



Jerusalem's Wall

Revival in Nehemiah

**Six studies from Nehemiah 6-13
To help you understand God's power to change His people.**

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Bible Studies in this series

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Introduction

The walls of Jerusalem were up, and the city was safe. Sadly, the hearts of the people were struggling and filled with holes of fear. The people had forgotten their God. It had been almost a hundred years since they had returned from Babylon, and the knowledge of God was vague at best. They needed to know who the God who was who rebuilt the walls. A revival began as the people gathered in one place to hear Ezra read from the scriptures. While the people were surrounded by failure and decay, Ezra reminds them that God does not forsake His people even when they abandon Him. The leaders and the priests stepped forward to make a pledge to God that they would not forget Him as their parents had done. Having made a pledge to God, it was time to celebrate what God had done. Their celebration was a testimony to all the nations that said that God had forgotten them. Sadly, the revival died when Nehemiah left. Nehemiah was forced to take action when he returned. He cleansed the temple, restored the Sabbath, and reinstated the offerings to God. Without his action, the nation would once again forget their God.

The church needs revival. Our first reaction is to look out into the world and complain that it has changed and is hostile to the church. The problem, however, is not the world. It is us. We have forgotten the Bible lessons that grandma knew by heart. Revival will not come until the people of God open up their Bibles and read what God has to say to us. Vitality and life come from God and not from us. Having heard the word, we must pledge to obey it. The bible is our map for life. It will do us no good if we don't follow the path it lays out. Sundays should be reserved to learn from God. Our character should be based on His values and not on the world. When God's people live out their faith, it will be a time of joy. Our burdens will be lighter and we will have a positive attitude about the future. The joy of the Lord will be our strength changing our lives and the lives of those we love. Such revival will not continue, however, without constant vigilance. Sin is like cancer that keeps coming back when we get tired or get sidetracked from the mission of God. It takes work to keep revival going.

There is no magic formula or program. Success will come from being the right people not doing the right things. Nehemiah connected to God in Word and prayer. He knew his Bible and could discern right from wrong. He learned to trust the Lord and leaned on the Lord to provide what he needed and protect him when things got rough. If you want a better life, be in the word, and obey it. When you don't know God, how can you ask for help in prayer? If you want each year to be better than the last for you and for your family, be in the word. The way back to greatness when we have fallen has two steps. We need to admit and confess our sins as the Jews did. Then we need to commit ourselves to follow God's path each day. Our God is a God of second chances. We see how He forgives people like King David and St. Peter and gives them a new chance at life. Happiness is not dependent on circumstances, but on the inward choice to live with God each day. Many things can erode that commitment to God so be vigilant. As you keep the Lord near, you distance yourself from Satan and his ability to make you fall. Revival is not a one-time event but a lifetime with God at your side.

Table of Contents

Chapter title and text

- 1 Faith that God will win. Neh. 6
2. Revival starts with scripture Neh. 8
3. God lifts us past our weakness Neh. 9
4. Relationship with God is the key Neh. 10
- 5 A celebration so others see God's glory Neh. 12
6. Keeping revival going Neh. 13

Theme

- Success is right people not right things
Read it, celebrate it and obey it
Confession can be the start of a new tomorrow.
Living with God is always better.
The joy of the Lord is our strength
Careful, the current will pull you back.

How to use this Bible study

Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. The questions will help you understand what is going on and apply it to your own lives. You may use this study in three ways. For a large class, distribute the student lessons to the class and use the leader's guide to guide the discussion. In small groups, print off the leader's guide so that everyone can have access to the answers. Giving the group the leader's guide before the session will give them time to look over the answers and formulate their own questions for discussion. For your private study, read the Bible passage and work through the leader's guide to gain a deeper understanding of the text. If you are the leader of the group, this might be a good discipline for yourself as you prepare to lead others through the text.

My prayer is that you and the members of your group or class can grow through these studies. The answers in the leader's guide may challenge you to find deeper meaning and application for your lives. Often we try to overcome problems in life by ourselves. The goal of this study is to help you understand Old Testament Jerusalem and the challenges that we have as we try to change the culture of our church. The people in Jerusalem are not unusual. We encounter people like them in our churches all the time. Our challenge is to be more like Nehemiah who has a deep understanding of the scriptures and who comes before his Lord in prayer every day. Only the Lord can change our hearts so that we have the understanding and love that we see in the life of Nehemiah. God is his strength and his guide. Nothing happens in the church without the Holy Spirit leading us through the Word. If you need to take more than one week per lessons, do so and enjoy the discussion and the learning. The revival of the Jews is worth more than just a passing glance.

Bibliography

Adam Clarke's Commentary.
Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - Old Testament
Life Application Study Bible.
Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible.
Nehemiah: Becoming a Godly leader by Gregory Brown
The Enduring Word Bible Commentary

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May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow in His grace.

1. Revival: Faith that God will win.

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Big Idea: Success is right people not right things

The wall is up, and the enemies of Nehemiah are starting to panic. First, they try to distract him. They offer to help if Nehemiah will stop and meet with them. Nehemiah resists them for he knows that they want to harm him and halt the work with all kinds of suggestions. Nehemiah has focus. God has called him to a task, and he will not let others keep him away from it. Next, they try to slander him in an open letter. They accuse Nehemiah of working for personal advancement. Finally, they try to get Nehemiah to run from the threats in fear. Nehemiah would not bow to them. He was willing to put his life on the line if that was the price of doing God's will. He had faith that God would succeed and care for His people.

Revival in a church is not natural. The church needs to keep its focus on doing God's will. Satan will flood the church with lots of suggestions, both well-meant and evil, to derail the mission. If the church is to prosper, it must remember that it has the purpose of reaching the lost and leading people closer to the Lord. It must keep its focus even when people slander the church from the outside, and people challenge what you are doing at voter's meetings and parking lot conversations. Keep heart and move forward when you know what God has in mind. Don't let Satan overwhelm you with fear. He may try to get us to quit a ministry because it is not working quick enough or because of dangers real and imagined. Such fear guarantees failure. Have confidence in God's guidance in ministry.

The revival of a church is not simplistic. There is no magic formula or program. Success will come from being the right people not doing the right things. Nehemiah connected to God in Word and prayer. He knew his Bible and could discern right from wrong. He learned to trust the Lord and leaned on the Lord to provide what he needed and protect him when things got rough. We want the Bible to give steps to a revival that we can do with a minimum of effort. The Bible seeks to build healthy people. It wants people to take the time and effort to grow by the study of the Bible. It wants people to make time for prayer so that we know what God wants and have the courage to follow Him. Revival is about bringing people closer to the Lord so that they can serve Him and serve one another.

1. What is your greatest accomplishment in life? What made the task difficult?

Answers will vary. It could be four years in college or the raising of their children. It could be a trial that they overcame. It might even be something spiritual as they wrestled with growing in their faith. We all must see that some of the best things in life are not easy. Revival isn't either. It is changing people and bringing them closer to Christ. Let the group discuss not only significant accomplishments but also what they had to endure to overcome the challenges.

Read Nehemiah 6:1-19

2. Verse 1-2 (2). The rebuilding of the walls is almost over. What message do Sanballat and his associates send Nehemiah? (6:1-2) What does Nehemiah discern is their real intent? (6:2)

The wall is up, and only the placement of the gates remain. Up till now, the enemies of the Jews opposed everything Nehemiah did; now they want to cooperate with him and help build the wall. They offer to meet at a village 20 miles from Jerusalem, where they can come and make plans to work together. It was a place halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria and came with a veiled threat that Nehemiah needed to be a team player and work with them. Once the enemy got a foothold in the project, they could ensure failure. Nehemiah sees through them. He knows they want to harm him and stop the work with all kinds of delays. He also senses that they want to kill him when he is far from Jerusalem. Nehemiah has focus. God has called him to build the wall, and he will not let anything stop him. He also knows the nature of

these men. They do not want what is best for Israel. Don't let others derail you from the great work that the Lord has for you to do.

3. Verse 2 Even if the offer to meet was sincere, how does Nehemiah not let the “good” get in the way of the “better”? When do we experience this kind of struggle in the church?

Nehemiah seems to sense that the enemy's strategy was to take over the project so that they can make it fail. He fears that they will derail the ministry from within. Cooperation in the church is a good thing, but leaders must be sure that suggestions are given at the right time and with the right purpose. If good ideas take you away from the mission God has given you, you will undoubtedly not fulfill the task God has given you. In the church, the ministry needs to keep its focus as well. Lots of suggestions at a voter's meeting or council meeting, both well-meant and evil, can derail the mission. If the church is to grow, reaching the lost and helping the members grow so that they can serve has to be your priority. Satan will flood the church with good intentions to keep you from doing the better things of God. Know what you are about and focus on the goal so that Satan doesn't short-circuit the goal.

4. How do you develop discernment like Nehemiah so that the enemy doesn't deceive you?

Allow the group to discuss and give their answers. Here are three answers from “Nehemiah: becoming a Godly Leader” by Gregory Brown. Discernment comes from 1) knowing the word of God (Hebrews 5:13-14). A lot of Christians struggle to distinguish good from evil because they are still infants in their faith. They don't regularly and consistently use the Bible, but only hear it on Sundays when someone else preaches it to them. 2) Discernment comes from understanding human nature (John 2:23-25). Jesus was a great judge of people and knew their fickleness. He didn't commit to the crowds because they were prone to rebel against God and God's will. 3) Discernment comes from prayer. We see Nehemiah pray almost continually in this book. It was also Paul's strength and his wish for his flock (Phil. 1:9-10)

5. Verse 5-7 What is Sanballat accusing Nehemiah of in the letter sent to him?

Slander is a favorite tactic of Satan. Satan slandered Job in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament. The enemies of the Jews slandered Nehemiah in an open letter read before the people. They accused him of building the wall for his advancement. Sanballat wanted the people to know the contents of this letter so that they might have doubts about Nehemiah's reputation and desires. If some of the people believed what was in the letter, they might rebel against Nehemiah and turn to Sanballat for answers and leadership. It was an excellent opportunity to divide the people and discredit Nehemiah so that the project would stop. The letter also was a veiled threat to discredit Nehemiah before the King back in Persia who would want to know why Nehemiah wanted to make himself King.

6. Verses 6-9 What have you seen Satan accomplish in churches with slander and gossip against leaders? How do you overcome slander and gossip in the church?

Answers will vary, but encourage them to share their experiences. Slander can cause discouragement among the members, derail programs and ministry, bring division in a church, and cause leaders to quit. It is a powerful weapon of Satan to destroy a church and its leadership. Churches need to be in the Bible to know the truth and counter the half-truths of the world. As we hold up what is said to the clear word of scripture, we can see what is right. In the church, trust has to be built for each other and for the mission that they have together. Most of all, they need to bathe their leaders and their own lives in prayer as Nehemiah does. Listen to God and ignore the naysayers.

7. Verses 8-9 What do you learn from Nehemiah about confronting slander in the church? Nehemiah faced the slander by telling the truth, praying to God for strength and by getting back to work. He would not let the slander waste his time. Nehemiah asked the Lord for strength and may have even included a prayer asking the Lord to deal with these men as he had in 4:4-5. He also had a Godly

character filled with generosity (5:14-19) and virtuous conduct in his life. Christian leaders need to know how to handle such false accusations, mean spirited letters, and gossip. Such hateful comments can make us lose perspective and keep us from doing the work that the Lord has given us. Leaders have to study scripture, so they know the truth and can counter the half-truths of the world. They have to trust one another and the mission that they have. Most of all, congregational members need to bathe their leaders and their own lives in prayer as Nehemiah does. Listen to God and ignore the naysayers.

8. Verse 10 What was the prophecy of Shemaiah intended to do to Nehemiah? (6:10) Why would it have been wrong for Nehemiah to go into the temple proper? (See Numbers 18:7)

One of Satan's greatest weapons is fear. The enemies of the Jews hired a prophet to try to convince Nehemiah that his life was in danger. The plan was ingenious. Shemaiah shut himself in his house and pretended that his life and Nehemiah's life were in danger. He wanted Nehemiah to stop the project and hide in the temple with the prophet. However, Numbers 18:7 says that anyone who is not a priest who goes beyond the altar shall be put to death. It was against God's law for a layperson to go into the holy place of the temple. Shemaiah wanted Nehemiah to break God's law so that God would abandon him and to do so would discredit Nehemiah and bring God's punishment on him.

