiles during the end of Babylonian captivity. He, like Daniel and his friends, served in the government. Nehemiah had heard from his brother Hanani that the restoration of the temple and the city of Jerusalem had been derailed (Nehemiah 1:3). Nehemiah was deeply affected by this. He sat down and wept and mourned for days. Then he fasted and prayed. His prayer was filled with praise for God's mercy, confession of the sins of God's people, and a reminder to God to fulfill his promise (vv. 5-11).

Nehemiah pleaded with the *Lord* (Adonai) to be attentive to his request and the requests of his other servants. Nehemiah and these servants delighted (took pleasure) in God's name. Nehemiah also prayed for success and favor (mercy) from King Artaxerxes. The chapter closes with an autobiographical comment: Nehemiah was the *cupbearer* (butler) to the king.

### Touched Is the Beginning of Action

*Nehemiah 2:1-4a*

A touched heart typically is what spurs a person to action. The devastating news of Jerusalem caused Nehemiah to weep and mourn in chapter 1, and God used Nehemiah's sadness to get the king's attention in chapter 2. Nehemiah was able to hide this sadness for four months (from Chislew to the first month in the Jewish calendar, Nisan—Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1). This professional effort to mask his feelings probably saved his hide for those four months. In the ancient world, to show sadness in the presence of the king was an invitation for discipline or death.

At some point, however, Nehemiah could no longer hide his sadness, and the king noticed it. The king could read the depression on his cupbearer's face. Nehemiah admitted his fear and then gave an apologetic for why he was sad. While never actually naming the city (Jerusalem) lest that trigger angst for the king, Nehemiah mentioned that the *city where his ancestors were buried lies in ruins* (waste or desolation), and the *gates have been destroyed by fire*. This emotional admission secured a good response from the king, "*What is it you want?*"

### Humility Is the Road to a Bold Request

*Nehemiah 2:4b-8*

Nehemiah was a classy person. He knew the protocol of the king's court. He had a sense of propriety. He knew the courtesy appropriate to royalty. In the earlier section he had spoken the typical, "*May the king live forever!*" That was the way people in that world addressed the king. And Nehemiah's humility continued to be on display by saying three times, "*If it pleases the king.*" To this phrase he added, *If your servant has found favor (wellness) in your sight.*

Nehemiah's humility was covered in prayer (like a quick flash prayer), and then he made his bold request to the king and queen (her presence probably indicates this was a private meeting, for the queen would not normally have been part of court dealings). Nehemiah requested permission to go to Jerusalem and *rebuild it*.

This bold request could have resulted in Nehemiah's death. Instead, the king asked him how long he would be gone. Nehemiah could see that it would be to his advantage to set a *time*. But his bold request also consisted of asking for letters for *safe-conduct* and provision. He needed the protection of the *governors* (captains or deputies) of the *Trans-Euphrates*, and he needed wood from *Asaph*, the Persian officer in charge of the royal forest. The *timber* was needed to rebuild the city gates, the city walls, and even for his own house. Nehemiah placed his courage in God for he was aware God's hand was providentially guiding him every step of the way.

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# APPLICATION

## KEYS TO COURAGE

BY DAVID FAUST

I led devotions for an Athletes in Action event at a large university. Before I spoke, the quarterback of the college football team was supposed to give his testimony. He was terrified! On Saturday afternoon, he would fearlessly play football in front of 60,000 people, but the thought of public speaking in front of 200 friends nearly froze him with fear.

Fear seems more common than faith these days. Fears about inflation grip consumers and investors. Social media amplifies bad news. I have struggled with fear myself, but over the course of my life, my best decisions have been the times when I chose to walk by faith, not by sight.

### Profiles in Courage

Courage is inspiring—and contagious. Followers rally behind a brave George Washington or a spunky Mother Teresa. We admire the cancer patient who insists, “The big ‘C’ in my life is Christ, not Cancer.”

