



9

Rebuilding the Walls

Key Theme

- God uses people to accomplish His perfect plans.

Key Passages

- Nehemiah 1:1–2:10, 2:17–20, 4:4–18, 6:15–16

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify examples of Nehemiah's dependence on God.
- Describe the connection between trusting in God and acting in faith.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Write on the board, "Why do anything if God is in control?"

Students will complete the Memory Verse Review Sheet. If time allows, have the students recite the verse together, to each other, or to you.

- ☐ Print one Memory Verse Review Sheet from the Resource DVD-ROM for each student.



Studying God's Word

The Lord allowed Nehemiah to find favor with the king so He could return to lead the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem. An unusual building plan worked! And despite much opposition, God blessed the building, which was accomplished in a mere 52 days.

- ☐ Study the Prepare to Share section.
- ☐ Go Before the Throne.
- ☐ Read through the lesson key passages and Prepare to Share.



Activity: Acting in Faith

Students will examine Nehemiah 4 and seek to explain the connection between trusting God and acting in faith.

- ☐ Student Guides
- ☐ Pencils



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the lesson key passages along with this background.

Nehemiah was another of the descendants of the Jewish exiles who found himself in the service of a Persian king. Just as the captivity of Judah came in three stages, the return to and restoration of Jerusalem was also in three phases. We have already learned about the first return in 538 BC as King Cyrus sent a group of Jews back to Jerusalem and the Temple was rebuilt. Then we learned about the second return of Ezra in 467 at the direction of King Artaxerxes. In this lesson, we will see how Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem in 454 to finalize the restoration of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's brother, who had likely gone with Ezra to Jerusalem about 13 years earlier, had returned from and given a report on the state of affairs there. Things were bleak. The people were in distress, they were being oppressed, and the walls around the city were in ruins (Nehemiah 1:1–3). At this news, Nehemiah was grieved. He fasted and prayed, asking God to forgive the sins of Israel. He recognized that God had redeemed Israel by His power and that it was only by God's hand that they could be restored (1:10). Nehemiah also knew that his prayers were to the God who held the heart of the king in His hand, and he cried out for favor in the eyes of the king.

After hearing the news of Jerusalem's sad state, Nehemiah appeared before the king. As the king's cupbearer, His job was to sample the wine and other beverages to ensure that they were not poisoned. So the life of the king was ensured by putting Nehemiah in harm's way. As Nehemiah served the king, his sadness was apparent and the king asked him for the reason (2:1–2). Nehemiah shared his concern for Jerusalem, and when the king asked him for his request, Nehemiah prayed to God and then asked the king's permission to rebuild Jerusalem. The king said yes! Then Nehemiah asked for supplies to rebuild the walls and gates and for letters to the local governors to support the project. And the king said yes! Nehemiah knew that it was God's hand in the matter that these requests were granted. Nehemiah prayed and then acted, trusting God in both.

As Nehemiah set out for Jerusalem, he was accompanied by captains of the king's army and letters to the governors of the region. Sanballat and Tobiah were two of these leaders who did not want to see Jerusalem

rebuilt (2:9–10). Nehemiah surveyed the task for several days and then called the people to rebuild, even in the face of the mocking of the governors of the region. Nehemiah knew what God had called him to do, and he knew God would prosper the work.

Nehemiah 3 describes the work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem and lists all of the people involved in the work. The work began in early July (Ab) and was finished in September (Elul)—only 52 days after they had begun (6:15). During this period of building, the Jews were harassed by Sanballat and the others who did not want to see Jerusalem rebuilt. They mocked and threatened the Jews, but Nehemiah cried out to God for protection and encouraged the people to persevere as they trusted God (4:4, 4:9).

But Nehemiah did more than pray—he acted! He trusted that God would protect the Jews while they worked, but he also understood the people's responsibility to defend themselves. God uses people to accomplish His plans. Nehemiah knew this truth and knew that the threat of attack from Sanballat and the others was real and required a response (4:7–13).

