

# BIBLE BACKGROUND

## JOURNEY 11: THE WINNER'S PLATFORM!

### *Nehemiah Builds the Wall*

**Key Passages:** Nehemiah 2:1–18; 4:1–19; 6:15–16

**Key Word:** *Team Player*

**Key Thought:** Develop character qualities that make you an MVP on God's team.

**Key Verse:** "It is good that I have been afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."  
—Psalm 119:71

## THE HOME STRETCH

Three separate groups of Jews were allowed to return to their homeland of Israel after the Babylonian captivity.

- The first group returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 537 B.C. He brought with him the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from Solomon's temple. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple and restored the worship of Yahweh.
- The second group of Jewish exiles returned in 458 B.C. under the leadership of Ezra, a skilled scribe and teacher with extensive training in the books of the Law. His main focus was to reestablish the Law as the moral basis of Jewish life.
- The third group of Jewish captives returned under the supervision of Nehemiah in 444 B.C. to rebuild the city and the walls around Jerusalem, which still lay in ruins.

## CUPBEARER?

As cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, the son of King Xerxes, Nehemiah enjoyed considerable influence. His duties of selecting and tasting the king's wine gave him constant access to the king.

As a Jew, he had not yet felt led to return to his homeland—until he heard a report about the conditions in Jerusalem. After almost 100 years, the walls and the city gates had not been rebuilt and the city lay in ruins. He literally sat down and wept (Nehemiah 1:4) to think about all that Israel had lost.

Nehemiah mourned for many days over the plight of his people. He fasted and prayed to God; he acknowledged Him as great and awesome.

- He looked to God once more as the Covenant-Keeper with mercy for those who love

# JOURNEY 11

Him and observe His commandments.

- He confessed to God the sins of the children of Israel as well as his own personal sin.
- He recognized the people's failure to keep God's commandments, statutes and ordinances.
- He recalled God's words once spoken to Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me, though you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather you to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for my name" (Nehemiah 1:8–9).
- He asked for mercy and blessing in the sight of the king.

## BROKEN WALLS

To the Jews, a city wall was a means of preservation. Without it, the people were facing assimilation into the culture of their neighbors. In those days, a city without walls was vulnerable to robbers and troublemakers of all kinds. Because there was no security, the Jews had scattered themselves among the people who lived in the surrounding towns and villages. There they intermarried and began to lose their identity including their language, culture and religion. A wall would give them a chance to make Jerusalem a truly Jewish city again, keeping it safe and controlling who came and went and how life was lived. Nehemiah felt compelled to do something.

## A SAD COUNTENANCE

When Nehemiah was called before the king, the king saw how downcast and troubled his cupbearer was. He could not resist asking him what was wrong. Nehemiah was afraid of sharing his grief, but he took a deep breath, said one last prayer and laid his requests before the king (Nehemiah 2:1–8).

<b>Nehemiah's First Request</b>	He asked the king to allow him to return to Jerusalem so that he could rebuild the wall.
<b>The King's Response</b>	The king agreed to let him return and even appointed Nehemiah governor of Judah.
<b>Nehemiah's Second Request</b>	He asked the king for letters to the governors of the nations through which he must travel to get home as a guarantee of safe passage.
<b>The King's Response</b>	The king not only provided letters for passage, but he also sent army officers and cavalry as an escort for Nehemiah.
<b>Nehemiah's Third Request</b>	He asked the king to provide him with a letter to the keeper of the king's forest so that he could secure the timbers he needed to make the beams for the gates of the city.
<b>The King's Response</b>	The king gladly agreed to make these building materials available to his cupbearer.

God had answered his prayers better than he could have ever imagined. He was on his way. God had given him the strategy and plan for Jerusalem. It would not be easy to accomplish his goal, but he was confident God would prepare the way.

## THE PLAN

Nehemiah was a good organizer and business manager, but more importantly, he was a man of God. He did not act without praying and he did not pray without acting. He recognized God's role in all that happened and never forgot to give Him credit for what was done to restore Jerusalem.

