



A Study of Nehemiah

GET BUILDING

Del Wells





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Lesson 1 – Introduction to Nehemiah

Welcome to the study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. As you work your way through the lessons, you will discover life principles from Nehemiah's example about growing your relationship with God and maturing your faith through active involvement in kingdom service. The course title *Get Building* is a challenge for you to look at your life as something to invest and grow to experience God's favour obeying his instructions. Your participation with the Lord in his kingdom agenda brings focus to daily living and adds to your eternal inheritance. You also influence others to get active with their faith in Christ and enjoy God's blessings themselves.

This lesson introduces you to Nehemiah and prepares you to benefit from the course. We start with a brief overview of the book to give some context of what is going on. You will read through Nehemiah and write down observations from each section using the chart at the end of this lesson. You can refer to your notes at any time during this study.

A Brief Overview of Nehemiah

The Bible book Ezra, immediately before Nehemiah, is linked to the same historical period. The city of Jerusalem is the concern of both books. Ezra, the priest, is tasked with rebuilding the temple as the centre of the Jews' spiritual lives. Nehemiah, the governor, prioritizes rebuilding the wall of the city so that resettlement of the Jews there can happen.

The Jews had been exiled and taken captive by foreign nations as God's punishment for their willful disobedience to him. Time had passed and the Jews longed to return to their homeland and start over. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah present major highlights of that undertaking. The following is an overview of the chronology of events:

- 1) Jewish exiles return and rebuild the temple – Ezra 1:1-6:22
- 2) Ezra returns to Jerusalem and institutes reforms – Ezra 7:1-10:44
- 3) Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem and rebuilds the city wall – Nehemiah 1:1-7:3
- 4) Jerusalem is repopulated with Jewish exiles – Nehemiah 7:4-73a
- 5) Ezra brings further reforms – Nehemiah 7:73b-10:39
- 6) Nehemiah appoints leaders and dedicates the wall – Nehemiah 11:1-12:47
- 7) Nehemiah brings further reforms – Nehemiah 13:1-31

Q1 How does it help to have the historical context for the book of Nehemiah?

Nehemiah's Building Opportunity

Nehemiah was faced with a daunting challenge. The capital city of his homeland laid in ruins while he lived in captivity to another nation far away. The news reached him that Jerusalem was in shambles and that broke Nehemiah's heart. He had a good job and was secure in Susa, but he felt compelled to do something for the city wall to be rebuilt. What role could he play in a project so large and complex?

Nehemiah shows us the best thing to do when faced with monumental challenges in our lives. He consulted the Master Builder of all things, God the Creator. He went to God in prayer day and night and presented his need, trusting that God would answer him. By faith, Nehemiah believed that all things are possible for those who believe God and trust him completely.

Think about the challenges in front of you. How do you deal with them? Do you see them only from your perspective or do you consider how God views them? What about the people around you? Do you see the brokenness of their lives and feel helpless to know what to do? In this study, you discover that God is in the business of building people's lives with meaning and purpose in him. The first step in every matter is to go to the Master Builder for consultation. He knows exactly what you need to do and will reveal it to you in time.

Q2 How do you learn to view challenges as personal building opportunities with God's help?

Have Faith in God not Fear

As Nehemiah prayed, he recognized he had to approach the king whom he served to ask for a leave of absence from his position to address the devastation in Jerusalem. He also knew that he required resources he did not possess to complete the massive building program. He needed special favor from the king to open doors to people in authority in the regions he would be traveling through. None of this was a small thing.

It is interesting that the king had ordered the building projects in Jerusalem to cease. Nehemiah was now going to ask the king to reverse that order and allow the rebuilding of the city wall. This scenario gave Nehemiah pause because kings in those days did not respond kindly to people who asked them to change their decisions. Nehemiah was understandably very afraid to approach the king, but he determined to not allow his fears to hold him back from doing important things for God.

Nehemiah shows us how to stretch past our fears that hinder us from experiencing the freedom God provides. While faithfully seeking the Lord and trusting him with all his heart, Nehemiah approached the king and made his request known. He stared down his fears and chose to believe God rather than be intimidated by this powerful man. The result was that Nehemiah met with the king and was favoured by God in how he was received and treated.

What if Nehemiah had not proceeded because he allowed fear to paralyze him? This book reveals the multiple miracles he would have missed. The same principle applies to all of us. You can trust God to enable you to confront your fears and put them in their proper place. God's love in you is perfect and drives out all fear (1 John 4:18). By trusting the Lord fully, you can move past your fear and experience amazing things you would not have otherwise.

Q3 What do you gain by exercising faith in God over fear?

Ask For Directions from God

Nehemiah needed a vision from God to inform and inspire him and the people in the building project. Vision is more than a great idea. It is a God-given picture in practical terms of what something looks like when completed. You can then assess where things stand at present and what you need from God to finish the task.

The king promised Nehemiah would receive the provisions necessary for building the wall of Jerusalem and other related details. Nehemiah wanted directions from God for facilitating the project from start to finish. Likewise, you can ask for God's directions about anything: your personal life, family, business, church, and kingdom service. You choose to want divine supervision and favor over you every step in the long term.

Nehemiah was a man on a mission. He was determined to go to Jerusalem and help set things in order. His commitment to the building project grew as he prayerfully immersed himself into the sad situation. Nehemiah was given a picture of what God would accomplish through him. He involved the Lord in every part of the planning and implementation and dedicated himself to seeing things through.

A vision from God for his purposes will humble you and keep you depending on him for each need. You will be amazed at what the Lord accomplishes by talking to him about the details and giving your best effort to do what he directs.

Q4 Give an example of God giving you a kingdom assignment and how you responded to it.

Things to Watch for in Nehemiah's Life as You Study the Book

- 1 He knew how to pray and did it constantly.
- 2) He refused to let fear derail him and exercised faith while doing new things.
- 3) He received directions from God to guide him to rebuild what was broken.

- 4) He stuck with the plan while facing and dealing with constant opposition.
- 5) He acknowledged every win that God gave him throughout the project.
- 6) He gave priority to God's word that he believed transformed people by obeying it.
- 7) He practiced accountability for his actions and expected others to do likewise.
- 8) He developed the people around him to competently serve God's mission.
- 9) He engaged with the people in worship with the Word and praise.
- 10) He left a legacy of godliness and faithful service for others to emulate.

Q5 How does this list about Nehemiah's life inspire you to be intentional about your own?

Get Building

Each of the sections covered below will be the focus of the course lessons with the same number. For example, Section 2 becomes Lesson 2.

Refer to this worksheet as you work your way through each lesson. You can compare your initial insights recorded here to what you learn by deeper study.

Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh and give you a keen mind to understand, apply, and put into practice the Biblical principles you learn.

You are building your life by discovering and participating in what God has planned for you. You will be amazed as you mature and produce spiritual fruit.

Chart of Observations from Your First Reading of Nehemiah

Read through Nehemiah in sections. Write down your initial observations and questions in each section before moving on to the next.

Section 2 - Nehemiah 1:1-11

Section 3 – Nehemiah 1:11b-2:10

Section 4 – Nehemiah 2:11-3:32

Section 5 – Nehemiah 4:1-23 / 6:1-14

Section 6 – Nehemiah 5:1-19

Section 7 – Nehemiah 6:1-7:3

Section 8 – Nehemiah 8:1-8

Section 9 – Nehemiah 9:1-10:39

Section 10 – Nehemiah 11:19 / 12:25,26

Section 11 – Nehemiah 12:27-47

Section 12 – Nehemiah 13:1-31

*Remember that each section corresponds to the Lesson of the same number.

Lesson 2 – Always Start with Prayer

Nehemiah 1:1-11

You are building your life as a follower of Christ. You desire to strengthen your faith and increase your spiritual maturity daily. You are learning to recognize God working in and through you by aligning yourself with his teachings and direction. Stay closely connected to God with the help of the Holy Spirit during the regular routines of life. Be realistic about your limitations and God's unlimited provision for difficult challenges.

You will realize by studying Nehemiah how much he relied on God. He was ordinary like you and God called to do something he had never done. God knew Nehemiah was godly and ready to take on a project of national proportions with long term implications that seemed impossible to do. Nehemiah had a relationship with God, and he assumed the Lord would not commission him without providing the means to succeed.

You may never be asked by God to do something as far-reaching as Nehemiah. However, God will call you to do things that are beyond your natural abilities. Nehemiah shows you how to respond well to God's plan whatever it is. By obeying the Lord's directions, you will grow and mature in ways you would not have otherwise. You will learn more about God and his unlimited power to do over and above anything you can imagine.

Q1 Give an example of a time God asked you to do something beyond your natural abilities.

Care About What God Cares About

"The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province and are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.' When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." Nehemiah 1:1-4.

Nehemiah was made aware of the problem facing the Jews in Jerusalem and it overwhelmed him. He lived a long way from there in the city of Susa, the capital of the foreign king he worked for. Israel had been conquered and taken into captivity as punishment from God for their long standing disobedience.

Years later, many Jews like Nehemiah remained in the countries they had been taken to while others went back to Jerusalem to resettle their families and rebuild the temple. Nehemiah had not heard how the returnees were doing because news in those days travelled very slowly.

One day, a brother of Nehemiah came to see him in Susa after spending time in Jerusalem. The report of how the Jews were doing in the city was disturbing. The living conditions were pitiful even though the temple had been rebuilt under Ezra's leadership. The wall around the city was broken down which left the Jews vulnerable to enemy attacks. Sadly, the inhabitants had no intention of doing anything about the sad situation because they were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project and paralyzed by fears of inadequacy.

Nehemiah's reaction to the news tells us how connected he felt to his fellow Jews. He was heartbroken by the situation in the holy city and sat down and wept. Nehemiah provides a good leadership lesson with his internal processing and deliberate actions. He would know that to experience God at work, you must care deeply about what he cares about. You learn what moves God's heart by studying the Word, connecting with him through prayer, and allowing the Holy Spirit to fill you and teach you spiritual things.

Q2 How does a spiritually soft heart prepare you to meet with and hear from God?

Go to God First Before Anything Else

"For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." 1:4b

What things break your heart like they do God's? What do you feel when you see families without Christ at the centre of their homes living like the Lord does not exist? What about those you know that once claimed to follow Jesus and now have no time for him? If those things move you, God can work in and through you. You can be involved with God in the rebuilding of lives with the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

When you are overcome with emotion by something that needs God's supernatural intervention, do what Nehemiah did. Go to the Lord and pour out your heart to him. Nehemiah showed that he meant business and prepared himself to hear from God. He mourned, fasted, and prayed for days. The first thing to do with your burdens is take them to God and talk with him about them. Fasting is a spiritual exercise to sharpen your spiritual awareness. You deny yourself sustenance to keep focused on God in your situation.

Remember to go to God first with every detail of life, large and small: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:33. Whether your concern is for your family, business, community, church, or a personal matter, go to God in prayer and call out for his help. Present the situation to him and let him know how much it concerns you. Tell him you need his divine intervention and be willing to do whatever he asks of you.

Q3 How have you trained yourself to involve God first in every situation large and small?

Essential Elements to Include in Prayer

Nehemiah 1:5-11 gives five essential elements to include in your prayer for God. Think about how you can integrate each one as you involve the Lord in your situation.

1. Pray with Praise

“Then I said: ‘LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments’ 1:5

Praise to God is the best way to start your approach to him in prayer. Praise is acknowledging that you believe God is above all creation and perfect in every way. Nehemiah praised the God of heaven as being great and awesome and keeps his promises with those who love and obey him. The Bible is full of descriptions of God’s attributes that are excellent and unparalleled. Any of those special qualities can be used in your praise to God. Declare that God is unique as you name the things that set him apart from anything else.

Praise to God helps you keep things in proper perspective. You remind yourself that God is the one in charge and you are his child that depends on him for everything.

Q4 Describe how you begin your prayer to God with praising him.

2. Pray with Intercession

“let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.” 1:6a

Intercession is an unselfish act of prayer. It is going to God as an advocate for someone else, asking the Lord to do something only he can do on their behalf. Be willing to intercede for those you care deeply about like a child, parent, grandparent, or close friend. Because of your close relationship, you have empathy for what they are dealing with and want to share in their need and help find the solution.

Sometimes you feel compelled to pray for people you do not know well or at all. The Holy Spirit lays them upon your heart, and you are moved to go to God on their behalf. You pray for people in other parts of the world or those in your own community that you have not met but feel a burden for them. For reasons known only to him, God gets you involved in the process of his work in their lives. Nehemiah knew some of the people in Jerusalem like his brother but was not acquainted with most of them. Time had elapsed and the distance between them was significant. However, he felt compassion for all of them and interceded to God on their behalf.

Q5 How do you know when God wants you to pray specifically for others?

3. Pray with Confession

“I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.” 1:6b,7

Confession is necessary in prayer to make sure nothing hinders it. Confessing is admitting sin and asking God to forgive it. The Bible says that if there is sin in your heart, the Lord will not listen to you (Psalm 66:18). Willful disobedience is an impediment that blocks open communication with God. At the same time, God will not turn away from one with a pure heart. It is wise to keep your sin account clear by confessing your sins to the Lord (1 John 1:8,9).

There is also profit in praying for the sins of others connected to you. Nehemiah humbled himself before the Lord and confessed the sins that he, his family, and the Jews had committed against God. Collectively, they had acted wickedly and not obeyed God’s commands for a long time. Even though you may not willfully disregard God’s laws, you include yourself in addressing the spiritual condition of others who do as an act of empathy.

It is a sign of maturity to recognize you are no better than anyone else and need ongoing cleansing from sin. We all need God’s grace daily and are instructed by Jesus to stay forgiven in the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father in heaven...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Notice the request is for God to forgive ‘us’ not ‘me’ alone. Take responsibility for collective sin and ask the Lord for his mercy on all of us.

Q6 Describe how you confess your sins and those of others. How does that affect you?

4. Pray with God’s Promises

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name. They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.’” 1:8-10

God’s promises are claimed and enacted through faith and prayer. The more you know the Bible, the better you know God’s promises to you and all who obey him. Nehemiah was familiar with the Scriptures and used them in his prayer for the Jews in Jerusalem. He reminded God of his past dealings with Israel and how he had given them the choice to be blessed or cursed by how they acted. The Jews would be blessed if they obeyed God and cursed if they disobeyed.

For reasons known only to them, the Jews chose to disobey the commands constantly. They were cut off from God’s blessing and sent into captivity by foreign nations as punishment. But even then, God promised that if the Jews returned to him in humility and lived in obedience to

his commands, he would restore and bless them. Nehemiah restated this promise of God as the basis of what he asked the Lord to do on the people's behalf. Including God's own words gives substance to your prayers because it aligns with God's intentions and will.

You mature in your praying when you act on God's promises regarding your personal life, family, church, or anyone else you intercede for. The Bible instructs you to pray earnestly, believing God to reward your faith in him (Hebrews 11:6). Approach God with your needs like Nehemiah, not demanding or acting entitled, but in humility with reverence. Respectfully ask God to do what he promised he would when one's repentance and obedience are evident.

Q7 When did you learn to pray God's promises confidently and respectfully?

5. Pray with God's Favour

“Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.’ I was cupbearer to the king.” 1:11

Nehemiah finished his prayer asking for God to give him success in his next step in the building project. God's favor is indispensable for whatever you do including his special assignments. With every challenge you face, you need God to provide the necessities to deal with it effectively. The Lord may ask you to say things that need to be said, do things that need to be done, give things that need to be given, and go to places that need you to go. You can feel incapable for any of the tasks and be tempted to stay where things are familiar, comfortable, and manageable. Choose to move ahead and ask God for his favor to do what you may have never done before.

Nehemiah had a privileged life in the king's palace even though it was in a foreign country. He had a desirable position as cupbearer to the king. He was a personal security guard with close contact to the ruler, testing first whatever was brought to the king. If he did his job well, he would keep his secure and enviable post. That arrangement was put to the test with what Nehemiah had to do next. He was required to surrender his comfortable position to God to carry out the plan to benefit the Jews he was praying for.

We will study in the next lesson what Nehemiah did to keep in step with the Lord's directions. Because he moved out of his comfort zone, he experienced God at work building up what had been broken and lay in ruins. You will be inspired in your faith seeing what Nehemiah accomplished in re-establishing Jerusalem as the centre of worship and national identity for the Jews. Remember that without God you are on your own and with God, you experience amazing things you would not have otherwise. Keep asking God for his favor as you do the things that matter to him. The walls that are broken in people's lives, families, churches, and communities can be rebuilt God's way and you will mature spiritually by being involved in the process.

