

HIS
PLAN
OUR
PURPOSE

IS THERE MORE?

*Understanding the Storyline of the Bible
from Genesis to Revelation*

THE STORIES OF FAITH + RENEWAL

PARTICIPANT
GUIDE

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28
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PURPOSE

OF THIS GUIDE

People from every generation seem to be asking the same question about life; “Is there more?”

The short answer is, yes. However, a more in-depth answer is that as we understand God’s plan and its impact on our purpose, we can better grasp what “more” there is as God’s chosen people.

Our goal throughout this year is to understand the storyline of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. At its most basic level, the Bible is simply the story of God fashioning a people for Himself and redemptively interacting with them throughout history. ¹

The Bible has 66 books, written by approximately 40 different people, covering a span of 4,000 years. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. Each book reveals God’s Plan and Our Purpose. From Genesis to Revelation we see that there is more to life than what this world and culture have to offer. Because of Christ, there is faith, renewal, and so much more that will be revealed in the weeks and months to come.

How to use this Guide:

Work your way through this guide each week, prior to the lesson date. You can do a little each day or do it all at one time. It is designed to be used with your Bible, which is God’s blueprint for life.

¹ *Chronological Life Application Study Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc Carol Stream, Illinois, 2012, p. A23

For each week:

- **READ** the scripture passages noted for each section.
- **PONDER** the points suggested in the outline based on the scripture passages you read.
- **ANSWER** the questions posed under each point.

Pray for your teachers and for those who will attend your class, that His story would come alive, that His plan would become clear, and that all would gain understanding that shapes our purpose.

IS THERE
MORE?

THE WHOLE STORY

Warren Weirsbe writes, “When He wrote the Bible, God didn’t give us a ponderous theology book divided into sections labeled God, Creation, Man, Sin, and so forth. Instead, He gave us a story, a narrative that begins in eternity past and ends in eternity future.”



THE STORY OF **GRACE**

> *January*



THE STORY OF **DELIVERANCE**

> *February*



THE STORY OF **PROMISE**

> *March*

FEATURED



THE STORY OF **FAITH**

> *April*



THE STORY OF **RENEWAL**

> *May*



THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**

> *June, July + August*



THE STORY OF **CHRIST: IN HIS OWN WORDS**

> *August + September*



THE STORY OF **POWER**

> *October*



THE STORY OF **CHANGE**

> *November*



THE STORY OF **HEAVEN**

> *December*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE STORY OF FAITH > 6



- 8 **Faith** in Suffering
April 4/5

Easter Weekend > *No Bible Study Classes*
April 11/12
- 16 **Faith** in God's Sovereignty
April 18/19
- 26 **Faith** in Seeking Him
April 25/26

THE STORY OF RENEWAL > 34



- 36 **Renewal** Through Prayer
May 2/3
- 44 **Renewal** Through New Beginnings
May 9/10
- 52 **Renewal** Through Leadership
May 16/17
- 60 **Renewal** Through God's Revelation
May 23/24
- 68 **Renewal** Through Commitment
May 30/31

THE STORY OF FAITH

In the last three months, we have studied the stories of Grace, Deliverance, and Promise. In each of those stories, we have seen the faithfulness of God to His people during times of difficulty and opposition. God paved the way for the story of faith in each context.

This month we celebrate the hallmark of our faith as Christians. Easter is the culmination of all that God had in mind from the very beginning, providing His grace in Jesus Christ; deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ; fulfilling His eternal promise through Jesus Christ.

The faith of God's people did not begin with a baby born in Bethlehem or wait for the Lamb of God to be crucified on a cross. The faith of God's people was a reality from the beginning and in the darkest times of history. This month we will see God's people in exile in Babylon, having been taken captive from their homes in Jerusalem and Judah. They would spend 70 years in a foreign land, with foreign leaders, in the midst of a culture that worshiped foreign gods. Their circumstances were dark and hopeless, yet somehow they had faith.

A biblical definition of faith is found in the book of Hebrews:

HEBREWS 11:1 *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

How do we have faith in what we cannot see and touch? How can we be confident



in that which has not happened yet? These are questions that have been pondered for centuries, dating all the way back to the 6th century B.C. Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to wrestle with these questions as they lived in captivity. Jeremiah had to wrestle with these questions as he wrote to God's people in exile. Each of us has to wrestle with these questions in the context of our lives.

God's promises in His Word from Genesis to Revelation can be trusted. Look at the first stanza of the hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*, from 1787:

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

As we study God's Word during this Easter season, in the Spring of 2020, may we be reminded the crux of our Christian faith is our belief that the birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what gives us everlasting life. This is THE story, His story, told from the very beginning through the end, in God's Word. It is a story of faith.

Join us for the next 4 weeks as we embrace the story of Faith.

Apr 4/5	Faith in Suffering - Daniel 3
Apr 11/12	Easter Weekend (No Bible Study classes)
Apr 18/19	Faith in God's Sovereignty - Daniel 7
Apr 25/26	Faith in Seeking Him - Jeremiah 29

FAITH

IN SUFFERING

DATE

April 4 & 5

WEEK

1 of 4

KEY VERSES

Daniel 3:17-18

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Circumstances are Heating Up
2. The Choice is Made
3. "Even If" kind of Faith
4. Testimony of Faith

THINGS TO KNOW

- Daniel's Babylonian name was Belteshazzar but we know him by his Hebrew name, Daniel.
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given Babylonian names when taken into captivity. Their Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

"IF IT BE SO, OUR GOD WHOM WE SERVE IS ABLE TO DELIVER US FROM THE FURNACE OF BLAZING FIRE; AND HE WILL DELIVER US OUT OF YOUR HAND, O KING. BUT EVEN IF HE DOES NOT, LET IT BE KNOWN TO YOU, O KING, THAT WE ARE NOT GOING TO SERVE YOUR GODS OR WORSHIP THE GOLDEN IMAGE THAT YOU HAVE SET UP."

DANIEL 3:17-18

SETTING THE STAGE



Daniel has something for everyone. History. Prophecy. Politics. Friends. Prayers. Lions. Statues. Wild Animals. A fiery furnace. Dreams. Visions. A king who thought he was a cow. Adventure. Escapes. Angels. Demons. Detailed information about ancient history as well as prophecies about the end times. This is one of the most unique books in all of Scripture, not just because of the topics but also the fact that it was written in two languages. Daniel was written in both Aramaic and Hebrew; Chapters 2-7 are written in Aramaic, all the other chapters in Hebrew, thus showing the brilliance and education of Daniel.

Ultimately Daniel is a story of faith. The faith showed by God's people during a very difficult time in their history. Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was the leader of the Babylonian Empire which included the most powerful army on earth at the time. There were three deportations of God's people leading them into a period of exile which would last for 70 years.

Jews were driven away from their neighborhoods, homes and all with which they were familiar and taken into captivity. The book of Daniel begins with the overthrow of Jerusalem and spans the entire 70 years of exile. We need to remember that history is His Story. Dr. Thomas Constables says, "This was a time in Israel's history similar to the time just before the Exodus. Israel was in captivity. Daniel contains proof of God's sovereignty."¹

God is sovereign and always at work for our good and His glory. When all is said and done, it is about His Plan and Our Purpose. The book of Daniel shows the plan of God is not derailed even in the midst of captivity. Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego live out their purpose in the midst of cultural pressure, vulnerability, and suffering.

¹ Dr. Thomas Constable, www.sonlight.com, *Daniel, Expository Notes*.

FAITH

IN SUFFERING

READ: Daniel 3:1-30

POINTS TO PONDER

In the first chapters of Daniel, there is an uncompromising conviction of Daniel and his three friends that was established from the very beginning of their time in Babylon as young teenagers. Nebuchadnezzar was new in his position as king. The Jews were in exile in a foreign land, experiencing foreign food, foreign language, and foreign gods. Daniel and his friends took a stand for God. They determined early to set their hearts to follow God and God alone, without compromise.

The Babylonians were a pluralistic society, which means they worshiped many gods and had many idols. They even worshiped the “heavens” but not to any “god in the heavens” in particular; just the “heavens.” In chapter 2, Daniel mentions the *God of Heaven* five times in this one chapter. And those who read it perhaps understood for the first time there was a *God of Heaven*. Daniel, in essence, was saying, you have all these little “g” gods. But I believe in, trust in, and have faith in the One True God, the capital “G” God, the *God of Heaven*, who will never leave nor forsake me. Daniel knew the reality that the *God of Heaven* cared about His people on earth, even in the midst of suffering during the exile.

Daniel’s friends also believed in this One True God; the *God of Heaven* who would never leave nor forsake them. This belief is put to the test in chapter 3 for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

1. CIRCUMSTANCES ARE HEATING UP

We have all experienced times in our lives where it feels like the walls are closing in on us. Circumstances beyond our control become overwhelming. The culture of the day seems to be free-falling and spiraling downward.

For those who choose to live a Christian lifestyle based on Judeo-Christian Biblical values, it is becoming much more challenging trying to sidestep the landmines. Some would even say the circumstances we are living in are heating up.

This is not unlike what three Jewish young men were facing in Babylon while in captivity.

REVIEW DANIEL 3:1-6.

The people were expected to blindly bow down and worship this grand golden 90-foot statue of King Nebuchadnezzar, or else. It was a blatant threat. There was no room for debate or questions.

The circumstances were heating up for all people, both Babylonians and Jews. It did not matter your background, race, education or socio-economic stature; the mandate and threat were the same. When these sorts of situations occur, there is a choice that has to be made. If you have not already pre-determined how you will respond when circumstances heat up, you are likely to get burned.

For those who believed in God, it was a very real test of their faith.

The devil tempts us to destroy our faith, but God tests us to develop our faith because a faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. ²

? What happens when the circumstances and culture are forcing you to choose whether or not you will bow down to something or someone other than God?

² Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary; Complete Old Testament*, Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2007, p. 1352.

2. THE CHOICE IS MADE

REVIEW DANIEL 3:12-15.

The decree is passed that those who refuse to bow down and worship will be cast into a fiery furnace to their death. Everyone must make their own individual choice. Some made a choice based on their faith, and it was noticed by others that they refused to bow down and worship this statue.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had administration positions in Babylon. They were respected enough by the king and the governing body based on their skill set to serve the kingdom of Babylon in a capacity of leadership. But now they had made a stand based on their faith in God. Their faith was being tested. They made a choice to stand up for God when everyone else was bowing down to a man-made statue.

In our culture, few if any have had to face this threat of putting our lives on the line if we did not bow down to a statue. However, we have increasingly seen compromises of the Judeo-Christian value system. Whether it is television, movies, music, video games, internet or printed media; there is a distinct slant to having us “bow down” to that which is not based on biblical principles. We too have to make a choice to stand for God based on our faith, regardless of consequences.

