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# NEHEMIAH

A 5-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

THE COMPLETE STUDY • WEEKS 1–5 • NEHEMIAH 1:1–13:31
GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

## Nehemiah: A 5-Week Bible Study

A 5-Week Bible Study • ESV® • 5 Sessions of 75–90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

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Participant Study Edition • General / Mixed Group Track

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WEEK 1 OF 5

# Week 1: Let Us Rise Up and Build — Nehemiah 1:1–3:32

Scripture Scope: Nehemiah 1:1–3:32 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

- **The title:** The book is named for Nehemiah, a Jewish official who served as cupbearer to the Persian king and later as governor of Judah. Much of it is written in his own voice. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were counted as one book.
- **The setting:** Nehemiah begins in 445 BC, about thirteen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes. The rebuilt temple has stood for about seventy years, but Jerusalem's walls lie in ruins, the same walls whose rebuilding was halted in Ezra 4. The book ends after Nehemiah returns for a second term, sometime after 433 BC.
- **The main characters:** Nehemiah, his brother Hanani, King Artaxerxes, the opponents Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, Ezra the scribe, and the people of Jerusalem and Judah.
- **The structure (two parts):**
  - Rebuilding the walls (chapters 1–7).
  - Renewing the people (chapters 8–13).
- **Why it matters:** Nehemiah shows prayer and action working together, God's people building side by side under opposition, the joy that comes from understanding God's Word, honest confession of a long history of failure, and a covenant made and broken. Its unfinished ending points to Jesus, who weeps over his city, builds his church, and brings the true reform no human leader could achieve.

### How This 5-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Nehemiah to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, each week of Nehemiah invites you to walk through the story of rebuilding and renewal together through six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's chapters inside the structure of Nehemiah and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.
- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. Longer focal passages are read aloud together from the ESV. Nehemiah includes long lists of builders, residents, priests, and Levites, which the study summarizes in words, and a few harsh moments, such as threats against the builders and Nehemiah's final rebukes, which the study retells briefly in its own words.

### Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

### Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Nehemiah:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

### The 5-Week Nehemiah Study at a Glance

| Week | Title & Passage | Movement 1 / Movement 2 | Canonical Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Let Us Rise Up and Build** (1:1–3:32) | Nehemiah's Grief and Prayer (1:1–2:10) / The Night Inspection and the Builders (2:11–3:32) | The Servant who weeps and builds |
| 2 | **The Work Is of God** (4:1–6:19) | Opposition Without and Within (4:1–5:19) / Plots Resisted and the Wall Finished (6:1–19) | The God who fights for his people and the Christ who finished his work |
| 3 | **The Joy of the LORD** (7:1–8:18) | A City Guarded and a People Recorded (7:1–73) / The Word Read and Understood (8:1–18) | The Word that brings joy |
| 4 | **You Are Righteous, We Have Done Wickedly** (9:1–10:39) | The Great Prayer of Confession (9:1–37) / The Firm Covenant (9:38–10:39) | The faithful God and the new covenant |
| 5 | **Remember Me, O My God** (11:1–13:31) | A City Filled and Dedicated (11:1–12:47) / Nehemiah's Final Reforms (13:1–31) | The city to come and the King who truly reforms |

**Scripture Scope:** Nehemiah 1:1–3:32 • **Focal Group Readings:** Nehemiah 1:1–11; 2:1–8; 2:11–20; 3:1–5; 3:12 (ESV) • **Session Pacing:** 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

# Opening: Let Us Rise Up and Build (Nehemiah 1:1–3:32)

### Opening

Far away in the Persian palace at Susa, Nehemiah serves wine to the most powerful king on earth. One day his brother arrives from Judah with news: the survivors there are in great trouble, the walls of Jerusalem are broken down, and the gates are burned. Nehemiah sits down and weeps. For days he mourns, fasts, and prays. Four months later, the king notices his sad face and asks what he wants.

Nehemiah breathes a quick prayer and asks to go and rebuild. The king says yes. In Jerusalem, Nehemiah rides around the ruins by night, then gathers the people and says, ‘You see the trouble we are in; come, let us build.’ And they answer: let us rise up and build.

### Week 1 At a Glance

| | |
|---|---|
| **Scripture Scope** | Nehemiah 1:1–3:32 (the report from Jerusalem, Nehemiah's grief and prayer, the king's question and permission, the journey and first opposition, the night inspection, the call to build, mockery answered, and the builders at work around the wall) |
| **Focal Passages** | Nehemiah 1:1–11; 2:1–8; 2:11–20; 3:1–5; 3:12 |
| **Literary & Structural Anchor** | Prayer and action belong together: a long prayer (1:5–11), a silent arrow prayer (2:4), then careful planning. The good hand of God is on Nehemiah (2:8, 18), as it was on Ezra. The goal is to end the disgrace of God's people (1:3; 2:17). Everyone builds (chapter 3). Opposition appears from the start (2:10, 19). |
| **Big Idea** | God's servant grieves, prays, and leads his people to rise up and build. |

### Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

| | |
|---|---|
| HEAD | **Know the Story:** Understand why Jerusalem's walls mattered, how Nehemiah prayed, and how the people joined the work. |
| HEART | **Let It Break Your Heart:** Allow what breaks God's heart to move you to prayer before action. |
| HANDS | **Pray and Build:** Take one concrete step to pray about a need you care about and then do your part. |

### Opening Frame: Rise Up and Build

Ezra ended with the temple standing and the people confessing, but Jerusalem's walls still lay in ruins, and the work of renewal was unfinished. Nehemiah picks up the story about thirteen years after Ezra arrived. In the Persian palace, a cupbearer hears bad news from home and sits down and weeps. This week, watch how Nehemiah responds to bad news, how he prays, and how the whole community joins the work. The question for this week: what breaks our hearts, and what might God want us to do about it? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

### Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

**1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question):** Think of a project that only came together because everyone pitched in. What made it work?