Q8 What is the connection between surrendering yourself and experiencing God's favor?

Always Start with Prayer

You are building your life as a follower of Christ every day. Do everything you can to grow your faith and be spiritually mature. Prepare for what you need to do today and for whatever will be required tomorrow and beyond.

Follow Nehemiah's example and take one step at a time, involving God in all situations. Go humbly to the Lord in prayer acknowledging your need of his supernatural intervention in every detail. Stay connected to God prayerfully so that you are ready to hear, understand, and implement his instructions.

Life Application

1. Take time to think about where you are today in life and ministry and what you see ahead.
2. Commit to knowing God more each day through the Word, prayer, and Holy Spirit fullness.
3. List burdens you carry for others that need God's intervention and tell him about them.
4. Ask the Lord what he wants you to do about any situation and write his directives down.
5. Review your regular prayer pattern and be sure the following elements are included:
 - a) Praise God for his supernatural attributes.
 - b) Intercede for those who need God's intervention
 - c) Confess your sins and those of others involved with you.
 - d) Remind God of his promises to those who love him and do his will.
 - e) Ask God for his favor every step you take.
6. Surrender yourself to God daily and make yourself available for him to use.

Lesson 3 – Move Past Your Fears

Nehemiah 2:1-10

“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, ‘Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’ I was very much afraid...” 2:1,2

Recognize The Power of Fear

Fear can be a paralyzing force that prevents you from doing things you know you should do. Being afraid is a normal emotion that can be useful at times. It serves as a warning signal to protect yourself against danger, like taking shelter in a thunderstorm. However, fear becomes a problem when it paralyzes you from doing what needs to be done. In those cases, fear needs to be put in its place so that you move forward instead of going backwards or staying in neutral.

Nehemiah experienced fear when he thought about the implications of the task he was called by God to do. You learned in the last lesson that Nehemiah knew he needed God to accomplish the huge undertaking in front of him. The situation seemed impossible for him or anyone else to do. So Nehemiah did the wise thing and went to God in prayer for days and asked for supernatural help.

When you spend time in prayer, you change for the better. You come away with a revised perspective on the matter at hand. You see it more from God’s view than how you and others do. Sometimes your role will be the intercession itself, praying into the situation and asking God to intervene. You and others share the burden of the challenge and do spiritual battle in the unseen realm that affects the outcome in the physical dimension.

At other times, God tells you to get involved and be part of the solution. While you do not know all the details of your assignment, you are given the steps to take next in the process. Often what is required of you makes you uncomfortable and anxious. You wonder if you will suffer in some way doing things that expose your vulnerabilities. You must decide if you will allow fear to hold you back or if you will take the next steps with God’s leading and provision.

Q1 How can you tell when fear is a good thing and when it becomes a hindrance?

Learn to Pray Through Fear

Nehemiah felt emotional pain for his nation over the disrepair of Jerusalem. The wall of the city needed to be rebuilt, but how could a project of that magnitude be accomplished. The longer

he prayed, the clearer it was to Nehemiah that he was God's choice for the job. Agreeing to take the role might cost him his job, lifestyle, and even his life. Thinking about that, he panicked and admitted his apprehension and anxiety: "I was very much afraid" 2:2b.

Can you imagine what was going through Nehemiah's mind? He would question his abilities to do the job and why he should take the risk. Notice that Nehemiah admitted his fears after spending extended time in prayer about the Jerusalem dilemma. Does that make sense? Are godly people supposed to be afraid even after they go to God first? As humans, believers will experience emotions Nehemiah did and can be informed by how he dealt with them. Nehemiah is honest about how things looked to him and how he could be affected.

It is a sign of maturity to admit personal inadequacies and be open to do something about it. Immaturity makes excuses, blames others, and refuses to take responsibility for lack of faith. Choose to be mature and develop spiritually. Learn and apply the Word and you will grow your faith and face your fears with the Holy Spirit's enabling.

You will often find yourself confronting and dealing with fear. Be aware of the many times in the Bible God's people are told not to fear anything but God who is all powerful. We are instructed and encouraged to not be anxious or to worry but to trust God instead. Worry and fear cannot resolve anything and will harm you emotionally, spiritually, and physically if left unattended. Learn to deal with worry and fear effectively so it does not hold you back. Choose to get past your fears by practicing faith in Christ and his promises.

Q2 How do you teach yourself to deal with your fear instead of letting it continue?

You Have Nothing to be Afraid of with God

In the natural realm, Nehemiah respected the power the king held over life and death. It was dangerous to approach the ruler unless invited to do so under strict protocols. At a whim, the king could exact severe punishment on anyone he determined had crossed the line in some way. Consider that dynamic as you put yourself in Nehemiah's place concerning his next step in God's plan. He needed to ask the king for his assistance and permission for the Jews to rebuild the wall and city of Jerusalem.

You can see God actively involved in the situation. Nehemiah being in the right place at the right time to interact with the king was no accident. God had been preparing Nehemiah for this strategic meeting long before he realized it. The same divine involvement applies for you as a follower of Christ who is interested in helping God's kingdom advance, The Lord is preparing you for what he has in store, and you realize that as his plan unfolds.

Nehemiah needed the king's approval and assistance. Because of his unique position, Nehemiah was one of a select few that had regular direct contact with the king and could use

his access for God's purposes. His safety and security were serious considerations like they would for anyone of us. Would he choose to obey God's instructions despite being anxious? Yes he would because he knew God. Remember that you have nothing to fear when you put your trust in God.

Q3 How do you get to the place where you instinctively trust God over your fear?

God is Preparing You for His Purpose

Nehemiah understood in prayer that he was exactly where God intended him to be. He did not know a lot of details of the building program, but he trusted that God was working on a master plan that would succeed. He had been promoted by God to his strategic cupbearer position with direct access to the king.

Have you wondered why you ended up where you are, doing what you do, living, working, or studying where you do? As a follower of Jesus, God knows exactly where you are, where you have come from, and what is in store for you. Along the way, you have been watched over and favored by the Lord who directs your paths. You have been prepared for what you are doing today and being prepared for what you will do tomorrow and beyond. Be encouraged that you are not going through life alone. In Christ, you have a life purpose of doing the works the Lord has prepared in advance for you to do (Ephesians 2:10).

As cupbearer, Nehemiah was a personal steward or valet to the king. He was part of the security detail who tasted the food and wine before it was served to the king. If the cupbearer was not poisoned and did not get sick or die, the food was safe to serve. While it carried risks to be a cupbearer, it was a coveted position with benefits attached within the confines of the royal residence. Nehemiah was one of only a few that had direct access to the king. That privilege provided him with opportunity to approach his master to ask for assistance with the Jerusalem project. This is more evidence of God working in Nehemiah's life and in the details of the building project..

Q4 How do you cooperate with God who is preparing you today for what is ahead?

Focus on God Instead of What Might Happen

Nehemiah was afraid that the king might react badly to him. He could potentially lose his job and be punished in some way. Nehemiah was looking at what might happen negatively and not what God had in mind. Focusing on the 'what ifs' fuels unnecessary anxiety and fear. Most of the things you worry about do not happen and, for those that do, worry does not change the outcome. Trusting God instead of worrying is always the best approach. Study the Word, pray continually, and ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and keep you centered on the Lord.

Nehemiah stayed in close contact with God through prayer which enabled him to see the situation from a spiritual perspective. He was aware that God was supernaturally setting things in place including Nehemiah's involvement in the plan. He came to see that God had every detail covered no matter what it seemed like in the physical realm.

When God has something he wants you to do, you have a choice to make. You either operate in fear of what you are not sure will happen or act in faith that God knows what he is doing. Fear holds you back and jeopardizes your progress while faith pushes you past your fear to experience God's provision. Every time you focus on the Lord instead of the 'what ifs', you will be glad you did. You will sense God at work in you in more deeply and see things accomplished that you would not have otherwise.

Ultimately, Nehemiah chose faith in God over fear. He laid it all on the line to do what God was asking of him. His job, security, and future were all placed in the Lord's hands because he wanted God to work in his life. Nehemiah did not regret his commitment to trust God in every challenge he faced. His cooperation with God helped advance the project and facilitated growth and maturity in his faith life.

Q5 How do you learn to focus on God and not the negative things that might happen?

Learn to Discern the Insights and Timing of the Spirit

As you read the conversation Nehemiah had with the king, you see the productive outcomes of facing your fear with faith in God. At some point during his prayer preparation, God showed Nehemiah how to approach the king differently than he had before. This exemplifies the potential for every Spirit filled believer who learns to discern spiritual insights and God's timing. What, how, and when you speak matters. You may have the correct words to say but the listener is not ready to hear them. Timing is everything.

The Holy Spirit will give you a picture of what God wants you to do when you spend time with him and ask for it. He will prepare you to move forward with confidence and tell you what to say or not. The Spirit will prompt you at the ideal time to act in conjunction with what he is doing in the people involved in the situation.

Nehemiah became aware of what to do and say and when to proceed. God was preparing Nehemiah well for his next big step. In faith, he went before the king with a sad face which was not his standard practice. The king noticed Nehemiah's sadness right away and asked him why he looked downcast. That question opened the door for Nehemiah to explain the reason for his sorrow was the sad situation in Jerusalem. Nehemiah stepped out in faith not knowing how the king would react, believing that God had it all under control.

Your faith will be tested with every challenge you face. You can learn to trust God to be with you, help you stay focused on him despite how things appear, and not be anxious about what might happen. The Holy Spirit will give you the insights you need and the timing to follow to accomplish what needs to be done.

Q6 How do you learn to discern the Holy Spirit insights and timing in any situation?

The Holy Spirit Will Work Through You

The king's response may have surprised Nehemiah even though he was trusting God. The king was open and interested in what Nehemiah had to say as evidence of God at work. Have you been surprised with God's favor in a situation after asking for it? That happens all the time.

"The king said to me, 'What is it you want?'" 2:4a. These were inviting words to Nehemiah, and he needed to make his answer count. What to say is crucial and requires exceptional insight, timing, and effective delivery. Perhaps you can relate to Nehemiah in this scenario. You needed to give a wise and godly response to someone, and you were able to do so to your amazement. Remember that the Holy Spirit enables you to operate beyond your normal capabilities.

Nehemiah was aware of his need for God's help in the whole process. In this situation, he depended on God to help him with his approach and words to the king. He stayed focused on God at work and readied himself to do whatever the Lord directed. Nehemiah's prayerful dependence on God is evident: "Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king..." 2:4b,5a.

Have you done that? Have you offered a quick prayer to God when you were stepping out in faith? "Lord, help me to say the right thing you want me to say". "Lord, help me not to freeze or have my mind go blank". "Lord, give me the words to speak as I open my mouth". These are examples of maintaining an attitude of prayer so you can ask for God's help in an instant whether out loud or in your spirit. God knows your thoughts as clearly as he does your spoken words. Before you speak, acknowledge God. Nehemiah did that as he prayed and answered the king with divine inspiration and confidence.

As the process unfolded, Nehemiah sensed he would be required to do more than ask for help for the Jews in Jerusalem. He became aware that God was calling him to give leadership to the project which required him to make a huge ask of the king. The Lord gave Nehemiah the right words to make the case to his superior: "'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.'" 2:5b. The Spirit informed Nehemiah to ask the king to grant him a leave of absence from his duties which he did by faith.

Nehemiah's request was reasonable considering his track record. He had shown himself to be an exemplary worker, someone reliable that could be trusted. Making the effort over time to be a person of good character and conduct is an asset for asking special favors. Believers gain the respect of those who watch them build a good reputation. It was beneficial for Nehemiah interacting with the king to be known for his commendable lifestyle and work ethic.

Q7 How have you experienced the Holy Spirit help you make the most of a strategic encounter?

God Does Over and Above

The pieces of the plan were coming together for Nehemiah as he talked with the king. He was learning that God does not just do the minimum but goes beyond expectations: "Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, 'How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?' It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time." 2:6.

Nehemiah got everything he asked for from the king and more. As you read through the rest of this passage you see God opening doors of opportunity and provision. The king wrote letters of introduction for Nehemiah to the governors of the territories he would travel through on his way to Jerusalem. These documents provided legitimacy and security for doing official business and the king sent a cavalry to escort Nehemiah and his team for added protection. The king also wrote a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, telling him to provide Nehemiah with all the timber he needed to accomplish the massive building project (see 2:7-9).

The king's response and the provisions offered are examples of God doing over and above. Nehemiah experienced this because he was involved with God in his work. When you surrender yourself to God's plan, you see things you would not have otherwise. You discover that every detail large and small is covered by God. He knows what you need and will provide it.

The more you engage with God in his kingdom plans, the stronger your faith becomes. As your faith matures, the less fear has a hold on you. You experience an increase of God's favor because you put yourself in the position to receive it. Nehemiah acknowledged that his success was because God made it happen: "And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests." 2:8b.

Q8 Give an example of God doing above and beyond what you asked for.

Be Willing to Surrender Everything to God

How much favor do you need from God today? You require a lot when you believe God and step out by faith in his plan for your life.

As you mature spiritually, you become less concerned about receiving personal benefits even though you will be blessed abundantly. Your care about being supernaturally resourced, so you stay faithful to God and do what he wants.

You need God's favor because you care about your community and want everyone to know Jesus. You commit to spiritual growth and invest in kingdom service because it is God's will. You experience closeness with God and receive his benefits by aligning with his purposes. You do what you can to help unbelievers be transformed from fear to hope in Christ. The task of advancing God's kingdom is daunting and full of challenges, but you trust that God is at work in you by surrendering to him.

Connect with the Lord in prayer and offer everything you have to him to use. You will prove time and again that God does over and above. You receive everything you need to live a godly life and impact others to know, love, and serve Christ.

Q9 Why and how did you come to willingly surrender everything to God to work through?

Life Application

1. How can you tell when fear is holding you back from doing God's will?
2. How do you learn to trust God and overcome fear?
3. What has God called you to do with your life?
4. What are some challenges to living out your calling?
5. How do you get to the point of surrendering everything to the Lord to use?
6. What do you believe about God's ability to meet every need and more?
7. How does the Holy Spirit prepare you to live confidently each day?
8. How do you stay focused on God and his provision instead of the obstacles?
9. Why is it beneficial to thank God every time he meets your need?
10. How has Nehemiah inspired you to face your fears and move ahead with God?

Lesson 4 - Have Something Worth Giving Your Life To

Nehemiah 2:11-3:32

You have been learning about Nehemiah and the huge task of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem God had laid on his heart. He continually connected with God in prayer to keep proper perspective and gain insights for taking the necessary steps. Nehemiah was distressed by the desolation of the holy city and the despair that was crippling the Jews from doing anything about the situation. He got involved with God's plan to accomplish what seemed impossible.

Think about the desperate condition of your community and the world at large. Satan, the enemy, is having success destroying people who lack spiritual walls of protection around them. So many of your neighbours are without hope as they see their lives, families, and society in ruins. People are spiritually, emotionally, and relationally broken and need God to help them to find wholeness through faith. Reaching them and helping them build their lives in Christ is a huge undertaking that requires God-given resources and vision.

Q1 How does the reality of our broken world affect you?

God showed Nehemiah the need to influence and motivate the Jews to rebuild what was broken. Having access to the king, he asked for special assistance and resources to accomplish the task. Nehemiah confronted his initial fear by acknowledging God is the one in charge who has him covered. He chose to trust God and move forward and was provided with everything he needed to complete the assignment. Nehemiah was given authority by the king, the materials to build, and the time he needed to get the job done. This was more than he could have asked or imagined in the natural realm.

As a believer, you have been given access to everything you need in Christ to do what the Lord wants you to do. You will be provided with the skills, gifts, resources, and time to carry out your work with God's blessing. God will provide a blueprint to follow when you ask him for it.

The picture of what needs to be done can be called vision. It is the picture of what needs to be accomplished and how to get from where you are to where you need to be. Having vision from God is valuable and worth giving your life to. It puts your life in spiritual and eternal context for everything you do. You know the things to involve yourself in that fit God's purpose for your life. God directs you how to advance the work of the kingdom by completing every task large and small. Partnering with the Lord in his life transforming mission facilitates your own spiritual development and gives meaning to your daily living.

Q2 How did Nehemiah's personal life become part of God's vision to rebuild Jerusalem's wall?