Now, it is true that God acts in miraculous ways and that He could have killed the attacking armies just as He did the Assyrian army that encircled Jerusalem 250 years earlier (2 Kings 19), but that miraculous activity seems to be the exception rather than the expectation. God sent His people to battle many times, and He miraculously protected them many times. Nehemiah organized the people so that some would work while some would keep guard, and even those who worked had their weapons ready for battle (Nehemiah 4:14–23).

Prayer and action are not contrary to one another, but both are ways to demonstrate faith and trust in God. Even though Nehemiah and the others were prepared for battle, the credit for their safety and their accomplishments was always directed toward God (Nehemiah 4:14–15, 4:20, 6:9, 6:12, 6:16).

As we live as Christians today, God honors our prayers as well as our actions—the two should not be separated. If we are in need of money, to sit and pray for a miracle without being willing to work to meet our needs is not an attitude that honors Christ. However, we cannot fall into the opposite ditch of thinking that God only helps those who help themselves (a saying that many are surprised to learn is not in the Bible). Our responsibility to act and God's providence are both clearly presented in Scripture.

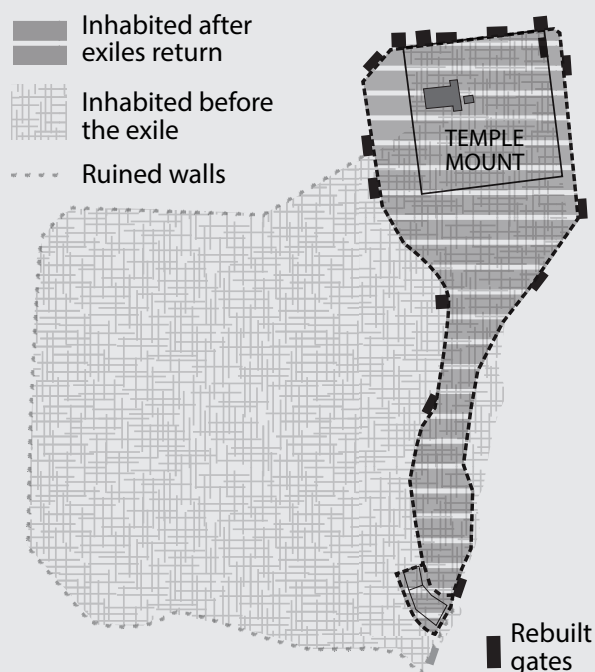
As we pray for the salvation of loved ones, we should also be speaking gospel truths to them and serving them in love. As we pray for the homeless in our communities, we should also seek to meet their physical needs and offer them true hope in the gospel. As we pray for wisdom from God, we should be diligently seeking truth from His Word and counsel from others. Our prayers should not keep us from acting, nor should our actions keep us from praying. Both are demonstrations of our trust in God. God will accomplish His perfect plans through both.

HISTORICAL/APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

As we have mentioned before, much archaeological evidence has been found that lines up with accounts from the Bible. That is exactly what we would expect from the trustworthy source of the Bible. Papyrus scrolls found in southern Egypt contain records from the time of Nehemiah. These Elephantine Papyri were recorded by a Jewish community there and were preserved in the dry climate to be discovered 1,200 years later. Within this collection is a letter to the Samaritan governor Sanballat. This is the same Sanballat who harassed the Jews as they sought to rebuild the walls. Also mentioned in these ancient documents is Jehohanan (Johanen), a leader mentioned in Nehemiah 6:18 and 12:23. These details in a source that is dated to the exact time of Nehemiah's return are a great confirmation of the truth we find in Scripture. God has given us a trustworthy revelation.