9. Verse 10 How should a Christian distinguish between God's will and the words of a false prophet or someone speaking from their convictions?

Answers will vary based on their own experience. In the text, Nehemiah knew that this prophecy was false because it asked him to do something against God's law. He was willing to put his life on the line rather than doing something he knew was wrong. We also need to test what people tell us to do by the rules of scripture. God will never ask us to do something that violates his word. The end never justifies the means. Secondly, know who you are as Christ's servant. Nehemiah trusted God and bluntly asked why he should run away. Leaders should also recognize that God calls them to ministry and that God's ways are always best. Triumph over fear and avoid sinful shortcuts by knowing the word of God so that you know of God's power, his path, and your calling.

10. Why are the days after a success sometimes the most dangerous time in a project?

Answers will vary, but it is crucial to see how Satan does not give up because we have had some success. I have watched a church work together to build an addition or to have a great Easter with a lot of visitors only to see everyone take a vacation from ministry right afterward. People get tired of working and want to get back to other things. Sadly, our temptation is to rest on our laurels while Satan is ready to attack the church anew. If you are not careful, you can lose everything. Keep your focus and don't let Satan lure you away with other pressing issues or with struggles that come in times of success.

11. Verse 17 Although the work is finished and the wall is complete, what final tactics does Tobiah still use and what was he trying to accomplish?

Tobiah continued a letter-writing campaign to make Nehemiah look bad, and himself look good. He also sent letters to intimidate Nehemiah and force him into doing something foolish. The Jewish leaders reported everything to Tobiah so that this enemy could plan his next move and intimidate Nehemiah or cause the people to stumble. Sadly, many of the Jews were secretly cooperating with the enemies of the Jews. They finished the wall, but their hearts were not right. Many were a threat to Nehemiah from inside the camp of the Jews. Right after a victory is a deadly time for we are proud of what we have done and think that nothing can defeat us now. Be on your guard.

12. Verse 18 What caused some of the leaders to turn their backs on their fellow Jews and Nehemiah when he was having success rebuilding the city?

Many of the nobles had intermarried with the enemies of the Jews. Their wives were not of Jewish ancestry, splitting their allegiance between the Jews and their enemies. The family bonds were stronger than their obligations to their people. It caused the nobles to give loyalty to Tobias instead of to God and God's servant. Ezra had come in 458 BC and dealt with a large number who had intermarried with the local people in Ezra 11. Now, Nehemiah who came thirteen years later in 445 BC still has to deal with the same problem. He will deal with it again in Nehemiah 13 since foreign brides tended to take people away from the Lord and the faith.

13. "Success is not doing the right things, but being right with God." Do you agree or disagree with that statement, and what does the life of Nehemiah teach you about success?

Answers will vary. It would be tempting to try and find the steps to building a church in the pages of Nehemiah. We want some magic formula for building a wall and building a church. If we look for a method, we miss the point of Nehemiah's experience. Success came from being the right people, not the right things. Nehemiah connected to God, and so must we be. He knew his Bible and could discern what was good and evil because of that knowledge. Nehemiah knew his God and trusted God fully to provide what we needed and defend him when things got rough. He often prayed in times of trouble. If the church is going to have revival, we will need to be "right" people. We will need to be people of the book like we have never been before. Satan is forced away by scripture. Just look at Jesus' temptation when three Bible passages defeated Satan. Prayer defeats Satan.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 If someone offered a book that would help you through the darkest times and would bring joy and happiness in your life, what would you pay for such a volume? Why might you be suspicious of such a book? How do those suspicions mirror the suspicions that non-Christians have about the Bible?

Deep 2 What are the benefits you receive from being a Christian? What are the costs of being a Christian?

Deep 3 Think of one friend. What benefit would they receive if they were to become a Christian that would change their life?

2. Revival Starts with scripture Nehemiah 8

Big idea: Read it, celebrate it and obey it so you may have a vibrant life

The walls of Jerusalem were up, and the city was safe. Sadly, the hearts of the people were struggling and afraid. The people had forgotten their God. It had been almost a hundred years since they had returned from Babylon, and worship was still anemic, and the knowledge of God was vague at best. It had left them empty and hopeless. Life had become difficult. They needed to know who the God who was who rebuilt the walls. They needed how God wanted his people to live so that they could thrive and be a strong nation again. Having finished the wall, the leaders chose to assemble people by the Water gate so that they could have the refreshment of the scriptures. Here was what their hearts needed. From this point on, the Jews would become the people of the book. They would read and study the Bible so that they built their lives on it.

The church needs revival. Our first reaction is to look out into the world and complain that it has changed. We complain about the government. We complain about our culture. We want to write nasty things on Facebook and badger people into doing what is right. We are looking at the wrong place for the problem. The church flourished amid the evil Roman Empire. The church has prospered in times filled with more hardship than we have now. The problem is us. The problem is that the church is listening more to the media and culture than to God. How would the church change if every Christian read the Bible for even 30 minutes a day giving up one television show or if they would spend one night with others in group Bible study? There is more. You must read and obey the Bible if it is to help you. The problem today is that too many Christians make up what they think God says or should say. What use is it to hear this message and not obey the Lord?

If you want a better life, be in the word, and obey it. We have been slow to learn that being a church member doesn't guarantee anything. Thousands of people leave churches every year disappointed that the church didn't help them with trials. The trouble is that people don't know God and don't know how to ask for his help. The word of God brings God into your life so His power and love can help you. It is God who helps those in need. Sadly, most of those people didn't read their Bible and didn't know God. If you want a better world, be in the word. It is hard to get a family member to go to church or know Jesus if you are not in the word. It is hard to handle troubles or the frustrations of life without being in the word. It is hard to be a person that has real character and the admiration of others without being in the word. We think that we can change the world by force with laws and lectures, but we can only change the world with God's love. Nehemiah started with scripture to alter his world, and so must we.

1. Where do you get your news? Is it from television, newspaper, radio or somewhere else? Why do you rely on that source?

Answers will vary. Let the group talk about the diversity of information out there. They may want to talk about how different news sources seem to have a different slant. Another question that you might deal with is whether they trust the source that they use for news. Do they trust the newspaper but not the television? Is radio a reliable source of information? Everyone has their opinions, and the class should be willing to discuss it openly. Don't let this become an argument over the news but a chance to see that not all news is the same.

Read Nehemiah 8

2. Verses 1-3. Where and when are the people meeting? What do you think was the purpose of this gathering?

They met on the first day of the seventh month which was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year's Day and was unusual because the first day was the feast of Trumpets with the Day of Atonement coming on the tenth day and the Feast of the Tabernacles starting on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. It was an appropriate time for a new beginning. The place was in the street before the water gate, an area large enough to contain such a big crowd. The purpose was renewal. The people of Judah had finished the wall, but they had forgotten their God. It had been almost a hundred years since they had returned from Babylon, and worship was still anemic, and the knowledge of God was vague at best. It had left them empty and hopeless. Life had become desperate, but God had answers for them in His word.

3. Verse 3. How well do you think that the average Christian knows the stories and teaching of the Bible?

Answers will vary. Sadly, I find that most church people know less about the Bible than their parents did a generation ago. Parents don't think it is vital to teach their kids the simple Bible stories at home or make sure they get to Sunday school. Few people want to stay and be in Bible class or come for an evening study at church. Christians are struggling for they have the wrong information. They know more about pop culture than biblical characters and values. They want God to build the world and make it beautiful, but their hearts are running on empty. Those who take the time to read and study the Bible will have a significant advantage in their own life and will be able to influence the world around them.

4. Verses 5-8. What do Ezra and his assistants do to make this event useful for all the people gathered?

Ezra may have left Judah for a couple of years. Here, he resumes his work of sharing the Law of Moses to the people. He was put up on a platform so that everyone can hear his words. The scroll is visible so that everyone knows that Ezra is not speaking his ideas, but is speaking God's Words. 13 men are up on the platform with him (perhaps the leaders of people?) showing that this message is to be heard by all the nation. There were also thirteen others (8:7-8) who explained the words that they were hearing. Remember that the ordinary people did not own copies of the scriptures. The Hebrew language may have also undergone some changes since the time of Moses making it harder for the people to understand. These thirteen teaching priests mingled with the people to explain the message during breaks. The people needed to grasp the message.

5. Verse 7. How does your church help people to understand the meaning of the Bible better?

Answers may include Bible classes, small groups, and Sunday school. Handouts in the bulletin of the sermon outline or summary of the message may be helpful. One church I know provides a few PowerPoint slides with a map and pictures of the setting of the story to help people understand the text before the sermon. Take time to think about how you can make your Bible class or worship service more beneficial to the members. We have many new methods and technologies to help people learn and apply the message to their lives. What might your church do better?

6. Verse 9 What was the people's first reaction to the reading of the law?

As Ezra read the word, and the teachers explained the message to the people, their first response was one of grief. They mourned over their sins and began to weep. They realized how they had strayed from God's ways and saw all the pain that they had caused themselves by not being in the scripture. They saw all their sins and were afraid of God. They felt the law and not the gospel. It may have been Ezra reading certain parts of Deuteronomy which convicted the people of their neglect of God's commands and the punishments that came with such sin.

7. Verse 10. How did Nehemiah and the others encourage the people?

Assisted by the Levites, Nehemiah encouraged the people to stop mourning and start celebrating. They wanted the people to see the love of God in these words and not just the law. The leaders are telling them to celebrate because your God loves you and forgives you. God gave his word so that we might know the depth of His love and commitment to the people of Israel. Look at the walls; God wants to build a relationship with you and make this a great city again. The Word of God brings a conviction for our sins, but it also should bring joy. God has forgiven us, and a forgiven child rejoices in the love of God. It was the joy of a renewed relationship with the Lord that the people were celebrating that day. God was still with them in spite of their sin.

8. What joys do you find in reading the scripture?

Answers will vary. For me, Bible study is not a duty but a visit with a special friend. Like a child sitting on her grandfather's lap listening to his stories and waiting for the presents he wants to give, our time with God in His word builds our relationship with Him and fills our life with blessings. Every Bible verse is full of treasures that will improve lives and help you see how much God loves you. Rejoice in your opportunity to study the word. Look forward to your next visit with God in the word. Let him wrap you in his arms each day and take you away from the pain of this world.

9. Verses 13-16. How do the leaders (8:13) and the people (8:16) respond to the words that they have heard?

Since the Feast of Tabernacles was only days after the reading of the law, the leaders had just a few days to get word to all the people to gather the branches so that they could celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. The leaders recognized the need to obey the law that they had heard. The Feast of Tabernacles looked back and remembered the forty years of wandering, but it also looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promises in the Promised Land. Reading the Bible is not enough. We have to follow what we have learned. Like a map, the Bible is not very useful to you if you do not follow its directions. If you ignore it, you do not profit from its information.

10. Verse 14. Why is reading the Bible of little value unless you obey it as well?

Answers will vary but should include a discussion of how the Bible moves us to action. Any information must be used for it to give an advantage. A map in the glove box has no value unless it's read. Likewise, the Bible must be read and obeyed if it is to help you. The problem today is that too many Christians make up what they think God says or should say. The wise person will hang on every word from God and make this wise advice their guide. If you hear the word of God, but if you do not obey it, you lose the advantage that God's word can give for your life. If you read and follow the Lord's word, you have an advantage over most people who are just guessing at what they should be doing in life.

11. The Israelites follow a pattern of "read, celebrate and obey." How are these actions by the Israelites a good model for us today?

Answers will vary. For me, the walls were up, and they were beautiful, but they would offer no protection if the people forgot God as their grandparents had done. Their source of happiness and prosperity was God and not the walls. It was the time that the Israelites got to know their God by reading the Bible. If the nation was to thrive and to survive, they needed to be a people of the book. It was important that they learned the Bible and taught it to their children. It was a book that would bring joy as they obeyed the book. Encourage your group to consider ways to incorporate these ideas into their worship or small groups.