Lean into God's Plan

Nehemiah was called by God to be the lead person for the wall building project. He did not go to Jerusalem right away and continued to serve as cupbearer for the king in Susa until he received the go ahead from the Lord. He consulted God every day and the vision got clearer in detail over time. When you believe God has given you a vision for something, take time to discern when to proceed. Continue your normal routine as the Lord clarifies the plan for you. He is putting the pieces of the mission together as you prepare for your role. The Lord lets you know when to proceed according to his timetable.

The goal of Nehemiah's vision was straightforward. It was to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that the Jews could return, live in safety, and re-establish the temple with God's presence at the center. Success of the mission would show the Jews and the nations around them that God is great and worthy to be praised. Participating in God's plan brings you increased blessings. When the vision becomes reality, you are beyond thankful that you played a part and have matured through the process.

If you are unsure of God's vision, learn what God's priorities are and how they relate to your values, talents, and experiences. God knows all about you and how you fit into his kingdom agenda. God loves every person and wants them to become part of his spiritual family by faith in Christ. God is in the transformation business of rescuing people from brokenness caused by sin. You can play a part in the Lord's mission by introducing unbelievers to Jesus and helping them to put their trust in him. You have abilities, relationships, vocation, home, time, and resources God can use for his purposes. Ask him what he has in mind.

Nehemiah had a comfortable life as cupbearer to the king as God was at work preparing him for his assignment. When Nehemiah realized how he could be used, he allowed the Lord to shape and equip him for the role he would play. Wherever you are in life, be ready to hear from the Lord and step into the vision he reveals to you.

Q3 What motivates you to ask God for his plan and lean into it?

Keep Practicing Faith Over Fear

The previous lesson talked about practicing faith over fear, laying everything you are and have on the line for the kingdom. You trust God enough to step out and do what you are convinced he is asking of you. Every action you take solidifies your resolve to go the distance. For example, when you pray for healing, or speak a word of truth to someone, or give sacrificially to a specific need, you participate in God's mission, advance his work, and bring him glory. You give others the opportunity to see God at work through you in practical ways as you faithfully play your part along with others that God assigns to their tasks.

At this point in the story, Nehemiah is in the early stages of his major assignment. He spent considerable time in prayer about the Jerusalem situation. He stepped beyond his fear of the king and asked for big favors related to the project. He witnessed God consistently going over and above meeting every need. The king provided him with royal authority to lead, the time away to accomplish the task, and the resources required to complete the project. This is all amazing and faith building but there was still lots to do.

Nehemiah knew the challenge he faced was no small thing. The goal of the mission was to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that the city itself could be restored, reinhabited, and fully functional. This was obviously more than a one person job and others needed to join the effort. The Jews living in other nations would have to be persuaded to help in the mission for it to succeed. There were significant obstacles to overcome logistically for assembling the building team as well as strong opposition from outsiders.

Nehemiah could have looked at the never ending list of issues to be addressed and become discouraged and tempted to quit. But he chose instead to look past each obstacle and trust God to provide the answers and resources for all of them. By consistently practicing faith in God over fear, he matured spiritually and developed his leadership competency so that the project proceeded steadily.

Q4 How is it helpful to take the long term approach in practicing faith over fear?

Take Care of the Details

Nehemiah shows the importance of administrating the details well to ensure the success of the mission. Making sure that every job gets done right is essential for best results of any undertaking. Kingdom ministry assignments of every size have no room for carelessness with doing the tasks. Think about your God-given role in his mission to transform the world and bring it under his rule. You have a purpose for life beyond the material and temporal that comes and goes and will not last. You learn what you have been given to do and make sure you do it well with God's help. The effectiveness of the transformation mission depends on you, and everyone involved taking care of the details.

God's vision for the world and for your life are connected. You can set your personal goals to align with God's kingdom agenda which will make things clearer for you about what to do, when, and why you do them. You will see value in every detail of God's plan and want to make sure it is looked after well. People not involved kingdom vision are easily discouraged by the monotony of the daily grind with no overall purpose. The writer of Ecclesiastes observed that living without God-focus seems meaningless, like chasing after the wind. Only when you fear God and do what he commands will you find ultimate meaning and purpose for your life (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 12:13,14).

Q5 How does breaking large projects into smaller segments help with the details?

Nehemiah was a true believer. He cared about what was important to God and put himself in the position of doing something about it. The wall building project in Jerusalem was God's will and Nehemiah committed himself to playing his assigned role. Having the big picture in mind, he had to work through the details involved and make sure they were addressed. The entire project depended on everything being taken care of to ensure success. Nehemiah took the time to figure out what was required by going to the site and taking it all in: "I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem." Nehemiah 2:11,12a.

It is interesting that Nehemiah had not yet talked to anyone about what God was calling him to do. To this point, the matter was between him and the Lord and would remain so until it was time to share it. That is good insight about how vision from God develops. It takes time to ponder, let it capture your heart, and be clear in your mind. It is wise to not tell your vision to others prematurely because there are a lot of things that can change. You will be on record for your pronouncements so do your due diligence to confirm what God's plan and timing. Get a grasp of the scope of the undertaking and the details involved to effectively describe the vision to others when it is time.

Q6 Why is it important to take time to work through the details of God's assignment first?

Share Your Vision with Others Clearly

When he knew it was time, Nehemiah shared his vision with a few other people he trusted. He began to involve them this way in the undertaking. Nehemiah took this select group with him to assess the situation in Jerusalem and devise a plan to accomplish the task.

Nehemiah and the team examined the broken down condition of the wall and the devastation of the city (2:12b-16). They identified what needed to be done and the details required to do it. Thorough examination and prayerful thought is good management practice for any project, whether it is a personal matter or involves a group of people.

Consider how this dynamic relates to you and the broader implications of the kingdom. It is obvious to even a casual observer that people everywhere are broken and need to be rebuilt. Many are without hope and fear the worst outcomes because of the pervasive chaos and evil. As a believer, you know there is a way out for anyone looking for answers and guidance. It is possible for them to discover a full life that is meaningful by believing in Christ and becoming part of God's eternal family. Look at the sad condition of those around you as broken walls that need to be rebuilt. Let that picture capture your heart and motivate you to participate with God in his kingdom mission of life transformation.

Q7 Why is it important to be realistic about how things are to plan properly?

Spend time praying into the life situations of people you know and those you do not. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what he can do in their lives and how you can be a part. Look at your extended family, neighbours, your children's friends, co-workers, and casual acquaintances. See them with spiritual eyes and believe for the miracle of life transformation available to them. The abstract becomes reality when you take time to consider people around you and ask God to show you how to reach and impact them.

After Nehemiah and his team surveyed the situation of Jerusalem, the reality of what needed to be done became clear. Rebuilding the wall required a large group of people working together with the same goal in mind. There would be many challenges to face, but the result of the effort would be significant. It was now time for Nehemiah to tell all the people in Jerusalem about God's rebuilding plan and that he needed them to join him in the undertaking. The vision was clear to Nehemiah, and he would get the larger group on board with him.

"Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.' I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work." 2:17,18.

Notice how Nehemiah engages the people in the vision. He reminds them of their predicament, what needs to be done, and how God was with them. The city was in shambles and its wall needed to be rebuilt. The people would need to get involved hands on. Nehemiah encouraged them by recounting how God was working through him including his favor with the king.

The reaction of the Jews indicates they were ready to participate. You see God orchestrating the plan from the beginning to the present. The people were inspired by Nehemiah's clarity and preparedness and committed themselves to getting the job done. They made a group decision to buy into the vision and then got to work. Read Chapter 3 now and note the teamwork utilized in building sections of the wall including the gates for each one.

Q8 How is Nehemiah's approach to sharing vision instructive for spiritual leaders?

Count on Opposition to the Vision

As soon as the Jews in Jerusalem agreed to start the building project, the naysayers showed up and tried intimidation to get them to stop: "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. 'What is this you are doing?' they asked. 'Are you rebelling against the king?'" 2:19. This is the first account of the relentless opposition you read about during the entire rebuilding effort.

Nehemiah faced the critics and made a faith statement about the vision for all to hear: "I answered them by saying, 'The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.'" 2:20. Nehemiah announced that the project was God's idea and that his plans will always succeed. He called out the opponents for their lack of credentials and standing to have any say in the matter. He did not take the bait of the false accusation of being rebellious towards the king and he stayed on point. Nehemiah provides valuable insights for leaders to stand firm in the truth against the tactics of underminers.

You can count on being opposed in anything you do for God. Be determined to not allow the opposition to make you afraid and less resolved to continue. Keep moving forward in the direction God is leading with the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Nehemiah was convinced that nothing was going to stop the Jews from accomplishing the vision because God was in it. That is still the case. As a participant in God's mission of transforming lives, you can be confident that the plan will not fail. Pray, utilize the Word, and be filled with the Holy Spirit daily. You will experience the favor of God and see people impacted by the power of the gospel. The next lesson unpacks common dynamics of opposition and how to effectively deal with them.

Q9 How do you stay positive when you know that your plan will be opposed?

Be encouraged and inspired by the Jews who caught the vision of God at work and got involved: "'Let us start rebuilding'. So they began this good work." 2:18b. Be an example for others by giving your best effort to God's mission and practicing your faith like Nehemiah: "'The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding...'" 2:20a.

In Christ you have spiritual walls of protection around you, your family, and your church family. Grow in knowing God and you will experience his favor upon you in whatever you do.

Be spiritually discerning. See how God is transforming lives one by one as he works through believers like you committed to his gospel mission. Make every decision align with God's kingdom building plan and be an active partner with the help of the Holy Spirit. God's work is worth giving your life to.

Q10 How does God's life transforming mission give context, meaning, and purpose to your life?

Life Application

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the brokenness of the world.
2. What do you see with spiritual eyes that breaks your heart?

3. What is God's vision for rebuilding people's brokenness?
4. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to participate in God's mission.
5. What do you do to prepare for moving forward in the vision God gives you?
6. How do you ensure that the details of your kingdom service are taken care of?
7. Why is it important to share your vision from God with some trusted believers?
8. How do you know when to make public your assignment from the Lord?
9. How does being realistic about the situation prepare you for taking risks for God?
10. How do you prepare to face and overcome inevitable opposition?

Lesson 5 – Stare Down the Opposition

Nehemiah 4:1-23

Nehemiah was a man with a vision. He felt called by God to oversee the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem that had been destroyed along with the entire city. With the wall back in place, construction inside the city could be undertaken. Nehemiah prayed and moved past his fears of inadequacy for the task and made a big ask of the king. He was granted permission to go to Jerusalem and rally the Jews to join him in the restoration project. The people bought into the plan and committed themselves to participating in rebuilding the wall. Things were steadily moving ahead with God's help.

As often happens during a project, strong opposition appeared. A group of powerful and outspoken leaders protested to Nehemiah and those working on the rebuilding. They spoke discouraging and disparaging words that troubled many of the Jewish people but affected Nehemiah in a different way.

Nehemiah was prepared for the challenge, and he handled the criticism effectively. He stared down the people taunting and insulting him while encouraging his coworkers to focus on God, not the threats. Nehemiah openly confessed his trust in God who would fight for his people and give them the strength to withstand opposition until the project was completed.

When you receive a clear directive from God and start doing it, be ready to be challenged by others. Satan does not want you to succeed and will use people under his influence as his mouthpieces. The enemy will throw whatever he can at you and the team to discourage and intimidate. Be like Nehemiah and remind yourself and your coworkers that God is for you and will enable you to finish what you start.

Q1 What does this recap of the last lesson remind you to keep in mind every day?

Be Aware of Your Opposition

“When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, ‘What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are?’ Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, ‘What they are building – even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!’” 4:1-3.

This lesson digs deeper into the dynamics of dealing with opposition introduced previously. Sanballat and Tobiah were leaders from nations that had been driven out of the Promised Land

by the Israelites. They were natural enemies of the Jews and did not want them to succeed at re-establishing themselves in Jerusalem. They were unwitting agents of Satan whose mission is to stymie God's work everywhere and always by any means.

When you are involved in advancing God's kingdom in any way, you will be opposed by your enemy. Satan wants you to fail in your life and ministry and will attack you in ways you cannot see and those you can: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Ephesians 6:12. Keep in mind that the people opposing you are being used by the devil for his purposes.

Sanballat and Tobiah were puppets of Satan sent to intimidate, discourage, and hinder Nehemiah and the Jews. They used taunts, sarcasm, and threats to try to get into the minds of those doing God's work. That is what you can expect when obeying your call from God. Your mind will be assaulted with lies and discouraging words designed to defeat you if you let them. Learn from Nehemiah's example to keep things in perspective, maintain your composure, and stare down your opposition with resolve.

Q2 Why is it helpful to understand who your opposition is to deal with it effectively?

Turn the Opposition Over to God

"Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders." 4:4,5.

Satan's strategy is to try to sidetrack you from involving God in every detail of life. You can get caught up reacting in kind to insults against you and debate those who are unreasonable on purpose. Spiritual war is not won through arguments but by putting on and utilizing your spiritual armour and weapons: "Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." Ephesians 6:11.

People with questions about your faith who exhibit a teachable attitude are candidates for dialogue. At the same time, do not get into heated exchanges with those who want to crush your spirit. Nehemiah gives a masterclass on dealing with attackers who have evil intent. He believes the battle will be won in the Lord's strength and refuses to be sidetracked from the mission. He keeps going to God in prayer with frankness about the situation. Nehemiah turns the antagonists over to God to deal with while he continues with the project.

When people behave badly towards you and other believers, go to God with your observations and concerns and entrust them to him. When you are insulted for being an obedient follower of Christ, you will be blessed by God (Matthew 5:10-12). Do not overreact to the opposition in

frustration and anger and lose your kingdom focus. Stand firm in your resolve and ask the Lord to deal with the antagonists his way.

Q3 How does overreacting to your opponents play into their hands and sidetrack you?

Keep Building with All Your Heart

“So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.” 4:6.

In life, whatever you give your heart to has your attention and focus. Nehemiah and the workers ignored the opposition and continued to build. In remarkable time, the wall was reconstructed to half its height, signaling the project was going extremely well. The reason given for the early success was that the people worked with all their heart. Similarly, when you give your best effort to building your spiritual life and doing God’s work with full devotion, you will see ongoing measurable progress. Settle yourself in for sticking to the mission long term giving your best effort and you will experience spiritual growth and ministry progress.

You will occasionally need to adjust your building project details. Opposition comes in different approaches and at various times. You will have to take the appropriate action to deal with any viable threats. The Jews were pleased with how the construction was going but their opponents were not: “But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.” 4:7,8.

There was an army of haters opposing Nehemiah and his coworkers. They were very angry with the Jew’s success and plotted to attack and stir up trouble to derail the project. When you are successfully doing God’s work, there are people who will fight you fiercely and plot for your defeat and ruin. Remember that there are spiritual forces devising schemes against you and every follower of Christ. Evil adversaries work through unwitting humans to do their dirty work giving the impression they are the masterminds. Their goal is to discourage and defeat you in your spiritual growth and ministry assignments. As noted above in Ephesians 6, you must be spiritually prepared and stand your ground. When you make use of your spiritual armor and weapons with the Holy Spirit’s empowering, you have nothing to fear. You can stay on track and keep doing your kingdom work regardless of the pressure you face from opposition.

Nehemiah responded to the intensified enemy attacks by staying connected to God and making the necessary adjustments to the details of the plan: “But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.” 4:9. Nehemiah added a new measure to the building project by placing guards around the clock to protect the workers and preserve the progress.

Keep building God's kingdom with all your heart. Stay connected to God in prayer, alert to any attempted intrusions by the enemy. The Bible says that the devil is always on the prowl looking for unsuspecting prey. When you recognize and resist him, you will stand firm in your faith and he will back off (1 Peter 5:8,9 / James 4:7).

Q4 What things do you do to maintain a heart that is fully devoted to God and his work?

Stay Resilient When Fatigue and Frustration Set In

"Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot build the wall.' Also our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.' Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us.'" 4:10-12.

The building project had reached the mid-way point in good time because the workers gave their best effort. But there was still the second half to complete and fatigue from the hard work and frustration with the constant opposition started to take its toll. The initial enthusiasm for the project was gone and the people committed to doing the work were emotionally and physically exhausted. People will start saying negative things among themselves and to their leader when they lose sight of their mission.

