

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Nehemiah**

#### **Lesson 1: Nehemiah – A Man With A Broken Heart**

##### **Reading**

Nehemiah 1.

##### **A Man With A Broken Heart**

Home is where your heart is. Nehemiah was a captive. He was taken 'miles away' to a foreign land by enemy force. But his heart remained 'miles away' in Jerusalem.

It's interesting to note that materialistically Nehemiah was quite well off. Yes, he was a captive; yes, he had been exiled from home, but God had 'promoted' him to that great position of trust and honour – that of cupbearer to the Sovereign.

He could have been forgiven for ignoring the people back home. Jerusalem could so easily have become a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. He could have just sat on his hands and done nothing and just prayed. Or he could have thrown his arms in the air and said, "What can I do?" But he didn't. He was made of sterner stuff.

He had received a first-hand report about the depressing state back home and it broke his heart. He decided, therefore, that something needed to be done. He couldn't sit idly by and do nothing. He had to put method into his praying and 'worked with God' on the problem.

First of all, he identified with the problem. He admitted before God that God was totally justified by His actions in sending the people into exile because of their sin. He accepted personal responsibility, admitting that he was no better than the rest. However, he sought God's forgiveness based upon God's promise to forgive and restore. He, like both Abraham and Moses before him, reminded God who He was, what His Name stood for and of His grace and asked for mercy and forgiveness.

It's what happened next that I want to highlight. For the next 4 months, Chislev to Nisan (November to March), he sought wisdom and strategy from God. He cried out in desperation for help and answers - and over that time formulated and honed his plan.

Once he had got it settled in his mind, he submitted it all to God's timing. As we shall see, he was a man who 'walked with God' and followed His will and let God do the impossible. It's a strategy we should all use.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 1 continued: Nehemiah – A Man With A Broken Heart**

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

If you want to change society, you must be personally and passionately disturbed by what you see and be prepared to be a part of the answer.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please prevent me from moaning about situations without making myself available to be the answer to them. Grant me the determination to follow Your perfect will for my life and to be sensitive to Your constant leading and wisdom. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

1 John 2:15-29; Psalm 51; Daniel 1.

#### **Questions**

What are the things that 'bother' you about society today?

What do you think are some of the answers to them?

What are you prepared to do to see things change?

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### **Lesson 2: Nehemiah – Prayer, Plans and Miracles**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 2.

#### **Prayer, Plans and Miracles**

I was taught that Nehemiah's prayer recorded here in chapter 2 was an emergency prayer, sent to God in a desperate situation and requiring an instant answer - the inference being that we don't need to make any plans for life, just pray to God and miracles will come our way. But life is just not like that and God is neither a spiritual Father Christmas nor genie of the lamp. And if we ignore chapter 1, and Chapter 2 verse 1, I guess it could look like that.

However, Nehemiah had gone to great lengths in the previous chapter to explain that this was in fact all part of his strategy to return to Jerusalem and give aid to the remnant of the Jews living there. Chapter 2 opens with the fact that he had never been sad in the presence of the king before. There was a reason for that – Kings don't like sad people being around them.

Knowing this, Nehemiah decided that "today" was the day to present his plan to the King and there wasn't a better way to get the conversation going than to look sad. King Artaxerxes took the bait and asked what the grief was all about.

In response, I believe Nehemiah's prayer went something like this – *"O.K. God, so far so good, now it's entirely up to You."* He then proceeded to present the plan he had been working on and agonising over before God for the last 4 months. He was able to tell the king how long his travels would take and how long he would be away.

Please notice he didn't say – *I want to have a bit of leave to pop back home and try and help them.* He told the King exactly what he intended to do and where he needed the King's specific help. Verse 8 records the miracle – *"Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests."*

Christianity is both real and a relationship with God. It is not a set of rules and regulations or some ritual. Nor is it a life of miraculous escapes or provision everyday. God expects us to use our brains, submit our plans to Him and then allow Him to make them become a reality in His time and in His way, with the odd miracle thrown in where needed.

The Bible tells us that the day the Israelites ate the food from the Promised Land the Manna ceased. Yes, of course, God delights in granting us miracles. Each breath we take is one. However, He also expects us to use our God-given brains and abilities to fulfil His plans and purposes, too.