The king gave them a second chance to do it the “right way;” more accurately “his way.” They stood their ground and made one of the greatest declarations of faith recorded.

These three did not hesitate in their response to the king.



In what ways are you choosing to stand for God in our culture?

3. "EVEN IF" KIND OF FAITH

REVIEW DANIEL 3:16-18.

In their response, we see maturity, wisdom, and humility. They very simply, with humility, stood their ground as they made a stand for God. They showed great confidence and faith in the *God of Heaven* who promised to never leave nor forsake them.

Their statement of faith was not dependent on the outcome. Their faith was firm regardless of the outcome. They believed God "could" deliver them; it honestly did not matter to them whether or not God "did" deliver them.

I love that "even if" statement in verse 18. That is where faith comes in to play. So often people will turn to God in times of trouble and try to bargain with God. "God I will do this for you if you do that for me." We get caught up in a 'what is in it for me' kind of faith. The motivation for these three was not based on their safety, being delivered or even destroying the statue. Their motivation was simply to be obedient in their faith to the *God of Heaven*.

- EVEN IF - God does not give me a job; I will have Faith.
- EVEN IF - God does not give me physical healing; I will have Faith.
- EVEN IF - God does not give me 'this or that;' I will have Faith.

We need to have that "*Even If*" kind of faith in an ever-changing culture.

REVIEW DANIEL 3:22-25.

As the king looked into the furnace he saw not three, but four people; the fourth being either an angel or pre-incarnate Christ; the promise fulfilled. God is there in a changing culture, in the time of suffering and when the heat is being turned up in their lives and in ours.

We may not ever see a physical "fourth" person in our midst during times of trials and suffering. But we can be confident that God is present with us through the Holy Spirit (*John 14:16*). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were confident in the power, authority and protection of God; giving them faith to make a stand rather than bowing down. Their faith turned their test into a testimony.



Why is “even if” kind of faith a sign of maturity?

4. TESTIMONY OF FAITH

REVIEW DANIEL 3:26-30.

Not only did God protect and save them, but their clothes were not burned, their hair was not singed, and they did not even smell like smoke. I smell like smoke when I simply grill in my backyard.

God wanted to make sure there was no doubt, no other explanation, nor any sort of coincidence involved with this scenario. It was God and God alone. Even the king acknowledged that truth when he called to them, “*you servants of the Most High God.*”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had an eternal perspective rather than a temporary perspective. Their “*even if*” kind of faith was not based on what God may or may not do in the temporary set of circumstances. Their faith was based solely on who God is, period. Often times we base our faith on immediate results, focusing on the actions of God, rather than the character of God. The faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was literally and figuratively tested by fire, resulting in praise, glory and honor to God. In the New Testament, Peter explains this kind of faith as follows:

1 PETER 1:6-9 *In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials,⁷ so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;⁸ and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,⁹ obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.*

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

In her study on Daniel, Beth Moore writes this about the fiery furnace experience:

We can be delivered **from** the fire and our faith is **built**.
We can be delivered **through** the fire and our faith is **refined**.
We can be delivered **by** the fire and our faith is **perfected**.³

Notice there is always going to be some sort of fire and it will directly impact our faith. There is never going to be a life with the absence of trials and sufferings. Our challenge is how we prepare for and persevere through those times of testing by fire.

We do not hear anything else about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego after chapter 3, but their faith through the fire has made a lasting impression on eternity. Even King Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the *God of Heaven*, the Most High God as the only One who could have done this miracle.

The contemporary Christian music group, Mercy Me, has a song called “Even If.” Part of the lyrics read:

It’s easy to sing when there’s nothing to bring me down
But what will I say when I’m held to the flame
Like I am right now

I know You’re able and I know You can
Save through the fire with Your mighty hand
But even if You don’t my hope is You alone

Whether it is **from** the fire, **through** the fire, or **by** the fire; let our faith be **built, refined and perfected** as a witness and testimony to all who see. God’s plan is to be with you every step of the way in every circumstance; Your purpose is to have that “*even if*” kind of faith, where your hope is in God alone, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

³ Beth Moore, *Daniel*, Lifeway Press, 2006.

FAITH

IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

DATE

April 18 & 19

WEEK

3 of 4

KEY VERSE

Daniel 7:13

LESSON OUTLINE

1. 20/20 Foresight
2. The Ancient of Days
3. Keep Looking

THINGS TO KNOW

- The Book of Daniel was written in two languages - Hebrew and Aramaic.

I KEPT LOOKING IN THE NIGHT VISIONS, AND BEHOLD, WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN WAS COMING, AND HE CAME UP TO THE ANCIENT OF DAYS AND WAS PRESENTED BEFORE HIM.

DANIEL 7:13

SETTING THE STAGE



In our last session we looked at the “even if” kind of faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were taken into exile along with Daniel. This week, God’s people are still in exile, having been taken out of Jerusalem and Judah into captivity in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar captured them and brought them back to Babylon. This exile would last for 70 years. Daniel continued to serve God faithfully throughout his life though living in exile. Even when Babylon was overthrown by Persia, the leaders of the new empire recognized Daniel for his integrity and valued him as an adviser. Daniel remained faithful to God even when faced with death, and God blessed him for it and rescued him.¹

Throughout these 70 years of captivity, Daniel served four kings represented in the chart below:

KING	EMPIRE	STORY TOLD IN
Nebuchadnezzar	Babylon	Daniel 1-4
Belshazzar	Babylon	Daniel 5, 7-8
Darius	Medo-Persia	Daniel 6, 9
Cyrus	Medo-Persia	Daniel 10-12

From the chart you can see that the book of Daniel was not written in a chronological fashion. The first 6 chapters deal with the biography of Daniel and his three friends while under three different kings. They began as teenagers in chapter 1 and by chapter 6, Daniel is facing the lions when 80+ years of age.

The powerful miracles recorded in Daniel chapters 1-6 show God’s sovereignty at work for His people. *Continued on page 18 >*

¹ *Chronological Life Application Study Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois, 2012, p. 1135.

FAITH

IN GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Setting the Stage, continued > The prophecies in chapters 7-12 show God's sovereignty over the Gentile nations and Israel by unveiling what He will do with them far into the future. ²

John MacArthur explains,

Chapter 7 of Daniel is pure future prophecy. It sweeps all the way from the life of Daniel to the return of Jesus Christ and touches the great epics of history in between. It is one of the chapters that lays out for us God's incredible, unchangeable, redemptive plan for human history. ³

Chapters 7 and 8 chronologically fit between chapters 4-5. It is after the death of Nebuchadnezzar and at the beginning of the reign of Belshazzar. It was a time of transition for the people of Babylon as well as a time of the unknown for God's people under the leadership of a new earthly king. God's message to Daniel via a dream, comes at a very critical time in the midst of their captivity, giving them a vision of the future.

Introduction

I must admit, though I hate to admit, I can see better with glasses. Mine have "progressive" lenses; helping me to see far away, mid-range and very near. So, it may look like I am always agreeing with you, but the truth is I am nodding my head trying to focus!

When dealing with prophecy in the Bible, we need to focus. Sometimes prophecy is to be seen near; what will happen very soon in the next few days, weeks, months, or years. Other times prophecy is mid-range; perhaps in the next several years or generations, and still other times it

² Dr. Thomas Constable, www.soniclight.com, *Daniel*.

³ John MacArthur, www.gty.org, *The Coming of Christ Part 1*, sermon on Daniel 7, March 16, 1980.

is far away in the distant future, time unknown.

Daniel 7 begins the prophetic part of the book. Although we will not be going through to the end of the book, this will provide a great picture of God's faithfulness in His sovereignty. There are times when these chapters of Scripture look a bit fuzzy to us. We cannot quite focus on the trees for the forest, or the forest for the trees. And some of us are not even in the woods!

But, we should never shy away from a passage of Scripture because it is difficult to understand. In our Bible Study classes, we do not just hang out with the "feel good" passages, it is our goal to actually study the Bible in its entirety. With this year's curriculum, we are asking the question "Is There More?" as we look at God's plan and our purpose through the stories of Grace, Deliverance, Promise, and this month, Faith. And what better time to look at the faith and sovereignty of God than the week after Easter when Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of His death, burial and resurrection. Our goal this week is to put on spiritual glasses and get a clear picture or perhaps "less fuzzy" picture of what Daniel saw. Unbeknownst to Daniel, he had 20/20 foresight.

READ: Daniel 7:1-27

P O I N T S T O P O N D E R

1. 20/20 FORESIGHT

Ironically in the year 2020, we have 20/20 hindsight that God gave Daniel a panoramic picture of the future of world history. Though Daniel did not see it come to pass and was literally physically sickened by what he saw (*Daniel 8:26, 27*), God provided him with 20/20 foresight into the political and spiritual world.

One thing for us to remember as we go along is what God says in Isaiah.

ISAIAH 46:9-10 *"I am God and there is none like me¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times, the things that are not yet done."*

Let us put on our spiritual glasses and see how the 20/20 foresight unfolds.



Daniel’s vision took place approximately 50 years after Nebuchadnezzar had his dream, so Daniel was in his late 60’s at this point.

In Daniel 7, the four animals represent the four kingdoms. Look at the chart comparison.

For Daniel, everything depicted in the vision was in the prophetic future having 20/20 foresight. For us, we see most of it as historical fact, most having already occurred and viewed as 20/20 hindsight.

There was not a specific timeline given to Daniel, only that change was going to happen, and it was going to be aggressive, challenging, and messy at times.

The Lion with eagle’s wings represents Babylon; both animals are powerful,

one on land, one in the air and yet we see the changing of their power. The wings are plucked off, perhaps showing the humiliation of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar towards the end of his life and then his change of heart toward God in the animal standing on two feet with the mind of a human. But we see the transition taking place.

The Bear represents the Medo-Persian Empire; also powerful. Notice it is lopsided; one side taller than the other, most scholars think that represents the Persian dominance in the empire. The explanation for the three ribs in the mouth is a toss-up depending on who you read. The disagreement is found primarily in what countries they represent, but most all agree it shows they have conquered other countries to achieve their present dominance.

The Leopard with four heads and four wings represents Greece; most believe it reflects the speed of Alexander the Great's conquest. The four heads may represent the division of Alexander's kingdom into four provinces after his death: Egypt, Syria, Macedonia, and Pergamum.

Now the Fourth Beast described as dreadful, terrifying and extremely strong, had large iron teeth, different from the others and ten horns. Many scholars believe this to be Rome and the Roman Empire which became the strongest, most powerful, and influential of all Empires up until that time.

