THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

The King Who Is Our Strength

Nehemiah, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Is Our Strength: The Book of Nehemiah, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Nehemiah is the story of a guy with a great job, a comfortable life, and a broken heart. When he heard that Jerusalem was still in ruins, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. So he risked everything to go fix it.

Most of Nehemiah is written in the first person. It reads like a journal: honest, fast-moving, and full of personality. You’ll see Nehemiah pray, plan, organize, lead, get mocked, get threatened, refuse to quit, stand up for the poor, celebrate, and lose his temper. He isn’t a polished hero. He’s a real person trying to do something hard for God.

So why read it? Because Nehemiah shows what it looks like to care about something enough to act, to pray and work at the same time, and to keep going when people laugh at you. And its ending shows something just as important: walls can be rebuilt in fifty-two days, but hearts take a lot longer.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Nehemiah in seven chapters: the cupbearer’s prayer (Nehemiah 1–2:8), the midnight ride and the builders (2:9–3), trowel and sword (4), the cry of the poor (5), a great work (6–7), the joy of the LORD (8–10), and the messy ending (11–13).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Nehemiah is, when it happened, and how it connects to Ezra. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to judge Nehemiah's harsh actions at the end of the book, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Nehemiah in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the sixteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Nehemiah is a natural fit for teenagers: a story about caring deeply, praying honestly, working hard alongside others, standing firm under mockery, and finishing what you start. Real Talk boxes address prayer, courage, dealing with ridicule and threats, standing up for people who are being taken advantage of, using influence well, and rest.

The book ends with Nehemiah throwing Tobiah's belongings out of the temple, shutting the city gates on the Sabbath, and, in 13:25, striking men and pulling out their hair. This book handles that ending honestly. It doesn't excuse Nehemiah's temper or hold it up as a model, and it presents fairly the different ways Christians have evaluated his actions. Above all, it shows why the book ends this way: outward reforms, however necessary, could not change the human heart on their own. A box on anger encourages healthy ways to handle frustration and points readers to trusted adults.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Nehemiah's unfinished reform and rebuilt city pointing to Jesus, who rebuilds people from the inside out, and to the unshakable city of Revelation 21, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Nehemiah in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find in Nehemiah courage to do a great work for God, and will discover that the joy of the LORD is their strength.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Nehemiah is history told mostly as a personal memoir. Large parts are written in the first person, as Nehemiah tells his own story, complete with his feelings and his short prayers to God. Other parts include lists of builders, residents, priests, and Levites, and the account of a great public Bible reading and confession. Like Ezra, it may have been assembled from Nehemiah's memoir and official records.

One Book, Two Parts

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. Ezra tells how the exiles rebuilt the temple and how Ezra taught God's law. Nehemiah continues the story, telling how the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and how the community renewed its covenant with God. Ezra himself appears in Nehemiah 8, reading the law to the people.

When It Happened

Nehemiah begins in 445 BC, the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes I of Persia, about seventy years after the Second Temple was finished and thirteen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. Nehemiah served as governor of Judah for twelve years, went back to Persia, and later returned to Jerusalem, probably around 430 BC. The prophet Malachi likely preached during this same period, and many of the problems he addresses show up in Nehemiah 13.

Why Walls Mattered

In the ancient world, a city without walls was barely a city. Walls protected people from raiders, wild animals, and enemy armies. They made trade and daily life possible. And a city with broken walls was a public disgrace, a sign that its people and its god were weak. Nearly 150 years after the Babylonians tore down Jerusalem's walls, they were still rubble. For Nehemiah, rebuilding them was about safety, but it was also about honor: the honor of God's people and of God Himself.

The Enemies

Nehemiah faced three main opponents. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, the province to the north; a papyrus letter found at Elephantine in Egypt mentions him and his sons. Tobiah was an Ammonite official, probably a governor or powerful landowner east of the Jordan, with family connections to leading Jews in Jerusalem. Geshem was an Arab leader from the south, also known from ancient inscriptions. Together, they had Jerusalem surrounded on three sides.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Nehemiah 1–2:8): The cupbearer's prayer.

Chapter 2 (Nehemiah 2:9–3): Let's rise up and build.

Chapter 3 (Nehemiah 4): Trowel and sword.

Chapter 4 (Nehemiah 5): The cry of the poor.

Chapter 5 (Nehemiah 6–7): A great work.

Chapter 6 (Nehemiah 8–10): The joy of the LORD.

Chapter 7 (Nehemiah 11–13): The messy ending.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 The Cupbearer's Prayer *1–2:8* .....

2 Let's Rise Up and Build *2:9–3* .....

3 Trowel and Sword *4* .....

4 The Cry of the Poor *5* .....

5 A Great Work *6–7* .....

6 The Joy of the LORD *8–10* .....

7 The Messy Ending *11–13* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The Cupbearer's Prayer

Nehemiah 1–2:8

The book opens in the winter of 445 BC, in Susa, one of the royal capitals of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah is a Jew whose family never returned from exile, and he has a job most people would envy. He's the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What's a Cupbearer?**
>
> A cupbearer wasn't just a waiter. He served the king his wine, and in a world where poisoning was a common way to get rid of a king, he often tasted it first. That meant the king had to trust him completely. Cupbearers were usually close to the king, saw him every day, and could have real influence. Nehemiah was probably well educated, well dressed, and well paid. He had a position of power and comfort in the most powerful court in the world.

One day, Nehemiah's brother Hanani arrives from Judah with some other men, and Nehemiah asks how things are going in Jerusalem. The news is terrible. The people who returned from exile are "in great affliction and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

It had been more than ninety years since the first exiles returned, and seventy since the temple was finished. But the city was still defenseless and humiliated. The walls the Babylonians had torn down were still lying in heaps.