In the Old Testament, Joseph found the moral fortitude to say no when Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce him. Moses boldly stood up to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go.” David faced Goliath armed with a strong faith and five smooth stones. Daniel held onto his convictions when he was thrown into a lion’s den. Jerusalem’s walls lay in ruins until a cupbearer boldly confronted the king and God transformed Nehemiah from a butler to a builder.

In the New Testament, a young virgin bravely took God at his word and Mary gave birth to the Savior. John the Baptist boldly informed King Herod it was wrong to commit adultery, and John was jailed and beheaded as a result. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea stopped being secret disciples when they courageously took Jesus’ body down from the cross and buried him in a public place. Paul traveled around the Mediterranean as a missionary, enduring imprisonment, beatings, shipwrecks, and criticism, all because of his faith.

### Three Keys to Becoming More Courageous

*Courage comes from deeply held beliefs.* America’s Founding Fathers sacrificed a lot because they felt compelled to defend our God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Abraham Lincoln endured much (and achieved much) because he was convinced slavery was wrong and the Union must be preserved. If you believe Jesus rose from the dead, you can live (and die) with courage. “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold” (2 Corinthians 3:12). Elisabeth Elliot said, “If a duty is clear, the dangers surrounding it are irrelevant.” *Courage grows as our convictions deepen.*

*Courage comes from caring about those you love.* Normally you and I wouldn’t run into a busy street and risk getting hit by a car, but if we saw a child in harm’s way, we wouldn’t hesitate to intervene. Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51)—knowing he would be crucified there—because he was motivated by love. *Courage grows as our compassion deepens.*

*Courage comes from the Lord.* The Lord told Joshua, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). Pray for boldness. The apostle Paul wrote, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14). *Courage grows as our reliance on the Holy Spirit deepens.*

### Personal Challenge:

In what part of your life do you need to be brave right now? Do you need courage to intervene in a difficult situation? To face a serious illness? To say “no” to temptation? To confront someone whose attitude or behavior is hurting others? Decide that you will live by faith, not by fear.

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## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In what specific way have you been a “light” to the people around you over the last week?
2. Who among the people you know has acted with courage? What’s their story?

Ask two people to read aloud **Nehemiah 1:11-2:8**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. What words would you use to describe Nehemiah?
4. Where did Nehemiah’s courage come from?
  - How did he deal with fear?
5. From what you know about the Bible, who are some other courageous people in Scripture?
6. What can we learn today from Nehemiah’s attitude toward the king?
7. What do you learn about God from this passage?
  - What do you learn about yourself?
8. In what ways can trust in God and prayer help us to obey God even in anxiety-inducing situations?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: “This week, I will . . .”
10. In what way do you need the gracious hand of God to be on you this week?

**For Next Week:** Read and reflect on **Nehemiah 4:1-18**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

## WEEK TWO

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

**STUDY:** 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

## STUDY

# 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, Abraham Lincoln, who took great risks to save the country during the Civil War. Although he faced great risks, the risks were worth it.

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# APPLICATION

## 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.

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## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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 briefly summarize the passage.

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 and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

**WEEK THREE**

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

**STUDY:** 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 enslav-

ing 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.

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# 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?

*David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.*

## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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 briefly summarize these verses.

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 and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

## WEEK FOUR

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

**STUDY:** 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).

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# APPLICATION

## PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT MATTERS

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?

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## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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 4:28-39**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize these verses.
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:** This week's lesson bring this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "**1717: Your Word Is Truth**" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at [ChristianStandard.com](http://ChristianStandard.com).

## WEEK FIVE

**LESSON AIM:** **Choose to center your life on, and be guided by, the Spirit.**

**STUDY:** Galatians

**THEME:** Choose

**LESSON TEXT:** Galatians 5:16-26, 6:7-10

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Galatians 6:1-6; Romans 8:5-13, 13:11-14; Ephesians 2:1-5; 1 John 2:15-17

## WHICH DESIRES?

BY MARK SCOTT

Desires are primal. Brain research—a quite recent medical focus—finds that our “first brain” (sounds evolutionary, doesn’t it?) functions at a deeper level than cognition. Volition is at the real guts of the human experience. Maybe this is why when the serpent tempted Eve, he did so at the level of her desires (Genesis 3:6; cf. 1 John 2:16).

