

NEHEMIAH

return + rebuild



NEHEMIAH OVERVIEW

The book of Nehemiah tells the story of the return of God's people to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. But this isn't just about physically returning to Jerusalem. This story is about returning to God and his ways – what the Bible calls repentance.

This is a story for all of us. It's a story about all of us. We all go through seasons of rebellion and ruin. And we all have the opportunity to return and rebuild, repent and restore.

Thankfully, we have a God who never gives up on rebellious people and offers means for us always to return to him and be made new. Israel was given the means to return and rebuild through foreign kings. We are given the means to return and rebuild through King Jesus.

To learn more about Nehemiah, watch this Bible Project video on Ezra-Nehemiah: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah/>.

PART 5: RESTORE JUSTICE

Read the text: Nehemiah 5:1-19 (only vs. 1-13 included below)

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." And there were those

who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

As the work on the wall continues, Nehemiah is confronted with the injustices both he and those around him are committing. First, he slows down to really listen with empathy to the voice of those suffering from injustice. As he listens with true empathy, his

heart is moved to righteous anger and towards action. He speaks directly to those who have sinned and committed injustice and is very specific about what they are doing. He also gives a voice to those who are oppressed and who don't have a position of power to speak for themselves. He's honest about his own sin, openly admitting how he has contributed to this injustice. And he calls the other leaders to make reparations for the injustice they have committed, paying back what they have taken. He then commits to live generously, using his position of power and privilege to serve others and provide food for many without taking more for himself.

This passage ends, just like the whole book itself, with Nehemiah hoping he has done enough, yet the people's hearts had not really changed. This points us to the only One who is able to bring true, lasting justice to this world; Jesus Christ. Unlike Nehemiah, He never participated in the oppression, He was treated as though he was guilty of it, so that we who have participated might be forgiven. And He made the ultimate reparation by paying for all sin, past, present and future, once and for all, with His own life. He exchanged His righteousness for our sinful injustice at the cross. Though He had every right to be exalted, He was humbled and gave up everything so that with Him in His resurrection we might be exalted and enjoy all that is rightfully His. He leveraged His power, position and privilege for our sake. And one day, all those who trust in Him will feast at the most lavish feast paid for by Him!

Discussion Questions:

These questions are written for DNA groups, but you can use in any setting, including missional communities. Because they were written for the intimacy of DNA friendships, you may need to adjust for larger groups.

1. Where do you need to stop and truly listen to others experiencing injustice with empathy? What keeps you from doing that? Do you think the Father listens to you with empathy?

2. When we think about our own contribution or participation in injustice, our first response can often be defensiveness or denial. Why do you think that is? Have you asked the Spirit to reveal your heart and bring conviction regarding your role in injustice? If so, what has the Spirit revealed? If not, how will you stop and listen to the Spirit in this way?
3. Nehemiah used his position of power to give the oppressed a voice and ultimately to lead others in making things right. What position, power, or privilege have you been given by God? Remember, we have nothing that wasn't given to us from God! (1 Cor. 4:7) How might you use that position or power, leverage it, or even lay it down to serve others who suffer from injustice? Take time to think out loud together about this. Ask God to give clarity and direction for you.
4. Although Nehemiah and the offending leaders were right to make reparation to those they had taken from and hurt, ultimately it was not enough to truly satisfy the demand for justice and to change their selfish hearts. Who is the only one who can make all things right and bring true justice, and how did He do this? How does this "good news" give hope to those who have suffered injustice? How does this rightly motivate us toward action and pursuing justice here on earth?
5. What next step is the Spirit calling you to take? How can those you are processing this with help you take this step?