Nehemiah's reaction tells you everything about him. "When I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned several days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

He didn't live in Jerusalem. He had never seen it. He had a great life in Susa. He could have said, that's too bad, and gone back to work. Instead, he let it break his heart.

> **REAL TALK** **Let It Break Your Heart**
>
> It's easy to scroll past bad news. We see so much of it that we can become numb. Nehemiah let the news about Jerusalem get to him. He cared about people he'd never met and a city he'd never seen. Some of the greatest things people have done started with a broken heart: someone who couldn't stop thinking about kids without clean water, or people stuck in poverty, or a friend who was lonely. What breaks your heart? It might be a clue to what God is calling you to do. And if bad news ever overwhelms you to the point of anxiety or despair, it's okay to step back, take a break, and talk to a trusted adult. Caring doesn't mean carrying everything alone.

Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 is a model of how to pray when something is wrong. He starts with who God is: "the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and loving kindness with those who love him and keep his commandments." He asks God to listen. Then he confesses sin, not just the sins of others, but his own. "I and my father's house have sinned," he says. He reminds God of His promise through Moses: if My people are scattered for their sin and then return to Me, I will gather them back. And he ends with a specific request: give me success today, and grant me mercy in the sight of this man.

This man is the king. And then the chapter ends with a little line that makes everything make sense: "Now I was cup bearer to the

king." Nehemiah has a plan, and it's going to involve risking his position, and maybe his life.

Here's something easy to miss. Chapter 1 happens in the month of Chislev, around December. Chapter 2 begins in the month of Nisan, around April. Nehemiah prayed for about four months before he did anything. He didn't rush. He waited for the right moment and prayed the whole time.

Then one day in April, Nehemiah is serving the king his wine, and his face gives him away. He'd never been sad in the king's presence before. In the Persian court, you were expected to look cheerful around the king. A sad servant could be seen as a sign of disloyalty or a hidden plot.

The king notices. "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart." And Nehemiah writes, "Then I was very much afraid."

He answers carefully, and respectfully. "Let the king live forever! Why shouldn't my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates have been consumed with fire?" Notice that he doesn't mention Jerusalem by name. He talks about the city where his ancestors are buried, something any king would respect.

Then the king asks the question Nehemiah has been praying about for four months. "What is your request?"

And here's one of the most famous moments in the book. "So I prayed to the God of heaven." Then he answers the king.

Between the king's question and his answer, Nehemiah prayed. It must have been a split second, a silent, quick prayer, sometimes called an arrow prayer, shot up to heaven in an instant. He didn't

have time to kneel or fast. He just reached out to God in his heart, and then he spoke.

> **REAL TALK** **Arrow Prayers**
>
> Nehemiah prayed two kinds of prayers. One kind took months: weeping, fasting, confessing, and asking God day and night. The other took a second: a silent cry for help in the middle of a tense moment. Both matter. The long prayers prepared his heart. The quick prayer kept him connected to God in the moment. You can pray arrow prayers too: before a test, before a hard conversation, when you're about to lose your temper, when someone asks you a question about your faith, when you walk into a room full of people you don't know. God, help me. Give me wisdom. Give me courage. He hears those prayers just as much as the long ones.

Nehemiah asks to be sent to Judah to rebuild the city. The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asks how long he'll be gone. Nehemiah gives him a time. He's obviously thought it through. Then he asks for letters to the governors of the region so he can travel safely, and a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, for timber for the gates, the wall, and his own house. He's done his homework. He knows exactly what he needs and who controls it.

"The king granted my requests, because of the good hand of my God on me."

Nehemiah prayed and planned. He didn't think prayer meant he didn't need to prepare, and he didn't think preparation meant he didn't need to pray. He did both, and he gave God the credit.

KEY VERSE

Then the king said to me, "What is your request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 2:4 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nehemiah cared so much about a city he'd never seen?
2. What news or situation in the world breaks your heart?
3. Why do you think Nehemiah prayed for four months before acting?
4. When could you use an arrow prayer this week?

TRY THIS *Pick one situation that breaks your heart. Pray about it every day this week, and write down one practical thing you could do to help.*

CHAPTER 2

Let's Rise Up and Build

Nehemiah 2:9–3

Nehemiah travels to Judah with army officers and horsemen the king sent with him. Two officials hear about his arrival and are deeply upset: "Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant." The text says it "grieved them exceedingly, because a man had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." Someone who cared about the Jews was the last thing they wanted.

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and waits three days. He doesn't make speeches or announce his plans. Then he does something smart. "I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I didn't tell anyone what my God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem."

In the dark, riding a single animal, he goes out through the Valley Gate and inspects the walls. He sees the broken stones and burned gates. In some places, the rubble is so thick that his animal can't get through, so he goes on foot. He sees the damage with his own eyes before he asks anyone to fix it.

> **REAL TALK** **Do Your Homework**
>
> Nehemiah didn't rush in with a big announcement. He waited, looked carefully, and gathered information before he made his plan public. That's a wise way to approach a big challenge. If you want to start a project, solve a problem at school, or help a friend in a tough situation, it helps to understand the problem first. Ask questions. Look carefully. Listen. Then act. Good

> intentions are important, but good intentions plus good preparation get things done.

Then Nehemiah gathers the leaders, priests, and officials and tells them, "You see the bad situation that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come, let's build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we won't be disgraced."

Notice that he says we. Nehemiah had a comfortable life in Persia. He could have spoken as an outsider who came to fix their problem. Instead, he made their problem his own. Then he tells them his story: how God's good hand had been on him, and what the king had said.

The people respond immediately. "They said, 'Let's rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work."

Sanballat, Tobiah, and now Geshem the Arab laugh at them. What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king? Nehemiah's answer is short and confident. "The God of heaven will prosper us. Therefore we, his servants, will arise and build; but you have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem."

Then comes chapter 3, which might look like another boring list. But it's actually one of the most inspiring chapters in the book, if you read it carefully.