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### **Lesson 2 continued: Nehemiah – Prayer, Plans and Miracles**

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

Always submit your plans to God in prayer and then trust Him to provide the miracles to make it happen.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, thank you so much that You care about every detail of our lives – the big ones and the small ones. Help me to remember that although I may not 'see' You working on my behalf, it doesn't mean You have forgotten me or are unaware of the pressures and concerns I face. Help me to learn to trust You more and to use the brain, gifts and talents You have given me to follow You closer every day. Help me also remember that we still live in an age of miracles. Thank You. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Psalm 37:1-11; Luke 14:25-35; Philippians 4:4-13.

#### **Questions**

Should we plan before we pray or pray before we plan?

Why is it we have a bias towards wanting miracles to come our way rather than for us to carry on the work regardless?

What miracles have you experienced? What ones are you waiting on God to send?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 3: Nehemiah – Just Because You Are Doing What God Wants Doesn't Mean You Are Immune To Spiritual Attack**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 2:10-20.

#### **Just Because You Are Doing What God Wants Doesn't Mean You Are Immune To Spiritual Attack**

Wouldn't it be nice if God made sure that whenever we followed Him and did whatever He wanted us to do, He would set up a 200 km-enemy exclusion zone around our family, our ministry and us?

No sooner had Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem than the opposition raised its ugly head. Did you notice what the Bible said, *"they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites."* (Not much different today, is it?) What we discover throughout the record is that they were a constant pain in Nehemiah's side.

They tried all sorts of tricks to get Nehemiah off track from his job, and to thwart the progress he was making. They mocked, ridiculed and jeered. They even threatened physical attack so Nehemiah had to make stringent plans to defend the workers. He had to arm them and make them work in shifts so that their safety was not compromised.

He also had to overcome slander, their wicked scheming and intimidation. Even in the end he had to make sure that only the 'true' Jews – those who could prove their genealogy – were those who would reap the benefits of the completed work. Each time he took the problem to the Lord and carried on with the job.

Be encouraged, it will be the same for you, too. Maybe even now you are going through a particularly tough time. Remember Nehemiah. Just because you are facing opposition doesn't necessarily mean you are out of God's will. It may be the enemy is fearful of what you are achieving in God. Don't give up, look up.

We have found that every time we run an *Alpha* Course, things 'happen.' Is it any wonder the enemy gets upset when so many have come out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of Light through attending an *Alpha* Course? We are making permanent eternal damage to the enemy's kingdom – no wonder he gets upset. And he is going to be really upset for a long time yet – because we are carrying on.

Give every situation to the Lord and ask Him for wisdom, help, courage and strength to carry on. As Nehemiah told the people – *"the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 3 continued: Nehemiah – Just Because You Are Doing What God Wants Doesn't Mean You Are Immune To Spiritual Attack**

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

People who do something are always open to attack. Do it anyway and let God deal to the opposition.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for Nehemiah's example to us. Thank You for recording his struggles and the ways he dealt with opposition. Thank You that he kept going to the end. Please help me to do the same and above all, please don't let me lose my joy in You. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Ephesians 6:10-18; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; 1 Samuel 30:1-12.

#### **Questions**

What lessons can we learn from adversity?

How do we maintain our joy in the Lord?

What are you facing today that you need God's help to overcome?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 4: Nehemiah – You Are Responsible For Your Area Of Influence**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 3.

#### **You Are Responsible For Your Area Of Influence**

Nehemiah was a great leader in many ways. Here in Chapter 3 he demonstrates the importance of sensitivity in leadership. Yes, he saw the big picture. He was the one with the vision and passion to carry the work to fruition regardless of the cost to him and opposition from others.

However, he also recognised that was his 'call'. He had been anointed for the role and responsibility. He knew that the people would be overwhelmed if they had to take on board the whole project so he divided it up into bite-sized pieces which each could understand and fulfil. He had to give each of the depressed people a 'win' situation.