Nehemiah refused to give into the gloom and doom spreading among the workers. There were nonstop attacks by the opponents and negative reporting and predictions by the Jewish observers. Instead of being deterred from leading the people to get the job done, Nehemiah once again pivoted. He made the adjustments needed to meet the latest challenges to their security from intruders and address the declining morale of the workers.

"Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.'" 4:13,14.

There will be times as a leader you must act and speak positively to the people working with you that are tired and discouraged. Even though you face the same difficulties as everyone else, you act decisively. You ask the Holy Spirit to empower you to move forward by faith and influence the others to do the same. Nehemiah assessed the problem points, devised a plan for the people to implement, and reassured everyone that God would enable them to fight the real battle successfully. Their lives and their families were at stake.

Q5 How do you learn to stay resilient and speak faith when others are fading and losing heart?

Take Note of God at Work

“When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.” 4:15

When Nehemiah stood tall and refused to give in to the negative feelings and fears, he influenced the whole group to refocus, adjust to new safety measures, and get back to work. It is amazing that one person with Holy Spirit resolve can positively affect the attitudes and actions of other. Be like Nehemiah in your situations. Choose to not give into the forces working against God’s plans and give your best effort with the ongoing empowering of the Spirit. Notice that God was credited with the turnaround of the Jewish workers following Nehemiah’s lead. The enemies recognized God at work on the Jew’s behalf when they saw them get back to rebuilding the rest of the wall.

Read through 4:16-23 now and see an incredible picture of a devoted team getting the job done. The workers did their jobs diligently with building materials in one hand and a weapon in the other. A person was positioned and ready to sound the trumpet of alarm when intruders were spotted. The guard stayed close to Nehemiah so he could react quickly to any new threats and get the message out. Nehemiah kept the people informed and constantly reminded them that they were in good hands as they kept building according to the plan: “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!” 4:20. Never underestimate the unifying power of declaring your trust in God fighting the enemy on your behalf.

Q6 How has declaring that God is with you during a challenge given you courage?

Be Familiar With the Enemy’s Tactics

Read Nehemiah 6:1-15 now that details further opposition to the building project. Take note of six tactics the enemy used to try to defeat the Jews. These strategies are like those Satan uses against you and other believers committed to kingdom building. Be aware of each tactic and learn from the Spirit how to respond to neutralize the attacks.

1) The enemy ridicules and makes fun of you for living for God.

Ask the Holy Spirit to empower you to be bold in your faith in the face of intimidation and persecution for being a disciple of Christ.

2) The enemy uses others to stir up trouble and gang up on you.

Ask the Spirit to give you keep you full of God’s love that drives out fear and assures you of your security in him. See your enemies through God’s eyes.

3) The enemy adds to your exhaustion to discourage you and make you afraid.

Ask the Spirit to empower and energize you to persevere and renew your mind with the Word so that you are encouraged and unafraid.

4) The enemy tries to seduce you with distractions to get you out of focus.

Ask the Spirit to speak to your spirit clearly so you make right choices. Keep in step with the Holy Spirit and ignore the temptations to give into sinful desires.

5) The enemy lies and spreads false rumours about you.

Ask the Spirit to help you always live in the truth so that you can distinguish between reality and gossip and rise above the lies.

6) The enemy uses false prophets to try to intimidate you with spiritual sounding words.

Ask the Spirit to produce his spiritual fruit in you to mature daily. Ask for spiritual discernment to recognize what is of God and what is not. Ask for confidence and boldness to call out the spiritually arrogant and misguided for their foolishness. Ask the Spirit to help you to not become confused or manipulated by falsehoods.

Reliance on the Holy Spirit is the common action to take in all the enemy's attacks. God has already provided everything you need to counter every one of the enemy's strategies. You are in a favoured position in Christ by faith with access to supernatural resources. The Holy Spirit provides whatever is required to successfully address every situation.

Keep asking the Spirit to fill you with his presence and power. Depend on him to enable you to utilize the Word and prayer effectively. Stay connected to God, you will be prepared to stare down any opposition attempting to discourage and defeat you in your God-given mission.

Q7 Give an example of the Holy Spirit helping you respond to one of the tactics noted above.

Life Application

1. Thank God that you are totally secure in Christ no matter what you face.

2. Remind yourself who your true enemy is and what he wants to do to you.

3. Remember that Satan works through people to do his dirty work most often.

4. Ask the Holy Spirit to keep you focused on the mission God has given you.
5. Determine every day to give your best effort to spiritual growth and kingdom service.
6. Anticipate times of weariness and discouragement and push through with God's help.
7. Stay renewed in spirit, mind, and body with the Word, prayer, and Holy Spirit fullness.
8. Acknowledge and praise God every time you recognize him at work around you.
9. Stay alert with the Spirit's enabling to overcome Satan's tactics to try to defeat you.
10. Keep playing your part wholeheartedly in God's people building plan.

Lesson 6 – Maintain Your Godly Integrity

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Integrity is defined as adherence to moral and ethical principles. It is maintaining honesty with soundness of moral character. The word implies a state of being whole and undiminished. It is the ideal condition of being unimpaired and sound. That is a character quality that will always stand out in any group and will contribute to building one's solid reputation over the long term. Followers of Christ should be models of integrity because of their growth in godliness with the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

Nehemiah was a man of outstanding integrity who served as an example to others. While leading the Jews in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem and fending off the constant opposition trying to undermine them, Nehemiah modelled godly character. He was a legitimate God follower who gained the respect of the people because he proved repeatedly that he meant what he said.

Read 5:1-19 now and see how Nehemiah dealt with an issue that threatened the people's integrity collectively. He was made aware that some people with significant resources were taking advantage of their fellow citizens that had very little. They were charging exorbitant rates of interest on the money they lent the needy causing the poor people to sell their lands and children to pay their debts. Nehemiah knew God was not pleased with this and he made the point clear by personal example. He and the leadership team announced they would not take advantage of the less fortunate. Nehemiah also publicly confronted the guilty parties for their objectionable conduct to underscore its seriousness.

Nehemiah could have ignored the situation that was demoralizing many vulnerable people. Instead, he demonstrated how to be a person of integrity and gain influence with those who watched him closely. Nehemiah refused to treat sin lightly and used the Word as the standard to judge conduct and life choices. He lived in the fear of the Lord to keep him accountable for his actions and expected others to do the same.

Nehemiah also modelled integrity by being a giver instead of a taker. Even though he was entitled to many privileges as the governor, he knew that he already had more than he needed to meet his daily needs. So Nehemiah fed many extra people around his dinner table and refused to place unreasonable demands on others as recognition of God's blessing upon him. These actions gave Nehemiah credibility so that when he spoke, the people paid attention.

Godly integrity will make you a person of influence in your home, community, workplace, and church. As a transformed Christ follower, you set a godly example in a world of darkness and evil. You can be counted on to say and do the right thing always, regardless of the personal cost. Guarding your integrity requires effort but will be an asset for whatever you do.

Q1 Why is integrity downplayed in our society today? What are the results?

Practice the Principles of Integrity

Nehemiah shows what a life of integrity looks like while dealing with stressful situations constantly. The world you live in is desperate for men and women with godly character to influence others to follow their example. People take notice of your unimpaired condition, being sound in word and deed, and adhering to a code of moral values. You live that way because you are complete in Christ and full of the Spirit.

Nehemiah demonstrated how to maintain your integrity by living out the following principles. Think through each action and consider how it applies to your daily life.

1. Deal with Sin Tenaciously – 5:1-8

“Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.’ Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’ Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.’” 5:1-5

Think about the sad situation for many of the Jews living in and around Jerusalem described in these verses. The Jews should have known that God’s commandments are essentially about loving him as the only God and loving others unselfishly. But the Israelites had long forgotten God’s expectations. Most of them treated the Lord with disrespect and took advantage of others for their own gain. That is sin which is missing the mark that God has established as the standard to adhere to. Sin breaks one’s fellowship with holy God and when it continues unchecked, it leads to spiritual death (James 1:15). All sin is displeasing to God and must be dealt with tenaciously.

Nehemiah was a man of integrity who cared about how he and the people lived out God’s commands. He taught by example that when sin is revealed, it must be confronted and remedied. Nehemiah was made aware of sinful behaviour occurring among the people while the building project was moving ahead. It was not convenient or easy to call the guilty ones to account, but Nehemiah did so because the spiritual and social health of everyone was at stake.

Q2 How do you learn what sin is, why it is destructive, and how to avoid it?

The Jews in Jerusalem were paying heavy taxes to the Persian government that ruled over them. Added to that, some members of means in their own community were buying poor people and placing them in slavery to repay the money they had borrowed from them. Nehemiah was informed of this practice and knew it displeased God. His reaction was swift: “When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials.” 5:6,7a

Nehemiah expressed righteous anger about the situation, not self-righteous indignation. He reacted so strongly because these actions were sin against God. He was not rash in his response but measured when addressing the guilty parties. He took time to prayerfully think through what God would expect him to do. He concluded that he had no option but to deal with the sin on God’s behalf: “I told them, ‘You are charging your own people interest!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them...” 5:7b

Nehemiah spoke plainly. He talked to the offenders bluntly, believing that they knew deep down what was right. Because of his proven integrity, they respected him as one speaking for God. Their silence confirmed they knew that Nehemiah was right about his accusations of their mistreatment of their countrymen: “They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.” 5:8b. When truth is valued, there is no room for making excuses.

If you find yourself in a position where sin is exposed, remember you have the Holy Spirit to guide and empower you to speak truth into the situation. You have God’s word to teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness those willing to learn (2 Timothy 3:16,17). You act with godly integrity by maturely addressing sin in yourself and others when it is revealed. Your actions contribute to the spiritual health of the entire faith community.

Q3 Why is it essential to deal with revealed sin maturely and not ignore it?

2. Walk in the Fear of God – 5:9-11

“So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?’” 5:9

Fear of the Lord is different from being afraid of people or things. It means to show respect to holy God, acknowledging him as the sovereign ruler over all creation. It requires trusting God with your life, believing that he watches over your every step to sustain you. The practice of not fearing the Lord helps to explain why the world today is in a disordered mess: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 1:7. Foolish behaviour is the inevitable result of not fearing the Lord and living your own way.

In Nehemiah’s rebuke of the wealthy taking advantage of the poor, he appeals to their understanding of God and his holy expectations. Those who truly fear the Lord live to a higher

standard than those who do not. Their reputation as God-fearers is on the line with fellow believers and outsiders watch to see if their actions match their words.

Q4 How is the fear of the Lord different from fearing other people or things?

“I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them – one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.” 5:10,11

The interest being charged by the wealthy lenders was an issue to Nehemiah. Imagine any amount of interest being considered too much in our day. Nehemiah commanded those with means to give back to the poor the assets they had taken and the interest they had charged. This is reminiscent of the sabbatical seventh year and the jubilee fiftieth year observed in the Old Testament. Debts were cancelled and properties were returned to the original owners. People were released from the burden of poverty as an expression of unselfish concern for others part of the faith community. The New Testament teaches that believers are to do good to others, especially to those of the church family (Galatians 6:10). When you give of yourself generously to help others, you will be blessed by God accordingly (Luke 6:37,38).

The response of the wealthy Jews to Nehemiah’s demands was swift and complete: “We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.” 5:12a. When everyone wants to please God, solutions fall into place. Fearing the Lord will help you maintain your godly integrity. You know that God is watching everything you do, and you want to always act in a way that lines up with his holy expectations. Living with respect and awe for God is a path of knowledge and wisdom that correctly informs your decisions.

Q5 How does healthy fear of God motivate you to be generous towards others?

3. Be Accountable for Your Word – 5:12b,13

“Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!’ At this the whole assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.” 5:12b,13.

It is impressive how quickly the sin problem was resolved. The offenders were confronted and found guilty of lacking integrity in God’s eyes. They did not try to excuse themselves but simply did the honorable thing. They immediately gave back the poor people’s possessions and no longer required interest on what they lent them.

That is an outstanding picture of building and maintaining integrity. The wealthy ones respected Nehemiah and feared the Lord more than anything else. They learned their lesson and promised to not commit this sin again. While confessing sin to God and committing oneself to change for the better is good, making yourself accountable to others is even better. The priests were called to oversee the assembly making promises to always do what is right.

If you are required to confront sin in others, follow Nehemiah's example of assuming that the offenders will repent and change their ways. Add accountability to the process so that other people will be aware of and involved in the keeping of commitments by those making them. This is a good practice for you if confronted by a godly leader to deal with sin. Make restitution as required and promise to do better. Make yourself accountable to mature believers who will help you follow through on your commitments made to God and others.

Q6 How is formal accountability valuable for maintaining godly integrity?

4. Be Generous with Your Resources – 5:14-18

“Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year – twelve years - neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor...Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations...I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.” 5:14,16,17,18b.

A person of godly integrity sees needs they can contribute to and then does so. Rather than rationalizing how to keep what they have for themselves, they give generously to benefit others. Nehemiah is a good example of someone choosing to deny himself legitimate entitlements and take care of others using what he already had.

Nehemiah made no demands for personal gain and managed his resources in a way that pleased God. He refused to take the governor's allotment which would add to the financial burden the people carried. Nehemiah had the means to feed his own household, so he did not tax the people and lord his position over others like previous governors and their assistants had done. He devoted himself to finishing the wall building project. Nehemiah and his team did not acquire any land for themselves even though they had the means to do so.

When you consistently treat others with godly integrity like Nehemiah did, you gain a good reputation and are taken seriously when you speak. People know that you mean what you say so they take it to heart. Nehemiah's generosity was on display daily as he fed a hundred and fifty people at his home at his own expense and showed hospitality to visitors from surrounding regions willingly. Nehemiah practiced contentment with what God had given him and used much of what he had to benefit others.

It is common in our day to see people taking instead of giving. Those who are disciples of Christ act differently. They consider what they do for others investments in God's kingdom. You benefit by being a channel of God's blessing and you store up treasures in heaven as eternal reward. Be generous with what you have, and you will prosper (Proverbs 11:25).

Q7 How do your resources test your integrity? How does your generosity facilitate godliness?

5. Seek God's Approval – 5:19

"Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people." 5:19.

These are the words of a mature, faithful servant of God. For a person of integrity, it matters what God thinks about their labors of love. Many times God is the only one who knows the full extent of what you have done and why. Nehemiah cared about doing an excellent job of carrying out the mission God had given him.

Leadership is often exhausting and thankless for someone who is not a self-promoter but a God-pleaser. Dealing with situations that have multiple options that disappoint some by whatever is decided is common. Making sacrifices for others and protecting people at personal cost is what a person of integrity does. Leaders are sometimes misunderstood and criticized unfairly while acting in the best interests of the group. The burden of responsibility for a spiritual leader is heavy and often not comprehended by the beneficiaries.

Nehemiah was aware of the personal costs of leading others. That is why he took ample time in the preliminary stages to connect with God. He wanted clear perspective about his mission and the amount of God's provision needed to do it. There comes a point for a mature leader when they realize what people think about you is not what matters. The main concern is what God thinks about your efforts. You want God's favor upon you to maintain your godly integrity. This dynamic applies to every believer whether in a role of leadership or not.

There will be times you feel drained physically, emotionally, and spiritually when giving your best effort to live a godly life and influence others to do the same. Your acts of kindness can go unnoticed which may tempt you to feel undervalued. It is wise to not allow your feelings to distract you from what you know is most important. Go to God like Nehemiah did and ask him to reaffirm his approval upon your life: "Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people." 1:19. Saying this reminds you that God is always aware of what you do to bring him glory.

The Holy Spirit will renew you by spending time with him and asking to be refreshed with his presence. Remember that one day you will meet the Lord and receive rewards that last for eternity. Until then, keep doing good for God because it is never in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Q8 How do you seek God's approval and how you know you have it?

Be an Influencer With Integrity

Live each moment knowing God is watching what you say and do. Make every decision based on what God will approve. Do this by studying and practicing the Word, staying connected to God in prayer, and by asking the Holy Spirit to fill you with his presence. Practicing these spiritual disciplines continually transforms your mind to think like Jesus in every situation.

Regardless of your age, choose to live differently than the world does. Be a person of godly integrity that refuses to conform to sinful patterns of compromise. Be a model of Biblical morality and incorruptibility. Never treat sin and its consequences lightly but live in the fear of the Lord to keep you honest. Ask the Holy Spirit to teach and enable you to keep your word without fail, to give generously as able, and to seek God's approval above all else.

Be influential like Nehemiah was. Show others how to do the right thing always regardless of the cost. Impact those around you to follow your example and experience the blessings of God themselves.