It lists who built each section of the wall, going counterclockwise around the city, gate by gate. And the people on this list are not professional builders. Eliashib the high priest and the other priests rebuild the Sheep Gate. Then come men from nearby towns like Jericho and Tekoa. A goldsmith named Uzziel repairs a section. Next to him, Hananiah, "one of the perfumers," makes repairs. Rulers of districts work on the wall. And "Shallum the son of

Hallohesh, the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, he and his daughters made repairs." Merchants work together. Levites work. Temple servants work.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Everyone on the Wall**
>
> Imagine a goldsmith, used to delicate work with precious metals, hauling heavy stones. Or a perfume maker, whose hands usually mixed fragrant oils, covered in dust and ash. They weren't experts. They had no special training. They just showed up and worked. Shallum's daughters are especially notable. In the ancient world, building walls was not usually considered women's work, but here they are, named in the record. Everyone had a part. The wall was rebuilt by ordinary people, side by side.

The phrase that keeps repeating in chapter 3 is "next to him." Next to him, so-and-so repaired. Next to them, someone else. The wall went up because people worked side by side, each one doing their section.

And many of them worked on the part of the wall closest to their own homes. "Above the horse gate, the priests made repairs, everyone across from his own house." That made sense. People were motivated to protect their own families, and they could work without traveling far. It's a picture of how a lot of good work happens: people taking responsibility for what's right in front of them.

The chapter also includes one embarrassing note. The men of Tekoa made repairs, "but their nobles didn't put their necks to the Lord's work." The important people in Tekoa thought they were too good to work. But the ordinary people of Tekoa didn't let that stop them. Later in the chapter, they repaired a second section.

REAL TALK **Your Section of the Wall**

Nobody built the whole wall. Everyone built a section. That's how God's work usually happens: lots of people, each doing their part, next to each other. You don't have to do everything. You just have to do your section. That might be helping out at church, being kind to the new kid, working hard on a group project, encouraging a friend, or serving your family at home. Don't wait until you feel like an expert. The goldsmith and the perfume maker weren't experts. And don't be like the nobles of Tekoa, who thought the work was beneath them. No job done for God is too small.

It's worth stopping to notice how Nehemiah led. He didn't show up in Jerusalem with a speech about how terrible everyone was for letting the walls stay broken for so long. He didn't blame them. He looked carefully at the problem first, quietly and at night. Then he stood with the people and said, "you see the bad situation that we are in." We, not you. He included himself in the problem and in the solution. He told them how God had already been at work, and what the king had said. And he invited them to join something bigger than themselves.

That's what good leadership often looks like. It isn't bossing people around or making yourself look important. It's seeing a need clearly, caring about it deeply, telling the truth, and inviting others to work alongside you. You don't need a title to lead like that. You can do it on a team, in a club, in your family, or in your group of friends.

KEY VERSE

I told them about the hand of my God which was good on me, and also about the king's words that he had spoken to me. They said, "Let's rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Nehemiah 2:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nehemiah inspected the walls secretly at night?
2. Why do you think the people were so quick to say, "Let's rise up and build"?
3. Which builder in chapter 3 stands out to you most? Why?
4. What's your section of the wall right now, the part of God's work right in front of you?

TRY THIS *Find one job at home, church, or school that needs doing, especially one nobody wants. Do it this week without being asked.*

CHAPTER 3

Trowel and Sword

Nehemiah 4

As the wall goes up, Sanballat gets angry. Very angry. And he starts mocking the Jews in front of his friends and the army of Samaria. "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, since they are burned?"

Tobiah adds his own joke. "What they are building, if a fox climbed up it, he would break down their stone wall." A fox weighs about ten pounds. That's how flimsy he thinks their wall is.

> **REAL TALK** **When People Mock You**
>
> Mockery is one of the oldest weapons there is. It doesn't break bones, but it can break your spirit. Sanballat and Tobiah weren't attacking with swords yet. They were trying to make the builders feel stupid, weak, and foolish for trying. You've probably experienced that too: people laughing at your faith, your appearance, your dreams, or your effort. Online, it can be relentless. Nehemiah's response is worth noticing. He didn't fire back insults. He prayed and kept working. If you're being mocked or bullied, especially if it's constant, please tell a trusted adult. You don't have to handle it alone, and it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. If it ever makes you feel like life isn't worth living, call or text 988 right away.

Nehemiah's response is a prayer, and it's a raw one. "Hear, our God, for we are despised. Turn back their reproach on their own head."

He asks God to deal with his enemies. It's honest, angry, and real. He doesn't take revenge himself. He hands it to God.

Then the very next line: "So we built the wall; and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." The whole wall was connected, all the way around the city, up to half its height. Mockery didn't stop them. They had a mind to work.

When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod hear that the gaps are being closed, they're furious. They plot to attack Jerusalem and cause confusion. Now it's not just words. It's a real threat.

Nehemiah's response is a perfect summary of his whole approach to life. "But we made our prayer to our God, and set a watch against them day and night." They prayed, and they posted guards. Faith and action, together.

But inside the city, discouragement is spreading. The people of Judah start saying, "The strength of the bearers of burdens is fading and there is much rubble, so that we are not able to build the wall." In Hebrew, it sounds like a sad little song, as if people were chanting it while they worked. They were exhausted. The job looked impossible. Meanwhile, Jews who lived near the enemies kept coming to warn them, ten times over, that they would be attacked from every direction.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Halfway Discouragement**

It's interesting that the discouragement came right at the halfway point. The wall was half done. The excitement of starting had worn off, and the end wasn't in sight yet. Many people find the middle of a project the hardest part. The same thing happens with school years, sports seasons, long-term goals,

and even faith. If you're in the middle of something hard and feeling worn out, that's normal. It doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're in the middle.