12. Verse 17 What was the mood of the people after they had read the Torah of the Bible and understood the love of God?

The text tells us that the mood was exuberant so that they had not celebrated this feast with so much joy since the times of Joshua. The feast had been observed in Solomon's day (2 Chron. 8:13) and when the people had returned to Palestine (Ezra 3:1-4). This time was different. Joy came as they understood and celebrated the love and mercy of God in a new light. Ezra and the Levites had explained the message, and they were glad. Talk in your group about the joy that you have when a bible passage takes on new meaning and understand that this was a time when the Jews felt hope after being in despair for a long time.

13. How has this passage changed your attitudes about reading scripture? Why should it be a critical part of your life and your church?

Answers will vary. I see how the Bible changes my life and changes my world. The Bible brings God into our lives so His power and love can help us. It is the source of His time-tested wisdom that will work in every situation. It is a source of strength that can drive Satan out of your life and the lives of the people you love. Without it, you are in trouble. It is also hard to get a family member to go to church or know Jesus if you are not in the word. It is hard to handle troubles or the frustrations of life without being in the word. It is hard to be a person that has real character and the admiration of others without being in the word. We think that we can change the world by force with laws and lectures, but we can only alter the world with God's love.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 In what ways do we see reverence for the Bible in Nehemiah 8? Why is reverence for God's Word so important? How do you see the Bible treated today?

Deep 2 Why is congregational bible study necessary for revival? What happens if only a few are in the Bible daily?

Deep 3 What are the benefits would you expect from daily bible study and prayer? What would you have to give up to make time and energy for regular time with the Lord?

3. Revival: God lifts us past our weakness and gives life

Neh. 9:19-21, 29-38

Big idea: Confession can be the start of a new tomorrow.

They stood on a place of greatness, but all around them was failure and decay. The temple above them had gleamed with gold, and the surrounding nations paid tribute to their King. Now, their temple was simple, and the walls made of burnt and broken stone. Judah paid tribute to a faraway king, and food was scarce and straightforward. All around them said failure. They were a shadow of what they had once been. The Jews began revival with the Lord because they knew their weakness. They were an oppressed people in a town whose former glory was hard to see. God was their hope. Ezra reminds the people that God did not let Israel die in the desert, and He will not let them die now. God does not abandon His people even when they forsake Him. God keeps His promises. He would take care of them now just as He had done in the past.

We remember the days when it was fashionable to go to church. Churches were the center of the community, and kids filled the Sunday school eager to learn. Now we step into half-filled sanctuaries permeated with graying heads. We wish for revival in the church. If we are ever to have vitality in the church, it must come from the Lord. It is for that reason that we must praise our God. We must worship Him and depend on Him for our only hope for the future is His care of our world and our lives. God still does not abandon his people. His people may leave Him and chase after other things that they consider more important than God. Sadly, He is there, but they don't look for Him. Perhaps, when times get tough enough, they will get down on their knees and look for Him again. They may come when they remember all the things that the Lord has done for his church over the years. We can't change the future, but God can.

The way back to greatness has two steps. First, we must admit the reality and confess our sins as the Jews did. We all have to stop making excuses about the changing culture or the enemies of the church. The problem is not them. It is us. We have been too busy and self-absorbed to care about the church and the community. We need to confess that we have not shared and have not helped other Christians grow in their faith. Second, it is time to commit ourselves to God's path. Like the Jews, it is time to pledge to live by God's standard. Commit yourself to grow in your faith with daily Bible study and prayer. Commit yourself to turn outward and do whatever it takes to help people know about Jesus and grow in their faith. The way back to greatness in your life and our communities is to stop focusing on self and start focusing on God and His ways.

1. What is the longest time that you ever prayed in one sitting? What drove you to pray that long?

For many of us, it is a few minutes. If you have prayed longer, it may have been in a hospital room when you were sick or in the waiting room when someone you love had surgery. It is not uncommon for us to have a conversation for over an hour with a friend or a relative. Talking with God that long is often a strain. Verse 3 relates that the people worshipped and prayed for a quarter of the day after they had read the Bible for the same amount of time. As we study, we will discover what drove them to pray that long.

Read Neh. 9:19-21, 29-38

2. Verse 1. Why had the Israelites gathered together at this time?

The Feast of Tabernacles had just ended. The feast was a harvest festival in which the people built booths to recall the Exodus pilgrimage. The festival started on the 14th day of the month and lasted for seven days. Feasting had turned to a fast as the reading of the word throughout this month had convicted the people of their sins. Many had separated themselves from foreign spouses and repented of this sin. The

people turned to Ezra for answers from the Bible and a connection with the Lord. Sackcloth and ashes were a demonstration of the people's repentance and desire to come humbly before the Lord.

3. Verse 3 What do you do when you feel guilty for something that you did? How do you “get right” with the Lord?

Answers will vary. The group should share ways that they show repentance and how they receive forgiveness. Challenge the class to explore ways that someone who has committed a hideous sin like murder, adultery, or theft could confess their sins and feel the relief of forgiveness. The Jews focused on God's word and prayer. They read and studied the Torah so that they would know who God was and what He required. They began to pray to recall all that He had done for them and admitting that they had not lived as God's people. We need to ask ourselves if this is what we need to do. We need to look around and see what other Christians do in this situation. Ask yourself what your group could do if someone in the group wanted to confess something that was bothering them?

4. Verse 6. What are the four things that the Jews praise God for as they began their prayer? Why would each be of comfort to people who are struggling and feeling guilty about the past?

To recover life, we must begin with the source of life. We need to recognize who God is and give Him glory for all that He has done. Life begins with God. The people understood these four things as they began their prayer. 1) He is God alone. All the other gods and creatures that people put their trust in will fail. The nation of Israel was surrounded by idolatry and the degrading lifestyle that was associated with pagan worship. 2) God is the creator, and all people and things belong to Him. 3) God is the one who gives life to everything and keeps the world running. Finally, 4) He is so great that even the hosts of heaven worship Him. If we are ever to have a real-life, it must come from the Lord. It is for that reason that we must praise our God. We must raise Him and depend on Him for He alone is God. Everything we see as made by His hand and our only hope for the future is His care of our world and our lives.

5. Verses 7-13 What three actions of God that formed the nation of Israel do the Jews recall in verse 7, 9, 13?

1) It began with an act of pure grace as God chose their ancestor Abram from all the peoples of the world to create the nation. There is no reason that God should have set Abraham above all the peoples of the world but Genesis 12 details the covenant that God made with Abram and that the people of Jerusalem could claim as their own. 2) When they became slaves in Egypt, it was God again who rescued them and took them as His own. He gave them the promise of a land they could call their own and a future as a free people. 3) Finally, at Mt. Sinai, God forged a nation out of slaves He had delivered by giving them the law and a vision of the Promised Land. No other people around them could claim such honor from their gods. The love of God and His continued help set Him and them apart from the nations.

6. Verse 7-13 What is your story of God's blessings to you? Where has God touched your life and made you what you are today?

Answers will vary. Encourage the group to share two things or events in which God blessed them. Often we forget the past blessings as we try to live in the present. It is essential to see how the Lord has helped us in the past so that we trust Him in the future. Look for events that shaped who you are today. God is working in our lives if we let Him help us grow and gain strength so that we can be ready for the future. Let the class learn from each other's experiences. Take time for sharing and let people see the Lord and each other in a new light.

7. We all fail God, just as the Jews did. How has God been with you throughout your life and which of the qualities of God mentioned in verse 17 do you most appreciate?

As you look at the saints of the Bible, no one is perfect. Abraham lied about his wife. David committed adultery and murder. Peter denied his Lord after he had boasted the strength of his faith. Let the class identify with the people of Israel. Many of us have our times when we stopped coming to church or got caught up in sin. Let people talk about that if they wish but focus on the four qualities of God mentioned in this text and let them unravel their greatest blessing. I am glad that God is slow to anger. There are things that I should have been punished for that God allowed me to learn from God.

8. Verses 19-30 How had God showed them his great love despite their constant grumbling and rebellion during the exodus years?

The Jews were a story of disappointments and struggle. There were significant parallels between what was happening to the Jews after the Babylonian captivity and what had happened years ago after the people left Egypt. Despite grumbings and rebellion in the wilderness in which a whole generation died, God never forsook His people. He led them with the cloud and fire, taught them the word, provided them with the necessities of life, and gave them victory over their enemies. God keeps His promises and fulfills His purposes. God had compassion for them (v.30), overcame their enemies (v.22) and made them as numerous as the skies (v.23). The hope of the Jews in the text was that God would do for them as He had done for their ancestors long ago. They believed that God didn't change and that He would still guide and protect His people.

9. Verses 29-31 If God was so loving, why did the patient God allow the suffering that the nation had felt?

God had been very patient with His people (v.30), but Israel's sins had become so disgusting that God handed them over to their neighbors. When Israel obeyed Him, He was faithful to bless; when they disobeyed Him, He was committed to chasten; when they asked for mercy, He was faithful to forgive. God is willing to give His people many privileges, but our Lord will not allow them the opportunity of sinning and having their way. It is a sign of a Father's love that He will not let His children continue to destroy themselves with sinful behavior and selfish attitudes. God's purposes are greater than our pleasures, and the Lord will accomplish His goals even if He has to chasten us to do it. It was for this reason that God used the Assyrians to destroy the Northern Kingdom, and then He brought the Babylonians to take the Southern Kingdom (Judah) captive and to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.

10. How has God shown His mercy to you or to someone you know even though they did not deserve it? How has God used hardship to bring people back to faith?

Answers will vary. Allow people to tell the stories of others without mentioning their names. The point of this question is not to shame, but to show that God is still merciful just as He was for the Jews. Realize that there can be a point when grace runs out. Verse 30 seems to speak of the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel who were destroyed in 722 BC. God had been patient with them, but ultimately, their lack of repentance and continued sin brought consequences. We can turn our backs on God and refuse His grace and suffer the consequences. The Jews were concerned that their end was coming just as it had for the Northern Tribes. Repentance opens us up for mercy from the Lord. Let the group share the joys of that mercy.

11. Verses 32-37. We finally come to the petition of this prayer. After telling the story of God's mercy and the rebellion of their ancestors, what are the people asking?

The leaders and the people have reviewed history, and now it is time to make their request. They pray that all the hardship that they face not seem small in God's eyes. They have paid dearly for their sins as a nation. They admit that God has been just in all that He has done for them. He has been more than gracious. Verse 36 reveals the current condition of the Jews. They are slaves in the land that God promised to their fathers. They should be enjoying God's blessings, but they are in torment and do not get

to keep the material blessings that the Lord has given. The implication is simple. “Have you forgotten us, Lord?” God had been with His people through the ages, but His mercy seems far away. They confess their sins and have the hope that the future will be better because of the character of God.

12. Verse 38 The chapter closes with the people making a covenant with the Lord. Why do you think that they made this pledge?

The people made this pledge because history had shown them that the failure they saw all around them was due to centuries of abandoning God. God is gracious and merciful and loves His people. They were convinced that if they returned to the Lord that He would be gracious and restore the people and keep His promises. They had learned that God was their only security for the future. He was the source of all Israel’s greatness in the past. It was a commitment to God, but it was also a commitment to their future and themselves. Without God, the future would look as bleak as the present. In committing to God, they were committing to change their future and their legacy. The content of this promise is found in chapter 10. Sadly, the people did not keep these promises for long.

13. What have you learned from the experience of the Jews as you look at the church’s struggles? What must the church do to become great again?

Answers will vary. Encourage the group to review how the people of God live out their faith. God has not changed, but we have. As I look at the church, it is time to define by God’s standard what it means to be a Christian. Put, it is to grow and to share. It is to commit ourselves to grow in our faith so that we are in the Bible and are people who follow what the word has to say because we believe that God’s ways are best. It is time to pledge to turn outward and do whatever it takes to bring salvation to the people around us. It is a commitment to God, but it is also a commitment to us. We have seen how the church and Christian fair without God. It is essential to renew the commitment to God and to live in His kingdom and love. We can’t wait too long.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How committed do you believe that God is to improving the lives of His people and His church? Why?