As Daniel describes this fourth beast he says in verse 8, "*contemplating the horns, behold another horn, a little one, came up among them....*" Most scholars see this representing the "antichrist."

Often we think of the prefix "anti" as the "opposite of" something. However, the more appropriate meaning of it in this context is "against" or "instead of" as it pertains to Christ. Warren Wiersbe explains, "The final world ruler will be both a counterfeit Christ and an enemy who is against Christ."⁴

2. THE ANCIENT OF DAYS

REVIEW DANIEL 7:9-12.

In Daniel 7:9-12, in this midst of dramatic prophecy, we see the good news

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary OT*, p. 1370.

that God is on the throne. Do not be distracted by the description, rather embrace the majesty and authority of the Ancient of Days. This gives us faith in His Sovereignty. The Ancient of Days, God Almighty, the Creator, the Alpha and Omega took His seat on the throne. If everything else has looked a little fuzzy, a little bit out of focus; put spiritual glasses on and see this truth, this promise, this hope that builds our faith!

The Ancient of Days took His sovereign seat; He is beyond compare:

- The Lion with Eagle wings is powerful, but not Omnipotent.
- The Bear with the ribs in the mouth is strong, but not Omnipresent.
- The Leopard with four heads is fast, but not Omniscient.
- The Fourth Beast is terrifying and dreadful, but not the Creator who spoke the world into existence and is the beginning and the end.

In times of war and rumors of war, we have the promise that the Ancient of Days will take His seat with full authority and sovereignty. Our faith is based on what we know.

We can be sure of the future because God has been faithful in the past. It may sound like a cliché, but that does not diminish its truth. “I don’t know what tomorrow holds, but I do know who holds tomorrow,” the Ancient of Days! The same one who held yesterday is the same one who holds today and is the same one who holds all of our tomorrows.



How is the Ancient of Days working in our world today?

3. KEEP LOOKING

REVIEW DANIEL 7:13-15.

These verses show the humanity of Daniel and a glimpse of his faith. Notice what he does in verse 13, “I kept looking in the night visions.” We know this was a troubling experience for Daniel, he admits it in verse 15, but in spite of his fear, his confusion, his distress, his alarm and perhaps even his doubt, he “kept looking.”

That in itself is a lesson for each of us. If we are honest with ourselves there are times when we are afraid, confused, or are experiencing doubt because of the “unknown.” Or sometimes it is because of the “known.” But whatever we are experiencing in life, even when we want to look away, look in another direction, remember Daniel “kept looking.”

Daniel kept looking and as he kept looking he finds the key to the entire vision; a new Kingdom! This is the heart and soul of the vision. There is coming a new King, establishing a new Kingdom that will be eternal, it will not pass away, and it will not be destroyed.



In what ways can you “keep looking” when the culture seems dark and the future out of focus?

There is coming a final Monarch, a glorious King that will establish an eternal Kingdom. A Kingdom unlike anything the world has ever known. Every kind of kingdom and every kind of ruler has been temporary at best. But now there will be an Eternal King, an Eternal Kingdom; one that knows no boundaries or language barriers, known as the Son of Man.

Jesus used this title, Son of Man, to refer to Himself throughout the Gospels, 31 times in the Gospel of Matthew alone. Each time Jesus referred

to Himself in this manner, it should have taken those who were listening back to Daniel 7:13. If they had been wearing their spiritual glasses, it should have been an “ah-ha” moment.

This kingdom, the fifth and final kingdom, will be an everlasting Kingdom! The Ancient of Days, the Son of Man; victorious over all evil, over all earthly kingdoms, over all that is temporary. A reminder of what we celebrated last week during Easter, victory over the sting of death.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Two years later, Daniel had another vision with more detail about the “Little Horn” which is recorded in chapter 8. I think the last two verses of chapter 8 serve as a reminder of what we are to do with all this prophetic information.

DANIEL 8:26-27 *“The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future.”* ²⁷ *I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king’s business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding. (NIV)*

Like Daniel, reading these words of prophecy can leave us feeling exhausted, sick and confused beyond understanding. Sometimes we allow the unknown, out of focus, fuzzy future of this world cause us to live in fear, doubt and not wanting to move forward.

Verse 27 says Daniel was exhausted and ill for several days. He could have easily lived in isolation or just focused on those prophetic visions and nothing else. But look at what he did in the second half of verse 27. Daniel got up and went about the king’s business. Even though he was appalled by the vision, and it was beyond understanding, he did not let it get him down or distracted.

Daniel knew that even though the future was fuzzy and seemingly blurry and out of focus, God had it all in focus. The Ancient of Days, the Son of Man, will be victorious in the end for all eternity.

In the midst of this highly troubled and dangerous world, God is present, a God more powerful than all the beasts—a God who loves and nourishes rather than hates and devours. It is in this God we are given hope and meaning, life and salvation “forever and ever.”

As we watch the news, hear about the wars and the various world leaders, let us look with spiritual glasses asking God for wisdom, discernment, courage and focus. But let us not be so distracted that we do not get up and go about the business of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man. May our faith be built upon the certainty of His sovereignty.

“LET US NOT BE SO
DISTRACTED THAT WE
DO NOT GET UP AND GO
ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF
THE KING OF KINGS AND
LORD OF LORDS.”

FAITH

IN SEEKING HIM

DATE

April 25 & 26

WEEK

4 of 4

KEY VERSE

Jeremiah 29:13

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Faith found in Exile
2. Faith found in God's Plan
3. Faith in Who He Says He Is

THINGS TO KNOW

- Jeremiah was a contemporary of Daniel and Ezekiel.
- Jeremiah's ministry was primarily in Jerusalem and Judah.
- Jeremiah wrote letters to those living in exile in Babylon.

YOU WILL SEEK ME
AND FIND ME WHEN
YOU SEEK ME WITH ALL
YOUR HEART.

J E R E M I A H 2 9 : 1 3

SETTING THE STAGE



Jeremiah served God during the same time period as Daniel. Each had to rely on their faith during extraordinary circumstances that were beyond their control. However, Jeremiah was primarily serving with those who were still in Jerusalem, while Daniel was with those who were taken into exile in Babylon.

Each were being used by God to encourage and minister to God's people in a very difficult environment. The last two weeks in the book of Daniel we have seen faith expressed by those living in Babylon. While they were there, Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem writing and ministering on behalf of God to those who had been taken into captivity. (*Daniel 9:2*)

The prophet Jeremiah must be one of the most courageous of all the prophets. Living through one of the darkest times in Israel's history, his enemies did not like his message nor did his family and friends who rejected him. He was beaten, ridiculed, rejected, thrown in a dungeon, tied up; yet, he did not give up. The Lord does not ask us to be successful, He asks us to be faithful to His call and obedient to His Word. Through it all, Jeremiah was faithful. He is known as the "weeping prophet," as he lived his life heartbroken for God's people. It was this compassion that allowed him to move forward in the midst of the sadness of the circumstances that were not going to change anytime soon.

The fact of the matter was that God's people were in exile which would last for 70 years. The reality was that people who were taken from Jerusalem and Judah may never return based on their age when they left. However, the fullness of God's plan is never limited to the timetable in which we exist on this earth. God's purpose and plan are based on the eternal, not the temporary and finite. Jeremiah recognized that truth and communicated it for the benefit of God's people, encouraging them not to give up, but to hold tightly to their faith as they would keep seeking God.

FAITH

IN SEEKING HIM

Introduction

Jeremiah constantly assures the people, reminding them to remain faithful to the hope of restoration within their own land even in the midst of persecution for their blatant disobedience. Despite their disobedience, our Heavenly Father who cares deeply for His people, desired their faith to be restored and provided assurance of His constant faithfulness through Jeremiah.

Many are familiar with the verse found in Jeremiah 29:11, *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”* (NIV) Out of context, this verse can mislead us to find faith in the promised outcome instead of finding faith in the midst of our current circumstances.

How can we find faith in the midst of our struggles? By seeking Him. The God that came to restore their faith in the middle of a time of exile is the same God that will restore your faith no matter your current circumstance.

READ: Jeremiah 29:1-32

POINTS TO PONDER

1. FAITH FOUND IN EXILE

The people of God had repeatedly ignored God and turned their backs on God. God had warned them this would happen. They did not believe that it would actually happen to them; that is the sort of thing that happens to someone else. They had a choice to make on what they would do in the midst of their circumstances.

The first part of this chapter establishes the next steps for the people of God. The Lord says LIVE in this season, produce in this season and

establish your roots until your time is completed. He is encouraging them and us to have faith regardless of our current situation.

Their circumstances were about as bad as one could imagine. They could have given up on living. They could have sunk into a deep depression. They could have embraced a lifestyle of bitterness and anger. But God wanted them to live. Build houses, raise families, live a life of faith in the midst of the exile. Obviously, this would not be an easy task to do on their own.

However, they were not alone. God was a personal God, not a geographical God. Just because they were no longer living their familiar life in their familiar surroundings, they did not have to miss out on a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. All they had to do was to have enough faith to seek God in the midst of their circumstances.



How is the world we live in similar to living in exile?

2. FAITH FOUND IN GOD'S PLAN

REVIEW JEREMIAH 29:10-14.

Verse 10 initially sounds like good news. God is going to fulfill His good promise. God is going to bring you back to this place, your home, to Jerusalem. But wait, it is going to take seventy years to complete? Hold everything.

The Israelites were no longer in Israel, no longer home, no longer near their ordinary and familiar. The weeks would turn into months. The months would turn into years. The years would turn into decades. But it was all part of God's plan. That is the good news and the bad news of this story.

With this context in mind, let us look at one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 29:11.

God's people thought they would never end up in Babylon. Then once there, they thought they would never get out of Babylon. This is not unlike how we live our lives. We get caught up in circumstances that we never thought we would have to deal with; divorce, job loss, death of a loved one, illness. Sometimes we spiral downwards to where we feel we can never overcome or move beyond the present set of circumstances. But it is in those difficult, challenging, overwhelming times in life that we find faith in God's plan.

We often forget that God thinks about us. If God has plans for you and me, that means that He thinks about you and me. God takes time to not only think about us but to put together a plan for us. Ultimately God plans to prosper you, though that most likely will not be through financial riches. God does not plan to harm you; He loves you. God thinks about you so much, that He plans to give you a hope and a future.

REVIEW JEREMIAH 29:12-13.

In verse 12 we see that God wants to have a relationship with us that goes both ways. When we call on God, come to God and pray to God; He will listen.

This kind of relationship does not come haphazardly, it only happens with intentionality. Look again at verse 13, *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”* It takes patience and diligence to seek God, especially in a place of exile. Notice that God puts a small parameter on this promise. We are to seek God with all our heart. It is not about changing the circumstances; it is about building the relationship.