Nehemiah reorganizes. He stations people behind the lowest, most exposed parts of the wall, by families, with swords, spears, and bows. Then he looks around, stands up, and speaks to everyone. "Don't be afraid of them! Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

When the enemies hear that their plot is known, they back off, and everyone goes back to work. But from then on, things are different. Half of Nehemiah's men work, and the other half stand guard with spears, shields, bows, and armor. The people who carry materials do their work with one hand and hold a weapon in the other. Every builder works with a sword strapped to his side. And a trumpeter stays next to Nehemiah at all times.

Nehemiah explains the plan. The work is spread out, and we're far apart on the wall. "Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally there to us. Our God will fight for us."

They work from dawn until the stars come out. The people from outside the city stay inside Jerusalem at night so they can help guard. And Nehemiah and his men don't even change clothes. They keep their weapons with them at all times, even when they go for water.

REAL TALK **Trowel in One Hand**

The picture of builders working with one hand and holding a weapon in the other has inspired believers for centuries. It's a picture of the Christian life: we build, and we also stand guard. We work to do good, and we watch out for the things that would tear it down. For you, the sword might look like saying no to temptation, setting boundaries in a relationship, guarding your mind from

> things that drag you down, or standing up for someone. The trowel is the good work: serving, loving, learning, creating. You need both. And notice the trumpet: when one part of the wall was attacked, everyone ran to help. You weren't meant to fight alone either. When you're struggling, sound the trumpet. Tell your people.

There's one more detail in chapter 4 that's easy to miss. Nehemiah tells everyone to stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can guard the city at night and work during the day. And he and his brothers and servants and guards don't even take off their clothes to sleep, except to wash. Nehemiah didn't ask the people to do anything he wasn't doing himself. He was on the wall with them, tired with them, ready with them.

The people who kept working in Nehemiah 4 weren't fearless. They were scared, tired, and surrounded by rubble. Some of their own relatives kept coming in from nearby towns, telling them over and over that the enemy would attack from every direction. What kept them going wasn't that the danger disappeared. It was that they remembered who God was, they had each other, and they had a leader who stayed beside them. Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's doing the right thing while you're afraid, because you trust God more than you fear the threat.

KEY VERSE

I looked, and rose up, and said to the nobles, to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them! Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Nehemiah 4:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think mockery is such an effective weapon?
2. Nehemiah prayed and set a guard. What does it look like to pray and take action at the same time?
3. Why do you think people got discouraged right at the halfway point?
4. What's your "sword" right now, something you need to guard against while you build?

TRY THIS *Identify one person you can sound the trumpet for when you're struggling. Tell them this week that you'd like them to be that person for you, and offer to do the same for them.*

CHAPTER 4

The Cry of the Poor

Nehemiah 5

In the middle of building the wall, with enemies outside, Nehemiah faces a problem inside the city that's just as dangerous. "Then there arose a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brothers the Jews."

There's a famine. Food is scarce. And the people are in crisis. Some say, our families are large, and we need grain just to stay alive. Others say, we've had to mortgage our fields, vineyards, and houses to buy grain. Others say, we've borrowed money to pay the king's taxes, putting our land up as collateral. And then the worst part: "Behold, we bring our sons and our daughters into bondage to be servants, and some of our daughters have been brought into bondage. It is also not in our power to help it, because other men have our fields and our vineyards."

Who were they borrowing from? Not foreigners. Their own people. Wealthy Jews were lending money to poor Jews at interest, taking their land when they couldn't pay, and taking their children as servants. While everyone was working on the wall together, some of the rich were profiting from the poor people working beside them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law About Lending**

God's law for Israel had clear rules about lending to the poor. Israelites were not allowed to charge interest to a fellow Israelite in need. They were to lend generously and help their poor neighbors. Every seventh year, debts were to be canceled. And if a fellow Israelite was forced to sell himself as a servant, he was to be treated as a hired worker, not a slave, and released. The point was to keep the rich from permanently crushing the poor and to remind everyone that the land and the people belonged to God. The nobles in Nehemiah 5 were ignoring all of it.

Nehemiah is furious. "I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words." But he doesn't explode. "Then I consulted with myself," he writes. He thought it over before he acted.

Then he confronts the nobles and officials directly. "You exact usury, everyone of his brother." He calls a great public meeting. He points out the absurdity of the situation: we have been working to buy back our fellow Jews who were sold to foreigners, and now you're selling your own brothers, so that we have to buy them back again! The nobles have nothing to say.

"The thing that you do is not good," Nehemiah tells them. "Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" Their behavior made God's people look terrible in front of the very enemies who were mocking them.

Then Nehemiah admits something. He and his own family and servants had also been lending money and grain to the poor. He doesn't say whether he had been charging interest, but he includes himself in the solution. "Please let us stop this usury." Give back their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses, and the interest you've been charging, today.

REAL TALK **Standing Up for People Being Taken Advantage Of**

Nehemiah could have ignored this. He had enough on his plate. The wall wasn't finished. The enemies were threatening. Confronting the most powerful people in the city was risky; he needed their support. But he wouldn't let injustice slide. Throughout the Bible, God cares deeply about how the poor and vulnerable are treated. Maybe you see people at school being taken advantage of: a kid who always gets picked on, someone being pressured or manipulated, someone left out. Standing up for them takes courage. You don't have to be loud or dramatic. Sometimes it's a quiet word to a teacher or a choice to sit with someone. And if you see something unsafe, like someone being bullied, threatened, or hurt, tell a trusted adult.

The nobles agree. "We will restore them, and will require nothing of them," they say. Nehemiah calls the priests and makes them take an oath. Then he shakes out the fold of his robe and says, may God shake out everyone who doesn't keep this promise, just like this, and leave him empty. The whole assembly says amen and praises the LORD. And the people do what they promised.