Why was Nehemiah so interested in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem? Walls were important for defense of ancient cities. Nehemiah recognized the need for the protection of the city and the Temple and for a place for the Jews to seek refuge under attack. The gates that had been burned and the sections of the walls that had been torn down left the Jews practically defenseless. In 2007, a portion of the wall constructed under Nehemiah's leadership was uncovered. Discoveries like these are consistent with the biblical accounts and give skeptics fewer and fewer reasons to doubt the truthfulness of Scripture. Of course, even without archaeological confirmations, we can trust the Word of the God who cannot lie.

For more information on this topic, see the Online Resource Page.



BEFORE THE THRONE

O great and awesome God. You keep your promises and show mercy to those who love you. My heart is heavy and I pray earnestly for my students who are surrounded by the sin and evil of this cursed world. How I would love to surround them with a thick wall of protection, like the one that surrounded Jerusalem. Instead I pray for a spiritual protection that comes from the knowledge of your Word and a relationship with you. And I pray that you will bring them to the security and peace that only Your truth can bring. Lord have mercy on the next generation. Much of their lives is spent in godless pursuits. But you Lord can protect their impressionable minds. Use this lesson to get them excited about living a life dedicated to you. Holy Spirit, move in the lives of my students and in mine. Use us for your glory!



COME ON IN

- Write on the board, “Why do anything if God is in control?”
- Students will complete the Memory Verse Review Sheet. If time allows, have the students recite the verse together, to each other, or to you.



Review

As we draw near to the end of our study of the Old Testament, we are still in the period of the return of the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon. We have talked about the first return under Zerubbabel, and we looked at Ezra’s leadership in restoring a reverence for God’s Law. Ezra taught the people things they had forgotten, calling them to repent and divorce the pagan wives they had taken. Undoubtedly, there were more reforms that followed but are not recorded for us.

One significant part of our lesson last week was the hope the people had in their repentance—the hope that God would

forgive and restore them. While they offered animal sacrifices to cover their sin, we look to the perfect sacrifice of Christ on our behalf to cleanse us from our sins. All of these things are part of the scarlet thread of redemption that we have seen woven throughout the Old Testament.

Our lesson today looks at the third and final stage of the return completed under Nehemiah’s leadership. In our lesson today, we are going to try to look for Nehemiah’s reliance on God and try to better understand the connection between relying on God and acting in faith.



➤ Write on the board, “Why do anything if God is in control?”



Studying God’s Word

READ THE WORD

Let’s read Nehemiah 1–2 together. *Have someone read chapter 1 and another person read chapter 2.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text



How can we determine when these events took place? *It refers to the “twentieth year” and the period of Artaxerxes. We know that Ezra was sent in the seventh year of his reign, so this places these events 13 years later, in 454 BC.*

Nehemiah 1–2

- ? **Where was Nehemiah living?** *He was in Shushan, or Susa, serving King Artaxerxes as his cupbearer. This is the same palace where Esther was queen.*
- ? **What does a cupbearer do?** *He is responsible for sampling the drinks given to the king to assure that they are not poisoned.*
- ? **What report did Nehemiah receive?** *Hanani, his brother (7:2), returned from Jerusalem with others and told him of the reproach of the people and their distress.*
- ? **The people of Jerusalem were in distress. But why? Why were they upset?**
What did the messenger say about the walls around Jerusalem? *Nehemiah 1:3. The wall was broken down. The gates were burned with fire.*
- ? **Why was the condition of the walls such a concern?** *Walls around a city represent its strength, and the gates being left wide open represented the pitiful condition of the Jews. This reflected poorly on the character of God as the surrounding pagans would have believed the God of the Jews was not strong enough to even provide them with a secure city.*

All of this news caused Nehemiah to mourn, fast, and pray for many days. We see a glimpse of his heart in the prayer of 1:5–11.