Deep 2 What do you see as some of the weaknesses of the church and your congregation? How have those sins/weaknesses affected the church at large and the members in particular?

Deep 3 How would a renewed commitment to follow the Lord and his mission impact the lives of the members and the future of the congregation?

4. Your relationship with God is the key
Neh. 10:27-39
Big idea: Living with God is always better.

Over 500 years had passed since the glory days of David and Solomon. There were 500 years of hardship as the once glorious kingdom slid into ruin with broken walls and broken dreams. The Jews had learned the hard way about the pain that came when you did not honor God as your king. Eighty-four people gathered to sign a pledge to begin anew with Nehemiah leading the way. No longer would they treat the Sabbath as any other day. They had made it a time to socialize and to do business like the Gentiles around them. It had kept them from God. When they did worship, they often gave blemished animals as sacrifices. They would never have dared do that to the Persian King, but somehow God was less important. They realized how their treatment of God had cost them. It was time to begin anew.

Some would say that the glory days of the church have passed. Churches are closing, families are breaking up, and chaos fills our cities. We are under the curse but have not yet acknowledged it. America no longer honors the Lord and is paying an ever-growing price for it. We cannot force the world to change, but we can transform our world. Sunday must be a holy day. Our children should be learning about the Lord instead of attending soccer games. Adults should make a priority of worship instead of working extra hours. Satan loves to keep Christians busy with activities that keep us from God. The effect is that God gets second best if anything at all. Churches struggle to do the ministry and are falling in disrepair as God is not seen to be worth the bother. It is time for us to begin anew, just like the Jews.

The past was forgiven but not forgotten. The Jews had learned the lesson that life is better in God's kingdom, and they wanted to live in that kingdom and enjoy the blessings of a relationship with God. They wanted to have what their ancestors had missed. Our God is a God of second chances and new life. He gave new life to the thief on the cross and a second chance to David after he sinned with Bathsheba. Just because things look bad does not mean that the church is forever doomed. God revives His church and gives it new life if they will but ask. It is time to focus on the joys of living under God as our king. We live in grace and forgiveness. We live with God's provision and protection. We live with God's purpose and direction which helps us to know what is right and wrong. God's kingdom is a good place to live with Him. Those who commit their life to the Lord will find joy all the days of their lives.

1. What is a significant agreement that you put your name to in writing? (Buy a home or car, sign up for the military, or get a marriage license, etc.) Why did that need to be in writing?

Encourage the group to share. All of us have signed some document in our life. I have a marriage license, a deed for my home, and titles for my cars. It is helpful to explore how putting it in writing helps us spell out the details and makes it binding. Your deed for the home protects your rights to that piece of property. Your marriage certificate gives you and your spouse certain rights if either of you dies. Contracts spell out our hopes for the future and bind us so that each party knows what they agreed to.

Read Neh. 10:27-39

2. Verse 1-27. Look back to the first verses of the chapter. Who signed the agreement? Why was this a serious matter and not taken lightly?

With Nehemiah's name heading the list, eighty-four persons put their seal on the covenant that they made with the Lord. This list included priests (vv. 2-8; see 12:1-7), Levites (10:9-13), and the leaders of the people (vv. 14-27). Many other citizens subscribed to the covenant who didn't "sign their names" individually (v. 28), including wives and children who didn't have the legal right to put a personal seal on an official document. A nation had heard the Word of God read and explained and were now committing

themselves to obey what they had heard. Putting a seal on this document was a serious matter because it meant taking a solemn oath before the Lord (v. 29; see 5:13). The law governing vows and oaths is found in Numbers 30 and is introduced with these words: "When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said" (v. 2, NIV). Since a testimony involved the name and possible judgment of God, it was not to be taken lightly. Jesus warned against using empty oaths (Matt. 5:33-37; 23:16-22), and Solomon gave a similar warning (Eccl. 5:1-7).

3. How seriously do people you know take their confirmation vows or baptismal vows for their children today? How do their actions show their commitment or lack of dedication?

Let the group discuss the commitment of people they know or their commitment. Most people will know friends who dropped out of the church because they got too busy. God is deemed not to be as important as the activities of life. It has caused the church to struggle and Christians to lose the benefits of a relationship with the Lord. Currently, the church loses half of the children baptized before confirmation, and half the children confirmed before they become young adults. That means that only 25% of our baptized children are still as active as they were when they become young adults.

4. Verses 28-30. The first promise deals with relationships. Why were the Jews supposed to separate themselves from their neighbors?

The Jewish remnant was surrounded by idolatrous Gentiles, who wanted the Jews to become a part of their social, religious, and business society. The Law of Moses prohibited God's people from living like the Gentiles, although it didn't stop the Jews from being good neighbors or even great customers. Marriage was a particular problem. The Jews had intermarried with the surrounding nations. Like Solomon, who married foreign princesses, the neighboring countries had taken Jews from their faith. It was hard to observe the dietary laws or celebrate festivals. They began to worship the gods of the other nations, along with the true God. Slowly, the values of Israel eroded as people ignored the laws of God and grew distant from their faith. The covenant pledged to be unique and obey God's will. This promise decreed that they would have a relationship with God rather than the gods and ways of their neighbors.

5. Verse 30 Many Christians marry non-Christians and expect that they will convert the spouse. In your experience, does it usually work out that way?

A Christian indeed brings blessings on a non-Christian spouse. Their Christian character and prayers make the life of their spouse better. It is also true that a non-Christian spouse makes it harder for the Christian to worship or to give generously. Like the Jews in the text, a non-Christian makes it more challenging to raise Godly children. Non-Christians in the family are more likely to take the Christian from their faith than become active Christians. For that reason, Christians should seek out Christian spouses and families that have non-Christians in them should do all in their power to witness to the non-Christian. The lives of non-Christian family members impact us more than we think. Their problems and ungodly behavior drag us down and cause us pain and worry. It is wise to commit to building Christian families.

6. Verse 31 The second promise deals with the Sabbath. Why might it be hard to keep the Sabbath special surrounded by foreign nations? What would they lose if they lost the uniqueness of the Sabbath?

The gentiles around Jerusalem treated the Sabbath as any other day. It was a time to socialize and to do business. It was easy for the Jews to rationalize that they needed this business because they were starving. How could they give up the opportunity to make a living or get food? The loss of the Sabbath meant no time for God. Their busy lives provided no time to worship the Lord, and no time to contemplate what God's word was teaching them. There was no time to rest and spend time with family and friends. Life

would become a grind instead of a time of refreshment with God and other believers. It was time to commit to God so that the quality of life could improve.

7. Verse 31 How does the world around us look at Sunday worship, and how has that affected our time with the Lord?

Our world sees Sunday as just another day. Children are encouraged to be at soccer games and Boy Scout campouts. Parents are taught to work or be at charity events on Sunday mornings. We have exchanged a better time with the Lord for good activities in the world. We rationalize that it is ok to do this occasionally for our kids and to serve others, but soon it becomes all the time, and God is left out. Satan loves to keep Christians busy with good things that keep us from the best time with God. Never being renewed by God in His word and sacraments, our lives begin to lose their high quality. We run, run, run, and never find time for rest. God becomes distant, and we wonder why life is a drag. We flounder as we miss the encouragement of scripture and love of others. When God gets left out of our lives, life suffers.

8. Verses 32-39 The remaining promises deal with our resources and the support of God's house. What four areas of support did the people pledge at this time?

First, the people pledged to pay the temple tax (10:32). The tax was to be used to support the ministry of the house of God and was a reminder to the people that God had redeemed them and paid the price to set them free, and that they should behave like people who belonged to God. Second, the people promised to bring wood (10:34) since the fire on the brazen altar was to be kept burning steadily and wood was a precious commodity. Third, people pledged to give God their first fruits (10:35). The Jews were to give God their first and best. The giving of their firstborn is a reminder that God saved them from death in the land of Egypt (Ex. 14). Finally, the people pledged to give God a tithe of their produce (10:37) to support the ministry.

9. Verse 35 Which part of the crops did the people pledge to bring to the Lord? Why is it significant that they would bring this portion?

The people promised to give God the first fruits, which were both the first and the best. Malachi complains that God often gets the leftovers (Mal. 1:6-9). He receives the lame animal for an offering, or he receives fruit that is not fit to eat. By giving God the first and the best, they were trusting that the Lord will provide an abundance after the first fruit. It was also a belief that God would continue to give a good crop for them to feed their family and to sell to others. The first-fruits belong to God (Proverbs 3:9) and giving God anything less than the best robs God (Mal. 3:8) which has brought a curse on the people. Like the Jews, we should give God the best believing that He will continue to provide us with more of good quality.

10. Verse 35 What is the danger of giving God less than the best?

Malachi, a contemporary of Nehemiah, complained that the people gave blemished animals to the Lord and robbed the Lord of the full tithe. They gave God the leftovers instead of giving Him the best. They would half-heartedly worship the Lord as if He was not worth the bother. Churches struggle to do the ministry and are falling into disrepair as God is not seen to be worth the trouble. Malachi's rebuke is still appropriate. A small % of most church members fund the lion's share of the budget and do the majority of the work. For most, God gets leftovers. However, people will expect God to answer their prayers and give them what they need as if they were the most important person to God. Offerings have become a duty for most people instead of a response of love to a faithful God.

11. Verse 39 The people pledge to no longer neglect the house of the Lord. What do you suppose that the past had taught them about life with or without the Lord?

Over 500 years had passed since the glory days of David and Solomon. Five hundred years of hardship as the once glorious kingdom slid into ruin with broken walls and broken dreams. The Jews had learned the hard way about the pain that came when you did not honor God the king. For the Jews, it was a time to start over. The past was forgiven but not forgotten. They had learned the lesson that life is better in God's kingdom, and they wanted to live in that kingdom and enjoy the blessings of a relationship with God. They wanted to have what their ancestors had missed. It was a time to begin under God's grace. They would not ignore God with their money or their lives. They would stop living apart from Him but build a relationship with God that would last unto eternity. They would honor the Lord and live in His kingdom and mercy.

12. As you look around the American church and our nation, what parallels do you see? What should we learn from the lessons of this chapter?

Answers will vary, but few can deny that churches are closing, families are breaking up, and chaos fills our cities. We are under the curse but have not yet acknowledged it. America no longer honors the Lord and is paying an ever-growing price for it. I pray that we do not pay the cost that the Jews paid of captivity, poverty, and the breakup of the nation. Thankfully our God is a God of second chances and new life. He gave new life to the thief on the cross and a second chance to David after he sinned with Bathsheba. Just because things look bad does not mean that the church is forever doomed. God revives His church and gives her new life if she will but ask. It is time for the church to begin to live under God's grace. It must turn outward instead of having a church just for us. It must honor the Lord with its possessions and time. It is time to live as subjects of the kingdom and listen to our God and obey His will so that we might prosper.

13. If the church makes and keeps the commitments that the Jews made in this passage, how would life change?

Answers will vary, but we all need to see how wonderful it would be to live with God as our Lord and live in His kingdom. I picture us living with God's provision and protection. God is the king who gives His people their daily bread and who protects them from Satan and His evil aims. I picture people having a clear understanding of right and wrong so that we avoid so many of the hardships people face. I view each person having a purpose in life that brings glory to God and service to others. We would know what it is to live in a caring group of individuals and to build families that surround each other with love. Commitment to the Lord would change lives, families, and communities. Christians would be a positive influence on everyone around them.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Where have you seen decay in the commitment of Christians? How has it impacted the church and community?

Deep 2. What does this passage teach us about giving to the Lord? Why is attitude just as important as the size of the offerings that you live?

Deep 3. What do you think the church would look like if members made similar commitments as we find in this passage? How would it impact the atmosphere of the church? How would it affect their ability to change their community?