Paul wrote at the level of our desires when he shared the practical application of living by faith in Christ as opposed to living by works of the law. Desires shape much of our lives. But what shapes those desires?

**The Flesh (Galatians 5:16-21)**

When believers *walk* (live by or tread about) by the Spirit, they ensure that the flesh will not dictate their desires. Those walking by the Spirit will not *gratify the desires of the flesh*. *Desires* is a word that got dirtier in its etymology. It started out well (cf. Luke 22:15), but it became synonymous with evil. *Flesh* can simply mean “human.” But in this passage, it means “opposed to God.”

The flesh, which becomes the threshold for sin (Romans 7:14-20), is at war with the Holy Spirit. *Flesh* is mentioned seven times in our lesson text, while *Spirit* is mentioned nine times. So, which is stronger (Mark 14:36; 1 John 4:4)? People who do not have the internal help of the Holy Spirit need external laws to make them good.

Paul mentioned 15 acts (works) of the flesh. (The biblical vice lists are most often longer than the virtue lists. Could it be that living from the inside out by the Spirit needs only a few guidelines whereas living by rules requires greater specificity to know what God desires?) The acts of the flesh can be divided into four categories. The first three deal with sex. The next four deal with religion. The next six deal with various societal sins, and the final two deal with alcohol. We were born in the flesh, but we do not have to live by the earthy desires that drive that flesh.

**The Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26)**

The contrast between living externally and living internally could not be clearer. The Spirit produces *fruit* (singular) as opposed to the flesh which produces acts. John R.W. Stott recited these nine fruit every morning in his devotional time because he believed that these nine fruit summarize the life of Christ better than any other list. They could be viewed as three groups of three—love,

joy, peace; forbearance, kindness, goodness; faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. In Jewish lists, things that head the list and end the list seem to get the accent. Love is our finest apologetic, and self-control helps us keep our head in a world gone nuts.

These nine fruit need no law. When they are produced in believers who live out the cruciform life, no law is necessary. Paul harkened back to Galatians 2:20 and spoke again about being *crucified* with Christ. When we live in Christ, by Christ, and for Christ, it is as if our desires and passions were crucified the day Jesus died. It was like a co-crucifixion. When believers abide in Christ, fruit is produced naturally—even if we need to be pruned occasionally (John 15:2).

When we *live* (the verb is indicative of the best life, i.e., life lived at the highest level) *by the Spirit*, we will *keep in step* (to go in rank or walk orderly) *with the Spirit*. Of course, this will keep us from becoming conceited, and provoking others, and envying still others.

**The Harvest (Galatians 6:7-10)**

The flesh can drive our desires, and the Spirit can drive our desires. But an additional aspect that can shape our desires is the law of harvest. The future is a powerful shaper of our desires. Knowing that there is such a thing as “payday someday” can keep us internally motivated.

Before discussing the law of harvest, Paul called believers to help fellow Christians who are overtaken with sin, to bear burdens, to be willing to be tested in their faith, and to share financially with spiritual directors. God cannot be *mocked* (to snort or clear away mucus). The law of harvest has been in place since creation (Genesis 1:11-13).

People reap what they sow. If they sow to fleshly desires, they will reap *destruction* (spoiling). If they sow to *please the Spirit*, they will reap eternal life. If believers do not *become weary* (lose their courage) *in doing good*, they will reap a harvest of goodness. Finally, Paul called believers to *do good* to everyone, especially to the church. Desires are shaped by the flesh, the Spirit, and the future.

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## APPLICATION

### SHE THOUGHT HE WAS A GARDENER

BY DAVID FAUST

How much sorrow must a person endure? How could she withstand another crashing wave of disappointment?