He invited the people to be responsible for their part of the wall. That bit in front of their eyes. That 'little' bit they could manage and be both proud and protective of. He kept it local and relational. Each whanau looked after their part of the wall and repaired it. Together they encircled the city and had the whole operation under control.

Changing a nation is daunting. Influencing a city can seem a huge challenge. Break it down. Even an 'impersonal' city is made up of districts, streets and families. The issue is one of priorities. How much do you really care about your society and where it is heading? We can't do it on our own but if we all concentrate on our area of influence, it can have an incredible effect. Especially if we get our directions from God.

However, it all starts with our family. We are responsible for our children. How we live with them, what we model to them. The problem today is that we so often abdicate our responsibilities to others - the day-care centre staff, the state schoolteachers, the Government agencies and church leaders.

We need to repair and strengthen our section of the wall of society, and then family-by-family society will change. We need to remember it begins with us. We should never have to ask the question – I wonder where my children are right now? They are our children – it is our job to know.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 4 continued: Nehemiah – You Are Responsible For Your Area Of Influence**

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

Get your own house in order and then reach out to others. You are responsible to and for your family – you can't leave it to outside agencies. Whether you like it or not, you are a role model. The question is what sort of role model are you?

#### **Prayer**

*Father, I thank You that You have given me terrific role models in both Nehemiah and in Jesus. Please help me to follow their example and to pass on a worthy heritage to my children and be a good example to my neighbours and work colleagues. For Your Name's sake. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3; 1 Timothy 4; Psalm 1.

#### **Questions**

How much do you really care about the society in which you live?

What sort of role model are you to your children?

What do you think your neighbours think of you and your lifestyle?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 5: Nehemiah – The Battle Is Over Your Family**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 4.

#### **The Battle Is Over Your Family**

Nehemiah fought in the natural what most of us have to fight in the spiritual. He had returned to Jerusalem to restore it as a place of peace and prosperity for the people who felt defeated and desperate. He gave them a vision, direction and a hope. He gave them a practical task to help re-establish their self-esteem and sense of purpose.

The enemy preferred them to be as they had been before – dejected, downcast and helpless. Once he saw the people revitalised and working, he tried to discourage them by words and insults. When that failed, he threatened physical warfare.

What did Nehemiah do? Believe their lies and shake with fear? No. He prayed to God for protection and made plans for survival. He was not going to give up on the job because the very life and health of the people depended on them finishing the task. So he employed his defence strategy. Yes, it would take hard work and inconvenience but the prize was worth infinitely more than personal physical discomfort. They were fighting for their very existence.

Hello! Society today is suffering because we have abdicated our responsibility as parents. We neglect our families. We prioritise work, financial security and toys above the priceless value of children who should be secure, balanced and enjoying a life with God as their Father and Guide.

And we are the ones to blame. We can't blame the Government, we can't blame the schools, and we can't blame society. We can't say the church failed them – we have. We have the responsibility for our family and we have abdicated that to our and our children's peril. We brought them into the world and gave them life. God expects us to nurture, train and lead them. It's the parents' role.

Now is the time to take back our God-given privilege and regain a society that prefers relationships to finances, and communication to self-centredness. It's worth fighting for.

Don't blame the 'world' for the state of your family if you have not fought to save it and maintain it. Yes, you may be criticised for 'discipline', for 'censorship', for restrictions and narrow-mindedness but if the result is a stable, fun-loving, peaceful and balanced family that is not a drain on society but rather a contributor to it, you have 'won' the battle for them, for God and humanity.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 5 continued: Nehemiah – The Battle Is Over Your Family**

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

Don't be afraid of those who are out to destroy your family. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes. Our God will fight for us.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, Thank You for inviting us to become a part of Your family. I want to thank you that You established families and that You care about each member of them. Please help me prioritise my family so that they don't just get the scraps of my time and my day but get the best. Help me to fight for the family You have entrusted to me. In Jesus' name and for His sake I ask. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Deuteronomy 11:13-25; Psalm 127; Ephesians 5:22-6:4.

#### **Questions**

Why is the family under threat?

From where do the most frequent attacks come?

In what ways can we 'protect' our families?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 6: Nehemiah – Don't Let The Urgent Ruin The Important**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 6.