5 Celebration so others can see God's glory

Neh. 12:27-47

Big idea: the joy of the Lord is our strength

Joy wants a party. It is a happy feeling that wants to burst out and let others know how great things are. The city was slowly showing signs of urban renewal. The empty capital had taken on new residents who had left their comfortable homes in the country. The celebration was not just for the new residents, but the nation. The focal point was not the walls, but the joy that everyone had in the temple. The people had such great delight at all the Lord had done that they could not keep silent. The Lord had worked a miracle, and the marching choirs had proved the strength of God's wall. Their joy was so great that people could hear the shouting miles away. Their celebration was a testimony to all the nations that said it couldn't be done. God was mighty, and God was back in Jerusalem to claim His people and His town. The world was put on notice.

The church should have a reputation for being a place of joy. God's word will fill our hearts with new insights and the power to tackle daily life. Prayer will be a chance to give God all our concerns. We need to invite everyone to share in that happiness. People should walk out of here with their burdens lightened and a positive attitude for the week because God will be with them. Our celebration is not just in friendships but is in our God. He is the source of our joy. A lot of people pass by the church because they think it is dead and dull. Nehemiah declares, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." It is this joy which can change our lives and the lives of others. Celebrate so loud that others take notice and want to learn more. Celebrate in your life, so people want to know why you have this happiness. His joy is infectious. Change the world with joy.

Happiness is not dependent on circumstances, but upon the inward choice to live with God. The walls were up in Jerusalem, but the lives of the people were only slowly being rebuilt. They were on an upward trail of hope because God was there. Life will always have its ups and downs. We can complain when we are down and complain when the highs are not as good as someone else's highs. We can make ourselves downright miserable because our focus is us and what culture thinks we should have. If you want joy, focus on our Lord. We should celebrate the highs that He brings into our lives and brings His joy through prayer into the lows. Let His joy be infectious. Celebrate his joy so others can see what the Lord is doing for you. Celebrate so that others will see our God is a God who loves and brings hope to his people. The joy of the Lord is your strength every day.

1. What celebrations are meaningful to you? What elements did those celebrations include that made them special?

Answers will vary. Celebrations can include national holidays like the Fourth of July or Memorial Day as well as family gatherings like a wedding or family reunion. Encourage the group to share special celebrations from their lives. Let them tell why these were unique to them and their family. It may have been seeing extraordinary family members or something special like fireworks or parades. These chapters describe a time of joy and hope for the Jews. After years of just getting by in a city with broken walls and homes, life was looking up, and the people wanted to celebrate and worship the God who was making renewal possible.

Read Neh. 12:27-47

2. Verses 27-30. Why were the Levites sought out of the countryside? What benefits did the added musicians bring to the celebration?

It was time for a party. The city of Jerusalem was slowly showing signs of urban renewal. The empty town had taken on residents who had left their comfortable homes in the country to build homes and businesses in Jerusalem. (Chapter 11) It was time to dedicate the walls, and the leaders wanted everyone to participate. Levites were needed because this celebration was not just for the new residents, but the nation. The joy was to be shared and not kept to only a few. The Levites and singers made the choirs bigger and louder so that two choirs formed and the whole city could celebrate. It was to be a big celebration for God had blessed them all.

3. Verse 27 Why is our joy so crucial in the church? How could you foster the kind of celebration that is evident here in Jerusalem?

Answers will vary. I see the celebration and joy of the sharing of the peace can be contagious. It can be just what a person with a burden who walks in that door need. Surround each other with the joy of the gospel and the hope that things will be better because you are with God. I would hope that each church sings so loud that the world can hear it. I would hope that each of us brings that joy into our lives. Use music, scripture, or pictures around your house so that everyone who comes in contact with you can feel and sense the happiness that you have because Jesus is near. Find times in the church whether it be the holidays like Christmas or Easter or special events like a mission festival or the beginning of a new year of Sunday school to celebrate and point the church and the world to the Lord. We all need to see that our God brings joy and happiness into the lives of His people.

4. What is the source of joy of the text and the church?

Joy is not dependent on circumstances, but upon the inward choice to live with God. The walls surrounded Jerusalem, but the city was only slowly being rebuilt. God was with them, and that gave them hope. They were on an upward trail because God was there. Joys and sorrows will always fill our lives. We can complain when we are down and complain when the highs are not as good as someone else's highs. We can make ourselves downright miserable because our focus is us and what culture thinks we should have. If you want joy, focus on our Lord. "The joy of the Lord is our strength." We should celebrate the highs that He brings into our lives and joys He brings through prayer into the lows. The sky is the limit with our God, and that is our hope so celebrate and let His comfort be infectious.

5. Verse 31 – 37. What did Nehemiah do with the choirs to celebrate and dedicate the walls? What advantages do you see in this method of dedication?

Nehemiah directed the two large choirs to sing praises going opposite directions along the wall and meeting at the temple. Ezra led one group and Nehemiah was part of the other group. The processions started at the valley gate and went in opposite directions meeting again at the temple area where a service climaxed the celebration. They walked toward each other, covering the whole wall on either side. The festival would be a time of praising the Lord and giving Him credit for constructing the walls so quickly. Their eyes were on the walls, but the people also looked past them into heaven and gave glory to God.

6. Verse 31. Why do you think it was necessary to march a virtual crowd of priests, singers, and people across every inch of the wall? What were they showing to themselves and the world around them?

The choirs showed how strong the walls were and how robust God's defenses. As the choirs marched on the walls with praise to God, the people followed around the city seeing their labors and God's power. In Nehemiah 4:3, their enemies had boasted that the walls were so weak that "if a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones." Here a musical army marched on the walls showing the strength of what God had built. The march also helped them understand that they constructed the walls as they came together as one man under the power of God. It was a tour of the walls and a celebration of what God had done in one festival.

7. Verse 43. What was the worship like when the choirs meet in the temple? How would you describe the mood of the people?

It was a great spectacle with sacrifices to the Lord before the temple. The focal point was not the walls, but the joy that everyone had in the temple. The people had such great pleasure at all the Lord had done that they could not keep silent. Men, women, and children participated in the celebration for they all saw this celebration as the beginning of a new era under the Lord. The Lord had worked a miracle, and the marching choirs had proved the strength of God's wall. Their joyful praise was so strong that people could hear the shouting miles away. Their joy was a testimony to all the nations who said it couldn't be done. God was mighty, and God was back in Jerusalem to claim His people and His town. The Jews put the world on notice. They could not hold in their thanks or joy.

8. Verse 43. How do you think that the celebration affected the nations surrounding the Jews?

The nations said that it could not be done. People like Sanballat, Geshem, and Tobias had done everything in their power to keep the wall from being built up. The celebration was so loud and walking on the walls had proved their strength so that the enemies could not help but be discouraged. The people pointed to their God and served notice on the nations that their God was so strong that He had done the impossible. This festival was a day of Jewish celebration and a time of discouragement for the surrounding Gentiles. The nation of Israel was rising again and would deserve respect.

9. What is the mood like in your worship? What does your spirit say to visitors about the character of your God?

Answers will vary. Encourage the group to be honest, but not brutal. On vacations, my family has been to several churches of my denomination that had a feeling of a funeral parlor. Sadly, I think that a lot of people pass by the church because they believe that it is dead and monotonous. Our piety sometimes gets the best of us, and we give the appearance that the church is all law and no gospel. Nehemiah declares, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." It is this joy which can change our lives and the lives of others. It is the time that we celebrate so loud that people around us can hear. Our joy is not to mock others but to invite them in so that they can join in the celebration. People will notice and want to learn more. Celebrate in your life, so people want to know why you have this happiness. Celebrate so others can hear God's praises. His joy is infectious. Change the world with joy.

10. Verse 44-45. How do the people show that this dedication is a beginning and not an end? What is their desire for the future?

The people prepared storerooms and appointed people to be in charge of them. Food filled the storerooms for priests and the singers. The people provided for the Temple and future celebrations. They knew that the joy could only continue if it were centered here in the Lord. They knew that neglecting the temple would bring the desolation they had experienced since their return from captivity. The people invested in their future. They wanted God to be with them and wanted the joy He alone could bring daily and weekly as they came to this temple and celebrated with Him. Joy was not just to be at the festival, but every day since God was with them every day. No day should be without Him.

11. Verse 47. What happened after the last church dedication, pastor installation, or another festival at your church? Did people see it as an end or a beginning?

Answers will vary. I would guess that too often a church dedication marks the end of the celebration and return to business as usual. A celebration takes energy, and we just get worn out. We often go back to our lives and do not continue to take care of the church or the new pastor. Such milestones in the congregation should be the beginning. How will we use the new building? How will we serve with this new pastor? God wants the joy to continue. He intends to build on the joy that we have, even as we continue to look

forward to pleasures in the future. Fill His house with gifts, and He will abundantly bless. Fill His church with your joy and watch the joy multiply as we rejoice in all that God is doing.

12. What steps can you take to care for those serving the Lord and serving you in your church or missions?

Let the group ponder this. Some things are natural. We provide a good salary for our pastor and resources for the upkeep of the church. We may also offer money for missionaries that serve in the inner city or Asia or Africa. Realize that ministry can be lonely and that God's servants can also benefit when people take time to care for them. Why not offer to take care of your pastor's children for a night so that he and his wife can have a date. Make sure that your pastor takes his day off and that he gets vacation and the opportunity for continued learning and growth. The more we invest in our servants, the more that those people can give to us and others.

13. How does the lonely walk of Nehemiah in chapter two compare to the celebration here in chapter 12? What do you think he might have written in his diary as he weighed the two days?

Have the group look back at chapter two and take in Nehemiah's predicament. Have they ever experienced a miracle like this in their life? Nehemiah's walked around the city in chapter two with just a few men in the middle of the night. Nehemiah sadly expressed the trouble that the city faced. The walls were in ruin and the gates burned with fire. He encouraged the men, and they set about getting the project started amidst the ridicule of their enemies. In chapter 12, the whole city joined in the celebration in the middle of the day. The worship was so great that the surrounding villages could hear their joy. The enemies are silent for God had done something that no one believed was possible. If I were Nehemiah, I would have filled my diary with words of thanks. God had brought him through it all, and there had to be satisfied in his heart.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Nehemiah had hopes when he walked the walls in chapter 2. What are the dreams that you have for the future of your congregation?

Deep 2 What are joys that you can already celebrate in your congregation? What are the blessings that you want to celebrate this time next year?

Deep 3 How can you prepare so that the celebration will continue after your weekend and into the next year?

6. Keeping revival going

Neh. 13: 1-28

Big idea: If you are not careful, the current will pull you back.

Nehemiah had served for twelve years before being recalled to the Persian palace. In his absence, the revival had practically died in Judah. Without serious action, the people would return to the destructive ways of their ancestors, and the nation would perish. It began with a failure of leadership. Tobiah, who had been an enemy of the people, was given a room in the temple. The priests had grown soft and compromised God's house. Because the leadership had forgotten God, the people did too. They did not support the ministry and forced the priests to go back to farming to support their families. Soon the people ignored their faith and saw the Sabbath as not unique. Buying and selling filled the city on what should have been a holy day. Nehemiah was forced to take drastic actions upon his return. ,

Revival will die if God's people are not vigilant. Sin is like cancer that keeps coming back. It starts at the edges and works toward the center of the church. If we are passive with evil, it will destroy the church and us. If it is to survive, revival must be more than a pledge. It must be a lifestyle that you cultivate so that compromise is not a possibility. The downfall can start today as it did in Jerusalem with compromised leadership. People start living according to their own standards, not what God commands. Soon the whole church has declined. Offerings take a nosedive as people return to their old habits and begin to miss worship and devotional time. They wonder in times of crisis why the Lord has left them when they are the ones who left the Lord. Satan is at work here. He knows that one of the best ways to separate people from God is to pull them away from the Lord and then give them hardship so that they blame God instead of leaning on Him.