Mary Magdalene had been down the road of despair before, confused and tormented by the devil. Then she met Jesus, who freed her from Satan's power and gave her hope. But then came that dark afternoon when soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross. For Mary and all the other disciples who loved him so dearly, hope drained to the ground along with his blood.

Overwhelmed by grief, Mary wanted to see his body one more time and anoint it with spices in a final gesture of appreciation. When she and two other women arrived at the tomb early in the morning, their broken hearts endured yet another blow. The stone had been removed from the front of the tomb. Jesus' body was gone.

Bitterly disappointed because she couldn't anoint the body of her beloved Lord, Mary burst into tears near the empty tomb, barely noticing the man standing behind her. He asked, "'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?' Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him'" (John 20:15).

It was Jesus, who had risen from the dead! Mary was standing in the presence of the living Lord, but she didn't realize it. Actually, her mistake is understandable. Her eyes were filled with tears, and early morning fog may have lingered in the still-dark garden. Mary's whiplashed emotions made it difficult for her mind to grasp history's greatest miracle. In your own life, have there been times when the Lord was right there with you, but you didn't recognize his presence?

#### **A Place Where Things Grow**

The Bible says, "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid" (John 19:41). It's interesting that Jesus was buried in a place where things grow. On the farm where I grew up, our garden was an integral part of our family's food supply. We canned and froze tomatoes, corn, green beans, and other fruit and vegetables. In my travels I have seen artfully landscaped gardens in England, Austria, New Zealand, and Japan filled with beautiful flowers, shrubs, and trees. Solomon built palatial gardens and parks where fruit trees were watered by reservoirs (Ecclesiastes 2:5-6). God seems to have a special place in his heart for gardens. At the beginning of human history, he walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jesus poured out heartfelt prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. The book of Revelation pictures a crystal-clear river and a tree that continually bears fruit in the paradise God is preparing for the faithful.

When Jesus called Mary's name, she recognized him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). At first, she mistook him for a gardener, and in a way, she wasn't wrong.

Jesus skillfully trims and prunes his followers so they will bear more fruit (John 15:1-8). He is a wise teacher who wants his students to produce a harvest of "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

#### **Personal Challenge:**

When you read the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23, which fruit seems most abundant in your life right now? Which fruit do you lack?

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## DISCOVERY

### QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did it go when you shared a verse from last week's study with someone who is living according to a law-keeping system to try to find favor with God?
2. What circumstances did you face as you went through the past week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Galatians 5:16-26** and **6:7-10**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions (one of which could be a paraphrase such as *The Message*). Then ask a third person to briefly summarize these verses.

3. What contrasts do you see in these passages?
4. Let's dig deeper:
  - What warnings does Paul give in these passages?
  - What promises do you see?
  - Look specifically at the contrasts between the "acts of the flesh" and the "fruit of the Spirit." Before even considering the acts and fruit themselves, what do those headings demonstrate to you about living as a follower of Christ?
  - What does Paul's choice of the word *fruit* teach you about how love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are produced in our lives?
  - How should Christ followers deal with sinful desires and passions?
  - How does Galatians 5:16-25 help someone carry out the instructions of 5:26 and 6:7?
  - What do you learn about God's timing versus human timing from these passages?
5. What do you learn about God's Spirit from these passages?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. Choose a command from these passages to obey and then share specifically how you will seek to obey it this week:
  - Keep on walking by the Spirit.
  - Be willingly led by the Spirit.
  - Crucify the flesh with its passions and desires.
  - Keep in step with the Spirit.
  - Sow to please the Spirit.
  - Do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.
8. When we care for fellow believers in our community of faith, we become stronger and then together we can share God's love with a needy world. What good thing will you do for another Christ follower this week so that they may not become weary in doing good and so that we as a community of Christ can reap a harvest?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. What opportunities to do good to others do you anticipate this week?

**For Next Week:** This week's lesson bring this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "**1717: Your Word Is Truth**" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at *ChristianStandard.com*.