Q9 How do you benefit by being an influencer of others with integrity?

Life Application

1. Define integrity and why it matters to you.
2. What do you do to maintain a pure heart before God?
3. Why and how do you fear the Lord?
4. How do you ensure you never devalue fearing the Lord?
5. How have you made yourself accountable for keeping your word and acting godly?
6. What is your goal for practicing generosity towards others?
7. How are you renewing your mind daily to think and act like Jesus?
8. How do you stay prepared to recognize choices that will compromise your integrity?
9. How are you being a godly influencer on your family and others?
10. How are you anticipating God's favor for godly integrity like Nehemiah did?

Lesson 7 – Develop Mental Toughness

Nehemiah 6:1-7:73

You have learned that Nehemiah stayed on track and kept moving ahead despite the intense challenges he faced. Making a commitment to God and obeying his commands is a fulltime occupation that includes taking on responsibilities to serve. Spiritual leaders know the pressures faced influencing others to be godly. How did Nehemiah battle through the physical and emotional fatigue that can feed the temptation to give up? He stayed the course by developing mental toughness to remain focused on God and his assignment.

As a disciple of Christ, you choose to live as one approved by God and impact others to do the same. Inevitably, you will be tempted to entertain thoughts of discouragement and defeat. Your enemy will come against you with various strategies to get your focus off Christ and onto the difficult circumstances you are in. Your mind is a battlefield where Satan bombards your thought life with lies. He speaks evil to your ears and parades sinful temptations before your eyes. You need to develop mental toughness to defeat the enemy.

You counter Satan's assaults with supernatural resources God provides in Christ through the Holy Spirit. You learn to speak truth to the lies by knowing and applying God's word. You stay connected to Christ in prayer to maintain your dependence on him. You take every thought and bring it into line with Christ and his will. Doing these things will ensure spiritual victory by crushing every attempt the enemy makes to defeat you.

Keep your mind renewed. The Holy Spirit activates the Word in you by cooperating with his transforming work: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." Romans 12:2.

Nehemiah knew how to develop mental toughness while executing the mission God had given him. He was able to keep the building project moving ahead amid the multitude of voices threatening him and telling him to quit. Nehemiah kept his focus on God and determined to persevere so that he and the Jews would succeed.

Q1 What are you doing to keep your mind renewed to know God's will?

Stick to Your Assignment from God

God called Nehemiah to oversee the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem and he prepared and committed himself to seeing the project through to completion. Through teamwork and diligent effort, the Jews were close to putting on the finishing touches.

There were no gaps in the wall and only the doors needed to be set in the gates. Everyone could see the impressive work that had been accomplished with God's help. Were the enemies ready to concede and give up their opposition with so little of the work left to be completed? No, they were not. They chose to go after Nehemiah and the workers one more time.

"When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates – Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.'" 6:1,2a.

Beware of the plain of Ono. It is no man's land where you are exposed and not well protected from the enemy's attacks. Opponents will try to divert your attention and confuse you by playing mind games. The plain of Ono was a real place during Nehemiah's time. For you, Ono is a spiritual place where the enemy likes to prowl and try to capture the unsuspecting. It is full of diversions like busyness and side issues designed to take your focus off your mission. Ono is the land of compromise leading you to the slippery slope of falling away from your commitment.

You need to stay clear of Ono, but how? You study and apply the principles you are learning from Nehemiah that help you develop mental toughness to stick to your assignment. Nehemiah would not for a moment consider wandering onto the plain of Ono because he knew that it was a trap. He would not put himself in harm's way unnecessarily and stayed on high alert to the seduction and manipulation of those scheming against him and the plan of God.

"But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?' Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer." 6:2b-4.

The enemy is relentless. Four times Sanballat and Geshem sent the same message pretending to want open dialogue with Nehemiah. He knew it was a scheme to do him harm and so four times Nehemiah rejected the invitation flat out. This steely resolve to stay the course and do God's work is not accidental. It is the result of knowing and loving God, accepting your calling, and asking for and utilizing God's provisions. You have the Holy Spirit in you to release everything needed to remain committed. Involve the Spirit in every detail of life and he will give you boldness, endurance, insight, direction, and everything to succeed.

Q2 How has the enemy invited you to 'spiritual Ono'? How did you respond?

Confront Every Lie with Truth

Sanballat's strategy against Nehemiah is typical of Satan's ploy against you for being obedient to God's call. He tries to wear you down with lies that he speaks to you and others. The Bible calls him the father of lies whose language is lying (John 8:44).

Be spiritually discerning to know the difference between truth and falsehood. The Holy Spirit will give you truth for every situation when you ask him. He will help you understand and apply God's word effectively. Use the Word as the measure for evaluating whatever is said. As you mature spiritually, you grow more competent to read every situation like Jesus did who is the embodiment of absolute truth (John 14:6).

It is freeing to live your life in truth as a disciple of Christ: "Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" John 8:31b,32. By doing the spiritual disciplines of the Word, prayer, and engagement with the Holy Spirit, you can distinguish between truth and falsehood every time. You have freedom from the power of the lie and have a distinct advantage over your adversary.

Q3 Why is it freeing to learn and obey Jesus' teachings with the Spirit's help?

Nehemiah is a good example of living out the truth. He refused to get caught up in fiction and fantasy which easily become strongholds in your mind if allowed to take root. Nehemiah committed to learning God's truth and being fluent in the language of truth, God's word. As you absorb the Word by reading, meditating on, memorizing, and obeying it, you incorporate the truth in your conversations and prayer life. Nehemiah was determined not to lose the battle for his mind. He stayed prepared to use the truth against lies as often as was necessary because Sanballat was relentless in his deceptive assaults.

"Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: 'It is reported among the nations – and Geshem says it is true – that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.'" 6:5-7.

Talk about total fabrication. Everything Sanballat communicated to Nehemiah was a lie. Notice the terminology used to try to make it sound legitimate: "It is reported" and "according to these reports". Who reported? Are they credible? Do they have evidence? And who was the character witness for the story being circulated among the nations? It turns out to be none other than Geshem, Sanballat's sidekick and puppet. Your enemy will make stuff up, pretend it is real, and quote false witnesses. Sanballat tried to intimidate Nehemiah by saying that the fake report would get to the king and there will be fallout as a result. This deception is a false narrative manufactured by a person or group to create the illusion that it is factual.

Nehemiah's response to Sanballat's deceit is a classic to emulate. He was committed to only operating in truth which is always reliable and will overcome the lies. When you are being intimidated with made up stories from the evil one and those he uses against you, do not entertain them for one moment. Do not give lies any opportunity to take root in your mind.

Confront each falsehood with truth and they will be demolished. Nehemiah understood the power of truthful words and used them effectively.

“I sent him this reply: ‘Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.’ They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.’ But I prayed, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’” 6:8,9.

Nehemiah would have none of the nonsense. He refused to be intimidated by what Sanballat concocted in his own head. Because he maintained mental toughness, Nehemiah was unaffected by each attack and dealt with it with it convincingly by knowing the truth. You see Nehemiah’s constant communication with God as he asks for renewed strength to keep going with the project until completion. You too benefit by keeping God in the loop about everything you are doing. He will deliver what you need to persevere in what he calls you to do.

Q4 Why is it good to consider the source when discerning the truth of someone’s words?

Be Spiritually Discerning

Nehemiah showed himself to be spiritually discerning when the enemies utilized false prophets for their agenda. Not everyone who claims to have a word from the Lord for you does. Jesus teaches his followers to be on guard for those doing evil while claiming to do good (Matthew 7:15-20). The apostle Paul instructs believers to encourage prophetic words but only accept what is good by testing them (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).

Nehemiah was invited by a man named Shemaiah to meet him at the temple and to close the doors to protect him from people coming to kill him (6:10). This was a ploy to trap Nehemiah by those who wanted to harm him. It is sad to see Shemaiah pretend to be godly while participating in a treacherous plan. He failed because Nehemiah was spiritually discerning and saw right through the ruse and refused to comply with the request.

“But I said, ‘Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!’ I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.” 6:11-13.

Spiritual discernment is the supernatural ability God gives to distinguish if something is of him or not. You see into the realm of the unseen by faith and can know what is really going on. The Holy Spirit operates this gift through believers when they need it (1 Corinthians 12:10).

Q5 Why is it necessary to be Spirit filled to utilize spiritual gifts effectively?

Someone is not godly and spiritually mature because they say they are. The Holy Spirit enables you to recognize who is legitimate and who is not. He will confirm in your spirit what is truth and what you need to disregard. Nehemiah knew instantly that he was being set up. Spirit filled believers have a distinct advantage over imposters because God gives them the insight they need and the power to deal with the deceivers. Nehemiah called Shemaiah out for his duplicity and turned his enemies over to the Lord for him to deal with.

This was one of many false prophets Nehemiah contended with: “Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.” 6:14. It is hard to imagine the ongoing attacks Nehemiah endured by those claiming to speak for God but did not. He dealt with every attack effectively by staying spiritually alert and discerning the truth of every word spoken.

Q6 Why are false prophets successful many times? How do you not fall for their deception?

Enjoy the Payoff of Mental Toughness

“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.” 6:15.

How impressive is that? Nehemiah and the workers rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem that had been in ruins for decades in fifty-two days. They faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles and persevered to complete the project. During non-stop resistance and opposition, they trusted God and endured to the end with his help.

At any point, it would have been tempting to give up. But Nehemiah led the way and stuck to the plan because his mind was renewed and tough. He had clarity to see things as God does and the resolve to keep doing whatever came next. He influenced and motivated the Jews to stay the course with him. The results of persevering with God in the plan are outstanding and faith building.

For you to be spiritually mature and complete, you must take good care of your mind. By absorbing God’s word, connecting continually with God in prayer, and staying full of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power, you are transformed daily by the renewing of you mind. You are prepared and equipped to know and do God’s perfect will in every situation. You live as worship to God, conformed to his will and not the world’s ways (Romans 12:1,2).

You will not be disappointed after completing your God-given assignments. You will be grateful that you stood firm in your resolve and moved forward in your work. By developing mental toughness, you experience the satisfaction of dealing with every challenge with a clear mind and undistracted focus on Christ. Every win over the enemy is an opportunity to praise God and affirm your commitment to serve him faithfully whatever he asks of you.

Q7 Why is it beneficial to take time to enjoy and reflect on your spiritual wins?

Preserve the Gains You Make

Read Nehemiah 6:16-7:73 now. Note the lists of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild and reinhabit the city. The following is an overview of events that occurred after the rebuilding of the wall including things put in place to preserve the gains made by completing the project.

Much of the opposition subsided when it became obvious that God was on the Jews' side: "When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God." 6:16. Bullying and bravado are ineffective against God's people who do his work faithfully. When believers stand their ground in the strength of the Lord, the opposition fades for the most part because they know they are overmatched.

Opposition never completely disappears because the enemy is persistent. There are always those who refuse to accept God's plan and resist acknowledging defeat until the very end: "Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shekariah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me." 6:17-19. Tobiah was not willing to relent from attacking Nehemiah. He was obviously envious of Nehemiah's favour with God and the people. He used those in Judah related to him to report everything Nehemiah said and did.

Q8 Why must you keep your spiritual guard active even after significant victories?

Nehemiah made sure the city was secure by putting reliable people in place as guards: "After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. I said to them, 'The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own homes.'" 7:1-3.

Preserving the gains you make is good stewardship. Nehemiah chose people known for their integrity and competence to ensure that everything was kept safe from intrusion from those wanting to tear it down and take over.

Jewish exiles were welcomed back from abroad to rebuild Jerusalem after it had been secured with the wall in place. As you read in 7:4-73, the people are named, and their numbers and ancestry are listed. Included in the returnees are priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, and temple servants. Almost fifty thousand people, eight thousand riding animals, and substantial currency came into Jerusalem and surrounding towns for the resettling process. All of this was possible because Nehemiah heard from God and responded to the call to rebuild the wall.

Q9 What things do you put in place to ensure you preserve your spiritual gains?

Life Application

1. Review your routine of knowing God through the Word, prayer, and the Holy Spirit.
2. Commit to maintaining daily life transformation by renewing your mind.
3. Start every day reminding yourself to stay active in God's kingdom building mission.
4. Prepare to overcome the temptations you face to compromise your integrity.
5. Practice speaking God's word as truth in your prayers and conversations.
6. Ask the Holy Spirit to keep filling you and giving you spiritual discernment.
7. Evaluate with Spirit discernment every word anyone claims is from God.
8. Thank God for everything he accomplishes through you.
9. Preserve your spiritual gains by staying spiritually alert to withstand enemy strategies.
10. Commit to influencing others by your example to be mentally tough to go the distance.

Lesson 8 – Experience God’s Word

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:18

We have mentioned the importance of knowing God’s word for building your spiritual life numerous times in this study. Absorbing the Word, connecting with God in prayer, and staying filled with the Holy Spirit are indispensable disciplines for your spiritual growth, maturity, and productive kingdom service. This lesson focuses on the joy produced in you from experiencing the Word personally and corporately.

Rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem was not the end of the mission for Nehemiah. While that physical accomplishment is noteworthy, spiritual walls also needed to be rebuilt. The people had drifted away from their worship of God and needed to return to it. One of the first things Nehemiah did after celebrating the rebuilding of the city wall was re-establishing the spiritual walls that had been broken and neglected. The foundation for that undertaking was reading, studying, and obeying the Word of God. Similarly, you, your family, and faith community need commitment to God’s word to be spiritually whole and secure.

An Overview of the Jews’ Spiritual Condition

In 7:73b-8:18, you see lingering effects of Nehemiah’s influence on the Israelites throughout the building of the wall of Jerusalem. The people settled into their communities and got back to regular routines. Those involved in the rebuilding project saw God work through Nehemiah to accomplish what had seemed impossible. They watched Nehemiah in action and knew his devotion to prayer for God’s favor and his integrity in obeying God.

Something stirred within the people to reacquaint themselves with God’s written Word that had come through their esteemed forefather Moses. Keep in mind that the Law was all the Scripture that was available at the time. It took hundreds of years more for the complete Bible we have today to be written.

The Israelites wanted to hear the Word so that it would come alive to them in a fresh way: “When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.” 7:73b-8:1.

The Israelites experienced more than they anticipated when they assembled as a community. They were impacted significantly through conviction and life transformation. They were dramatically changed by God’s word because they gave it their full attention. The listeners received and celebrated the Word that had power to convict of sin, offer the way of forgiveness, and bring hope and joy by trusting God.

Q1 What do you think motivated the Jews to ask Ezra to read the Law to them?

Develop the Desire for God's Word

We are introduced to Ezra the priest who had been instrumental in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem years before the city wall was rebuilt. You may recall from Lesson 1 the overview of the timeline of the temple and wall projects. The book of Ezra in your Bible forms a unit with Nehemiah describing this period in Jewish history.

All the people gathered in the city square and “told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.” 8:1b. The people were referring to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that were collectively called the Book of the Law of Moses. Ordinary people did not have copies of the Scriptures like we do today. The few manuscripts that were available were kept secure under the supervision of the religious leaders.

Are you familiar with these Old Testament books? Have you read, studied, and discussed them with others? If you have, you know that Genesis, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are filled with interesting accounts about God from the beginning of time and his interaction with his creation. Exodus and Leviticus are loaded with lists, laws, and worship practices God gave the Israelites to obey out of reverence and love for him. Now the people wanted these Scriptures read aloud so that everyone would hear them together. They instinctively knew that God's word was foundational for who they were and how they should rebuild their lives.

Q2 What are your thoughts about the importance of studying the Book of the Law?

Listen Attentively to the Word

“So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.” 8:2,3.

There are several noteworthy insights in these verses:

- 1) All the people gathered to hear God's word. There are unique dynamics in effect when everyone gathers for public teaching of the Word. While you benefit significantly from personal Bible study, there are added dimensions doing it with others. The Word was the focus of the corporate worship while other expressions came after.