Then Nehemiah adds something about himself. For twelve years as governor, he and his relatives never took the food allowance that governors were entitled to. Previous governors had heavily taxed the people, taking food, wine, and forty shekels of silver a day, and even their servants pushed the people around. "But I didn't do so, because of the fear of God." Instead, he fed 150 officials at his own table every day, plus visitors from other nations, all at his own expense.

Why? "Because the bondage was heavy on this people." He saw how much they were struggling, and he refused to add to their burden. He also says, "We didn't buy any land." He could have taken advantage of the crisis to buy up cheap property. He didn't.

> **REAL TALK** **Using Influence Well**
>
> Nehemiah had power and could have used it to make himself rich. Instead, he gave up what he was entitled to so that others wouldn't suffer. That's the kind of leadership Jesus modeled when He said He came not to be served but to serve. You might not be a governor, but you probably have influence somewhere: in your friend group, on a team, in a club, online, or with younger siblings. How are you using it? To get what you want, or to help others? The best leaders aren't the ones who take the most. They're the ones who give the most.

The chapter ends with one of Nehemiah's short prayers that show up throughout the book: "Remember me, my God, for all the good that I have done for this people." Some people find these prayers a little self-focused. Others see them as honest: Nehemiah didn't do these things for applause, but he hoped God would see. Either way, he trusted that God noticed what no one else did.

KEY VERSE

But the former governors who were before me were supported by the people, and took bread and wine from them, plus forty shekels of silver; yes, even their servants ruled over the people, but I didn't do so, because of the fear of God.

Nehemiah 5:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the wealthy Jews were willing to take advantage of their own people during a famine?
2. Nehemiah "consulted with" himself before confronting the nobles. Why is that important when you're angry?
3. Why do you think Nehemiah refused the governor's food allowance?
4. Where do you have influence? How could you use it to help someone this week?

TRY THIS *Look for someone in your life who is being taken advantage of or left out. Do one thing this week to stand with them.*

CHAPTER 5

A Great Work

Nehemiah 6–7

The wall is almost finished. There are no gaps left, though the doors haven't been hung in the gates yet. Nehemiah's enemies are running out of time, so they change tactics. Mockery didn't work. Threats of attack didn't work. Now they try to get Nehemiah himself.

Sanballat and Geshem send him a friendly invitation. "Come! Let's meet together in the villages in the plain of Ono." Ono was about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem, far from the city and close to enemy territory. Nehemiah writes, "But they intended to harm me."

His answer is one of the great lines of the Bible. "I am doing a great work, so that I can't come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and come down to you?"

They send the same invitation four times. Nehemiah gives the same answer four times.

> REAL TALK **I Can't Come Down**
>
> Distractions don't always look like enemies. Sometimes they look like invitations. Sanballat's message sounded reasonable: let's talk, let's meet, let's work this out. But Nehemiah saw what it really was, a way to pull him away from what God had given him to do. There are lots of things that can pull you down off your wall: endless scrolling, drama, arguments that go

nowhere, people who want to drag you into their mess, good things that crowd out the best things. You don't have to say yes to every invitation. Sometimes the wisest answer is, I'm doing a great work, and I can't come down. And saying no to the wrong things is how you say yes to the right ones.

The fifth time, Sanballat sends his servant with an open letter, meant to be read by anyone along the way. It says there's a rumor going around, and Geshem confirms it, that Nehemiah and the Jews are planning to rebel, that he's building the wall so he can make himself king, and that he's even hired prophets to proclaim him king in Jerusalem. The king of Persia will hear about this, the letter warns. So come, let's talk.

It's a smear campaign. Nehemiah's answer is blunt: none of this is true. You're making it up. He knows what they're trying to do. "For they all would have made us afraid, saying, 'Their hands will be weakened from the work, that it not be done.'" And then he prays one of his short arrow prayers: "But now, strengthen my hands."

REAL TALK **When People Spread Lies About You**

Rumors and lies can be devastating, especially when they spread online or through a group of friends. Nehemiah's enemies tried to destroy his reputation with a lie that sounded just believable enough. He didn't panic or spend all his energy trying to convince everyone. He stated the truth clearly, prayed for strength, and kept working. If someone is spreading lies about you, it's okay to calmly set the record straight with the people who matter. But don't let it consume you. And if rumors or online harassment are making you anxious, depressed, or unsafe, please tell a trusted adult. That's not snitching. It's getting help.

Then comes the most dangerous trap. A man named Shemaiah, who seems to be a prophet, invites Nehemiah to his house and gives him a warning. Let's meet in the temple and shut the doors, because

people are coming to kill you, maybe tonight. It sounds like a friend looking out for him.

But Nehemiah sees through it. “Should a man like me flee? Who is there that, being such as I, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.” Nehemiah wasn’t a priest. Going into the holy parts of the temple to hide would have broken God’s law. It would also have made him look like a coward to the whole city. He realizes that God didn’t send Shemaiah at all. Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him to frighten Nehemiah into sinning, so they could ruin his reputation.

Even a prophet was on the enemy’s payroll. Even a woman prophet named Noadiah and other prophets were trying to scare him. Nehemiah prays again, asking God to remember what they’ve done.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **How Did Nehemiah Know?**
>
> How did Nehemiah know that Shemaiah’s message wasn’t from God? Because it told him to do something God’s law clearly forbade. That’s an important test for anyone who claims to speak for God. God doesn’t contradict Himself. If a message, a feeling, or advice from someone, even someone who seems spiritual, tells you to do something the Bible clearly says is wrong, it isn’t from God. The better you know God’s word, the easier it is to recognize when something doesn’t line up.

And then, in one quiet sentence, the work is done. “So the wall was finished in the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days.” Elul is around September. Nehemiah had arrived in Jerusalem only a few months earlier. Walls that had been rubble for nearly 150 years were rebuilt in less than two months.