Nehemiah did several things to get the nation back on track. First, he was vigilant about the compromises that the people made. Instead of looking the other way like we often do, Nehemiah confronted people when they sin. As governor, he shut the gates to stop the sales on the Sabbath. He purified the temple and kicked Tobias out. He made the changes that are hard because he loved the church and the people. Nehemiah also was constant in prayer. You will find him talking to the Lord several times in this passage alone. The power for change and to keep change going comes from the Lord. It is not something that we do on our own. Be in the word and be constant in prayer so that Satan finds it hard to pull you away from the Lord. Know that changes might need to come when our revival starts to fail. It may seem harsh, but love for the Lord and His church will drive you to take action.

1. What is a promise that you have had difficulty keeping? What made the commitment hard to follow?

We have all made New Year's resolutions to lose weight, stop smoking, or be more attentive to our spouse. Sometimes the decisions go well, but many times they do not. The difference is having the endurance to keep going. Going to the gym for the month of January will not be enough to improve your health. It takes months of gym time and changed eating habits to lose weight. Encourage the group to share the promises that they didn't keep and the reasons why. Help them to see how hard it is to keep a pledge and to find the motivation that we need if we are to succeed.

Read Neh. 13: 1-28

2. Verses 1-3. What did the Lord decree in the Bible which the Israelites had not kept? Who were the Ammonites and Moabites?

The Jews had willingly separated themselves from foreign wives and husbands in 10:28-29 as part of the binding agreement that they had made following their prayer of confession. They had realized that having

foreign wives and husbands was keeping them from worshipping God. Here we see that the separation was incomplete or they had soon forgotten their promise. They began to realize that there were Moabites and Ammonites among the fellowship. These people are the descendants of Lot and his two daughters. (Gen. 19:30-38) They had become the enemies of the Jews as they had tried to prevent the Israelites from entering the Promised Land.

3. Verse 5. In spite of the commandment to separate from the Ammonites, what had Eliashib the priest done for Tobiah the Ammonite? (13:5)

Tobiah the Ammonite, who had repeatedly tried to stop the building of the wall and attacked Nehemiah as governor, was given a place in the temple. The enemy of God's people was in the temple at the invitation of Eliashib, the priest. Eliashib is the first person named who rebuilt the wall (3:1). He had become a traitor and violated God's house by letting an unbeliever use it. It seems that he probably did this terrible deed because one of his grandsons had married the daughter of Sanballat, the Horonite who was in league with Tobiah. Eliashib, the high priest, was closely connected with the enemies of the Jews. It is a sign that the leadership of the Jews had grown soft and had not only allowed the enemy inside Jerusalem but compromised God's house.

4. Verse 8. What does Nehemiah single-handedly do to right this wrong? Why was that a bold thing to do?

Nehemiah had to cleanse the temple. He threw Tobiah out without the help of the leadership. He even commanded that the stink of Tobiah be purged out of God's house and put back the equipment and supplies stored in that place. It was a daring thing to do without the backing of the leadership. We often see the same thing today as the pastor or one of the leaders stands up when Leadership and direction have been compromised only to face opposition and the danger of splitting the church. It is simpler to take the easy way out and try to find the middle ground as we soft-pedal God's word. It is wise to put into writing what the church stands for so that it can be the standard that the church recalls at each time of conflict. Sadly, compromising God's Word can kill a church as it brings terrible consequences and takes away our access to God's plan and power.

5. Verse 8. When has your church or small group faced a challenge that caused people to drift away from God? How do you think leaders should handle the situation?

Answers will vary. The church may struggle with its vision, finances, or how to deal with the sin in the world. Our challenge is that often people look for solutions based on our emotion or fear of dividing the congregation. They don't want to offend someone who is part of the church. Give Nehemiah credit. He knew what the Bible said (13:1), and he forcefully set out to honor God's desires. It could have ended up badly, but he trusted the Lord. Have the group address the challenges of keeping God's word and the costs of letting the church follow the will of the people instead of God. Talk also about the fears that we have in offending someone so much that we compromise our beliefs.

6. Verse 10-11. What had forced the Levites to leave Jerusalem and return to their fields? How does Nehemiah deal with the problem?

When Nehemiah returns, he discovers that the people were not supporting the ministry as they had promised. Temple servants had left the city and gone back to farming to support themselves. The worship of God had no longer been a priority for the people, and so the finances began to wane. Most commentaries think the book of Malachi prophecies about this lack of support. Malachi complains that God was getting leftovers. Nehemiah knew that the temple was the heart of the community. He rebuked the officials whose responsibility it was to make sure that the tithes were collected. Nehemiah set four honest men (a priest, a scribe, a Levite, and a layperson) over the supplies for the temple so that the

temple had the needed materials for worship. It didn't matter that he had already ruffled feathers. God was to come first, and people knew it.

7. How does your church deal with a shortfall in offerings? What are some better options?

When God's people start to decline spiritually, one of the first places that you see it is in the offerings. The fire of revival starts to die out, and people return to their old habits. Before long, God is forgotten. The church begins to restrict what they can do in ministry, and quickly the staff is leaving because they can't support themselves. One of the best things a church can do is find someplace outside their walls and give generously. Support a missionary. Support a mission in the community. Support something that gives glory to God and frees the church from gathering dollars only to keep the congregation alive. Don't be afraid to talk about the blessings of giving. If we make it part of our culture as a church, it becomes a priority, and we can watch God provide for you.

8. Verse 15-16. What is the third area of the people's vows of chapter 10 that they forgot? How does Nehemiah deal with this problem? (13:17-21)

When the people made the binding covenant with God, they promised not to do business on the Sabbath. (10:31) Walking through Jerusalem, Nehemiah saw that the Sabbath had become just like any other day. Men were treading grapes, grain was being sold, and loads of goods were coming in and out of the city. The people had forgotten God and were not taking time for Him or rest. Nehemiah rebukes the Jews and orders that the gates be closed on the Sabbath. He calls in the nobles and reminds them of the disasters that happened to the people when they forgot the Lord. A child of God must choose spiritual wealth over the chance to make greater material wealth. Nehemiah knows that neglecting the Sabbath will result in God's wrath and the downfall of Israel. (13:18)

9. Verses 15-16. In our era, the Sabbath is routinely forgotten. How do you encourage people to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy?

Answers will vary. It is easy to rationalize missing church or never having time for personal or family devotions. It is important to remind people that sporadic worship or devotional life will bring havoc in your life. How will you ever be able to pray in the difficult times if you don't know God? How will you ever grow and prosper without His help? Forgetting the Sabbath is the easiest way to let Satan have control of your life. Compromise in the area of worship, and you are taking away the shield of God's word. Satan will violate people's lives, their families, and their future. People will cry out for help when it is too late, and life is in a shambles. If you want to encourage people to keep the Sabbath, make time at church enjoyable and extraordinary for people. Make sure that there is time for fellowship. Have the best bible class and Sunday school that you can. People will miss something far fewer times if it is something that they enjoy.

10. Verse 24. What made marrying foreign women so wicked? How did it affect the Jewish children?

It would seem that the cause for many of these broken promises was the marriage of foreign wives. The women had brought their gods into the heart of Israel. The families had children that could not even speak Hebrew, making it impossible to worship in the temple or read the Holy Scriptures. Families across Jerusalem had lost their faith or mixed it with the religion and teachings of other nations. No wonder the Sabbath and Temple meant nothing. Within a generation, the children would grow up, and the Jews would forget their God. Before long, the nation would return to the cursed days of their fathers. The extent of this problem is shown in that Nehemiah must punish the grandson of the high priest for marrying a foreign woman.

11. Christians marrying non-Christians is common today. How do the children pay the price in our society?

Answers will vary, but I have noticed several things in this area. When a Christian marries a non-Christian or an immature Christian, the non-Christian usually influences the Christian and church attendance usually drops. It affects the children who often do not know the simple Bible stories because parents stop sending them to Sunday school or bringing them to church. Without faith, our children have no values and find themselves in trouble more than the kids who go to church regularly. The reason is simple. They don't have an internal compass that tells them right from wrong. They think it is fine to live together, to cheat at school or get in bad crowds. Compromised faith is destroying our children and families. It is the high price we pay for leaving the faith or letting the kids decide if they want to believe or not.

12. Verse 29. It has been said that reviving a church or a Christian life is like rowing upstream in a canoe. Why must we keep working at keeping our promises and growing in our faith if we are to have a revival?

Answers will vary. Revival is an ongoing process and not a one-time event. We often get excited about expanding the church or about starting a new Bible series. Satan sees the initial excitement and bides his time because he knows that he only has to get people busy, so they put God on the back burner. A church that wants to keep revival going has to be vigilant and in the word. They can't become lukewarm in their faith or their devotion to God. Revival must be more than a pledge. It must be a lifestyle that you cultivate so that compromise is not a possibility. Revival is built on the word and prayer, and it can take you places as a person and as a church that few will ever see. It is worth standing up to compromise. It is worth the constant and daily effort to keep the fire of faith burning brightly in your church. Those who draw close to the Lord will find that they have a joy that others will never experience.

13. Which of the four problems addressed by Nehemiah do you see needing the most attention in our society? Close your session with a prayer about these matters as Nehemiah does.

Answers will vary. Let the group have a good discussion of the effects of compromised leadership, finances, worship, and faith. In Nehemiah's day, the compromised leadership seems to have been at the root of all the problems. Nehemiah has to return to Persia for a time, and the leadership does not follow his path. When he comes back, his leadership gets the Jews back on the straight and narrow. All four issues have impacted the church and its mission and caused us a great deal of worry and struggle. Be sure to close the session with a prayer about the church's need to defend the faith and personally keep our promises to God. We cannot change the world without the power of prayer. It was Nehemiah's greatest weapon in his fight to revitalize the people of God. God can help His church in ways that we cannot.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Which of the reforms that Nehemiah addressed need to be dealt with by your church or community? What damage have these issues done in your community?

Deep 2. Why had the people so quickly given up the promises that they had made in chapter 10? Why do people today neglect the Sabbath and the needs of those who work for the church?

Deep 3. What did you learn from the study of Nehemiah that you want to apply to your life? What do you hope to change in your life, your church, or your community?

1. Revival: Faith that God will win.

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Big Idea: Success is right people not right things

The wall is up, and the enemies of Nehemiah are starting to panic. First, they try to distract him. They offer to help if Nehemiah will stop and meet with them. Nehemiah resists them for he knows that they want to harm him and halt the work with all kinds of suggestions. Nehemiah has focus. God has called him to a task, and he will not let others keep him away from it. Next, they try to slander him in an open letter. They accuse Nehemiah of working for personal advancement. Finally, they try to get Nehemiah to run from the threats in fear. Nehemiah would not bow to them. He was willing to put his life on the line if that was the price of doing God's will. He had faith that God would succeed and care for His people.

Revival in a church is not natural. The church needs to keep its focus on doing God's will. Satan will flood the church with lots of suggestions, both well-meant and evil, to derail the mission. If the church is to prosper, it must remember that it has the purpose of reaching the lost and leading people closer to the Lord. It must keep its focus even when people slander the church from the outside, and people challenge what you are doing at voter's meetings and parking lot conversations. Keep heart and move forward when you know what God has in mind. Don't let Satan overwhelm you with fear. He may try to get us to quit a ministry because it is not working quick enough or because of dangers real and imagined. Such fear guarantees failure. Have confidence in God's guidance in ministry.

The revival of a church is not simplistic. There is no magic formula or program. Success will come from being the right people not doing the right things. Nehemiah connected to God in Word and prayer. He knew his Bible and could discern right from wrong. He learned to trust the Lord and leaned on the Lord to provide what he needed and protect him when things got rough. We want the Bible to give steps to a revival that we can do with a minimum of effort. The Bible seeks to build healthy people. It wants people to take the time and effort to grow by the study of the Bible. It wants people to make time for prayer so that we know what God wants and have the courage to follow Him. Revival is about bringing people closer to the Lord so that they can serve Him and serve one another.

1. What is your greatest accomplishment in life? What made the task difficult?

Read Nehemiah 6:1-19

2. Verse 1-2 (2). The rebuilding of the walls is almost over. What message do Sanballat and his associates send Nehemiah? (6:1-2) What does Nehemiah discern is their real intent? (6:2)

3. Verse 2 Even if the offer to meet was sincere, how does Nehemiah not let the "good" get in the way of the "better"? When do we experience this kind of struggle in the church?