- ? **How do we see Nehemiah's dependence on God in his prayer?** *The prayer is filled with words that demonstrate Nehemiah's reliance on God—asking God to have mercy on His people, asking God to hear their prayers, acknowledging that God had established His commands for them to follow, asking God for favor from the king.*
- ? **Why would Nehemiah ask God for mercy in the eyes of the king?** *Nehemiah was about to make a request before the king. He understood that the heart of the king was in God's hands, so he asked God to guide the king's heart and grant him favor (Proverbs 21:1).*
- ? **Looking to chapter two, when did Nehemiah appear before the king?** *He appeared in the month of Nisan. This would be late March. Looking back to chapter 1, he received the news in Chislev (November or December), so about four months have passed as we move to chapter 2.*
- ? **How did the king know there was something concerning Nehemiah?** *His countenance was sad as he served the king, something that had not happened before.*
- ? **Why was Nehemiah “dreadfully afraid” of speaking to the king?** *The answer is not entirely clear. It may have been because to be so downcast in the presence of the king would be an offense and may bring punishment. It may be more likely that he was afraid to ask the king for what God had put in his heart.*
- ? **After hearing Nehemiah's despair at the condition of Jerusalem, the king offered him a request. What was Nehemiah's first response?** *He offered a prayer to God before making his request.*
- ? **What did Nehemiah request?** *His first request was to be sent to Jerusalem to rebuild it.*
- ? **What was the king's response?** *He agreed and asked for a time frame.*
- ? **What was Nehemiah's additional request?** *He asked for an escort and letters to the governors of the regions around Judah as well as timber from the forest to rebuild the gates and other portions of the city.*

➤ Much time often passes between two verses.

- ? **What is meant by “beyond the River” in 2:7?** *As we said in Ezra, this refers to the region west of the Euphrates. Shushan was situated to the east of the Tigris and Euphrates, so Judah was “beyond the river” to the west.*
- ? **Why did the king grant the requests?** *God’s hand was in the matter (v. 2:8), and He granted Nehemiah favor before the king—just as Nehemiah had prayed in faith.*
- ? **How did the local governors respond?** *Sanballat and Tobiah were disturbed that the Israelites were going to be helped.*
- ? **What do we learn about Nehemiah’s task in verse 12?** *It had been given to him by God, being placed in his heart.*
- ? **Nehemiah waited three days after his arrival before inspecting the city and then revealing his plans to the leaders of Jerusalem. How did the other Jews respond to his plan?** *They immediately agreed and began to work.*
- ? **How did the pagan governors respond?** *Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem mocked them and suggested they were rebelling against the king.*
- ? **Why was this a false accusation?** *They knew of the king’s orders to allow and provide for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. They were likely trying to plant doubt in the minds of the Jews so that they would not cooperate.*
- ? **How did Nehemiah respond to these mockers?** *He looked to God and assured them that He would prosper the efforts to rebuild the city which was a memorial to His name.*

Discover the Truth

Again, I am sure you can see the striking parallels between the description of Ezra and Zerubbabel’s favor before the king. In all three of these instances, God is clearly identified as the one who caused these things to happen. God was guiding the hearts of these two kings, giving favor to the Jews and decreeing the initiation and completion of the work of rebuilding the Temple, beautifying the Temple, establishing God’s Law, and rebuilding the city of Jerusalem.

In all of these things, God was working through people. It was not the people in their own power, but in their reliance upon God. As we have just read, Nehemiah demonstrated his reliance on God by calling out to Him in prayer. Nehemiah knew that he could do nothing apart from God’s help. He fasted, he prayed, and he acted, knowing that God would accomplish what He saw fit in accord with His faithfulness to His promises.





Acting in Faith

MATERIALS

- ☐ Student Guides
- ☐ Pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

The students will examine the account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem to understand the connection between trusting God and acting in faith.

As we look at the structure of Nehemiah, the first two chapters are written as historical narrative and are chronological. Chapter 3 steps aside to detail all of the work that was accomplished and those responsible for performing the work. Chapters 4 through 6 overlap with the summary of the rebuilding in chapter 3, and then chapter 7 moves to the time after the wall was completed.