When he arrived and saw the shattered walls of the city, he was broken. He challenged his countrymen to rally and repair the wall of protection around the city. In spite of opposition from the outside, the people completed the task in only 52 days. This was accomplished by assigning to each family the portion of the wall that was in front of their house. Each family became a team of builders where they lived. The people caught Nehemiah's vision and rallied. The Bible says: "They worked with all their heart" (Nehemiah 4:6). Often they worked with a weapon in one hand and mortar and stone in the other to keep their enemies at bay. Their work proved to be a phenomenal achievement. Even their enemies realized God's hand was upon these people.

## REVIVAL

With the newly built wall surrounding the city, the Jews began to worship God again as they had done in the days of King David. Nehemiah led them to reaffirm their loyalty to the covenant God had made with Abraham. Ezra joined Nehemiah for a citywide crusade as the books of Law were read aloud for all the people to hear. The people renewed their commitment to obey God's commandments. After the exile, they fully understood what it meant to be cast aside. For a while at least, they wanted to be included in God's winning family team. They wanted Him to be pleased with their new commitment to live for Him. Never again did they worship the idols of other people living near to them.

## THE JESUS CONNECTION

Nehemiah illustrates Christ in several ways.

- He gave up a high position as cupbearer to the king in order to be a construction supervisor, just as Jesus left heaven to become a servant.
- Like Jesus, Nehemiah had a mission to accomplish and nothing could stop Him.
- Nehemiah bathed his work in prayer just as Jesus showed His total dependence on the Father.

## VICTORY

Nehemiah's writing reveals that everything Israel needed was restored: the temple, the city of Jerusalem, the covenant and the people. The only thing missing was a king. The

# JOURNEY 11

Messianic line was still intact through the tribe of Judah. Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks (Daniel 9:25–27) began with the decree of Artaxerxes for Nehemiah to rebuild the city. The Messiah would come at the end of week 69 as He rode triumphantly into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey. God was in the process of restoring everything that had been broken. The ultimate victory belonged to Him and the coming Messiah.

## SILENCE

Chronologically, Nehemiah is the last book of the Old Testament. The story of the Jewish remnant back in the land ends around 425 B.C.<sup>11</sup> The books of prophecy that finish out the Old Testament are best understood in light of their relationship to the period of exile in Babylon.

- **BEFORE THE EXILE:** Amos, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Habakkuk, Jonah, Nahum, Obadiah
- **DURING THE EXILE:** Daniel and Ezekiel
- **AFTER THE EXILE:** Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

At the end of the Old Testament, something very profound begins—God ceases to talk to His people through prophets. For 400 years, no one heard from Him. Then—when the time was right—God sent His Son, the long-expected Messiah (Galatians 4:4). God was preparing a new team to take His message to a lost and dying world.

---

<sup>11</sup> “The Books of the Prophets: Grumpy Old Men,” *Knowing the Bible 101*, Harvest House Publishers, 1998, p. 174.

# TEACHING PLAN

## JOURNEY 11: THE WINNER'S PLATFORM

### *Nehemiah Builds The Wall*

<b>KEY PASSAGES</b> Nehemiah 2:1–18; 4:1–19; 6:15–16	<b>KEY VERSE</b> “It is good that I have been afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” —Psalm 119:71
<b>KEY WORD</b> <i>Team Player</i>	<b>KEY THOUGHT</b> Develop character qualities that make you an MVP on God’s team.



### INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

**CONNECT** the Big Room experience with the Bible story by asking the students questions about what they saw.

- “Which character in today’s episode was not a team player?”
- “How did this affect the other members of the family?”
- “What happened to cause this character to join the team?”



### TABLE TALK 1: *Leave Me Alone!*

The difficulty of rebuilding the Jewish homeland can be illustrated by doing the following activity. **SECURE** three blank cardboard puzzle forms. Before class, **WRITE** the key thought across the face of the blank puzzles. **DRAW** a blank line where the word *MVP* should go. **CHALLENGE** the students to figure out what this word should be. **BREAK UP** the pieces for each puzzle and put them in envelopes.