#### **Don't Let The Urgent Ruin The Important**

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem found that Nehemiah was more than equal to their wicked schemes. They tried every weapon in their arsenal to stop, discourage and divert Nehemiah from the task in hand. However, Nehemiah was a man of God. He had been called by God to do a job and nothing but nothing from the enemy was going to stop him.

It didn't mean he enjoyed it; it just meant that he was determined and knew the result was worth it. His enemies also knew that if they didn't stop him soon, nothing would and their cause would be lost forever. So they hatched a plan to get him away from the work. Firstly, to join them in one of their villages, which was a bit obvious, wasn't it? Secondly, to take refuge in the temple, of all places.

Nehemiah was neither gullible nor a fool. He sent his replies and carried on working – doing his job. I love Nehemiah's comments. To the invite to the Temple he said, *"I realised that God had not sent them."* That's discernment. How we all need that, don't we?

I think the older I get the more I need it. We long to help people but we also need to understand that the enemy is able to send people to us just as easily as God can. The ones from the enemy come and drain us, frustrate us, and time-waste. We need to recognise them as soon as possible and deal with them appropriately.

I also love his reply regarding visiting them in their village – *"I am carrying on a great project and cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"* Interestingly, he said it four times. Come with me will you to Calvary. Jesus is hanging on the cross. Matthew records the scene and describes what the elders and chief priests said - *"He saved others but He can't save Himself. He's the King of Israel! Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him."*

By faith, I can't help hearing Jesus say, *"I am carrying on a great project and cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"*

Had Jesus 'come down', we would be destined for God's wrath and Hell. Yes, it was an insult; yes, it hurt Jesus but by God's grace and mercy – Jesus didn't come down. He carried on the great project and died to complete the work He came to do. Amazing Grace!

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 6 continued: Nehemiah – Don't Let The Urgent Ruin The Important**

Nehemiah and Jesus give us the ultimate examples – Don't give in and don't give up – the goal is too precious. Maybe you are involved in reaching out to those who have no relationship with God right now and you are feeling discouraged. Can I encourage you, don't give up and don't 'come down' – You are carrying on a great project – don't let the work stop!

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

Get to know the enemies' tactics. He is against everything you do and stand for. A sidetrack is as effective as an all-out attack because the result is the same – the work stops. So wise-up, keep your eyes on the goal and don't let anything divert you or get in the way of your success.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, I long to run my race swiftly, resolutely, and passionately to the end. Please protect me from giving in to temptation and the diversions of the enemy. Help me focus single-mindedly on the goal and destiny You have for me. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Joshua 1:1-9; Luke 9:51-62; 1 Timothy 4:1-8; Revelation 2:1-7.

#### **Questions**

Why do we so often 'give-in' to the 'squeaky' wheel?

What are the potential diversions in your life?

What warning signs can you establish in your life, which will help protect you from getting sidetracked?

To whom are you accountable - spiritually?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 7: Nehemiah – Know The Importance Of The Word Of God**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 8:1-12.

#### **Know The Importance Of The Word Of God**

The walls were completed in 52 days! Nehemiah also records that once they were in place, their enemies became afraid and lost their self-confidence – because they realised that this work had been done *with the help of our God*.

Hot on the heels of the completion of the work came the celebration. Nehemiah had completed the work and established the genealogy of the Jews and appointed the leaders and priests so that everything could carry on decently and in order.

Then it was time to celebrate.

Here is another example of one of the best qualities of a leader – knowing how, when and how important it is to celebrate. People will often give and give and go on giving, however, they will be far more willing to give of themselves again if they have been able to celebrate their successes.

In our target-focused world, it is so easy just to drive from one target to the next without taking time out to celebrate. Oh, we will usually dissect every issue, which may or may not have contributed to a shortfall but how often will we celebrate a win? We will if it is the All Blacks – so why not at work (or in ministry) too?

They started by praising the Lord and then reading from His Word. There is an interesting qualification there – did you notice? *“They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”* That was so important, wasn't it? How often have I heard someone read the Bible in public and there is either no enthusiasm or inflection so it all sounds monotonous, irrelevant and boring. These readers were so successful that the people understood what was being read and realised how much they had fallen short of God's standard - so much so they were weeping in contrition.