Your task is to read through chapter 4 and answer the questions that you will find in the Acting in Faith activity in your Student Guides. We will discuss what you find in a few minutes.

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

1. What examples of faith did you find in this passage? Verse 4 records a prayer asking for God to judge the enemies of the Jews. Verse 9 talks of another prayer to God for protection. Verse 14 has Nehemiah reminding the people to trust in their awesome and mighty God. Verse 15 acknowledges that God frustrated the plans of the enemy. Verse 20 affirms that God will fight for them.

2. What examples of action did you find in this passage? Verse 6 tells of rebuilding the wall as the people had a mind to work. Verse 9 talks of setting a watch to be prepared for the enemy's attacks. Verse 13 tells of setting up armed troops in the gaps of the wall, and verse 14 calls them to fight for their families. Verse 15 talks of the people returning to work. Verses 16–18 tell of how the

people worked as others guarded them and how some worked with weapons at the ready. Verses 19–20 talk of being ready to rally to where the trumpet sounded. Verses 21–23 talk of being constantly at work or on guard to repair the walls and the gates of Jerusalem.

3. Could God have protected the builders without weapons? Yes.

4. What examples of God's supernatural protection of Israel can you recall? We have discussed God's deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea crossing (Exodus 14), the deliverance from the Midianites under Gideon (Judges 6–7), and the protection of Jerusalem from the army of Sennacherib when Hezekiah was king (2 Kings 19).

5. How would you describe the relationship between the faith in God and the acts of the Jews building the wall? Saying "God will fight for us" while arranging the people to protect the workers with various weapons demonstrates this tension in the text: God will fight for them as they fight with the weapons they have. God is able to save and protect apart from our actions, but He often chooses to use our actions to accomplish His plans. God chooses to use people. In this case, God used the preparation of the Jews for an attack as a means to keep their enemies from attacking (4:15). Prayer and trust in God is not antithetical to our own actions, but God often fulfills His will (and our prayers) as we act in faith.

God is independent—He does not need us to bring about His plans. But, in His wisdom, God chooses to use His people to bring about the things that He has decreed. God ordains the ends as well as the means. In many things, God is pleased to use us as His children to bring about salvation from enemies and other circumstances. This is just one example from Scripture of how God worked through His people. The people chose to be prepared to fight for their safety, all the while trusting that God would protect them.



READ THE WORD

Nehemiah 6:15–19

Through all of that difficulty, Nehemiah and the others persevered as they trusted God to protect them. There is more detail that you can read about in chapters 5 and 6, but I want to wrap up this lesson by examining Nehemiah 6:15–19. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? How long did it take to complete the building of the wall? *52 days.*
- ? How did the enemies of the Jews respond to the completion of the walls? *They were disheartened at the news, knowing that their efforts to stop the rebuilding had failed.*
- ? What did this rebuilding effort communicate about God? *The enemies had been mocking the Jews and doubting the power of their God. These events showed God to be mighty and able to fulfill what He had decreed.*
- ? What do we learn about correspondence in verses 17–19? *Letters were exchanged between the leaders of Judah and the governors of the surrounding region, specifically Tobiah because of his relation through marriage to the Jews.*
- ? Who was Jehohanan? *He was the son of Tobiah who had married the daughter of one of the Jews.*

Discover the Truth

God had set Nehemiah to accomplish a task. With the aid of the king, and despite the constant threats from the surrounding governors, the Jews set their minds to work on rebuilding the walls of their city and accomplished it in an incredibly short amount of time. God's guiding and providential hand is obvious throughout the narrative whether it is expressly stated or not.

While we do not doubt that any of these events occurred just as described—they are clearly recorded in Scripture—we have a confirmation from outside of the Bible. A collection of papyri (a form of paper made of reeds) found on Elephantine Island in the Nile River in southern Egypt have the names of Sanballat and Johanan identified as leaders in the same period as Nehemiah. With these manuscripts that date to the fifth century BC, we have a way to demonstrate the trustworthiness of God's Word. Many similar finds are reported all the time and provide skeptics with some of the answers to their doubts about the truthfulness of the biblical accounts.