What challenges do you face when seeking God in the midst of difficult circumstances?

3. FAITH IN WHO HE SAYS HE IS

REVIEW JEREMIAH 29:15-17.

While in exile, the people of God looked for quick and convenient answers. They were being misled by false prophets. The Lord wanted to remind the people who was in control and that He was still God who was sovereign over all. Even though they had false hope, the Lord corrected all that had been communicated from the false prophets. Jeremiah gives a foretelling of the destruction that will take place within Jerusalem of the people who remain there. The grass was not necessarily greener back home. God was clearly showing the people that He was still God who remained true to His character. Their faith was being tested.

REVIEW JEREMIAH 29:19-20.

The Lord called them out. They had not listened to His words. Verse 19 hits close to home for all of us if we are honest with ourselves. We have access to God's Word like no other time in history. And yet, how often could those words be said of us, "*they have not listened.*" Distraction is easy, listening is not. We live in a world of distractions and excuses. It takes faith to listen to God; faith to realize that He is who He says He is. We might say it with our words, but do we live it in our lives? Do we listen to the truth of the Word of God?

All throughout Scripture the Lord reminds us of His character from beginning to end. These verses do not even scratch the surface of who our God is. Let us learn from those who have gone ahead. Let us remember in Whom to put our faith on a daily basis, regardless of circumstances. We are to have faith while in exile, faith in God's plan and faith in who He says He is. It is that kind of faith that changes lives and generations.



**Consider these verses: 1 John 2:1; John 6:35; Philippians 2:9-11.
Who does He say He is in these passages?**

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Since the beginning of time, God had a plan. His timing is perfect and purposeful. However, that does not mean that His timing is easy to understand or comfortable to embrace. There are times that circumstances challenge us in ways we do not want to be challenged. We experience things we do not want to experience. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, *There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.* Jeremiah realized this truth. Daniel realized this truth. The question is, do we realize this truth?

God wants to teach us, grow us, challenge us, and love us in all circumstances. In the days of Jeremiah, God wanted their faith to be found in Him alone not in temporary security given by false prophets. In their current circumstance of living in captivity, the Lord wanted their faith to take root. Living in constant faith takes time in the mundane, longing, and waiting for the outcome that is only held in our Creator's hands.

God wants nothing less for us today. God has a plan and a purpose for each one of us. Our challenge is to seek Him with all our heart, call out to Him, knowing He will listen. And then, it becomes our turn to listen to Him, as our faith is enriched.

THERE IS AN
APPOINTED TIME
FOR EVERYTHING.
AND THERE IS A
TIME FOR EVERY
EVENT UNDER
HEAVEN.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1



———— *COMING UP NEXT:*
THE STORY OF **RENEWAL**

THE STORY OF RENEWAL



The city of your forefathers is more than a thousand miles from where you now live. You have never seen it with your own eyes because you were born to a captive people in a foreign land, but you have heard endless accounts of its former beauty, glory, and fame. Now new reports have surfaced: the walls of this once-lovely city are broken down, the gates are burned and the people living there are in distress. ¹

Time had not stood still. Time had taken its toll on the people and the city. When God's people returned to the land they had been exiled from, the people and the city were in desperate need of restoration. They would find that the grass was not greener, nor were the circumstances sweeter. There would be challenges, obstacles and opposition from all directions; but they would be home. Home is where the heart is, and it would be where the work began; the work of renewal for both the people and the city.

The book of Nehemiah is a story of Renewal. The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God. The people of Israel have been exiled in Babylon for seventy years, suffering the consequences of their moral and religious failure. Treated as second class citizens of Babylon they lived as slaves to a foreign power experiencing oppression, unable to worship God freely. As the book opens, one generation has passed away and a new generation that has never seen the

Promised Land is free to return home. The story of Nehemiah encourages us that failure is not final. Exile is not the end. God never leaves His people. There is always room for renewal with God.

The Story of Renewal begins with brokenness. The people of Israel are returning to a broken Jerusalem. There are no walls or gates. The altar of God is decimated. The temple is destroyed. The people of Israel arrive in Jerusalem exposed to enemies and without a place to worship. They are in desperate need of renewal. While our circumstances are different than the people of Israel were in those times, we share a similar need for renewal in our life!

In Nehemiah, “there is something for virtually everyone – a general’s diary, a governor’s report, a civil record, a management handbook and a memoir – all in one short book.”² It is filled with suspense, heroism, hope, and a renewing of the covenant between Israel and God. Over the next five weeks, we will discover how we can experience renewal in our own lives. Broken walls and broken hearts can be renewed. Dissipated passion for God can be restored. The book of Nehemiah unpacks five principles that will lead to renewal in your life.

- May 2/3 Renewal Through Prayer - Nehemiah 1
- May 9/10 Renewal Through New Beginnings - Nehemiah 3-4
- May 16/17 Renewal Through Leadership - Nehemiah 5-6
- May 23/24 Renewal Through God’s Revelation - Nehemiah 8-9
- May 30/31 Renewal Through Commitment - Nehemiah 10

¹ *The Jeremiah Study Bible*, Worthy Publishing, 2013, p. 619

² *ESV Study Bible* p. 822

RENEWAL

THROUGH PRAYER

DATE

May 2 & 3

WEEK

1 of 5

KEY VERSE

Nehemiah 1:11 (ESV)

LESSON OUTLINE

3 Dimensions of Prayer:

1. Positional
2. Propositional
3. Personal

THINGS TO KNOW

- A cupbearer was a high-ranking official in charge of serving the king who had to be trustworthy and loyal. Because of his character, Nehemiah had the king's confidence and was able to exert influence in the royal court.

"O LORD, LET YOUR EAR BE ATTENTIVE TO THE PRAYER OF YOUR SERVANT, AND TO THE PRAYER OF YOUR SERVANTS WHO DELIGHT TO FEAR YOUR NAME, AND GIVE SUCCESS TO YOUR SERVANT TODAY, AND GRANT HIM MERCY IN THE SIGHT OF THIS MAN." NOW I WAS CUPBEARER TO THE KING.

NEHEMIAH 1:11 (ESV)

SETTING THE STAGE



At this point in our study, the Babylonian Empire has conquered Israel and destroyed Jerusalem, exiling the Israelite people out of their homeland and scattering them all over the known world. The Israelites' exile and their nation's destruction came as a result of their rebellion against God. However, as we studied in Jeremiah 29 last week, God promises to bring them back to Jerusalem and their homeland after 70 years of exile. ¹

The book of Nehemiah picks up where the book of Jeremiah leaves off. While Jeremiah pleads with the Israelites to turn to God and rely upon His promises while in exile, Nehemiah shows how God fulfills His promise of renewing Israel from its plight and suffering.

Historically, the Babylonian Empire ruled the known world in the 6th century BC until the Persian Empire gained prominence in the 5th century BC; and the book of Nehemiah specifically takes place during the relatively early stages of the Persian domain. In fact, Nehemiah, after whom the book receives its name, is a Jewish layman who serves as the cupbearer for the King of Persia at the time, “Artaxerxes Longimanus,” in the empire’s capital city of Susa.

During Nehemiah’s time of service for the king, the people of Israel continue to wade through the rippling effects of their national downfall. They are scattered and unsettled, destitute and hopeless. They even attempt several rebuilding efforts of Jerusalem, but their work falters and fails each time because of varying obstacles and threats from other nations.

The book of Ezra (the book right before Nehemiah), records two expeditions to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra, documenting the oppositions they face each time. *Continued on page 38 >*

¹ See Jeremiah 25:1-38, where God promises only 70 years of exile, and then Babylon’s punishment and desolation.

RENEWAL

THROUGH PRAYER

Setting the Stage, continued > The process remains difficult without the protection of a national wall.

One day while Nehemiah is serving in the royal palace, some of his friends relay to him that an Israelite remnant still in Jerusalem is under great danger and duress. There is no protection for them, and it seems as if it is only a matter of time before they lose their lives. Moved by both grief and compassion, Nehemiah prays and pleads to God on behalf of his people. In the process, Nehemiah shows us two remarkable truths: our place in God's story, and that exile is never the end for God's chosen people.²

In Nehemiah 1, we will look at Nehemiah's prayer after hearing of the Israelites' suffering and danger. In his prayer, we will see three different dimensions of prayer and why they are important: positional, propositional, and personal. By looking at Nehemiah's prayer of renewal, we can find renewal for our daily lives.

READ: Nehemiah 1:1-11.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. THE POSITIONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER

In chapter 1, we see that Nehemiah receives word from his brother that the remnant of Israelites were in grave danger and suffering greatly (v. 1-3). Their last strongholds of support and refuge had been demolished, and they were vulnerable to attack.

The news of the Israelites' suffering and sadness shakes Nehemiah to his

² The Bible Project, "Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah." via youtube.com.

core. By rejecting God's good authority, the nation of Israelites plummeted into darkness, injustice, and chaos, resulting in being conquered by the Babylonian Empire. To be sure, not all suffering comes as a result of sin. Jesus was perfect, yet suffered greatly. However, in this situation, Jerusalem's demise and their plight came as a result of their willful rebellion against God.

Nehemiah comes to God in prayer, expressing his grief for Israel, uttering his brokenness over the situation, and confessing his sin in repentance. Interestingly, even though Nehemiah is not 'present' in Jerusalem, is not 'broken' like they are, and is not even 'guilty' in the same way as his Israelite kin, he nevertheless acquaints himself with them deeply in every way.

Nehemiah associates himself with them to such a degree that he feels the depth of their own emotional sorrow; This is a grand picture of what a covenant community looks like. When one part suffers, the whole entity suffers and longs for restoration.

Nehemiah knows, however, that God *keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments* (v. 5), and God never turns His face away from those who come to Him.

All true, restorative and effective prayer begins on the bedrock of God's promise of our repentance. Prayer first and foremost begins as recognition of our position and God's position. Namely, that God is holy and we are not.

Nehemiah realizes his own spiritual position and the spiritual position of his people. They are broken and sinful. He also recognizes the gap that stands between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. The only opportunity for sinful man to have a relationship with a holy God is through the position of repentance, and trust in His grace.

What is interesting is that we can see glimpses of Jesus Christ and His salvation for us in the person of Nehemiah and in his intercession for the Israelites. Nehemiah heard the cries and felt the pains of his people from far away, and he associated himself with them in every degree. Similarly, Jesus heard our cries and sensed our distress on earth and acquainted Himself with us in every way, even to the point of bearing our own sin (*Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:8*).