The effect on the enemies is remarkable. “When all our enemies heard of it, all the nations that were around us were afraid, and they lost their confidence; for they perceived that this work was done by

our God." The people who mocked the feeble Jews couldn't deny it. This was God's work.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fifty-Two Days?**
>
> Some people wonder how such a big job could be done so fast. A few things help explain it. Many sections of the old wall were damaged but not completely destroyed, so they could be repaired rather than built from scratch. Archaeologists working in Jerusalem have found sections of wall from about this time that seem to have been built quickly, using rough stones and earlier foundations. Nehemiah's wall also enclosed a smaller area than the city of earlier kings. And huge numbers of people worked at the same time, each on their own section. But Nehemiah's own explanation is simpler: this work was done by our God.

Even after the wall is finished, though, the opposition continues in a quieter way. Tobiah has family ties to some of the leading families in Judah, and many nobles are writing letters back and forth with him, telling Nehemiah about Tobiah's good deeds, and reporting Nehemiah's words back to Tobiah. Tobiah keeps sending letters to intimidate Nehemiah. Not every threat comes from outside the walls.

In chapter 7, Nehemiah sets up the gates, appoints gatekeepers, singers, and Levites, and puts his brother Hanani and a man named Hananiah in charge of Jerusalem, "for he was a faithful man and feared God above many." He gives careful instructions about when to open and shut the gates. And he notices a new problem: the city is large, but very few people live in it. A wall with no one inside to protect isn't much of a city. So he finds the list of the families who first returned from exile, the same list found in Ezra 2, and begins planning how to fill Jerusalem with people.

Looking back over chapters 1 through 7, it's striking how much of the story is about prayer and persistence rather than spectacular miracles. There's no parting sea, no fire from heaven, no voice from a burning bush. God works through a cupbearer's courage, a king's favor, careful planning, hard physical labor, and ordinary people refusing to quit. That's encouraging, because that's how God usually works in our lives too. Most of the time, His work doesn't look dramatic while it's happening. It looks like showing up, doing your part, praying short prayers in hard moments, and not coming down off the wall. Then one day you look back and realize that God was doing something great the whole time.

KEY VERSE

I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work, so that I can't come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and come down to you?"

Nehemiah 6:3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nehemiah's enemies switched from threats to invitations?
2. What are the things most likely to pull you down off your wall?
3. How did Nehemiah know Shemaiah's message wasn't from God? How can you tell if advice is from God?
4. Why do you think the enemies "lost their confidence" when the wall was finished?

TRY THIS *Identify one distraction that keeps pulling you away from something important. This week, practice telling yourself that you're doing a great work and can't come down, and set a limit on it.*

CHAPTER 6

The Joy of the LORD

Nehemiah 8–10

With the walls finished, the story turns from building the city to rebuilding the people. And it begins with the Bible.

In the seventh month, the month of Israel's great festivals, "All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the wide place that was in front of the water gate; and they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses." Notice who asked. The people asked Ezra to bring the book. They were hungry for it.

Ezra, the priest and scribe we met in the book of Ezra, now an older man, brings the law before the whole assembly: men, women, and all who were old enough to understand. He stands on a wooden platform built for the occasion, with leaders standing beside him. And he reads from early morning until noon. "The ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

When Ezra opens the scroll, everyone stands up. He praises the LORD, and all the people lift their hands and answer, "Amen, Amen." Then they bow down with their faces to the ground and worship.

But reading alone isn't enough. Levites spread out through the crowd, helping people understand. "They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Giving the Sense**

Many of the people listening had grown up in exile, where the everyday language was Aramaic, not Hebrew. The law of Moses was written in Hebrew. So the Levites may have been translating the reading into Aramaic, explaining what the words meant, or both. Many scholars see this as the beginning of a practice that continued for centuries: reading Scripture aloud and then explaining it in the people's own language. It's a lot like what pastors, teachers, and Bible translators still do today. It's also a reminder that understanding God's word sometimes takes help. If you find the Bible confusing, that's normal. Ask questions. Use a readable translation. Find someone who can explain it.

Then something unexpected happens. As the people understand the law, they begin to weep. They realize how far they and their ancestors have fallen from what God commanded. But Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites tell them to stop. "Today is holy to the LORD your God. Don't mourn, nor weep."

And then Nehemiah says the words this book is named for. "Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for today is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

REAL TALK **The Joy of the LORD**

Nehemiah didn't tell the people their sins didn't matter. There would be a time for confession later. But this was a holy day, a day to celebrate what God had done. Feeling sorry for your sin is good when it leads you back to God. But God doesn't want His people to stay stuck in guilt. He wants them to know His joy. Notice what kind of joy it is: the joy of the LORD. It's not joy that comes from everything going your way. It's joy that comes from God Himself, from knowing who He is and what He's done. And that joy is strength. It holds you up when life is hard. Notice also what they were told to do with their joy: share it. Send portions to people who have nothing. Real joy always spills over into generosity. And if you're in a season where joy feels far away, or

you've been struggling with sadness that won't lift, that's not a sign of weak faith. Please talk to a trusted adult or a counselor. God's joy is still real, even when you can't feel it.

The people go home to eat, drink, share food, and celebrate, "because they had understood the words that were declared to them." Understanding God's word led to joy.

The next day, the leaders gather with Ezra to study the law more closely, and they discover something they had forgotten. God had commanded Israel to live in temporary shelters, called booths, during the festival of the seventh month, to remember how their ancestors lived in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. So the people go out to the hills, gather branches of olive, myrtle, palm, and other trees, and build booths on their roofs, in their courtyards, in the temple courts, and in the city squares. The writer says the Israelites hadn't celebrated like this since the days of Joshua. "There was very great gladness." And every day of the festival, Ezra reads from the book of the law.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Feast of Booths**

The Feast of Booths, also called Tabernacles or Sukkot, was one of Israel's three great annual festivals. For seven days, families lived in shelters made of branches, remembering that God had cared for their ancestors in the wilderness, and celebrating the harvest. Jewish families still celebrate Sukkot today, building a sukkah in their yards or on their balconies and eating meals in it. For the returned exiles, it must have been especially meaningful. They knew what it was like to be wanderers who depended on God.