- 2) The group consisted of men, women, young people, and children who could understand what was being spoken. 'Children' is implied by 'others who could understand' since men and women were already mentioned. Those who are capable of being still and reverent and take in what is spoken should be part of corporate gatherings. Those who are not able to understand should not attend so they are not a distraction for those who can.
- 3) The people met at daybreak prepared to hear the Word. This shows their eagerness by being there at an early hour. They were prepared to engage the moment they arrived. The preparation and anticipation they demonstrated are worth emulating.
- 4) Ezra read the five books of the Law of Moses straight through. That the speaker was a teacher of the Law is not a coincidence. The people wanted to hear someone present the Word who had studied it and could read every word proficiently. Not a word was left out as Ezra read the Law book from cover to cover. People who present the Word publicly should be trained and competent to do so.
- 5) The people listened attentively to Ezra read the Word. You get the picture of fully engaged hearers leaning into every word spoken with the intention of taking it to heart. This posture is essential for anyone to gain insight and understanding of the Word. That requires shutting out distractions of any type to ensure not a word is missed. To profit from studying the Word you must clear your mind and focus on it exclusively.
- 6) Ezra read the Law through the whole morning until noon. For four or five hours the people did not move as Ezra spoke. They listened attentively to gain understanding, allowing God's word to speak clearly and get inside of them. They invested several hours in one session focused on hearing from God. You will gain little when you rush the study of the Word. Train yourself to take in the whole teaching, not bits and pieces.

Q3 Explain how you prepare yourself to listen attentively to God's word being taught.

Show Reverence for God's Word

"Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion...Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground." 8:4a,5,6.

The crowd was large, and Ezra stood on a platform so they could see him. As he began to read the Word, all the people stood up. That is a natural reaction to something that moves and overwhelms you, like a standing ovation for a performance or speech.

In this case, it is honor for the Word of God that the listeners considered life changing. Standing during the entire reading showed their anticipation and honor for the Word. They treated God's word as being worthy of holy respect and full engagement. When Ezra praised God, the whole congregation bowed down in humble worship to the Lord.

Lifting hands to the Lord is practiced throughout the Bible. It is an act of surrender to God, giving yourself to his lordship. Perhaps you can relate to this when you have been overwhelmed by God's holiness and goodness and you surrendered everything by raising your hands to him. Saying "Amen! Amen!" means 'So be it! I totally agree with what has been said'. That is why you say Amen at the end of your prayers. You are declaring that you are in complete agreement with what you are declaring to God.

The people took a posture of reverence and respect for God. They realized they were standing on holy ground, so they bowed down as an act of humbling themselves before the Lord. It is good practice to acknowledge the greatness of God whose holy presence is life changing. Your posture and demeanor in the Lord's presence says a lot about your respect and awe for him. Be amazed by God who speaks to you through his Word in personal devotions and corporate gatherings.

Q4 Why must you ensure that the Word is treated with reverence in any setting?

Be Teachable to Understand God's Word

"The Levites.....instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read." Nehemiah 8:7,8.

The people listened to the Word spoken by Ezra and then studied it to understand. Every person who teaches God's word must have the goal of "making it clear and giving the meaning". That requires interactive study of the Word to facilitate correct understanding and application. For maximum benefit from godly teaching, be an attentive and engaged listener, learning the Word, and putting it into practice.

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Hebrews 4:12,13.

The Word is powerfully alive and active. It penetrates your outer walls of self protection and goes deep inside to your inner being. It cuts through any resistance and reveals what is going on in your heart. It shines holy light on your attitudes and actions and will show where you have missed the mark of God's will.

During this examination, you have a sense of unworthiness to be in God's presence, hear the truth, and receive his grace. Simultaneously, you encounter God with confidence that he will make you right in his sight. Through confession and trust in Christ, God's word does its work of grace in everyone who hears, studies, and applies what it teaches (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Q5 How does the Spirit help you develop a teachable spirit to listen to and apply the Word?

Celebrate God's Word

The Jews were encouraged to celebrate the transforming work God's word was doing in them: "Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'" Nehemiah 8:9,10.

It is appropriate to weep before the Lord as the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin when God's word is spoken. Brokenness is necessary for softening your heart to receive the seed of the Word and have it take root. Once you deal with your sin in repentance and ask God's forgiveness, step forward into freedom and joy in the Lord. Through that process, you are strengthened and renewed body, soul, and spirit.

Celebrating God's word like the Israelites did is appropriate following repentance and confession. You learn to acknowledge the holiness of the Lord in everything you do by living in a way that pleases him. Even when you are saddened in spirit by your lapses of obedience to him, you are strengthened within by the joy of the Lord produced by the Holy Spirit at work. You move forward with renewed devotion to God and practice generosity with others because you are overwhelmed by the Lord's grace: "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." 8:12.

The Israelites celebrated that they now understood God's word taught to them. That reality caused joy to fill them to overflowing. They could not contain their sense of privilege being blessed by God who spoke to them through his Word. They continued their celebration with joy as they had not done for a very long time: "From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great." 8:17b.

Q6 What are some ways you celebrate your joy because of God's word?

Make Hearing God's Word a Habit

"Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly." 8:18

The people put into practice what the Word was teaching them, and they were being transformed. The Word of God is a powerful, active, and life changing for living well and being godly. Integrate the Word into your conversations with family, friends, and acquaintances. Pray using the Word to instruct your approach to God to know and do his will.

Let the Word influence every choice you make. Learn to hear God speak to you through the Word as you read, study, and meditate on it. Make the Word your standard of morality and conduct through prayerful daily devotions. Gather for worship with your church family hungry to hear the Word and prepared to obey its instructions. Your willingness to do these things reveals the value you place on God's word.

Let yourself be challenged and motivated by the Jews' response to Ezra reading the Word and the teachers explaining its meaning. They were awestruck with the sense of God's holiness and humbly positioned themselves to listen and learn productively. They were convicted of their sin, repented with godly sorrow, and celebrated their freedom in the Lord with great joy.

Make it your habit to know God's word more each day. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to understand and apply the Word to every situation. When you do that, you will encounter God in a deeper way, and you will be transformed in the way you think and act. You will experience great joy in the Lord that will strengthen you for whatever you face. You will want to celebrate God's goodness personally and with those who you join with in worship.

Q7 How do you make a habit of learning and using the Word in your daily life?

Life Application

1. Take your Bible and hold it in your hands prayerfully for a moment.
2. Thank God for this tangible gift you have been given to know the Lord personally.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to deepen your desire to hear God speak through his Word.
4. Listen attentively to the Word when it is taught so that you are not distracted.
5. Show reverence for the Word with a posture of respectful worship.

6. Be teachable by listening to the Word with the intention of applying it.
7. Be convicted when the Word reveals sinful attitudes and actions in you.
8. Repent of your sin by confessing it and changing your attitudes and behaviours.
9. Celebrate your freedom in God's forgiveness with joy in the Holy Spirit.
10. Use the Word in your conversations and prayers to become fluent with it.

Lesson 9 – Make Yourself Accountable

Nehemiah 9:1-10:39

The last lesson examined the people in Jerusalem joyfully celebrating God's word. Recall that after completing the rebuilding of the wall of the city, they asked Ezra the priest to read the Book of the Law to them. From dawn until noon, he read aloud as all the people stood and listened. The Word convicted them deeply as they realized how far they had strayed from loving God and obeying his commands. The people responded with repentance, weeping, and mourning over their sinfulness. Nehemiah told them to go and celebrate God's word that had been restored to them which they did with much joy.

God's word is living and powerful. When you take it to heart, it reveals things about you that need to change like sinful attitudes, acts of disobedience, improper relationships, and self-serving behaviours. You feel compelled to respond and get your life in order. You confess your wrongdoing, ask God for forgiveness, and promise that you will change your ways and follow his commands and directions. In that moment you really mean what you say. But how long does your commitment last? How much time does it take to drift back into old ways contrary to what God expects of his spiritual children? Hopefully, you do not go back on your promise to God but keep growing spiritually. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

"I really mean it God" can quickly be forgotten, making your words meaningless. This happened to the Jews many times throughout their history. In fact, the necessary rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem was the result of their continual failure to do what they told God they would. Their captivity at the hands of enemy nations and the destruction of their holy city were punishment by God for their blatant refusal to keep their commitments to righteous living.

This dynamic gets played out all the time among those who claim to want to know, love, and serve God. When confronted by the Holy Spirit about things that are not pleasing to God, they feel overwhelming conviction. They go to an altar or get alone with God and ask forgiveness, promising to serve the Lord faithfully every day for the rest of their lives. It is a moving encounter, and in the moment, they really mean it. And yet, it is not uncommon for that experience to be forgotten and a gradual slide into sin to ensue.

Q1 Why do you think believers forget what God has saved them from and return to it?

You Need Accountability

Nehemiah was called by God to lead the Jews to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem and get them to center their lives on the spiritual foundation of obedience to God's word. Being spiritually mature and aware, he would know that the human heart is prone to wander.

It is easy to get caught up in the moment and make commitments without considering the long term implications. Everyone needs something beyond their emotional response to godly conviction to keep them faithful to the promises they make. People need to be accountable to others who will remind them to keep their word.

Most people do not like what accountability costs them. Making a concerted effort, being willing to hear and accept the truth, owning personal responsibility to repent, and aligning to God's will require a major investment of oneself. However, accountability is an indispensable element for facilitating personal growth and maturity. You must place a high value on keeping your promises to God including when it is difficult to do so. In society, it is common for people to say they are going to do things and then not do them without feeling guilt. Believers must do better than that in every facet of life including specific commitments to God.

If you answer only to yourself, you will have a difficult time keeping your word. To stay on track spiritually, you need other people in your life that you answer to. You must accept that you are an example to others watching how you match your words and actions. You can never afford to take a day off from your spiritual disciplines that equip you to stay on track. Accountability will help you do that. You are more likely to spend time in prayer, study God's word, and invite the Holy Spirit to keep you full of his presence when you are answerable for your spiritual progress to people you respect and to those you mentor.

Q2 Define spiritual accountability in simple terms that anyone can understand.

Godly Conviction Requires Confession

Nehemiah 9 recounts the Jews' progress in spiritual growth. They had celebrated the rediscovery of God's word and began to read and apply it to daily living. They discovered how much they had to learn to consistently obey God's commands. To show their seriousness, they gathered together wearing sackcloth with dust on their heads signifying humility and mourning. They fasted by going without eating food for a season to develop spiritual hunger for righteousness that is satisfied by God's word (9:1).

The people confessed the sins they had committed and those of their forefathers. They were aware of their long history of disobeying God as a people group and individually. As God's word was read and taught to them, they were convicted and confessed the sins revealed (9:2).

Confession is good for the soul. When you go to God, admit your wrongdoings, and ask his forgiveness, your burden of guilt will be lifted. You experience freedom from the lingering effects of your sin, and you feel a strong urge to worship the Lord like the Jews did: "They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God." 9:3.

Q3 Why is it best to deal quickly with sin when convicted of it and not put it off?

The people were led in worship by Levites standing above them on the stairs designated for that: "They cried out with loud voices to the LORD their God." 9:4b. The Levites told the people to "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting." 9:5a. The Levites were one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They had been set apart by God to care for the spiritual life of the Jews. All priests were selected from the Levites only, so you see the significance of their role in this massive worship gathering.

The people offered praise to God as part of a retelling of the Israelites' history with the Lord. The people admitted their disobedience repeatedly even though the Lord had been so good to them from the time of Abraham to the present.

Read through 9:5b-37 now and note the moving descriptions of God as praise.

"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise" v5b

"You alone are the LORD" v6a

"You made the heavens...all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas..." v6b

"You give life to everything" v6c

"the multitudes of heaven worship you." V6d

"But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" v17c

"Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love" v32a

These are some of the moving descriptions of God used as praise to declare who he is and what he has done for his people. Every attribute and act of God found in the Bible is something that you can praise him for. You will never run out of things to tell God about his incomparable nature and unlimited abilities.

Remember the times you were caught up in sincere worship of God being overwhelmed by his awesomeness. That is always an appropriate and valuable spiritual exercise. Do those encounters with God make a lasting impression and difference in the way you live and keep your promises to him? They should and you can as this lesson will explain.

Q4 What are some of your insights about praise as an important part of worship?

Accountability Preserves Credibility

How does genuine spiritual renewal make lasting change in people? How can the impact of God's word through Spirit conviction, repentance, and obedience be sustained? How can someone prove to be credible by keeping their promises to God?

While you must make the effort to move ahead spiritually, it is difficult to keep at it if you answer only to yourself. You need to include others in your life to spur you on to maintain the gains you make in faith.

Accountability to others is wise. Telling them your spiritual commitments to God puts you on record. Writing down what you promise to do is a visible reminder and motivator to follow through faithfully. That is what the Jews did after their spiritual renewal: “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.” 9:38.

The expression “we are making” in the Hebrew language literally means ‘we are carving in stone’. That expression is used to indicate that something has been firmly entrenched and out in the open. The stone is immovable, and the words etched in it endure. Whenever someone sees the stone, they are reminded of what they promised to do.

“A binding agreement” is a firm commitment, covenant, or promise with no loopholes, escape clauses, or time limits. It is a solid transaction between two parties agreeing to honor the promise made at whatever cost. There are no excuses for breaking the bond and the term of the agreement is forever. Notice that the Jews’ written document was witnessed and approved by the spiritual leadership with their official seal stamped on it. By doing this, the people made themselves accountable for their future actions to their leaders who were representatives of God. Writing things down gives substance to your words. When you see them in front of you, they remind you of what you promised. Accountability with others and having your commitments in writing helps you preserve your credibility.

Q5 Why is accountability essential for maintaining godly credibility??

Four Practices To Stay Accountable to God

The following are four godly practices the Jews put in writing as a binding agreement for them to keep. Think about how these accountability disciplines translate into our lives as believers today and answer the question in each one.

1) Obey all of God’s commandments

“The rest of the people - priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand – all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.” 10:28,29

“The rest of the people” is everyone besides the leaders listed in 10:1-27. It included the spiritual leaders and temple servers along with their spouses and children who were old enough to understand what they were doing.

The Israelites promised to carefully obey all of God’s commandments of the Law of Moses. They bound themselves to the covenant with a curse and an oath. They took responsibility for the consequences of their actions which would be blessing from God when obeying and disaster from God when disobeying. To follow through with their commitment they would have to study the commands to know and obey them faithfully.

Believers today are not required to obey the Old Testament Law because Christ met the requirements of it by his death and instituted a new covenant of love by his blood. Now believers must obey the commands of Christ to demonstrate their love for him and give evidence that they are his disciples (1 John 3:21-24 / Matthew 28:19,20).

Q6 What does the practice of obeying God’s commands look like today?

2) Marry a believer only

“We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.” 10:30

The Jews promised not to become unequally yoked in marriage. Israel had a long history of backsliding from God through the influence of spouses from unbelieving nations. Marriage is a partnership of faith in God at the core. Anything that threatens that bond must be avoided. A blessed marriage is the culmination of a process of relationship building. It starts with dating, becomes exclusive with courting, and is consummated as a binding covenant. It is essential that both partners be believers from the beginning of the process and for the rest of their lives.

It is a tricky balance to be in the world but not part of it as a believer. Your allegiance to Christ must never be compromised by partnerships with others who do not agree that Jesus is Lord. Paul taught and modelled how to be godly in an ungodly world. He was fully devoted to living in the light of God’s truth everywhere he went. He engaged in conversation with unbelievers to present the gospel but did not allow himself to be influenced by the world’s pattern and values. He warned believers to not become unequally partnered with those outside the faith out of reverence for God (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

Q7 Why must dating, courting, and marriage be with believers exclusively?

3) Honour the Sabbath Day and Year

“When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.” 10:31

The Jews promised to honor the Sabbath which is Saturday on our calendar. The Law required that the seventh day each week was devoted to God. Everyone was expected to rest from their labors and worship the Lord. There were to be no business dealings for the whole day so that everyone could participate. The gates to city were closed and all commercial activity ceased until the Sabbath and any other holy day was finished. Resting from the busyness of life to focus on and worship God was non-negotiable.

The people also promised to treat every seventh year as a twelve month Sabbath. Everyone let the land rest from production and all outstanding debts were cancelled. Imagine today taking a sabbatical for a year every seventh one. People could refocus on their priorities with the Lord at the center of everything. It would require good stewardship to work and save enough in six years to allow you to refresh and recharge during the seventh. All outstanding debts were cancelled which would promote the practice of sensible lending.

The Sabbath was an ongoing reminder of God, his holiness, and his faithful provision of all needs. Obedience to the Law was expected and doing so ensured God's favor and blessing would be bestowed as promised.

Q8 While not now under the Law, what could the principle of Sabbath look like today?