In Nehemiah 1:5, we see that God *keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments*. But interestingly, Nehemiah has not kept God's commandments, nor have any of the Israelites. So, what is their hope of reconciliation; and likewise, what is ours? It is the promise of One who would come and fulfill the Law perfectly, Jesus. Therefore, it is only by faith in Him and repentance from sin that God will, in fact, never forsake us, regardless of any exile we shall walk through, whether spiritual or circumstantial.

Praying in line with the holiness of God, the grace of Christ, and your dependence upon Him will not only usher spiritual renewal into your soul personally, but it will also usher renewal into the lives for whom you are interceding. Prayer begins with an understanding of our position before God and His heart towards us.



How would you describe your own prayer life?

2. THE PROPOSITIONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER _____

In the latter half of the passage (verses 8-11), we can begin to see the **propositional** dimension of prayer. In other words, through Nehemiah's prayer, what do we see about how Nehemiah approaches God with his petitions, pleas, and supplications?

There is one recurring word over and over and over again in the prayer. What is it? The words 'You' and 'Your' as referents to God and His ownership appear a total of 20 different times in Nehemiah's prayer. When Nehemiah prays, he is stamping his petitions and concerns with the seal of God's authority and ownership, not his own.

Nehemiah ascribes authority, ownership, and kingship solely to God as he looks out over the domain of his perspective and experience.

Nehemiah is already praying for the right things and in the right way because he is finally seeing reality rightly. Nehemiah recognizes that the ownership belongs to God because He is the King and because it is His people to whom He has covenanted Himself.

If we are honest, most of us would probably admit that the predominant word in our prayers is not ‘You’ and ‘Your’ referring to God and His kingdom, but rather, ‘me’ and ‘my’ referring to ourselves.

How we ‘label’ and ‘tag’ our prayer requests with the pronoun of ownership says more about our hearts than it does about the prayer request itself.

When we put our requests into the domain of *Your great power and by Your strong hand* (v. 10) instead of our own, we will finally start experiencing relief and renewal in our prayer life and in our relationship with God.

When we affirm by faith God’s heart and God’s authority over every area in our life, God will bring spiritual renewal and restoration into the spaces that have been broken and are weak. He did this for Nehemiah and the Israelites; and as His children, God will do the same for us.



What words and pronouns are repeated most in your prayers?

3. THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER _____

At the very end of the chapter, we see something significant about the personal dimension of prayer. Look closely at the very end of chapter 1, the last line of verse 11: *Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

Nehemiah recognizes that God had placed him in a strategic place for a specific purpose in light of his prayers and others’ needs. God had sovereignly placed Nehemiah in a position with proximity and relationship to the King of Persia. As the cupbearer, Nehemiah was perhaps one of

the few in the entire kingdom, who resided with the king for hours a day. Ironically, Nehemiah as a foreigner had greater access to the king than even the citizens in the king's own kingdom.

Nehemiah acknowledges that God has placed him, of all people, in a specific place at a specific time with specific connections in order to bring the goodness of God into the plight of others. By virtue of his job, he occupies a strategic position to be a personal influence towards the king and a political advocate for his own people.

As Warren Wiersbe writes, “God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.”³

God sovereignly leads His people into specific places for specific reasons to carry out specific callings for the good of others and the glory of God.

Gospel ministry is ultimately recognizing your place in God's world with the unique resources, status, talents, and personality that God has endowed upon you that perhaps no one else may have and leveraging them for the welfare of others and the sake of God's Kingdom.

It is a fundamental realigning of your entire life under the authority of God, with the mission of God, and for the glory of God.



Where has God specifically positioned you so that you can make a difference in the lives of others that perhaps no one else can do?

³Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete Old Testament in One Volume* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), p. 752.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Where do you find yourself right now? Are you in need of God to renew your heart and life? Maybe you need a renewed sense of urgency to impact those around you. What are the unique giftings, seasons, and relationships God has given you right now to make a difference in the lives of others?

Renewal begins in our life through prayer. We pray, acknowledging God's position as holy and righteous. We pray, acknowledging our position as sinful and broken. We experience the renewing work of God in our lives when we come to God submitting to His lordship over our lives. Renewal occurs in our lives when we pray "Your will be done" and not "My will be done."

When we are renewed through the power of prayer, we can spread that renewal to others in our sphere of influence. Imagine living a life where you constantly feel renewed through prayer. You find a renewed sense of God's love and grace in your life. You live a life that is renewed in the power of submitting to the Lordship of God. Imagine living a life with a renewed sense of purpose. The renewed life is deeply interested in renewing the lives of everyone around them.

A life that is committed to personal renewal and renewing the world, is a life that pleases God.

RENEWAL

THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

DATE

May 9 & 10

WEEK

2 of 5

KEY VERSE

Nehemiah 4:14

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Nature of Opposition
2. The Experience of Opposition
3. The Call to True Faith

THINGS TO KNOW

- Nehemiah met opposition with two things: prayer and action.

AND I LOOKED AND AROSE AND SAID TO THE NOBLES AND TO THE OFFICIALS AND TO THE REST OF THE PEOPLE, "DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEM. REMEMBER THE LORD, WHO IS GREAT AND AWESOME, AND FIGHT FOR YOUR BROTHERS, YOUR SONS, YOUR DAUGHTERS, YOUR WIVES, AND YOUR HOMES."

NEHEMIAH 4:14 (ESV)

SETTING THE STAGE



The Babylonian Empire has conquered the nation of Israel and its capital city, Jerusalem, along with its crowned jewel, the temple. As a result, the Israelites became scattered, exiled people without shelter or protection. Last week, we looked at Nehemiah chapter 1, which introduces Nehemiah, a Jewish man who serves as cupbearer for the King of Persia. One day while working in the king's courts, he learns that a group of Israelites are experiencing great distress and danger in Jerusalem.

Moved deeply by compassion over the grave situation of his people nearly one thousand miles away in Jerusalem, Nehemiah intercedes for his people to God and then makes a plea to the King of Persia on their behalf. As the story unfolds, God softens the king's heart who accepts Nehemiah's appeal with favor, and even sends him to Jerusalem with blessing to begin construction and restoration.

When Nehemiah arrives to Jerusalem with his crew, he first assesses the city's damage, particularly the condition of its gates and walls. He develops a citywide restoration plan, mobilizes his people into varying roles, and encourages them that God will give them success as they rebuild and fortify their city of old. In fact, Nehemiah 3 essentially outlines the Israelites' great 'assembly line structure' with much detail, showing how they organized themselves to work together efficiently and productively.

Nehemiah 3 shows the importance of planning, structure, and preparation. However, Nehemiah 4 takes a turn, revealing obstacles and oppositions the Israelites face both externally and internally, foreign and native, as they strive to carry out God's calling and plan. As the leader of the expedition, Nehemiah identifies the nature of the opposition and then encourages his people to continue with faith towards the new beginning God has in store for them. *Continued on page 46 >*

RENEWAL

THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

Setting the Stage, continued > While we might not be rebuilding a city like the Israelites or fending off national enemies, the very experience of opposition, transition, and the battle of faith are relevant to our day-to-day experience as Christians. As we look into the story of Nehemiah 4, we find immense hope and encouragement for our own lives.

READ: Nehemiah 4:1-14.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. THE NATURE OF OPPOSITION

As soon as Nehemiah and the Israelites assemble and begin the work of rebuilding the gates and walls, they are immediately hit with opposition and trial. The first three verses feature two powerful individuals, Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite, both who accompanied Nehemiah and his crew from the Persian palace to Jerusalem.

We are not told much about these two individuals in the text, but history reveals that Sanballat served as a powerful governing official of the Samarian district inside the Persian Empire. Historians also believe that his title ‘the Horonite’ likely comes from the small town, Horonaim, which is a constituent of Moab, a historical archenemy to the nation of Israel.¹

Sanballat and Tobiah both knew the king had approved and blessed Nehemiah’s mission, they did not like it; they resisted it; and as such, they began to mock and ridicule the Israelites as they worked. They started using psychological warfare first to stifle their morale and target them emotionally.

¹ Mervin Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. (Nashville, B&H Publishing: 2003). iBooks p. 433-434.

As soon as they tried to move in a certain direction of obedience, opposition came. Beau Hughes defines this opposition as, “anything or anyone that threatens your perseverance in the faith or in the work of ministry.”²

It is important to note that the first two chapters of the book are about Nehemiah’s prayer and the initial call of Nehemiah (chapters 1-2). Then, there is one chapter on preparing to do the work, (chapter 3). Followed by three-and-a-half chapters on the opposition that the Israelites face (chapters 4-7)³. The ratio of text regarding calling and opposition should encourage and sober us to the reality of what it means to trust God and follow His calling. Obedience does not guarantee smoothness, for it is often the path of great inconvenience and sacrifice.

In our culture today, we face philosophical opposition when it comes to following Christ. Our culture disregards the Christian view on life, salvation, society, gender, sexuality, and money. Many times, being a Christian can feel like swimming against the current of modernity’s values and beliefs.

But sometimes we face another kind of opposition, and that is circumstantial opposition. The obstacles and trials seem confusing and too difficult given what you can see directly in front of you.

Opposition can be philosophical or circumstantial, but regardless it makes obedience more difficult. It could come directly from the mouth of the enemy. Or it could simply come from living by sight and not faith, looking at circumstances more keenly than looking to God.



What kind of opposition are you facing? Is it impacting your obedience to God?

² Beau Hughes, “Nehemiah: The Reality of Opposition.” March 3, 2013. <https://www.tvresources.net>.

³ Ibid.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF OPPOSITION

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 4:4-12.

In response to Sanballat and Tobiah's mockery and ridicule, Nehemiah prayed for relief and then got back to business (*Nehemiah 4:4-6*). Prayer is an excellent, initial response to opposition because it is the purest act of humble dependence upon God, no matter the circumstance.

However, what happens next is something we might not expect. Instead of Nehemiah and his people receiving 'answered prayer' for an easier situation, the opposite actually happens.

Sanballat and Tobiah began to plot with their own people about how they could destroy Israel and prevent Jerusalem from gaining power.

Hearing plots from their neighbors, the Jews themselves started spreading disbelief among their people and entertaining the idea of compromise as well.

Here we learn not simply about the nature of opposition, but also, the very experience of it, and how we cope with it ourselves. By looking at the response of the Jews, we can find many similarities to our own experiences.

Opposition came and came and came. But Nehemiah and the Jews kept on praying and praying and praying. And even more than that, they kept on working and working and working. Yet, the opposition would not decrease; it only got worse. And so, it seems the workers and the inhabitants in Jerusalem became worn down by the opposition, and functionally surrendered. Perhaps they started thinking, "Maybe prayer does not work." Or, "Maybe God is not listening. If He really heard our prayers, wouldn't He make the situation easier?" Or, "If we are being obedient, shouldn't the process be easier than it is?" We have all interacted with these thoughts in the midst of trial and opposition.