Later that month, the mood changes. The people gather again, this time fasting, wearing sackcloth, with dust on their heads. They stand and confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors. For a

quarter of the day they read the law, and for another quarter they confess and worship.

Then the Levites lead them in one of the longest prayers in the Bible, recorded in chapter 9. It's a sweeping retelling of Israel's whole history, and it's really a story about God. It begins with creation: "You are the LORD, even you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens." It moves to Abraham, the exodus, the parting of the sea, Mount Sinai, the manna, and the water from the rock.

Then it gets honest. Our ancestors became proud and stubborn. They refused to obey. They even made a golden calf. "But you are a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and didn't forsake them." That line comes back again and again. God provided for them for forty years in the wilderness, so that "They lacked nothing. Their clothes didn't grow old, and their feet didn't swell." He gave them the land. And they rebelled again and again, killing the prophets God sent. Each time, He handed them over to their enemies. Each time they cried out, He rescued them. "Nevertheless in your manifold mercies you didn't make a full end of them, nor forsake them; for you are a gracious and merciful God."

The prayer ends in the present. God has been just in everything that has happened, "for you have dealt truly, but we have done wickedly." And now, the people say, we are slaves in our own land, working to make foreign kings rich, "and we are in great distress."

> **REAL TALK** **Telling the Story Honestly**
>
> The prayer in Nehemiah 9 does something powerful. It tells the truth about the people's failures and the truth about God's faithfulness, side by side. It doesn't make the people look better than they were. It doesn't make God

> look harsher than He is. That's a healthy way to look at your own story too. You can be honest about your mistakes without being crushed by them, because the bigger story is God's mercy. Try looking back at your own life: where have you failed? Where has God been faithful anyway? You might be surprised how often the answer to the second question shows up.

In response, the people make a written covenant, signed and sealed by the leaders, priests, and Levites. Everyone else joins in with an oath "to walk in God's law." They make specific promises. They won't marry their children to people who worship other gods. They won't buy and sell on the Sabbath. They'll let the land rest every seventh year and cancel debts. They'll give a tax for the temple, bring wood for the altar, and give the firstfruits of their crops and the tithes. The chapter ends with a strong promise: "We will not forsake the house of our God."

Remember that promise. It's going to matter in the last chapter.

KEY VERSE

Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for today is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah 8:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the people asked Ezra to read the law to them?
2. Why did understanding the law make the people weep? Why did Nehemiah tell them to stop?
3. What do you think it means that "the joy of the LORD is your strength"?
4. What would it look like to tell your own story honestly, including both your failures and God's faithfulness?

TRY THIS *Read one chapter of the Bible this week with a friend or family member, and take turns explaining what you think it means. Then do something to share joy with someone who has less.*

CHAPTER 7

The Messy Ending

Nehemiah 11–13

After the covenant, the book gets busy with practical matters. Jerusalem has walls, but not enough people live there. So the leaders move to the city, and the rest of the people cast lots so that one family out of every ten will move to Jerusalem. “The people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell in Jerusalem.” Moving to the city meant leaving farms and family land, and living in a place surrounded by enemies. It was a sacrifice, and the people honored those who made it.

Then comes the dedication of the wall, and it’s one of the most joyful scenes in the Old Testament. The Levites are gathered from all over the region to celebrate “with gladness, both with giving thanks and with singing, with cymbals, stringed instruments, and with harps.” Nehemiah organizes two huge choirs. They climb up onto the wall and march in opposite directions around the city, one led by Ezra, one followed by Nehemiah, singing the whole way, until they meet at the temple.

Imagine it. The same wall that Tobiah said a fox could knock down now has hundreds of people marching on top of it, singing.

"They offered great sacrifices that day, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; and the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even far away."

If the book ended here, it would be a perfect happy ending. But it doesn't.

Chapter 13 jumps ahead several years. Nehemiah served as governor for twelve years and then went back to Persia to report to King Artaxerxes. Sometime later, he gets permission to return to Jerusalem. And when he arrives, he discovers that almost every promise the people made in chapter 10 has been broken.

First, he finds that Eliashib, the priest in charge of the temple storerooms, has given one of the large rooms in the temple to Tobiah, the Ammonite official who had fought against Nehemiah from the very beginning. The room had been used to store the grain offerings, incense, and tithes for the priests and Levites. Now Nehemiah's old enemy had moved in, right inside the courts of God's house.

Nehemiah's reaction is immediate. "It grieved me severely. Therefore I threw all Tobiah's household stuff out of the room." He orders the rooms purified and puts the temple equipment and offerings back where they belong.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tobiah's Room**
>
> This is a vivid scene: a governor personally dragging furniture out of a storeroom and dumping it outside. Many readers think of Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple, saying, "Don't make my Father's house a marketplace!" Both men were zealous for God's house. Eliashib's choice also shows how compromise often works. Tobiah didn't conquer the temple with an army. He moved in quietly, through a friendship with a priest. It's a reminder that the biggest threats to faith often don't come

with a battle. They come through small compromises that seem harmless at the time.

Next, Nehemiah learns that the Levites and singers haven't been given their share of the offerings, so they've had to leave the temple and go back to their fields to survive. The people had promised, "We will not forsake the house of our God." Now Nehemiah asks the leaders, "Why is God's house forsaken?" He calls the Levites back to their posts and gets the tithes flowing again.

Then he sees people working on the Sabbath: treading winepresses, loading donkeys, and bringing grain, wine, grapes, and figs into Jerusalem to sell. Merchants from Tyre are selling fish and goods on the Sabbath. Nehemiah confronts the nobles. Isn't this exactly what your ancestors did, and isn't that why God brought disaster on this city? So he orders the city gates shut at sundown before the Sabbath and posts his own servants as guards. When merchants camp outside the walls hoping to sell, he threatens to arrest them, and they stop coming.