- Have the students get into their table groups. Give a puzzle envelope to each group.
- Tell the students they have one minute in which to reassemble the puzzle and figure out the word that goes in the blank.
- Choose two students from each group who will try to distract the others from their assignment by talking and joking. They may not touch the other students or the puzzle in an attempt to stop the activity.
- After one minute is up, discuss what happened and how the distractions affected the students’ ability to work on the puzzles.
- Ask if any of the groups were able to figure out the missing word—MVP.

# JOURNEY 11

**EXPLAIN** to the class this is exactly what happened when the Jews tried to rebuild their homeland. Other people interfered and tried to make them stop. These people did not want the Jews returning from exile. Things would certainly change if that happened. Let's look at today's Bible passage to see how the Jewish exiles handled the situation.



## EXPLORING THE BIBLE PASSAGE

**PROVIDE** background information on how three different groups of Jews had returned to Judah in hopes of rebuilding their country. **EXPLAIN** that 100 years had gone by and still the city of Jerusalem and its walls were in ruins. Nehemiah was in Babylon living a very comfortable life as cupbearer to the king. When he heard the reports coming in from Judah, he was devastated. What would he do? **HAVE** the students open their Bibles and read some of the verses as you narrate the account.

- A. Nehemiah 2** sets the stage for what is about to happen.
- **Verses 4–5:** What did Nehemiah ask the king to allow him to do?
  - **Verse 10:** Who was against the rebuilding of the city and why?
  - **Verses 17–18:** What did Nehemiah see when he inspected the city and its walls late at night?
- B. Nehemiah 4** explains how the walls got built.
- **Verses 1–3:** How did Sanballat and Tobiah try to hinder the rebuilding?
  - **Verse 6:** How committed were the workers to their task?
  - **Verse 11:** What did the opposing forces threaten to do?
  - **Verse 14:** What did Nehemiah say to the people to encourage the work?
  - **Verse 18:** What did the workers carry with them as they worked on the wall?
- C. Nehemiah 6** tells the final outcome.
- **SAY:** The work was hard, the hours long and the opposition great, but the people pushed on. **PROVIDE** some background on why the walls of the city were so important in Bible times.
  - **Verses 15–16:** How long did it take to complete the wall? Who had made it possible to complete such an enormous task in such a short time? (*only God*)

## THE RESTORATION

**SAY:** Nehemiah's writing reveals that everything Israel needed had been restored: the temple, the city of Jerusalem, the covenant and the people. The only thing missing was their Messiah. The captivity in Babylon had cured the Jewish people of idolatry. From the days of their captivity until the present, the Jewish people have never been guilty of this sin.<sup>12</sup> The Messianic line was still

<sup>12</sup> *What the Bible Is All About* by Henrietta Mears, Regal Books, 1998, p. 163.

intact through the tribe of Judah whose people were now back in the Promised Land. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem rather than Babylon.



## THE CROSSROADS

**ASK** the students to consider how Nehemiah is like Jesus. We know from Nehemiah's actions what was in his heart.

- He gave up a high position as cupbearer to the king in order to be a construction supervisor, just as Jesus left heaven to become a servant.
- Like Jesus, Nehemiah had a mission to accomplish and nothing could stop Him.
- Nehemiah bathed his work in prayer, just as Jesus revealed His total dependence on His Father.

**ASK:** What difficult tasks are you facing? There is nothing too hard for God. Remember the writing on the puzzle. Do you want to be an MVP for God? You can. It all begins with a prayer asking Jesus to be your Savior. *[Share the plan of salvation and close in prayer.]*



## TABLE TALK 2:

### **Application Opportunities** *(Older Students)*

**EXPLAIN:** Last spring, we had a series of bad storms reported on the news. We watched on TV in disbelief at the destruction people had experienced. These sights and sounds should be a motivation to us to extend a helping hand by sending money, food, clothing or even volunteering our time. **ASK** the students to discuss how something good can come from something very difficult and sad. Our key verse Psalm 119:71 helps us to see more clearly how God can use difficult situations to draw us to Him. Romans 8:28 gives us hope that God can take any circumstance and make something good come from it. **ENCOURAGE** your students to begin looking for good that can come from difficult situations.