When the fire of opposition gets hotter and hotter, the refining becomes stronger and the debris becomes clearer. The Israelites might have been hoping in God for something. And when that 'thing' did not happen as easily or as immediately as they would have liked or thought, they

began to compromise under the opposition to secure their livelihood (as far as they could see it).

Beau Hughes remarks that some people fall not because they do not expect opposition to come, but because they expect it will come and then go away on their own timeline. It is not actually opposition coming against us that threatens our faith; it is opposition that stays against us that threatens our faith. Why? This is because it reveals what our faith is truly built upon.⁴



How do you typically respond to opposition?

3. THE CALL TO TRUE FAITH _____

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 4:13-14.

Pressed in on every side with opposition from both his enemies and his own people, Nehemiah looks Godward with a heart full of faith, eyes full of anticipation and exhorts his people to do the same.

There are a couple of things to note about the kind of faith Nehemiah displays. First, it is a faith rooted ultimately in the character and plan of God. Secondly, it is a faith that is paired with action.

Nehemiah pointed them toward God, not toward their circumstance. He pointed them primarily not to what they could or could not see, but rather, who they could trust. In other words, Nehemiah shifted the attention of his people away from their circumstances, away from their enemies, and away from their progress and places their attention primarily on who God is.

This is the essence of what it means to walk by faith, and not by sight. Faith means moving forward in obedience regardless of what may stand

⁴ Beau Hughes, "Nehemiah: The Reality of Opposition." March 3, 2013. <https://www.tvresources.net>.

in the way, precisely because your view of God is bigger than the odds stacked against you, the obstacles riddled before you, and the opposition pressing down upon you.

Successful obedience is always motivated by faith in God's good character and good plan, even when you cannot see it. This is the battle of faith, and Nehemiah leads the charge. True faith is always paired to the truth of who God is.

We also see how true faith is paired with action.

Nehemiah never simply just prays. He prays and prepares. He prays and guards. He prays and reorganizes. He prays and gets ready to fight.⁵

Likewise, for the many trials and oppositions we face every day, the purest demonstration of faith is not simply believing something in your head, but acting upon it from the heart. Once we reaffirm who God is, only then will we have the peace of mind and strength of heart to move forward in obedience.

 **How is God renewing you in the midst of trials and opposition?**

⁵ Beau Hughes, *The Reality of Opposition*.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Where are you in life? Are you in the middle of a transition or is a new season unfolding? God is calling you forward in obedience in everyday living; however, sometimes He calls us forward along a path. Perhaps that is you right now. This text teaches us that no matter where we find ourselves on the path of obedience, we should expect opposition, but that we should also find deep confidence knowing that God is with us. And along that path, we should constantly evaluate our own hearts, asking, “Where is my hope?” Is your hope in a certain circumstance coming to fruition, or is it in God Himself? Is it in what God gives to you, or is it in who God is to you?⁶

Opposition, perhaps more than anything else, will reveal the bedrock of your hope. The Israelites were likely confronted with a conflict of hope. Their hope was grounded in a city coming together, and the opposition seemed so overwhelming that it made them despair. Only until they hoped primarily in God’s character and promise did they finally find peace and the strength to persevere. The same will be true of us as well in whatever calling or new beginning we are walking towards.

John Piper has once said, “Stop defining your future in terms of your past, and start defining it in terms of your God.”⁷ As we move forward in obedience, may we pray and ask God to give us faith-filled hearts in who He is to us and in what He has in store for us.

⁶ John Piper, www.desiringgod.com.

⁷ John Piper, Desiring God Instagram account, [instagram.com](https://www.instagram.com/desiringgod).

RENEWAL

THROUGH LEADERSHIP

DATE

May 16 & 17

WEEK

3 of 5

KEY VERSES

Nehemiah 6:15-16

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Leading Through Internal Opposition
2. Leading Through Internal Disobedience
3. Leading Through Subtle Opposition

THINGS TO KNOW

- The book of Ezra details how the House of God was rebuilt in the City of Jerusalem but the temple was without protection for 90 years until God commissioned Nehemiah to lead a team to build the wall.
- The wall was built in 52 days.

SO THE WALL WAS COMPLETED ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH OF THE MONTH ELUL, IN FIFTY-TWO DAYS. WHEN ALL OUR ENEMIES HEARD OF IT, AND ALL THE NATIONS SURROUNDING US SAW IT, THEY LOST THEIR CONFIDENCE; FOR THEY RECOGNIZED THAT THIS WORK HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD.

NEHEMIAH 6:15-16

SETTING THE STAGE



The book of Nehemiah is often viewed as a manual on biblical leadership. Essential elements of biblical leadership like prayer, faith, vision, planning, organization, team building, and perseverance are vividly displayed in Nehemiah's life. He was a man of God who could weep over the condition of God's people and city yet be proactive and decisive in responsive action. Nehemiah provides a model for God's servants of every age.

The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God. From both the divine and the human viewpoints, the wall around Jerusalem was essential to the restoration and establishment of Judah in the land.

Jerusalem would always remain vulnerable to attack and Yahweh's name seemingly discredited until the wall was restored (1:1-3). Prayer was Nehemiah's first approach to solving the problem (1:4-11), but prayer and action go hand in hand, so Nehemiah approached the Persian king with a plan and secured the support needed to do God's work (2:1-9). Opposition is immediate and plays a major role in what follows (2:10).¹

No test of leadership is more revealing than the test of opposition. Christian leaders can go to pieces under such pressure. Some grow too discouraged to continue. Others build walls around themselves, shoot from behind, and become embattled, embittered and vindictive. Not so with Nehemiah. Nowhere does his leadership shine more brilliantly than in his handling of opposition.² *Continued on page 54 >*

¹ Kenneth G. Hanna. *From Moses to Malachi : Surveying the Old Testament* (Kindle Locations 5124-5127). CrossBooks. Kindle Edition.

² John White. *Excellence in Leadership: Reaching Goals with Prayer, Courage and Determination*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, p. 66.

RENEWAL

THROUGH LEADERSHIP

Setting the Stage, continued > The circumstances Nehemiah faced in chapter 4 were common forms of opposition: ridicule and the threat of violence. Suddenly in chapter 5, a new form of opposition erupts from an unexpected source. The first had been from without, from Israel's enemies. This new form was from within. This opposition arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves.

Just when the work on the wall was coming to completion, another phase of opposition against Nehemiah appeared from his enemies: intrigue, innuendo, and intimidation. Nehemiah's challenge was to see the situation clearly and to discern how to face the changing circumstances presented by the opposition.

READ: Nehemiah 5 & 6.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. LEADING THROUGH INTERNAL OPPOSITION

During the days of the monarchy, the Jewish states had been opposed by their pagan neighbors, and Israel had fought many wars. When God sent prophets to recall the people to righteousness, it was not the pagans who killed God's messengers but the Jews themselves. In the same way, an examination of church history will show that the most successful attacks upon the church have come not from unbelievers but from those within, from people who have professed to know God and Jesus Christ.

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 5:1-6.

Originally the Jews who returned to Israel from Babylon were well off. Ezra 1:9-11 lets us know that those who had come back from the exile returned with significant resources.

So, what happened? Why were some people so poor in Nehemiah 5? Famine is mentioned in verse 3 and the king's tax on their fields and vineyards are mentioned in verse 4. The result of the burden was leaving the poor open to the exploitation of the wealthy and in some cases even to the point of slavery.

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 5:7.

Nehemiah was angry when he heard of this injustice with his own people. The reaction was different than the reaction he had against Sanballat and Tobiah in chapter 4. He expected wrong behavior from outsiders, so he was not angry with them. Righteous anger should be felt for those who profess to walk by God's standard and yet compromise those high standards by their actions. The exploitation of Jews by Jews was not right, and he was angry enough to confront it. However, Nehemiah did not let the circumstances control him. As a leader, he considered the situation before he contended with the nobles and rulers.



How do you handle injustices from those who should be like-minded?

2. LEADING THROUGH INTERNAL DISOBEDIENCE _____

Nehemiah addressed the sin and the issue of not walking in the fear of God. Oppressing their own people provided a wrong view of God and His Word not only to their brethren but also to their enemies.

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 5:9-16.

The nobles of Nehemiah's day were disobeying the teachings of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Why is it that so many within the church take the revealed Law of God so casually? It is no surprise that the world does this. The world does not receive the Bible as God's Book. But we do.

We even maintain that it is inerrant “in the whole and in its parts.” How then can we take it so lightly?

Nehemiah led differently because of his fear of the Lord. He applied himself to the work on the wall, he did not try to increase his possessions and all his servants were gathered there for work. The internal opposition did not deter Nehemiah from moving forward with the task at hand. Warren Wiersbe writes,

“The fear of our God” is not the servile dread of a slave toward a master but the loving respect of a child toward a parent. To fear the Lord means to seek to glorify God in everything we do. It means listening to His Word, honoring it, and obeying it. “The remarkable thing about fearing God,” wrote Oswald Chambers, “is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.” Because Nehemiah’s life was motivated by the fear of the Lord (*Nehemiah 5:15*), he did not fear what the enemy might do (*vv. 14, 19*). The fear of the Lord moved Nehemiah to be a faithful servant of the Lord. ³

If you are in a position of spiritual leadership, Nehemiah chapter 5 has some important lessons for you:

- Expect problems to arise among your people.
- Confront the problems courageously.
- Be sure that your own integrity is intact.
- See in every problem an opportunity for the Lord to work.



In what areas do you need to lead differently than you are now?

³ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined* Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996, p. 64.

3. LEADING THROUGH SUBTLE OPPOSITION ---

Nehemiah once again returned the workers to the wall and made such progress that within a short time the entire wall was finished. Only the gates needed to be completed. Just when the work seemed to be done, more opposition appeared from his enemies. This time, the attacks from the enemy were aimed at Nehemiah personally.

Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to Nehemiah asking for a meeting but Nehemiah knew they were planning to harm him. Being a discerning leader, he knew when to say no. The reason this communication was subtle and therefore dangerous was that on the surface it sounded quite plausible. What is more, it was attractive. If the invitation had come earlier, it obviously would have been a scheme to keep Nehemiah from working. But, now that the wall was completed and only the gates needed to be secured, this could appear to be a reasonable request.

The walls were at their full height but until the gates were completed the entire project was in jeopardy. Not only did Nehemiah say no but he knew these governors were scheming to harm him. He was determined to finish the job.

Sanballat's next tactic is to send an open letter throughout the entire territory for everyone to read, accusing Nehemiah and his fellow Judeans of plotting a revolt against the Persians (*Nehemiah 6:5-9*). The letter claims that the wall is being built to fortify the city of Jerusalem in defiance of King Artaxerxes.