4) Support God's house and work

"We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God." 10:32,33

The Jews promised to financially support the work of God's house that was a focal point for daily life. The temple was the center of worship, training in the Word, prayer, confession, sacrifices and receiving forgiveness from God. The people accepted their obligation to maintain the viability of the temple by supporting it financially. Notice how many offerings they gave throughout the year which would add up to a substantial commitment for each individual and family. The temple was the spiritual home base for the Jews, and they pledged to take care of it well.

Being under a new covenant in Christ today, believers do not support the temple with offerings on special days and for specific items. Every believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit in relationship with others of like faith who together form one building under Christ (1 Corinthians 3:16,17). Believers around the world are organized into local churches that facilitate spiritual growth, unity, teaching, serving, and disciplinmaking. Each member agrees to financially support the church with generous giving to ensure its sustainability.

The Jews under Nehemiah reinforced their commitment to taking care of the temple from that day forward: “We will not neglect the house of our God.” 10:39b. The people declared publicly and formalized under oath that God’s house would always be a priority.

Q9 What is a believer’s reasonable duty to support Christ’s church and work today?

The Jews made themselves accountable publicly and in writing to keep these practices faithfully. They signed an official document binding them to fulfill their pledge. They were deeply moved by God’s word and grace and obligated themselves to these responsibilities willingly. So, how long did it last? How faithful would the people be to these promises to God? You will find the answer to that in Lesson 12 that examines Nehemiah 13.

The takeaway of this lesson is to be serious about making sure your actions match your words. Think, speak, and act godly as the Bible instructs and make yourself accountable to God and others. Put your spiritual goals in writing so you can refer to them regularly and remember to practice them faithfully.

Life Application

1. Name some of the ways God has shown grace to you and thank him for each one.
2. What have you promised God you would do in response to his grace?
3. Why do believers need to be reminded to keep their promises?
4. How do conviction and confession affect your success at keeping your word to God?
5. Why do you need to share your spiritual goals with others?
6. Who are some godly people you know that are willing and able to hold you accountable?
7. Why is mutual submission necessary for an accountability relationship (Ephesians 5:21)?
8. Review the four accountability practices in this lesson. How will you implement them?
9. Ask the Holy Spirit continually to empower and enable you to keep your commitments.
10. Thank God for your spiritual growth in the Word, prayer, and Holy Spirit engagement.

Lesson 10 – Guard the Gates

Nehemiah 11:1-12:26

The temple was rebuilt under Ezra's leadership and the wall around Jerusalem was completed during Nehemiah's time. Simultaneously, the Jews were being rebuilt spiritually as the Word of God convicted, taught, and directed them to be godly. A major goal for the Jews was to return Jerusalem to its unique status as God's holy city on earth and lighthouse to the nations.

This was another significant undertaking that everyone had to buy into and support: "Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem." 11:1,2.

The Jews had been scattered throughout the nations following their overthrow and captivity by the Babylonians. Nehemiah and his family settled in Babylon where he secured a prestigious position working for the king in the capital city Susa. Jerusalem was hundreds of kilometers from Susa and had been devastated and was uninhabitable.

Some of the displaced Jews began to return to the Jerusalem to figure out a way to rebuild it. A group of people supported Ezra the priest in rebuilding the temple. Years later, another group helped Nehemiah rebuild the city wall. It was still impossible for all the Jewish families living in other countries to return and find somewhere to live. The city was in ruins and lacked space to accommodate everyone even after it was restored. A plan was devised for a coordinated and orderly resettlement process.

Read through Nehemiah 11:1-12:26 now. This details how the leaders of the people returned to Jerusalem to give oversight to the plan. A lottery was held to decide who would go back to participate in the project. Ten percent of the people were chosen to return and were applauded by the other ninety percent for willingly leaving their homes and moving back to the holy city. The people selected for the mission were descendants of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin along with the Levites who would serve as priests and temple workers.

Q1 What impresses you about the Jews' plan for re-establishing Jerusalem?

The Importance of Gatekeepers

In the middle of the lists of returnees to Jerusalem, you find a group of people noted that can be easily missed by casual reading: "The gatekeepers: Akkub, Talmon and their associates, who kept watch at the gates – 172 men." 11:19. Who were the gatekeepers and what was their function?

Gates were very important for communities in those days. Walls were built around cities for security against intrusion and established ownership for the inhabitants. That is why rebuilding Jerusalem's wall was a priority for Nehemiah. The wall had strategic gates installed for people to get in and out of the city.

Gates are not as secure as the stone wall. They were constructed of wood and other materials that are not as impenetrable as stone. Gates were the weakest points of the wall for protection of a city and were often the focus of attack by the enemy. The expression 'to possess the gate' means to penetrate the city by breaking down the gates and going inside. As a precaution, city gates were flanked by towers that provided a good vantage point for someone to observe the activity outside the perimeter. The monitoring of who went in and out of the city was a critical responsibility given to highly trusted and capable people called gatekeepers.

A lot of community activity occurred at and near the city gates including trading of merchandise. The main item sold near a gate often gave it its name. Examples are the Sheep Gate (3:1), Fish Gate (3:3), and Horse Gate (3:28). As well, important political and legal transactions were conducted at a gate along with major community announcements. You may recall that Ezra read the Law of Moses at the Water Gate where the great revival broke out (8:1). The gates to the city were extremely important for facilitating the community's vitality and gatekeepers played a critical role in preserving them. They kept an eye on who got into the city and who came out. They made sure the gates were closed at night and opened in the morning. Gatekeepers played an integral part of life in Jerusalem and were appointed and trained to be in place when the gates were installed.

Think about the responsibility of being a gatekeeper. The well being of the entire city depended on them. They stayed alert for enemies who wanted to do harm while deciding who could be let inside the city legitimately. Nehemiah 12:25,26 mentions a half dozen gatekeepers who were responsible to guard the storerooms at the gates which were like our modern day banks where treasures are kept safe. Gatekeepers were indispensable for ensuring the safety and productivity of the city.

Q2 What are your thoughts about the qualifications and role of gatekeepers?

You are a Spiritual Gatekeeper

Think about how the principle of gatekeeping relates to you. Who are the gatekeepers today? In the physical sense, most communities do not have high walls around them but are open concepts with free movement in and out. At the same time, there are people responsible to monitor the activities of people day and night, like police officers and security personnel. Their role involves figuring out who the good and bad people are so intense training, unimpeachable character, and keen insight are indispensable requisites.

While most people are not in law enforcement, believers are spiritual gatekeepers. We have been tasked with keeping a close eye on what goes in and comes out of important areas of life. You are a gatekeeper for your home for what gets in and what needs to stay out. You safeguard your marriage by not allowing anything or anyone to cause division and separation. You are responsible to protect the unity and health of your church family. These are vital areas you must guard, keep safe, secure, and healthy in your spiritual gatekeeping role.

Think about the gatekeeping of your own life. The devil is sneaky and wants to control and destroy you and those you know and love. He rarely uses demonstrations of raw power to paralyze you but often seduces you with tempting offers. The Bible says that Satan masquerades as an angel of light to hide his real intentions (2 Corinthians 11:14). He appeals to your sinful nature that craves self gratification and tries to wear you down with his advances so that you give in to his schemes.

Satan tempted Adam and Eve, the first human couple (Genesis 3). They took the bait and disobeyed God and suffered the consequences. The repercussions of their actions still affect every person to this day. Satan also tempted Jesus who rebuffed his offers by using the Word. Christ stayed alert to the enemy and finished his mission of providing salvation for all who believe in him.

You are the only one who can give Satan access to your mind. You alone can refuse to buy into the devil's schemes and close the door of your life to his evil advances. You can also help others learn to guard themselves against the enemy by teaching and showing them how to stay spiritually aware through the Word, prayer, and fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Q3 What are some examples of you being a spiritual gatekeeper for yourself and others?

Guard Your Heart

You are a gatekeeper of your heart. You are the one who controls what goes in and out of your heart through your mind. The Bible offers good insight: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Proverbs 4:23. This is not referring to your physical heart that is vital for your existence even though it is smart to maintain heart health. This verse is talking about your inner self, your control centre for everything you are and do.

The Biblical word 'heart' means an invisible substance you know exists but find hard to describe. It is who you really are on the inside that only you and God know about. It includes your whole being of spirit, intellect, emotions, and the ability to think, rationalize, and make choices. Your heart is your conscious self and inner qualities that make you who you are. You can speculate about someone, but you really do not know what they are thinking about, believe, and struggle with. You only know for sure what they tell you and even then, it may or may not be the truth. Each person chooses what they allow into their heart as the gatekeeper.

The evidence of what is allowed into your heart through your mind shows up by what you say and do (Luke 6:45). Be diligent at guarding your heart by taking in God's word (Psalm 119:9-11).

Q4 Describe your spiritual heart. What are you doing to guard it against evil infiltration?

Recognize the Threats at the Gate

It is a huge responsibility to be a gatekeeper for your life, marriage, family, and church. You must train yourself to see and assess potential threats to the security of your well being. Gatekeepers for Jerusalem during Nehemiah's time were trained to recognize who should be kept out of the city and who should be let in. They were aware of who the enemy was and were wise to their tactics. They committed themselves to protecting the people inside the walls from enemy infiltration at personal cost.

In the spiritual sense, you must be aware of who your real enemy is and how he tries to get past the gates of your mind and heart. Be ready to serve him notice that he is not welcome and must leave. Train and prepare yourself spiritually with the supernatural resources God provides. Become proficient at utilizing God's Word, operating in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and praying in the authority of Jesus' name. The Word unfolds God's ways to you and how to live them out. The Holy Spirit enables you to apply God's word effectively and recognize the enemy and his schemes. Jesus authorizes you to engage the enemy confidently and advance God's kingdom through faith filled prayer and action.

All the spiritual resources you need and how to use them effectively are detailed in God's word. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you daily so that you can understand, apply, and utilize the Word effectively. The more you devour God's word, the better you can spot the enemy and his evil schemes: "But solid food (God's word) is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil." Hebrews 5:14. The more of God's word you get inside you, the better you can tell the difference between the pure and impure. Things become more black and white than grey as the Holy Spirit brings clarity.

It is dangerous to expose your mind to thoughts, ideas, and values that can corrupt you. You must surrender to the leadership and direction of the Holy Spirit who brings God's word alive in you. Staying filled with the Spirit and discerning his directions helps to keep you pure: "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." Galatians 5:16. The Holy Spirit enables you to stay true to Christ by empowering you to be godly and obey his commands. Your mind and heart are supernaturally protected from any enemy aggression.

Q5 How has the Holy Spirit enabled you to be more discerning about good and evil?

Neutralize the Threats at the Gate

The apostle Paul describes the strategy of spiritual gatekeeping with Jesus at the center. You monitor every influence and put it in its rightful place with Jesus' authority as a believer: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:5. This is your spiritual advantage for ongoing victory over the enemy.

Commit to staying alert and discerning by spiritual training. Scrutinize every thought that arrives at the gate of your mind through the filter of God's word to determine if it is good or evil. Only allow things Jesus would approve inside while everything else is denied access. Make every thought you have submissive to Christ.

Although spiritual gatekeepers have huge responsibilities, they can remain calm in every situation. Be proactive regarding your state of mind: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6,7. God's peace guarding your heart and mind continuously is the reward of praying about everything with thanksgiving and not worrying because you trust God.

Q6 Give an example of you calmly neutralizing a threat at the gate of your mind and heart?

Life Application

1. Thank God for enabling you to build a spiritual wall of protection around your life.
2. Think about and write down the implications of your mind as the gate to your heart.
3. Describe what it means for you to be a spiritual gatekeeper for others.
4. What are your spiritual training exercises for developing gatekeeper skills?
5. Name some threats to your mind and heart that you know to keep out.
6. Ask the Holy Spirit to always give you discernment about what is good and evil.
7. Be sure to know how to confront the enemy aggressively with Christ's authority.
8. Take every thought that comes to your mind and submit it to Christ.
9. Include the Lord in every situation with thankful prayer without worrying.
10. Thank God for guarding your heart and mind with the supernatural peace of Christ.

Lesson 11 – Give God the Glory

Nehemiah 12:27-47

Jerusalem had been in ruins and now its wall was completely rebuilt. What had begun as a vision from God in the heart of Nehemiah was unfolding miraculously. The ability to overcome constant opposition from the enemy testified to the power of God to do above and beyond through those who trust him.

The Jews listened to the reading and teaching of God's word and responded with repentance and joy. Their lives were being transformed to live God's way and they had hope in the present and for the future. They chose to celebrate in worship together and give God the glory for all he had done on their behalf.

Q1 Why is it valuable to make time with others to celebrate God's goodness?

Nehemiah and the Israelites show us practical ways to express worship to God that glorifies and honors him. Like them, we want to show God our love and gratitude for all he had done for us. Read Nehemiah 12:27-47 now that details the dedication celebration of the rebuilt wall. Take note of the Biblical worship practices that have been utilized by believers for a long time.

Glorify God with Music

"At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres." 12:27.

Talented musicians were invited to participate in the special occasion of dedicating to God the rebuilt wall around Jerusalem. These people were Levites, an Israelite tribe set apart by God as the family line for all priests and temple workers. They were living in other communities because Jerusalem was uninhabitable. Many of them were tracked down and invited to be part of the celebration festivities using their musical skills.

Instrumental music is a universal language because there are no words to translate for understanding. The notes played themselves express the heart of worship of the musicians and connect with everyone participating in the service.

Q2 How have you seen instruments used to glorify God?

Glorify God with Singing

“I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks.” 12:31b

It would have been amazing to watch the two choirs proceeding around the wall. One choir went one direction and the other went the opposite way. Half of the congregation followed one choir and the other half followed the second one.

“The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God...The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah.” 12:40a,42b.

The choirs had obviously practiced before the worship celebration. Some people have voices that can carry a tune, harmonize, and express the music while others cannot. The choir members would be selected according to capability and willingness to learn and follow the direction of the leader. On this occasion, the choirs led the congregation to their places as arranged. The singing of the choirs would be exceptionally moving and glorifying to God.

Q3 How are both the untrained and the trained able to sing to glorify God?

Glorify God with Purification

“When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.” 12:30.

Presenting oneself in the holy presence of God requires spiritual cleansing. For priests to perform any religious duty, they had to go through rituals of purifying themselves according to the prescribed manner commanded in the Law. Everyone who takes seriously the privilege of meeting with God will take time to prepare themselves to be acceptable to him. The spiritual leaders would prepare for their encounter by fasting from food, abstaining from physical pleasures, and offering a sin offering to God for the forgiveness of their sins.

The rest of the people would wash the garments they would wear to the special occasion to make sure they were spotlessly clean. They would bathe their bodies to remove impurities and odors in recognition of their special privilege to worship. Even the gates and the wall were ceremonially purified by washing to devote them to God for his use.

Your purification does not come through rites and rituals but by the cleansing of the blood of Jesus as you live according to his commands and teaching: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:7,9.

God does not require perfect people to come into his presence because that is impossible for any human being. He does expect spiritual purity and provides the means for that through confession of sins and walking in the light of obedience to Christ.

Q4 How do you ensure you are purified to glorify God in worship?

Glorify God with Rejoicing

“And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.” 12:43.

You do not have to be musically talented to glorify God. Everyone can and should learn to offer sacrifices to God as expressions of worship. The Israelites were full of joy in the Lord for all that he had done on their behalf, and they let the world around them know it.

The people were reminded of the sacrificial system embedded in the Law of Moses they had heard, received, and committed to obeying: “...they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.” Perfect joy is a quality of God he shares with others who put their trust in him. The women and children are noted for rejoicing along with the congregation. Imagine every person in Jerusalem resounding in praise as a loud testimony to the awesomeness of God.

There is a strong link between sacrificing and experiencing joy. While the Israelites were full of gratitude to God for his benefits, their joy was maximized by giving themselves fully to bless the Lord. Sacrificing something of value to you for the sake of another will increase your sense of satisfaction and privilege. You prove the words of Jesus to be true: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35b. When you do things for others out of love for God, his favor is poured out on you. Whatever you give as worship to God pleases him and blesses you.

Sacrifice costs you something. In the Old Testament, items used as sacrifices to God were purchased out of one’s means or given away from one’s possessions. It is giving at a deep level, intentionally showing your desire to bless the one receiving. The rewards experienced are not the goal of giving but are the natural outcome of generosity. Inexpressible joy is supernaturally produced in you as a reward for giving.