So intense was their grief that Nehemiah had to stop them! He had to remind them that this was a day of Good News. A day of rejoicing at the grace and goodness of God. He encouraged them to have a party and celebrate, specifically with those who were worse off than they were.

Reading the Bible should always have that effect. We should be brought to a position of repentance and then released into praise and celebration because of the grace and love of God. We should also remember that what is true for us is also true for others and so we should share the Good News with those who haven't heard or received it.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 7 continued: Nehemiah – Know The Importance Of The Word Of God**

Jesus said that He had come to give us life and life in all its fullness. Let's never forget that although God is a perfect, righteous and holy God, He is also our loving Heavenly Father and Redeemer. He is fun loving and creative. Let's try and portray that to others so they too may have a new and exciting view of God.

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

There is no substitute for reading and knowing the Bible. Get to know it for yourself and don't leave it to others to teach you. Taste and see that the Lord is good, and then go and celebrate it with others. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for Your life-giving Word, the Bible. Thank You that You have made it totally trustworthy from beginning to end. Please help me get to know it even better and to make it exciting and relevant whenever I read it out to others. Help me to remember that You also love us to celebrate Your character, Your grace and Your goodness. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Psalm 19; Psalm 119:89-112; 2 Timothy 3:10-17.

#### **Questions**

Have you read the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation?

When you read it aloud to others do you try and make its message plain?

How do you celebrate your relationship with Jesus?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 8: Nehemiah – When The Going Gets Tough The Tough Get Going**

#### **Reading**

Nehemiah 13.

#### **When The Going Gets Tough The Tough Get Going**

Reading the Bible can often 'open up a can of worms'.

As soon as Nehemiah left, the people went back to their old way of life. Non-Jews were accepted into the 'fold' and inter-cultural marriage, which was expressly forbidden because of the potential for idolatry, was again permitted.

They even allowed their enemy, Tobiah, some space in the Temple complex.

Tithes and offerings were down, and the people were working on the Sabbath.

Things were looking grim. However, as soon as Nehemiah returned, he set about putting everything back in order and appointing appropriate people to be in charge - people of integrity and who could be trusted to both get the work done and to prosper it.

Many were complex issues and needed careful handling; however, Nehemiah didn't lose any sleep or time confronting each issue and the people who had created the difficulties. He didn't compromise but remained fair and firm.

Regardless of who was in error - the enemy, the leaders, the priests or the people - Nehemiah got stuck into each of the perpetrators of the crimes and dealt with them in the most appropriate way. It wasn't easy and he may well have lost friends in the process and no doubt many well-meaning people tried to get him to compromise on the way. But Nehemiah was going to hold true to what had to be done and ended up sorting the issues out one by one and re-establishing order and righteousness.

Each of us is called upon to act in righteousness and sometimes that is hard because it affects friends, family and maybe even our future. However, we have to make the decision – will we follow Christ or be bound by the fear of men?

Or will we hide in the hope that it will go away? That is an illusion! Often the price of procrastination is very high - on the person, on the extra people that are unnecessarily affected and on us for failing to deal with it. Follow Nehemiah's example and deal with the confrontation as soon as is practical and in the most righteous way.

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 8 continued: Nehemiah – When The Going Gets Tough The Tough Get Going**

Remember - integrity takes years to grow and only seconds to lose. Once you lose it, it is almost impossible to regain.

#### **Nehemiah would say to us today...**

Try to be impartial in all you do but don't procrastinate over issues that need to be dealt with, whether by foes, friends or family

#### **Prayer**

*Father, none of us enjoys discipline or having to discipline. However, help me to remember that discipline is to my advantage because through it I become wiser and more sensitive to Your ways and purposes for my life. Help me learn to deal with issues at the right time and in the right way. For Your Kingdom's sake. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Genesis 34:1-30; 1 Samuel 2:12-17; Acts 5:1-11; Hebrews 12:1-13.

#### **Questions**

What are the issues in your life that you would rather not deal with?

Why is procrastination never right?

Why is it more difficult to challenge those we love?