The letter was an obvious lie and was spreading a rumor intended to hurt Nehemiah and keep the work from being completed. Once again, we see the source of Nehemiah's strength and discernment when he prays, "O God, strengthen my hands." He prayed because the true source of his strength was the Lord. His relationship with the Lord gave him strength.

Enemies were trying to intimidate Nehemiah saying they were coming to kill him. Once again Nehemiah demonstrated discernment when *he perceived that surely God had not sent him*. Exercising the strength, only the Lord could provide, Nehemiah refused to flee and go into the temple to save his life. He was obedient and said, "I will not go in." (*Nehemiah 6:11-12*)

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 6:15-16.

In spite of the opposition from without and within, subtle and not so subtle, the work that God had ordained was accomplished for His glory and purpose. The faithfulness of Nehemiah's leadership paved the way for the wall and gates to be complete and the name of the Lord to be praised.



How do you typically respond if someone spreads a rumor or lie about you?

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Lord commissioned Nehemiah and gave him one task – lead the people to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem. As the leader, opposition was inevitable. We all lead in some way and are called to be men and women of God who, like Nehemiah, can lead through the circumstances of life. Consider these character traits of Nehemiah:

1. Nehemiah's closeness to God and his prayerfulness.

Nothing is more characteristic of Nehemiah than his closeness to God, expressed most often by his praying to God on all occasions. Nehemiah saw everything that happened to him within a spiritual framework.

2. Nehemiah's sense of calling to a task. Nehemiah had a strong sense of his one great objective, which was to rebuild the wall, but it went beyond that. Above all, he knew himself to be God's man and to have a call to God's service.

3. Nehemiah's self-awareness and knowledge of his own worth. The gifts Nehemiah had were from God; he would not have had them otherwise. He knew that he had these gifts and was not overwhelmed by the task he was given. We should know that we are equipped by God for whatever task He has for us.

4. Nehemiah's extraordinary discernment. He was able to detect in every subterfuge of the enemy exactly what was going on. Where did he get such discernment? Some of it may have been a natural gift, of course, but a large part of it must have come from his spiritual experience and understanding. He was able to focus on real issues and priorities.

5. Nehemiah's great courage. We must not forget this element, for many people have had other important gifts and yet have failed in times of testing because of a lack of courage. "Should a man like me run away?" Who is not afraid at times? Who is not disturbed? Who is not hurt? We all are. Yet it is precisely when we yield those fears to God and press on that we show leadership.⁴

How has the Lord called you to lead? In your family? In your church? At your workplace? In your home? Inevitably, you will face opposition. Like Nehemiah, look to the Lord to strengthen and lead you through the opposition toward completion of the task.

⁴ Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*, p. 74–75.

RENEWAL

THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

DATE

May 23 & 24

WEEK

4 of 5

KEY VERSE

Nehemiah 8:6

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Renewal Comes through Reverance to God's Revelation
2. Renewal Comes through Responding to God's Revelation
3. Renewal Comes through Our Repentance

THINGS TO KNOW

- Revelation means "an unveiling."
- General Revelation: General truth about God communicated in a general way to all mankind.
- Special Revelation: Specific truths that can be known about God through personal relationship.

THEN EZRA BLESSED THE LORD THE GREAT GOD. AND ALL THE PEOPLE ANSWERED, "AMEN, AMEN!" WHILE LIFTING UP THEIR HANDS; THEN THEY BOWED LOW AND WORSHIPED THE LORD WITH THEIR FACES TO THE GROUND.

NEHEMIAH 8:6

SETTING THE STAGE



We have the innate desire to be renewed in every arena of life. We desire for our relationships to be renewed, so we subscribe to blogs and read books on marriage that can help develop a new sense of renewal with our significant other. We desire for our bodies to be renewed, so we commit to contracts at the gym and diets in the New Year. Come February, we are left wondering why we are doing hot yoga and eating tree bark and grass (but only between noon and 7pm because of intermittent fasting). We desire for our purpose to be renewed so we volunteer at local charities or serve on a board for a while. It is not surprising to want renewal. It is a longing all of us possess to return to the zest and freshness of the Garden.

If we are honest, renewal is desired throughout our Christian life. We find ourselves in a place of staleness and stagnancy that pervades our relationship with God. We feel as if we are not getting anything out of the pastor's message. Worship feels dull and has lost its potency. Times of prayer are plagued with distraction and feel sluggish and dry. What is the solution? Do we need a new routine, a new devotional, a new study Bible or a new small group? While those things can be of value, the truth is we need personal renewal in our relationship with God. Renewal in our relationship with God comes through Revelation.

Theologians have broken down Revelation into two categories: 1) General Revelation 2) Special Revelation.

General Revelation - Through general revelation, God has communicated truth to every person in a general way concerning His existence, power, goodness, and supremacy. There is plenty of evidence of God's existence in the universe around us.

However, general revelation is limited. It does not reveal the depths of the love, grace, and mercy of God. *Continued on page 62 >*

RENEWAL

THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

Setting the Stage, continued > General revelation does not communicate the significance of the death of Jesus; or how to receive forgiveness through a personal relationship with God. For that, we need special revelation.

Special Revelation - Special revelation involves clearer communication of God's attributes and His redemptive plan for mankind. Special revelation helps us reach beyond knowing about God and allows us to know God, personally. Throughout the storyline of the Bible, we see God using various methods of special revelation to communicate with His people. The revelation of God's character and plan for us is found in the Word of God. God ultimately reveals Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we behold God in the flesh. God revealed Himself to us directly and clearly through the Person and finished work of Jesus.

In the book of Nehemiah, we see that the people of God are experiencing a lot of external renewal in their lives. They have renewed leadership in Ezra and Nehemiah. They have a renewed homeland with renewed walls and gates. They have a renewed sense of excitement and fervency as they were brought back from 70 plus years of exile in Babylon. Even though all those things are good and meaningful, God's plan for the people of Israel was for them to experience internal renewal through revelation. ¹

Introduction

At the center of the book of Nehemiah, we find that the people have finished rebuilding the walls and the gates of the city, at an astonishing pace, fifty-two days! They are gathered in the courtyard in front of the Water Gate. Nehemiah 8:1 tells us: "*they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.*" The people of Israel were desperate to be renewed through the revelation of Scripture.

¹ John MacArthur. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997. p. 638-639;656-657.

This account in the book of Nehemiah gives us three great principles for experiencing renewal in our life.

READ: Nehemiah 8:1-18.

P O I N T S T O P O N D E R

1. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH REVERENCE TO GOD'S REVELATION ---

Standing is an ancient way of showing honor and reverence toward an individual. We stand when a judge enters the room. We stand at a wedding when a bride enters the Chapel doors. We stand from where we are sitting to shake another person's hand. Standing is an outward symbol of inward reverence. The people realized that when the book of the Law was opened that God was present. It was God's Word to the people that would be heard, and if there was anybody ever worth standing for it is God. Jesus Himself gives us a New Testament example of standing up in reverence for the Word as He reads the Scriptures in the Synagogue. When He was finished reading and ready to preach, Jesus sat down. (*Luke 4:16-20*) If the immortal Son of God stood to read and show reverence for the Word of God how much more do we need to revere the Scriptures?

J.I. Packer brilliantly wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, "What is a Christian?... True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the Word of God."² Just as the people of Israel stood, to show reverence and submission to the authority of the Word of God, we also should show reverence toward the Word of God.

We show reverence for God's Word as we seek to read and understand it.

When we truly revere the Word of God, we will read it. We will desire to seek out the wisdom given in its pages. We will search for pearls of grace and gems of mercy as if they were hidden treasure.

The Bible is not just treasure to be sought, the Word of God is life. In

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 116.

Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” (ESV) We receive our daily sustenance from the nourishment that the Word of God provides. The church is comprised of people whose lives have been changed by the Revelation of Jesus in the Scriptures and their submission to His leading in their life.

When we read the Bible, the Bible reads us. It discerns our intentions, weighs our motivations and pierces into the deepest recesses of our soul. As the author of Hebrews writes,

HEBREWS 4:12 *For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*



How is the Word of God living and active in your life?

2. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH RESPONDING TO GOD'S REVELATION

It is not enough to just read the Scriptures. We must respond to them. Charles Spurgeon has famously said, “A Bible that’s falling apart usually belongs to somebody who’s not.” When we look at the response of the people in the Book of Nehemiah as the Word of God was opened, we see they responded with worship.

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 8:6.

When the people of Israel heard about all that God had done in the Law they could not help but respond to God in worship. They heard how Adam and Eve were covered by the skins of the animals in the Garden. They heard about Israel’s deliverance from Pharaoh. They heard about God’s guidance with the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They heard about God dwelling amongst His people in the Tabernacle.

We can read of Jesus' birth. We can read of His miracles. We can read of His love for His disciples. We can read of His compassion. We can read of the cross where He cried "it is finished." We can read of His resurrection. We can read of His Spirit active in the church. We can read of His return. We can read of His glory extolled throughout eternity. And that should produce a response of worship, lifted hands and bowed knees.

A rebuilt city with new walls and gates signified that Israel had returned to their land. But, what signified that Israel had returned to their God was their response to His Word. The people of Israel responded with bowed knees. They had a posture of humility. They also lifted their hands symbolizing a posture of surrender and praise.

Billy Graham has said, "To get nations back on their feet, we must first get down on our knees."³ If you want renewal in your relationship with God there must be a reading of God's Word and a response to God's Word in your life. Renewal will not come apart from reading and responding to God's voice in the Scriptures as truth is unveiled.



In what tangible ways have you responded to God's revelation in His Word?

3. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH OUR REPENTANCE _____

As Ezra read the Law to the people of Israel they began to be convicted.

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 8:9-18.

The Law produced deep conviction in the hearts of the people. That is how the Law functions. The New Testament informs us that, the Law provides

³ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Daniel*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2017.

an impossible standard that we cannot live up to. Paul would write in the book of Romans, *for by the Law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20)*. The Law does not impart saving grace. Instead, it convicts people and points them to their need for a Savior. (*Galatians 3:24*) When we read Scripture, it exposes and unveils our deepest sins. It presses against our heart to push out all that is poisoning our relationship with God.

The people of Israel wept because their sin was exposed in the light of God’s Word. But Nehemiah urged the people to take the next step. Repentance is not complete with conviction alone. There must also be rejoicing over our forgiveness. Nehemiah and Ezra urged the people, “*do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength*” (*Nehemiah 8:10b*).