Your life is the best sacrifice you can offer to God. You love him and want to show him you do: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.” Romans 12:1. Learn to live every moment as an offering to God in recognition of and response to his limitless mercy shown to you. Whether it is giving him time, money, or service in his kingdom, you worship willingly because he has been so good to you.

Seekers of pleasure will always be disappointed because life is often challenging and not fun. On the other hand, seekers of God who want to please him will be filled with joy even when going through difficulties. The Israelites under Nehemiah's leadership did not have it easy, but they could not contain their joy seeing God at work in and through them. When you rejoice in the Lord, you show everyone that you know, love, and trust him and that he has been so good.

Q5 Describe overflowing with joy by sacrificing yourself as worship.

Glorify God with Generous Giving

"At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites...So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron." 12:44a,47.

During this era, the contributions of the people to God and his work were generally not money. They gave from what they produced from the land. That necessitated having large storerooms to hold the offerings and putting dependable people in charge of administrating the enterprise. The Israelites had committed themselves to obeying the instructions of the Law of Moses including giving to support God's work. They were faithful to give their tithes and other offerings for the upkeep and health of the ministry.

Today you are not living under the instructions of the religious and ceremonial Old Testament Law. However, there are timeless spiritual principles that can be applied for how you express your love for God. One of those is the way you give of your resources to bless God and his work. As a believer, your expectation for giving surpasses that of the Law because you offer everything to God as sacrificial worship. Generosity with tithes and offerings to sustain the work of the ministry is considered a privilege that brings glory to God.

From Nehemiah's time and beyond, the Jews contributed generously to God's work. They took their offerings to the storehouse to support those in fulltime service to God. Similarly, in today's church, the largest cost of doing ministry is the personnel that oversee and facilitate the work. Pastoral staff, maintenance workers, administrators, and missionaries are all supported through the giving of the congregation. When you give tithes and offerings willingly as your response to God's mercy, you experience the pleasure and favor of God with overflowing joy.

Q6 What blessings have you received by glorifying God with your generous giving?

Summary

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” 1 Corinthians 10:31.

Give God the glory in everything you do. Your perspective changes dramatically when you accept that what you are and have is only by God’s grace. The amount of material things you possess is not the measure of your life. Who you are inside determines how wealthy you are in the things that really matter. You may not be rich by worldly standards, but you consider yourself most blessed because you have indescribable joy, love, peace, and contentment. These benefits are given to you by God through your relationship with him by faith in Christ.

You will not be able to contain your gratitude to the Lord when you recount all that he has given you. Willingly and intentionally do everything to glorify God as a testimony to everyone who sees you.

Life Application

1. What are the latest things God has done for you? Thank him for his goodness to you.
2. How freeing is it to declare that everything you are and have is because of God?
3. How does instrumental music move you to praise to God?
4. What is a song you sing that declares God’s abundance and love to you?
5. How often do you confess your sins to God? What does that do for you?
6. How do you offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice to please him?
7. Why is rejoicing in the Lord an act of faith at times?
8. Why would you give to God’s work over and above your regular tithes and offerings?
9. How do you remember to do everything to glorify God?
10. How does generosity to God please him and benefit you?

Lesson 12 – Seek God’s Ongoing Favor

Nehemiah 13:1-31

“Remember me with favor, my God.” 13:31b.

A debrief is a meeting that someone returning from a mission has with their superiors. Its purpose is to go over the details of the assignment for evaluation and recommendations. Nehemiah 13 presents a debrief that Nehemiah had with God years after he had completed his mission of building the wall around Jerusalem and re-establishing the Israelites in obeying the Law of Moses.

In this final lesson, you are given access to the words of a spiritual veteran who had spent large portions of his life undertaking a special calling from God. He had given himself to lead the Israelites to accomplish a task that seemed impossible to do in their own strength and limited resources.

Nehemiah led as an example of godliness in the face of fierce opposition. His efforts made possible the revival that occurred by facilitating the reading of God’s Word publicly. The people made formal commitments to obey the Lord by practicing holiness and guarding their spiritual gains. A joyful celebration by everyone gave glory to God and prompted the people to restore and maintain God’s work.

Nehemiah returned to Susa to resume his duties with the king after spending twelve years in Jerusalem. Now, perhaps twenty years later, he goes back to Jerusalem to see how the people were doing at keeping their promises to God and glorifying him as a testimony to the nations around them. What he found on his return shocked him and he confronted the people for their backslidden condition.

Q1 How can a spiritual community deteriorate so dramatically over one generation?

You are Responsible for You

Read Nehemiah 13 now before working through the lesson.

Nehemiah evaluated everything he had done in a conversation with God. Had his efforts been worthwhile? Had his service for God produced spiritual fruit to last? Had God been watching him and keeping record of the good he had done? These are the questions of a godly person in their later years. It is a useful exercise to check in with the Lord to confirm the evidence of one’s spiritual progress and legacy.

It is worthwhile to take account of your life anytime with the eternal kingdom in mind. You want to know you have managed your life well and have influenced others to know God doing so. At the end of your days on earth, you wonder what God is going to say to you when you meet him. Make time to debrief with God about your faith legacy periodically.

As you mature, you learn to accept that you are responsible for what you do and not what others choose to do. By giving your best effort in service to God, you will be encouraged by seeing the progress in those you have influenced for Christ. Take joy in those transformations and the impact they are having on others for the kingdom. Sadly, you will also discover that some people you invested in have fallen back into their sinful ways and are dishonoring God along with others. Nehemiah experienced both realities.

Sometimes you pray for a backslider's repentance but have no contact with them. Occasionally you get an opportunity to confront backsliders and try to get them back on track. That was the case for Nehemiah years after he finished his original assignment in Jerusalem. Probably in his sixties, he was informed of the spiritual reversal of many he had given responsibilities to and the widespread ungodliness that resulted.

Q2 How can looking at the long term effects of your spiritual influence be bittersweet?

People Forget God When Things Improve

There is a time tested principle that the more you need God, the more he has your attention. The opposite is also true. When life feels manageable, the easier it is to forget about God. This was the case for the Israelites, during and after Nehemiah's time with them. They had rebuilt the wall and had gotten everyone on track spiritually. The people had been reminded of and convicted about Israel's foolishness from reading the Book of Moses. They were made aware of the consequences of disobedience, and they repented. Regrettably they repeated the same mistakes of the past, lost their spiritual passion, and ignored the prohibition of being intertwined with foreign nations (13:1-3).

While Nehemiah was back in Susa, things deteriorated in Jerusalem spiritually, undoing much of the great work that had been established. Those entrusted with carrying on the spiritual rebuild were unfaithful to their responsibilities and allowed unqualified people to assume positions of power. Tobiah was one of the people that had caused Nehemiah so much trouble during the rebuilding of the wall. Later, he formed an alliance with Eliashib, the priest responsible for taking care of the storerooms of the temple. As well, Tobiah, who was a foreigner, was given an office in the house of God which was strictly prohibited and considered desecration of what is holy to the Lord (13:4,5).

Q3 Why are people prone to ignore God and disobey him after repenting and confessing?

You Can be Shocked by How Bad Things Are

“But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.” 13:6-9

Nehemiah was shocked by what he saw and learned when he returned to Jerusalem years later. He had left leaders in charge of every area of life and ministry, and they had put their seal upon the binding agreement they made to God. Everyone swore with an oath to obey God’s word to experience his blessing rather than his curse. They committed themselves to not marry unbelievers, to honor the Sabbath, to take care of God’s people, and to financially support the work of God’s house. There was no ambiguity in what the Jews had promised to do faithfully to please God. And yet, in the time that Nehemiah had been gone, they went back on their word and allowed everything to deteriorate.

No wonder Nehemiah “was greatly displeased” when he saw the mess. Put yourself in his position, having fully devoted himself to God’s assignment that produced positive spiritual results. He expected the people to keep their promises to God and then saw firsthand how dramatically things had gone backwards. This scenario is often experienced by believers who invest themselves in the work of the ministry and produce spiritual fruit. Later, they are made aware that much of what was accomplished has disappeared in their absence. The realization of the loss is shocking even when you know it can happen.

Q4 What is an example of seeing the reversal of spiritual gains in someone you disciplined?

Confront Spiritual Declension Boldly

“I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, ‘Why is the house of God neglected?’ Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.” 13:10,11

The people Nehemiah had put in charge of taking care of God’s house and the ministry workers had abandoned their responsibilities. They left their positions and went back to their previous occupations. Nehemiah responded decisively by calling the irresponsible leaders out for disrespecting God and breaking their sworn commitments to him. Nehemiah rebuked the people who knew better. He called them to account for their laxness and spiritual declension. That takes courage, but he knew it was the right thing to do.

Nehemiah models spiritual maturity in his confrontations. He saw things going on that were displeasing to God and he did not shrink back from calling the people involved to account. A godly person does that not because they want to, but because they know it necessary. Situations like these are defining moments for a spiritual leader's development and maturing. They do not act with self-righteous indignation but with a holy desire to protect God's name. They balance rebuke and correction with truth and grace by keeping in step with the Holy Spirit who discloses what to say at the right time. They are given spiritual boldness and are laser focused on what needs to be dealt with. The people confronted either respond positively and repent or negatively and act out poorly. They alone choose what they do with the truth.

You can be tempted to ask yourself if all you have done for God was worth the effort like Nehemiah did in his conversation with God: "Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and to its services." 13:14. Two more times in Chapter 13, Nehemiah prays this after calling the people back to their commitments to God. He wants God's reassurance because he knows that the Lord blesses those who act righteously on his behalf.

Q5 How do you learn to know how and when to confront sinful behaviour?

Disobedience Breeds Contempt for God

There are two major offenses Nehemiah charged the Jews with. The first one was dishonouring the Sabbath day by treating it like the other six. It had become business as usual in the marketplace on the Lord's Day and the house of God was being ignored. Nehemiah called out the leaders for their stupidity at allowing this to happen while ignoring the serious repercussions for their disobedience: "I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this wicked thing you are doing – desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.'" 13:17,18.

It is said that those who ignore history tend to repeat it. That is true of the Jews who disregarded the foolishness of their ancestors who disobeyed God and suffered the consequences. Now the Jews were doing the same thing to themselves. Nehemiah did not tolerate this and called them to account. He had the gatekeepers purified and re-stationed at the gates to ensure that the Sabbath day was respected in every detail (13:19-22a).

Nehemiah reminded God of his obedience and effort in restoring the Sabbath: "Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love." 13:22b. Nehemiah made sure that God had taken note of him calling the people to get their act together and to respect the Lord by Sabbath keeping.

The other major offense Nehemiah observed was the men of Judah again marrying foreign women who were not believers. These unsanctioned unions were harming the children from these marriages. They were losing their spiritual identity and were absorbed into the ways of the unbelieving world: "Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: 'You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned?'" 13:24-26a.

Nehemiah refers to Solomon, the wisest man that had ever lived up to that time. He fell into the ways of the world by being unequally yoked with unbelieving women. It cost him spiritually and contributed to dividing of the nation of Israel for generations to come. Believers must learn from Israel's experience. Parents are responsible to raise their children in the faith and protect them from being absorbed into the ways of the world. Each generation must perpetuate their children's fluency in the language and ways of God and for all who follow them. The sad state of Jerusalem during Nehemiah's return is exemplified by the children conversing in the ways of the world with ease but not knowing how to speak the language of God's people.

Both offenses were clear violations of what the Jews had promised to do. They had sworn an oath to the written covenant they made with God and then had willfully broken it. Everyone including the youth were disobeying God's commands and acting like unbelievers. Nehemiah used the people's own words against them to get their attention and called them to take responsibility for their sin against God.

Q6 How can you ensure that you do not begin to show contempt for God by disobedience?

Take Strong Measures to Make the Point

Nehemiah remained serious about spiritual things throughout his later years. He rebuked the husbands and fathers who knew better but disobeyed God anyway. He called curses down on them that they had previously agreed to accept if they backslid. He physically beat on some of the men and pulled out their hair as an act to humiliate and scorn them (See 2 Samuel 10:4). Nehemiah made the men take an oath to smarten up spiritually, be godly examples to follow, and train their children to serve God.

These strong measures are reminiscent of the time Jesus went into the temple in Jerusalem, upset tables, and drove out the money changers (Matthew 21:12,13). He reclaimed the temple as the house of prayer that the people had turned into a place of business. Onlookers were amazed at Jesus' zeal for guarding the sense of reverence for God's house. Centuries earlier, Nehemiah had also been zealous for people to respect God's holy standards and house.

After Nehemiah took disciplinary actions, he went to prayer and shared his thoughts with God. He knew that his corrective measures could cause people to react badly towards him and make his life miserable. However, what mattered most to Nehemiah was knowing God approved of what he had done, and it would be added as a credit to his eternal account. This time Nehemiah changed the focus of his prayer and asked God to hold the people accountable for their sinful behaviour: “Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.” 13:29.

Nehemiah’s actions were not vindictive nor self-serving. His motives were redemptive and praiseworthy. He wanted the people to repent and for God to be glorified. He purified the priests and Levites of their worldliness and reassigned them to their spiritual duties. Godly discipline is designed to bring people back in line with God’s will and re-establish them in spiritual growth.

Q7 Why are strong measures needed to address willful disobedience to God?

Desire God’s Favor Above Everything

We do not know if the people fully understood or appreciated what Nehemiah had saved them from. Left on their own, they would have drifted farther away from God and become worshipless and godless, generation after generation. The Bible does not indicate if anyone ever thanked Nehemiah for what he had done for the Jews at personal cost. Regardless, his desire was that God was taking note and was pleased.

Few people will realize how much you lay your life on the line for them. However, like Nehemiah, their recognition and approval are not what you need to keep you going. You are wise to not seek people’s applause as the reward for service. What you do look forward to is the Lord looking into your eyes one day and saying, “Well done” (Matthew 25:21). That will make everything you have done for God worth the effort.

Nehemiah concludes his book with his third request asking for God’s continued blessing and approval: “Remember me with favor, my God.” Nehemiah 13:31b.

Is that not what you desire for your life now and in the future? It is amazing to experience God’s favor each day everywhere you go. One day, you and every person will stand before God to give an account of how you have spent your lives. Every use of time, talents, money, and privileges has been noted by God and will be answered for. Every good thing you have done for Christ will be rewarded. When you manage your time well, use your talents to help others meet Jesus, spend your money wisely, love your spouse, train up your children to be godly, and influence people for Christ, you will receive the Lord’s commendation and eternal blessing.

This eternal certainty is important to consider at every stage of life. Everything you do each day adds to what you will say for yourself later. Throughout this study, you saw Nehemiah building a godly life over years of faithful service. He prayed regularly, studied God's word continually, and relied on the Holy Spirit to strengthen and enable him to be faithful to God's call.

The first time you read about Nehemiah, he was praying. He asked God for favor to fulfill his assignment: "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man (the king)." 1:11b. And what are the last words you hear from Nehemiah? He wanted God's approval for a life well lived: "Remember me with favor, my God." 13:31b.

Nehemiah involved God in everything he did and was rewarded with God's provision to meet each need and the enabling to carry out his mission successfully.

Q8 How does Nehemiah's lifelong desire for God's favor inspire you?

Get Building

We do not know how much longer Nehemiah lived after his final recorded prayer. We do know that he lived his life well for God on every page of the book that bears his name. He inspires us because he did not simply live for his own interests but gave himself for the benefit of others.

Godly people live like that. They influence and impact those around them for God because that is who they are. They are faithful to God's call and see the Lord at work in supernatural ways every day. They know they need the assistance of the Holy Spirit to enable them to live well and be godly. They consider themselves partners with Christ in the spiritual rebuilding of broken lives. They believe there is no better way to spend life than on eternal things that really matter. Like Nehemiah, they choose to build themselves up in faith and help to build others that are spiritually broken. Be one of those godly people who invest themselves in God's mission of transforming lives.

Get Building!

Life Application

1. Give a recap of Nehemiah's close relationship with God.
2. How does Nehemiah's assignment from God relate to you building yourself and others?
3. Name things you learned from Nehemiah about living with kingdom perspective.
4. Identify areas of your life that need to be spiritually rebuilt.

5. What is your plan for rebuilding them? How will you know when it is successful?
6. Who have you put in place to hold you accountable for your spiritual progress?
7. What are you doing to stay energized and productive in your kingdom service?
8. How are you becoming more spiritually discerning? Why is that important?
9. What are you doing to be ready to speak the truth in love when necessary?
10. How will you stay engaged with God building the broken and enjoying his favor?