4. How do you develop discernment like Nehemiah so that the enemy doesn't deceive you?

5. Verse 5-7 What is Sanballat accusing Nehemiah of in the letter sent to him?

6. Verses 6-9 What have you seen Satan accomplish in churches with slander and gossip against leaders? How do you overcome slander and gossip in the church?

7. Verses 8-9 What do you learn from Nehemiah about confronting slander in the church?

8. Verse 10 What was the prophecy of Shemaiah intended to do to Nehemiah? (6:10) Why would it have been wrong for Nehemiah to go into the temple proper? (See Numbers 18:7)

9. Verse 10 How should a Christian distinguish between God's will and the words of a false prophet or someone speaking from their convictions?

10. Why are the days after a success sometimes the most dangerous time in a project?

11. Verse 17 Although the work is finished and the wall is complete, what final tactics does Tobiah still use and what was he trying to accomplish?

12. Verse 18 What caused some of the leaders to turn their backs on their fellow Jews and Nehemiah when he was having success rebuilding the city?

13. "Success is not doing the right things, but being right with God." Do you agree or disagree with that statement, and what does the life of Nehemiah teach you about success?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 If someone offered a book that would help you through the darkest times and would bring joy and happiness in your life, what would you pay for such a volume? Why might you be suspicious of such a book? How do those suspicions mirror the suspicions that non-Christians have about the Bible?

Deep 2 What are the benefits you receive from being a Christian? What are the costs of being a Christian?

Deep 3 Think of one friend. What benefit would they receive if they were to become a Christian that would change their life?

2. Revival Starts with scripture Nehemiah 8

Big idea: Read it, celebrate it and obey it so you may have a vibrant life

The walls of Jerusalem were up, and the city was safe. Sadly, the hearts of the people were struggling and afraid. The people had forgotten their God. It had been almost a hundred years since they had returned from Babylon, and worship was still anemic, and the knowledge of God was vague at best. It had left them empty and hopeless. Life had become difficult. They needed to know who the God who was who rebuilt the walls. They needed how God wanted his people to live so that they could thrive and be a strong nation again. Having finished the wall, the leaders chose to assemble people by the Water gate so that they could have the refreshment of the scriptures. Here was what their hearts needed. From this point on, the Jews would become the people of the book. They would read and study the Bible so that they built their lives on it.

The church needs revival. Our first reaction is to look out into the world and complain that it has changed. We complain about the government. We complain about our culture. We want to write nasty things on Facebook and badger people into doing what is right. We are looking at the wrong place for the problem. The church flourished amid the evil Roman Empire. The church has prospered in times filled with more hardship than we have now. The problem is us. The problem is that the church is listening more to the media and culture than to God. How would the church change if every Christian read the Bible for even 30 minutes a day giving up one television show or if they would spend one night with others in group Bible study? There is more. You must read and obey the Bible if it is to help you. The problem today is that too many Christians make up what they think God says or should say. What use is it to hear this message and not obey the Lord?

If you want a better life, be in the word, and obey it. We have been slow to learn that being a church member doesn't guarantee anything. Thousands of people leave churches every year disappointed that the church didn't help them with trials. The trouble is that people don't know God and don't know how to ask for his help. The word of God brings God into your life so His power and love can help you. It is God who helps those in need. Sadly, most of those people didn't read their Bible and didn't know God. If you want a better world, be in the word. It is hard to get a family member to go to church or know Jesus if you are not in the word. It is hard to handle troubles or the frustrations of life without being in the word. It is hard to be a person that has real character and the admiration of others without being in the word. We think that we can change the world by force with laws and lectures, but we can only change the world with God's love. Nehemiah started with scripture to alter his world, and so must we.

1. Where do you get your news? Is it from television, newspaper, radio or somewhere else? Why do you rely on that source?

Read Nehemiah 8

2. Verses 1-3. Where and when are the people meeting? What do you think was the purpose of this gathering?

3. Verse 3. How well do you think that the average Christian knows the stories and teaching of the Bible?

4. Verses 5-8. What do Ezra and his assistants do to make this event useful for all the people gathered?

5. Verse 7. How does your church help people to understand the meaning of the Bible better?

6. Verse 9 What was the people's first reaction to the reading of the law?

7. Verse 10. How did Nehemiah and the others encourage the people?

8. What joys do you find in reading the scripture?

9. Verses 13-16. How do the leaders (8:13) and the people (8:16) respond to the words that they have heard?

10. Verse 14. Why is reading the Bible of little value unless you obey it as well?

11. The Israelites follow a pattern of "read, celebrate and obey." How are these actions by the Israelites a good model for us today?

12. Verse 17 What was the mood of the people after they had read the Torah of the Bible and understood the love of God?

13. How has this passage changed your attitudes about reading scripture? Why should it be a critical part of your life and your church?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 In what ways do we see reverence for the Bible in Nehemiah 8? Why is reverence for God's Word so important? How do you see the Bible treated today?

Deep 2 Why is congregational bible study necessary for revival? What happens if only a few are in the Bible daily?

Deep 3 What are the benefits would you expect from daily bible study and prayer? What would you have to give up to make time and energy for regular time with the Lord?

3. Revival: God lifts us past our weakness and gives life

Neh. 9:19-21, 29-38

Big idea: Confession can be the start of a new tomorrow.

They stood on a place of greatness, but all around them was failure and decay. The temple above them had gleamed with gold, and the surrounding nations paid tribute to their King. Now, their temple was simple, and the walls made of burnt and broken stone. Judah paid tribute to a faraway king, and food was scarce and straightforward. All around them said failure. They were a shadow of what they had once been. The Jews began revival with the Lord because they knew their weakness. They were an oppressed people in a town whose former glory was hard to see. God was their hope. Ezra reminds the people that God did not let Israel die in the desert, and He will not let them die now. God does not abandon His people even when they forsake Him. God keeps His promises. He would take care of them now just as He had done in the past.

We remember the days when it was fashionable to go to church. Churches were the center of the community, and kids filled the Sunday school eager to learn. Now we step into half-filled sanctuaries permeated with graying heads. We wish for revival in the church. If we are ever to have vitality in the church, it must come from the Lord. It is for that reason that we must praise our God. We must worship Him and depend on Him for our only hope for the future is His care of our world and our lives. God still does not abandon his people. His people may leave Him and chase after other things that they consider more important than God. Sadly, He is there, but they don't look for Him. Perhaps, when times get tough enough, they will get down on their knees and look for Him again. They may come when they remember all the things that the Lord has done for his church over the years. We can't change the future, but God can.

The way back to greatness has two steps. First, we must admit the reality and confess our sins as the Jews did. We all have to stop making excuses about the changing culture or the enemies of the church. The problem is not them. It is us. We have been too busy and self-absorbed to care about the church and the community. We need to confess that we have not shared and have not helped other Christians grow in their faith. Second, it is time to commit ourselves to God's path. Like the Jews, it is time to pledge to live by God's standard. Commit yourself to grow in your faith with daily Bible study and prayer. Commit yourself to turn outward and do whatever it takes to help people know about Jesus and grow in their faith. The way back to greatness in your life and our communities is to stop focusing on self and start focusing on God and His ways.

1. What is the longest time that you ever prayed in one sitting? What drove you to pray that long?

Read Neh. 9:19-21, 29-38

2. Verse 1. Why had the Israelites gathered together at this time?

3. Verse 3 What do you do when you feel guilty for something that you did? How do you "get right" with the Lord?

4. Verse 6. What are the four things that the Jews praise God for as they began their prayer? Why would each be of comfort to people who are struggling and feeling guilty about the past?

- 5. Verses 7-13 What three actions of God that formed the nation of Israel do the Jews recall in verse 7, 9, 13?**
- 6. Verse 7-13 What is your story of God's blessings to you? Where has God touched your life and made you what you are today?**
- 7. We all fail God, just as the Jews did. How has God been with you throughout your life and which of the qualities of God mentioned in verse 17 do you most appreciate?**
- 8. Verses 19-30 How had God showed them his great love despite their constant grumbling and rebellion during the exodus years?**
- 9. Verses 29-31 If God was so loving, why did the patient God allow the suffering that the nation had felt?**
- 10. How has God shown His mercy to you or to someone you know even though they did not deserve it? How has God used hardship to bring people back to faith?**
- 11. Verses 32-37. We finally come to the petition of this prayer. After telling the story of God's mercy and the rebellion of their ancestors, what are the people asking?**
- 12. Verse 38 The chapter closes with the people making a covenant with the Lord. Why do you think that they made this pledge?**
- 13. What have you learned from the experience of the Jews as you look at the church's struggles? What must the church do to become great again?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How committed do you believe that God is to improving the lives of His people and His church? Why?

Deep 2 What do you see as some of the weaknesses of the church and your congregation? How have those sins/weaknesses affected the church at large and the members in particular?

Deep 3 How would a renewed commitment to follow the Lord and his mission impact the lives of the members and the future of the congregation?

4. Your relationship with God is the key
Neh. 10:27-39
Big idea: Living with God is always better.

Over 500 years had passed since the glory days of David and Solomon. There were 500 years of hardship as the once glorious kingdom slid into ruin with broken walls and broken dreams. The Jews had learned the hard way about the pain that came when you did not honor God as your king. Eighty-four people gathered to sign a pledge to begin anew with Nehemiah leading the way. No longer would they treat the Sabbath as any other day. They had made it a time to socialize and to do business like the Gentiles around them. It had kept them from God. When they did worship, they often gave blemished animals as sacrifices. They would never have dared do that to the Persian King, but somehow God was less important. They realized how their treatment of God had cost them. It was time to begin anew.

Some would say that the glory days of the church have passed. Churches are closing, families are breaking up, and chaos fills our cities. We are under the curse but have not yet acknowledged it. America no longer honors the Lord and is paying an ever-growing price for it. We cannot force the world to change, but we can transform our world. Sunday must be a holy day. Our children should be learning about the Lord instead of attending soccer games. Adults should make a priority of worship instead of working extra hours. Satan loves to keep Christians busy with activities that keep us from God. The effect is that God gets second best if anything at all. Churches struggle to do the ministry and are falling in disrepair as God is not seen to be worth the bother. It is time for us to begin anew, just like the Jews.

The past was forgiven but not forgotten. The Jews had learned the lesson that life is better in God's kingdom, and they wanted to live in that kingdom and enjoy the blessings of a relationship with God. They wanted to have what their ancestors had missed. Our God is a God of second chances and new life. He gave new life to the thief on the cross and a second chance to David after he sinned with Bathsheba. Just because things look bad does not mean that the church is forever doomed. God revives His church and gives it new life if they will but ask. It is time to focus on the joys of living under God as our king. We live in grace and forgiveness. We live with God's provision and protection. We live with God's purpose and direction which helps us to know what is right and wrong. God's kingdom is a good place to live with Him. Those who commit their life to the Lord will find joy all the days of their lives.

1. What is a significant agreement that you put your name to in writing? (Buy a home or car, sign up for the military, or get a marriage license, etc.) Why did that need to be in writing?

Read Neh. 10:27-39

2. Verse 1-27. Look back to the first verses of the chapter. Who signed the agreement? Why was this a serious matter and not taken lightly?

3. How seriously do people you know take their confirmation vows or baptismal vows for their children today? How do their actions show their commitment or lack of dedication?

4. Verses 28-30. The first promise deals with relationships. Why were the Jews supposed to separate themselves from their neighbors?

5. Verse 30 Many Christians marry non-Christians and expect that they will convert the spouse. In your experience, does it usually work out that way?

6. Verse 31 The second promise deals with the Sabbath. Why might it be hard to keep the Sabbath special surrounded by foreign nations? What would they lose if they lost the uniqueness of the Sabbath?

7. Verse 31 How does the world around us look at Sunday worship, and how has that affected our time with the Lord?

8. Verses 32-39 The remaining promises deal with our resources and the support of God's house. What four areas of support did the people pledge at this time?

9. Verse 35 Which part of the crops did the people pledge to bring to the Lord? Why is it significant that they would bring this portion?