REAL TALK **The Gift of Rest**

The Sabbath was a gift from God: one day each week to stop working, rest, and worship. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Christians observe a day of rest and worship in different ways, and many gather on Sunday to celebrate the resurrection. But the principle of rest still matters. A lot of people today, including teenagers, never really stop. School, practice, jobs, homework, and screens fill every hour. Rest isn't laziness. It's trusting God enough to stop. Try setting aside time each week to rest, worship, and be with people you love, without trying to get anything done.

Finally, Nehemiah discovers that some of the men have married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, the same issue Ezra faced

years earlier, and that half their children can't even speak the language of Judah. They're losing their identity as God's people.

And here, Nehemiah loses it. "I contended with them, cursed them, struck certain of them, plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God." He reminds them of Solomon, the greatest king Israel ever had, who was loved by God and still was led into sin by his foreign wives.

> **REAL TALK** **Nehemiah's Temper**
>
> It's important to be honest about this scene. Nehemiah, the man who prayed for months, organized brilliantly, and stood strong against his enemies, ends up yelling, cursing, hitting people, and pulling out their hair. Christians have understood his actions in different ways. Some see them as righteous zeal, like the prophets' passion for God's honor, in a culture where public rebukes could be physical. Others see a good man whose frustration finally boiled over into something wrong. Many land somewhere in between: his concern was right, but his methods went too far. What's clear is that the Bible doesn't present this as a model for how to treat people. It simply tells the truth about what happened. Most of us have been angry enough to want to do something like this. James wrote, "for the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God." If you struggle with anger, you're not alone, and it's not hopeless. Take a break before you react, the way Nehemiah did in chapter 5 when he consulted with himself first. Talk to God about it. Talk to a trusted adult or counselor, who can help you learn healthy ways to handle frustration. And if anyone is hurting you physically, or you're afraid you might hurt someone, please tell a trusted adult right away, or call 911 in an emergency.

The last verses are a list of Nehemiah's final reforms and his final prayer. He purifies the priests and Levites, assigns them their duties, and arranges for the wood offering and firstfruits. And he

ends the book with the same prayer he's prayed throughout: "Remember me, my God, for good."

That's it. That's the last line.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Does It End This Way?**

Nehemiah is one of the last historical books of the Old Testament, and it ends on a surprisingly downbeat note. The walls are up, the temple is standing, the law has been read, and the covenant has been signed. And yet the people have already broken their promises, and their leader is exhausted and furious. Many readers think that's exactly the point. Nehemiah had done everything a leader could do from the outside. He rebuilt the walls, reorganized the temple, enforced the Sabbath, and made the people swear oaths. But none of it could change their hearts. The problem wasn't the walls. It was the people. The prophets had already seen this. Jeremiah promised a new covenant, when God would say, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart." Ezekiel promised a new heart and God's own Spirit living inside His people. Nehemiah's ending leaves us waiting for that kind of change.

REAL TALK **Rules Can't Change Hearts**

Nehemiah tried to fix the people's problems by changing the rules and enforcing them. Shut the gates. Throw out the furniture. Make them swear. Some of that was necessary. But it couldn't make anyone love God. You've probably seen that in your own life. Rules can keep you from doing some bad things, but they can't make you want to do good ones. Willpower, resolutions, and promises often fail. That's not because rules don't matter. It's because what we really need is a new heart. That's exactly what Jesus came to give. David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me." That's a prayer worth praying.

KEY VERSE

Remember me, my God, concerning this, and don't wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its observances.

Nehemiah 13:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the people broke their promises so quickly after Nehemiah left?
2. How did Tobiah end up living in the temple? What does that teach about how compromise happens?
3. What do you think of Nehemiah's temper in 13:25? Was he right, wrong, or both?
4. Why do you think the book ends without a happy ending?

TRY THIS *Think of a rule or resolution you keep breaking. Instead of just trying harder, pray David's prayer every day this week: "Create in me a clean heart, O God."*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days. But by the end of the book, the people had already broken the promises they made, and Nehemiah was throwing furniture and pulling hair. Walls could keep enemies out, but they couldn't keep sin out of people's hearts. Even the best reformer couldn't change anyone from the inside.

Jewish readers treasure Nehemiah as a model of faithful leadership and of renewing life around God's law, and they remember the walls of Jerusalem with deep love. Long before, the prophets had promised something more. Through Ezekiel, God said, "I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you." The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that promise came true in Jesus. Like Nehemiah, Jesus entered the temple and drove out what didn't belong there. But He also went to the cross, rose again, and sent His Spirit to rebuild people from the inside. Paul wrote, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." And Revelation describes a city Nehemiah could only dream of: "I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God," with walls that will never fall and gates that will never need to be shut, where "God himself will be with them as their God." Nehemiah's work was unfinished. Jesus finishes it.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He cares about what's broken in your life.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Nehemiah's people confessed that they had done wickedly. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The ruined walls of Jerusalem were a reminder of sin's cost. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus rebuilds from the inside.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He doesn't just fix the outside. He gives a new heart.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Nehemiah asked God to remember his good deeds. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Rise up and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that You are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness. Thank You that Jesus gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and rebuild me from the inside out. Give me a new heart, and let Your joy be my strength. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Nehemiah 1, 4, and 8, then Revelation 21, the city that will never fall.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Build next to someone. Nehemiah's wall went up as people worked side by side. Find a way to serve alongside other believers.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Nehemiah prayed for months before he acted. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Nehemiah is right, the God who rebuilt a broken city can rebuild a broken life, and He's inviting you to rise up and build.

I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

Revelation 21:2 (WEB)