## TABLE TALK 3:

### **A Wall of Protection** *(Younger Students)*

**SAY:** Just as a wall protects a city, Jesus can help us to build a wall of protection around our heart. **PUT** names tags on students with the following titles:

- |                          |                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| • Lying                  | • Doing poorly in school   |
| • Disobeying parents     | • Cheating or stealing     |
| • Being unkind to others | • Looking at bad TV/movies |

# JOURNEY 11

**HAVE** the class form a large circle by holding hands. This will represent *a wall of protection*.

- Have the students with the name tags to stand on the outside of the circle.
- As they try to break through the circle, tell the students holding hands to stand strong and not let them through.
- If possible, put a cross of some kind in the middle of the circle to represent Christ in our lives.
- Comment on the need to prevent sin from taking hold in our lives. We can use God's Word to put up barriers that will keep it out.



## **BIBLE LEARNING PROJECT: MVP Puzzles**

**Supplies:** blank puzzles, markers

- Distribute markers among the students.
- Provide a puzzle to each student.
- Instruct the students to write some of the following character qualities across the pieces of their puzzles.

Honesty

Integrity

Compassion

Determination

Kindness

Gentleness

Self-Control

Patience

Goodness

Joy

Peace

Once completed, direct the students to take apart their puzzles and then reconstruct them. For additional fun, students may exchange their puzzles and take turns rebuilding them. Discuss with the students how developing Christlike character qualities will make them an MVP on God's team.



## **SCRIPTURE MEMORY: Psalm 119:71**

**SAY:** It took 70 years in a foreign land for God's chosen people to realize that when God asked for their obedience, He meant it. The grief-stricken exiles had finally been allowed to come home. And even though Judah and Jerusalem were in ruins, it was still home.

**SAY:** The author of this psalm is uncertain. Bible scholars think it may have been written by David, Daniel or Ezra. As one of the exiles, he understood the lessons their time in Babylon (Persia) had taught them. Ezra led the people in worship and helped them make a new commitment to God's Word. Therefore, he could say:

"It is good  
that I have been afflicted,  
that I might learn your statutes."  
—Psalm 119:71



**HAVE** the students get into their table groups.

- Point out the key words: *good, afflicted, learn* and *statutes*.
- Ask how something as bad as being exiled could be considered good.
- Divide the verse into three phrase groups and assign one phrase to each group.
- Have the class say the verse five times with each phrase group chiming in when it is their turn.
- Then reassign the phrases to different groups and repeat the verse again five times.
- Reassign the phrases again to different groups and repeat the verse again five times.

**SAY:** Sometimes God allows difficult times to come into our lives so that He can get our attention and teach us His truth. **CHALLENGE** the students to remember this verse whenever difficult times come.



## A LOOK AT THE BOOK

**SAY:** Nehemiah knew how to get things done. He was a good organizer and he knew how to make others feel part of a team. **LOOK UP** the following Scriptures to discover who else was a good leader.



## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why was Nehemiah so troubled by the report from Judah? (*Almost 100 years after the first exiles returned, the walls and the city gates had not been repaired.*)
2. What made Nehemiah the right person for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem? (*He was an organizer who was passionate about the work God had given him to do.*)
3. Why were walls so important to the larger cities in Judah and Israel? (*protection*)
4. What did King Artaxerxes give to Nehemiah as he set out to return to his homeland? (*letters of safe passage; access to quality timber; and a blessing of God's grace on his work*)
5. How did he organize the people for the task of rebuilding the wall? (*He assigned each family the repair of the wall that was in front of their house.*)
6. How many days did it take to rebuild the wall under Nehemiah's leadership? (*52*)
7. What had the exile taught the Jewish people about idol worship? (*not to do it*)
8. Had they learned their lesson? (*Yes*)
9. Why was it good for the Jews to be carried off?
10. What did it teach them?