Applying God's Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

As we think about the way God works in the world, we can't help but conclude that He uses the prayers and actions of people to bring about His plans. However, God is not limited to working through what we might call natural means. God could have spoken new walls into existence or waved His hand and moved the stones back into their original places, restoring the walls and gates in a moment.

But God, in His infinite wisdom, chose to use a pagan king's wealth, the leadership of one of His chosen people, and the hard work of hundreds of individuals to rebuild the walls of the city where God had chosen to have His glory and His name dwell. Under the same type of efforts, the Temple had been rebuilt and God's Law had been restored (for a time). In a few short years, the leaders had failed to uphold the Law and were not proclaiming the greatness of God to all of those around them. God was being mocked, and Nehemiah was called by God to restore the city one more time. God put it in the heart of Nehemiah to request the king to allow him to return to Jerusalem and rebuild her walls and remove the reproach in the people of God.

In all of these things, Nehemiah and the others demonstrated their dependence on God by praying to Him. While their prayers acknowledged their dependence, their actions showed that they understood their own responsibility to act. God had protected this very city from Sennacherib's attack through a supernatural slaughter of the enemy, but the army was still ready to fight. Likewise, Nehemiah and the others prayed in faith . . . and acted in faith!

We can learn from the example of Nehemiah, acting and praying in faith—trusting that God is pleased to work through our actions. God has prepared good works for us to do as we serve Him and serve others in Christ's name (Ephesians 2:10). As we pray, we seek to align our hearts to God's will and set aside our own ambitions. Nehemiah was not discouraged for his own name, but for the reproach that had been brought upon God's name.

GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

- ? There is a popular proverb (not a biblical one) that says: God helps those who help themselves. How could the account of Nehemiah be misunderstood to affirm that unbiblical notion? How can we show someone that this "proverb" is incorrect? *Someone could use this account to teach*

that we must work, and then God will help us—that God only helps us when we are helping ourselves. However, we could show numerous biblical examples where God helps those who turn to Him without their actions. Our salvation in Christ is the greatest example: while we were helpless sinners, Christ died for us.

? **Nehemiah and the other Jews offered many prayers to God. If God had already intended to rebuild the wall, why were the prayers needed?** *In prayer, we present ourselves in submission to God, acknowledging that He is the one who governs the future. We can submit ourselves to God and ask Him for wisdom to act in a way that will bring about His plans in the world. We pray in faith so that we might act in faith, trusting that God will accomplish His plans through us.*

? **In what areas of your life do you tend to rely too much on praying without acting, or acting without praying?** *Discuss various answers including evangelism (not just praying for others, but sharing the gospel with them as well), providing for the needs of your family/self (praying for a job while actively seeking one), growing in wisdom (praying for God to sanctify my mind while I diligently study the Bible), etc. We honor Christ when we prayerfully act in faith.*

? **How can we help one another to recognize these tendencies and then seek to bring them into a biblical balance?** *We must seek to understand our own hearts and our tendencies. Interacting with one another in community and asking one another challenging questions to get to the root of our sins is an important part of our sanctification process. We are often blind to our own sins, and seeking godly counsel can help us to find help and encouragement for correcting those errors.*

? **Should we expect a skeptic to automatically believe everything in the Bible because we can show them two common names from the Elephantine papyri? Why?** *While they may agree that those people actually existed, they are not likely to acknowledge God's role in all of these events. Even in the face of compelling arguments and evidence, many reject God's role in the world and their need to submit to His authority.*



MEMORY VERSE

Nehemiah 9:6 You alone are the Lord; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You.



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Thank God for His willingness to hear our prayers.
- Praise God for accomplishing His work through broken vessels
- Ask God for wisdom and courage to act in faith.