God’s divine order for our lives when facing sin is conviction, cleansing, and then celebration. The people of Israel were struck with conviction but they were cleansed by the atoning sacrifice the High Priest had made. Now it was time to celebrate. Warren Wiersbe writes, “It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.”⁴

As believers in Christ, it is appropriate for us to be convicted by sin. As Believers in Christ, it is inappropriate for us to wallow in that state when Jesus has provided us joy in reconciliation. (*Psalm 32:1*) Repentance involves conviction, cleansing, and celebration. The joy of the Lord is our strength! We celebrate God’s presence and His renewing work in us!



In what ways do you celebrate God’s presence and renewing work in you?

⁴ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 113.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Story of Renewal for Israel began with revelation. The people of God revered God's Word. They responded to God's Word with worship. Then Israel repented with conviction and celebration. God's plan for our lives is no different. Our lives as Christians are to be marked by reverence for God's Word, a constant response of worship, and the discipline of repentance. As we seek to be renewed in our relationship with God let us remember that renewal does not come apart from God's revelation. The book of Nehemiah is a story about broken people in a broken city made whole by the power and love of God.

As the plan of God unfolded for the people of Israel to be restored and renewed, God's revelation was at its core. As the people of God began to know God and respond to Him, renewal began to take place. Broken walls and broken hearts were rebuilt. Revelation of God's character and His Plan always shapes Our Purpose. Can you imagine your life if every day you stopped in awe, humility, and surrender over who God is? Can you imagine your life if you celebrated the forgiveness found in Jesus? That is the life God wants you to live. That is a life of purpose shaped by God's plan.

RENEWAL

THROUGH COMMITMENT

DATE

May 30 & 31

WEEK

5 of 5

KEY VERSE

Nehemiah 10:28-29

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Commitment to Separate
2. Commitment to the Sabbath
3. Commitment to Support

THINGS TO KNOW

- The people of God are free to choose whether to be committed to God or not.
- God has already chosen to be committed to His people forever.

NOW THE REST OF THE PEOPLE, THE PRIESTS, THE LEVITES, THE GATEKEEPERS, THE SINGERS, THE TEMPLE SERVANTS AND ALL THOSE WHO HAD SEPARATED THEMSELVES FROM THE PEOPLES OF THE LANDS TO THE LAW OF GOD, THEIR WIVES, THEIR SONS AND THEIR DAUGHTERS, ALL THOSE WHO HAD KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING...

NEHEMIAH 10:28

SETTING THE STAGE



Throughout the book of Nehemiah, we have seen the faithfulness of a man who wanted to serve God and His people. It was a season of renewal for the Israelites. God had made a commitment to them to bring them out of Babylon, back to their homeland. God fulfilled His commitment. There was opposition externally and internally in this season of renewal. But God never wavered from His commitment. Nehemiah never wavered from his commitment to God going from cupbearer to leader.

Now it is time for God's people to make their commitment and not waver. They had heard the reading of the Torah; the Law, the stories of old. The people had stood in reverence to the revelation of God's Word. But there had to come a time to put action to what you believe. To make a commitment based on your values. If your values are based on the Scripture; then the goal is to embrace the Laws and ordinances of God found in His Word. We are to take the statutes of Scripture and commit to living them out even today, in a culture that has compromised and ignored the truths of God.

Today's lesson will challenge us to separate ourselves without isolating ourselves. It begins and ends with commitment to God to live in this world but not of this world. Jesus would put it like this as He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane the night before He was crucified.

JOHN 17:14 *I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.* ¹⁵ *I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one.* ¹⁶ *They do not belong to this world any more than I do.* ¹⁷ *Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth.* ¹⁸ *Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world.* (NLT)

Jesus realized how important the Word of God was for His disciples to make a commitment for their lives to be committed to the truth of God.

RENEWAL

THROUGH COMMITMENT

Introduction

Historically, anytime the people of God walk away from their commitment to God it never goes well with them. While we think if we shed our commitment, we will be free; the Bible teaches us that when we are unfaithful to God we choose to be “cursed and overtaken.”

DEUTERONOMY 28:1; 15 *And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth....¹⁵ “But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (ESV)*

God never honors disobedience, unfaithfulness, or a cavalier disposition toward Him. But when we live a lifestyle committed to God we experience spiritual renewal in our life. Commitment and renewal go hand-in-hand.

This month as we have been studying the book of Nehemiah we have been tracing the story of renewal. We have seen renewal occur through prayer. We have seen how renewal can occur in our lives through new beginnings. We have discovered that renewal through leadership can occur in our lives through opposition and difficult circumstances. Last week, we looked at how renewal comes in our lives through revelation from God’s Word. Today, we will look at how renewal can occur in our hearts through commitment.

In Nehemiah chapter 10 the people of God recommit themselves to the covenant their forefathers failed to uphold. The people of Israel show us three important principles to which we can commit in order to experience spiritual renewal in our own lives.

READ: Nehemiah 10:28-39.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. COMMITMENT TO SEPARATE

Nehemiah recounts Israel committing to be separate from the peoples around them. After they had heard God's Law read to them by Ezra, they realized that they were to be distinguished from among the other nations of the world.

God's people have always been called to separation. This is a difficult concept for us to grasp because Christianity does not operate in a vacuum. We may go to work with people who are not Christians. We do business with non-Christian mechanics, shop at supermarkets filled with non-Christians and send our children to non-Christian schools. We are surrounded by non-Christian culture every day. The church is called to be like a boat. A boat is in the water but does not let water inside. We are called to be in the culture, but we must not let the culture in, or we sink.

Separation always involves a **from** and **to**.

The Israelites separated themselves. They made a commitment to be markedly different **from** those around them by clinging **to** God's Word.

Our separation from the world is the distinguishing factor of our faith. At the end of the age, Jesus Himself will come to separate the church from the rest of the world. He will separate the wheat from the tares and the sheep from the goats. (*Matthew 13:24-30; 25:31-33*)

We are called to separation, but we are not called to isolation. Christianity is not an individual sport, it takes a team. Separation only works with a congregation, not in isolation. Separation that ignores the strength and accountability of the community leads to sin and self-destruction. Lone Ranger Christianity never pans out well.

We are called to commit ourselves to a lifestyle of separation but that does not mean we have to do it alone. The church is a place where you can be encouraged, strengthened, and spurred on toward living a life of separation. The church is oxygen to a dwindling flame that a dark world tries to extinguish. (*Hebrews 10:23-25*)



From what have you separated yourself? To what are you committed?

2. COMMITMENT TO THE SABBATH

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 10:31.

One of the ways in which we commit ourselves to a lifestyle of separation is by committing ourselves to Sabbath. For the Gentile culture, the idea of Sabbath was absurd. The Sabbath was just another day on the calendar without any significance. However, for the Jews—the Sabbath was a day that was to be devoted to rest and contemplation on spiritual things.

The Sabbath was a reminder to the Jewish people that their success was predicated on their relationship with God. It was truly an act of faith to believe that God would take care of their needs as they honored the Sabbath.

The Gentiles did not rest. They had seven days of open markets. They had seven days to make money. They had seven days to work their fields to get ready for the harvest. When we honor the Sabbath in our own life we confess to the world that less is more when God is honored. With God, six can be greater than seven.

For so many of us, the idea of Sabbath in our culture seems so archaic. With a world that is more connected than ever before with more activity and more opportunity for busyness; it seems crazy to think we could push pause on the unnecessary and to pursue the divine.

For a lot of us, Sunday is not sacred. We forfeit our commitment to church because our other commitments take priority on our calendar. As Christians, we do not follow God because of convenience, we follow God because of commitment. God has always called His people to honor the Sabbath. We are to be committed to live a Christian lifestyle. Saying yes to rest and reflection means saying no to other things.

God is calling us to commit to Sabbath; resting in the presence of God with the people of God dwelling on the works of God.



How could committing to honor the Sabbath change your life?

3. COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT

REVIEW NEHEMIAH 10:32-33; 39B.

For the Israelites, there was a temple tax that was instituted back in Exodus (*Exodus 30:11-16*). This tax helped to support the work that was done in the temple. Wiersbe writes, “The tax was a reminder that God had redeemed them and paid a price to set them free, and that they should behave like people who belonged to God.”³ Here in the book of Nehemiah, the people did not see the tax as a burden. They were not giving to the work of the Temple in a state of drudgery. Giving went further than duty, it was a delight. They obligated themselves to contribute and support the work of the House of God.

The way in which we give tells more about our hearts’ commitment to God than it does about our financial portfolio. First, we must acknowledge that God does not need our gifts. All things belong to Him. He is the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills (*Psalms 50:10*).

What God desires is not the gift, but the giver. In the New Testament we read, *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7 ESV)* God is more interested in the state of our heart as we give than He is in the size of our gift. Giving can become a challenge because our possessions start to possess us. We think possessions will bring us security and happiness.

³ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 138.

One of the most fulfilling things we will ever do is give to the work of God. The Gospel calls us to forsake a lifestyle that is defined by accruing possessions and to venture into a partnership with God. Through giving, we can participate in the work of God. When we give financially to the work of the church, we send the Gospel to the deepest darkest places in the world. When we commit to supporting the House of God, we commit to advancing the Kingdom of God.

We will experience the thrill of renewal as we commit to supporting the work of the church. Through our generous and cheerful giving, God will begin to renew calloused parts of our hearts. Where we are hard-hearted, God will bring tenderness. Generosity is a recognition of God's ownership over our lives.



How can you give of your time and resources to support the work of God? To glorify God?

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Few people in the world know commitment like a Navy SEAL. Their training is rigorous and gruesome. The few men who are Navy SEALs have a resolve that is atypical of most men. They are committed to the honor and rich heritage that comes with being a SEAL. They are committed to responsibility, humility and their Country. They are committed to the safety and well-being of others above themselves. They are committed to leadership

and authority. The Navy SEALs are committed to upholding the Constitution and protecting freedom at all costs. We respect them and honor them for upholding their commitment.

As God's people should not our commitment to God be significantly stronger than a Navy SEAL?

Spiritual Renewal enters our life when we renew our commitment to God. A renewed commitment to separate ourselves from the world produces a holy zeal. A renewed commitment to Sabbath produces a renewed confidence in the replenishing work of God in our hearts. A commitment to support the House of God reaffirms where our treasure really is. God has designed us to be people of commitment. We are made in His image and our commitment to Him is in response to His commitment to us.

Some of us have a commitment issue. But God does not. God has always been committed to our good. In the Garden, He warned us of the impending death that would occur if we ate of the tree. But He was committed to covering us and forgiving us by dying on His own Tree, the cross. God's commitment to us today is evident as He has placed His Spirit in us to convict us of sin, lead us in truth, and instruct us in righteousness.

He has always shown His commitment to us freely and His commitment moves us to live a life committed to Him.

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_____ *COMING UP NEXT:*
THE STORY OF **PURPOSE**