10. Verse 35 What is the danger of giving God less than the best?

11. Verse 39 The people pledge to no longer neglect the house of the Lord. What do you suppose that the past had taught them about life with or without the Lord?

12. As you look around the American church and our nation, what parallels do you see? What should we learn from the lessons of this chapter?

13. If the church makes and keeps the commitments that the Jews made in this passage, how would life change?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Where have you seen decay in the commitment of Christians? How has it impacted the church and community?

Deep 2. What does this passage teach us about giving to the Lord? Why is attitude just as important as the size of the offerings that you live?

Deep 3. What do you think the church would look like if members made similar commitments as we find in this passage? How would it impact the atmosphere of the church? How would it affect their ability to change their community?

5 Celebration so others can see God's glory

Neh. 12:27-47

Big idea: the joy of the Lord is our strength

Joy wants a party. It is a happy feeling that wants to burst out and let others know how great things are. The city was slowly showing signs of urban renewal. The empty capital had taken on new residents who had left their comfortable homes in the country. The celebration was not just for the new residents, but the nation. The focal point was not the walls, but the joy that everyone had in the temple. The people had such great delight at all the Lord had done that they could not keep silent. The Lord had worked a miracle, and the marching choirs had proved the strength of God's wall. Their joy was so great that people could hear the shouting miles away. Their celebration was a testimony to all the nations that said it couldn't be done. God was mighty, and God was back in Jerusalem to claim His people and His town. The world was put on notice.

The church should have a reputation for being a place of joy. God's word will fill our hearts with new insights and the power to tackle daily life. Prayer will be a chance to give God all our concerns. We need to invite everyone to share in that happiness. People should walk out of here with their burdens lightened and a positive attitude for the week because God will be with them. Our celebration is not just in friendships but is in our God. He is the source of our joy. A lot of people pass by the church because they think it is dead and dull. Nehemiah declares, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." It is this joy which can change our lives and the lives of others. Celebrate so loud that others take notice and want to learn more. Celebrate in your life, so people want to know why you have this happiness. His joy is infectious. Change the world with joy.

Happiness is not dependent on circumstances, but upon the inward choice to live with God. The walls were up in Jerusalem, but the lives of the people were only slowly being rebuilt. They were on an upward trail of hope because God was there. Life will always have its ups and downs. We can complain when we are down and complain when the highs are not as good as someone else's highs. We can make ourselves downright miserable because our focus is us and what culture thinks we should have. If you want joy, focus on our Lord. We should celebrate the highs that He brings into our lives and brings His joy through prayer into the lows. Let His joy be infectious. Celebrate his joy so others can see what the Lord is doing for you. Celebrate so that others will see our God is a God who loves and brings hope to his people. The joy of the Lord is your strength every day.

1. What celebrations are meaningful to you? What elements did those celebrations include that made them special?

Read Neh. 12:27-47

2. Verses 27-30. Why were the Levites sought out of the countryside? What benefits did the added musicians bring to the celebration?

3. Verse 27 Why is our joy so crucial in the church? How could you foster the kind of celebration that is evident here in Jerusalem?

4. What is the source of joy of the text and the church?

5. Verse 31 – 37. What did Nehemiah do with the choirs to celebrate and dedicate the walls? What advantages do you see in this method of dedication?

6. Verse 31. Why do you think it was necessary to march a virtual crowd of priests, singers, and people across every inch of the wall? What were they showing to themselves and the world around them?

7. Verse 43. What was the worship like when the choirs meet in the temple? How would you describe the mood of the people?

8. Verse 43. How do you think that the celebration affected the nations surrounding the Jews?

9. What is the mood like in your worship? What does your spirit say to visitors about the character of your God?

10. Verse 44-45. How do the people show that this dedication is a beginning and not an end? What is their desire for the future?

11. Verse 47. What happened after the last church dedication, pastor installation, or another festival at your church? Did people see it as an end or a beginning?

12. What steps can you take to care for those serving the Lord and serving you in your church or missions?

13. How does the lonely walk of Nehemiah in chapter two compare to the celebration here in chapter 12? What do you think he might have written in his diary as he weighed the two days?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Nehemiah had hopes when he walked the walls in chapter 2. What are the dreams that you have for the future of your congregation?

Deep 2 What are joys that you can already celebrate in your congregation? What are the blessings that you want to celebrate this time next year?

Deep 3 How can you prepare so that the celebration will continue after your weekend and into the next year?

6. Keeping revival going

Neh. 13: 1-28

Big idea: If you are not careful, the current will pull you back.

Nehemiah had served for twelve years before being recalled to the Persian palace. In his absence, the revival had practically died in Judah. Without serious action, the people would return to the destructive ways of their ancestors, and the nation would perish. It began with a failure of leadership. Tobiah, who had been an enemy of the people, was given a room in the temple. The priests had grown soft and compromised God's house. Because the leadership had forgotten God, the people did too. They did not support the ministry and forced the priests to go back to farming to support their families. Soon the people ignored their faith and saw the Sabbath as not unique. Buying and selling filled the city on what should have been a holy day. Nehemiah was forced to take drastic actions upon his return. ,

Revival will die if God's people are not vigilant. Sin is like cancer that keeps coming back. It starts at the edges and works toward the center of the church. If we are passive with evil, it will destroy the church and us. If it is to survive, revival must be more than a pledge. It must be a lifestyle that you cultivate so that compromise is not a possibility. The downfall can start today as it did in Jerusalem with compromised leadership. People start living according to their own standards, not what God commands. Soon the whole church has declined. Offerings take a nosedive as people return to their old habits and begin to miss worship and devotional time. They wonder in times of crisis why the Lord has left them when they are the ones who left the Lord. Satan is at work here. He knows that one of the best ways to separate people from God is to pull them away from the Lord and then give them hardship so that they blame God instead of leaning on Him.

Nehemiah did several things to get the nation back on track. First, he was vigilant about the compromises that the people made. Instead of looking the other way like we often do, Nehemiah confronted people when they sin. As governor, he shut the gates to stop the sales on the Sabbath. He purified the temple and kicked Tobias out. He made the changes that are hard because he loved the church and the people. Nehemiah also was constant in prayer. You will find him talking to the Lord several times in this passage alone. The power for change and to keep change going comes from the Lord. It is not something that we do on our own. Be in the word and be constant in prayer so that Satan finds it hard to pull you away from the Lord. Know that changes might need to come when our revival starts to fail. It may seem harsh, but love for the Lord and His church will drive you to take action.

1. What is a promise that you have had difficulty keeping? What made the commitment hard to follow?

Read Neh. 13: 1-28

2. Verses 1-3. What did the Lord decree in the Bible which the Israelites had not kept? Who were the Ammonites and Moabites?

3. Verse 5. In spite of the commandment to separate from the Ammonites, what had Eliashib the priest done for Tobiah the Ammonite? (13:5)

4. Verse 8. What does Nehemiah single-handedly do to right this wrong? Why was that a bold thing to do?

5. Verse 8. When has your church or small group faced a challenge that caused people to drift away from God? How do you think leaders should handle the situation?

6. Verse 10-11. What had forced the Levites to leave Jerusalem and return to their fields? How does Nehemiah deal with the problem?

7. How does your church deal with a shortfall in offerings? What are some better options?

8. Verse 15-16. What is the third area of the people's vows of chapter 10 that they forgot? How does Nehemiah deal with this problem? (13:17-21)

9. Verses 15-16. In our era, the Sabbath is routinely forgotten. How do you encourage people to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy?

10. Verse 24. What made marrying foreign women so wicked? How did it affect the Jewish children?

11. Christians marrying non-Christians is common today. How do the children pay the price in our society?

12. Verse 29. It has been said that reviving a church or a Christian life is like rowing upstream in a canoe. Why must we keep working at keeping our promises and growing in our faith if we are to have a revival?

13. Which of the four problems addressed by Nehemiah do you see needing the most attention in our society? Close your session with a prayer about these matters as Nehemiah does.

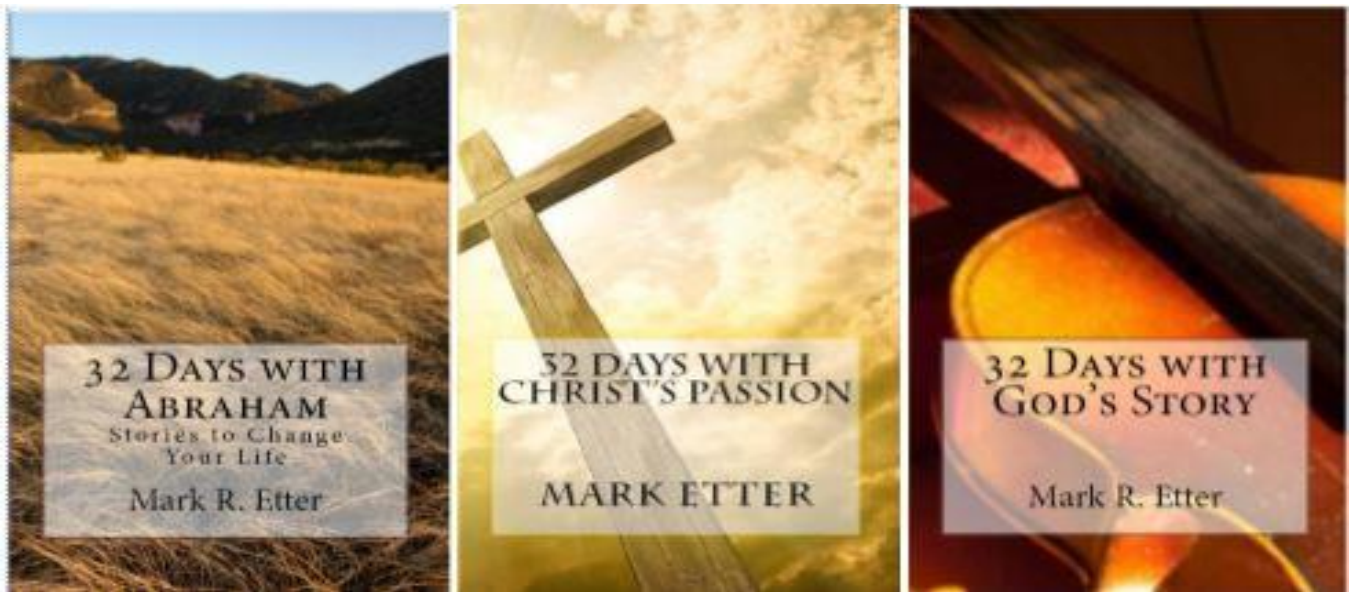
For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Which of the reforms that Nehemiah addressed need to be dealt with by your church or community? What damage have these issues done in your community?

Deep 2. Why had the people so quickly given up the promises that they had made in chapter 10? Why do people today neglect the Sabbath and the needs of those who work for the church?

Deep 3. What did you learn from the study of Nehemiah that you want to apply to your life? What do you hope to change in your life, your church, or your community?

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About the author

Rev. Mark Etter has been a pastor for over thirty-five years and is currently the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Erlanger, KY. Rev. Etter has published several books of Adult Bible studies and numerous devotions and youth studies with Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. He has been active in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as an LWML counselor, evangelism chairman, coach for pastors and circuit counselor. He is currently serving part-time as a regional facilitator for the Ohio District of the LCMS. He and his wife, Joan, have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Did you know?

How well do you know what it takes to lead a revival? Here are seven questions that are answered in this study. The page and question number in this study are given after each question.

1. How do you develop discernment like Nehemiah's so that others don't deceive you? (Page 6, Question 4)
2. What do we learn from Nehemiah about confronting slander in the church? (Page 6, Question 7)
3. Why is reading the Bible of little value unless you obey it as well? (Page 11, Question 10)
4. If God is so loving, why does the patient God allow suffering for His people? (Page 15, Question 9)
5. What is the danger of giving God less than your best? (Page 19, Question 10)
6. Why is joy so crucial in the church? How can you foster a celebration in your church? (Page 22, Question 3)
7. Why do we have to keep working at our promises if we are to have revival? (Page 28, Question 12)

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