Section 1.2

# Historical & Literary Context: A Cupbearer's Burden (Nehemiah 1:1–3:32)

## Entering the World of a Cupbearer's Burden

### 1. Historical Background

The report came in the month of Chislev (November–December) of Artaxerxes' twentieth year (445 BC), and Nehemiah spoke to the king in Nisan (March–April), four months later. An earlier attempt to rebuild the walls had been stopped by royal order (Ezra 4:7–23).

### 2. Cultural Setting

A cupbearer was a trusted royal official who served the king's wine, guarded against poison, and had the king's ear. Showing sadness in the king's presence could be dangerous. Susa was a Persian winter capital, also the setting of Esther. In the ancient world, a city without walls was vulnerable and disgraced.

### 3. Literary Structure of Nehemiah 1:1–3:32

- **The report** (1:1–3)
- **Grief** (1:4)
- **The prayer** (1:5–11)
- **The king's question** (2:1–4)
- **The request granted** (2:5–8)
- **Arrival and opposition** (2:9–10)
- **Night inspection** (2:11–16)
- **The call to build** (2:17–18)
- **Mockery answered** (2:19–20)
- **The builders** (3:1–32)

### 4. Key Themes

Prayer and action; the good hand of God; disgrace removed; everyone builds; opposition from the start.

### 5. Theological Considerations

Nehemiah's prayer rests on God's covenant promises (Deuteronomy 30:1–4). He trusts God's sovereignty and still plans carefully, asks boldly, and accepts the king's letters and escort.

### 6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

Documents found at Elephantine in Egypt, from about 407 BC, mention Sanballat as governor of Samaria, confirming him as a real regional official.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

> **1.2 Q1:** Nehemiah waited four months between his first prayer and the moment the king asked him what he wanted. What do you think he was doing in those months?

**1.2 Q2:** An earlier attempt to rebuild the walls had been stopped by the king (Ezra 4:21–23). What does it say about God that he used the same king to restart the work?

**1.2 Q3:** Nehemiah had a comfortable, powerful position in the palace. What did it cost him to care about a ruined city far away?

Section 1.3

# Movement 1: Nehemiah's Grief and Prayer (Nehemiah 1:1–2:10)

### Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Nehemiah 1:1–4** (focal passage) — Hanani reports that the survivors are in great trouble and shame and that Jerusalem's wall is broken down; Nehemiah sits down, weeps, mourns, fasts, and prays for days.
- **Reader 2: Nehemiah 1:5–11** (focal passage) — Nehemiah prays to the great and awesome God who keeps covenant, confesses the sins of Israel and of his own family, recalls God's promise to gather the repentant, and asks for success before the king.
- **Reader 3: Nehemiah 2:1–8** (focal passage) — The king notices Nehemiah's sadness; afraid, Nehemiah explains; when the king asks what he wants, Nehemiah prays to the God of heaven and asks to rebuild; the king grants letters and timber, because God's good hand is on him.
- **Summary of Nehemiah 2:9–10** — Nehemiah traveled to the province with army officers and horsemen, delivered the king's letters, and Sanballat and Tobiah were greatly displeased that someone had come to seek the welfare of Israel.

### Anchor Verses (ESV)

**Nehemiah 1:4:** As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

**Nehemiah 1:11:** O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cupbearer to the king.

**Nehemiah 2:4:** Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

### Teaching Narrative: Grief That Turns to Prayer

#### 1. Bad News from Home (Nehemiah 1:1–3)

Nehemiah asks about his people. The answer is trouble and disgrace.

### 2. He Sat Down and Wept (Nehemiah 1:4)

Nehemiah's first response is grief, then prayer.

### 3. A Covenant Prayer (Nehemiah 1:5–11)

He praises God, confesses "we have sinned," claims God's promise, and asks for one specific thing.

### 4. Afraid Before the King (Nehemiah 2:1–3)

Nehemiah's sadness puts him at risk. He is honest anyway.

### 5. An Arrow Prayer (Nehemiah 2:4)

Between the king's question and his answer, Nehemiah prays.

### 6. A Bold, Planned Request (Nehemiah 2:5–8)

He knows exactly what he needs: time, letters, and timber. God's good hand provides them.

### 7. Displeased Neighbors (Nehemiah 2:9–10)

Opposition begins before a single stone is laid.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

**1.3 Q1:** When Nehemiah heard the news, "I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (1:4). Why might grief be a good starting place for prayer?

**1.3 Q2:** Nehemiah confessed, "Even I and my father's house have sinned" (1:6), though he lived far from Jerusalem. Why does he include himself?

**1.3 Q3:** Nehemiah reminded God of his own promise to gather his people if they returned to him (1:8–9). How can praying God's promises back to him shape our prayers?

**1.3 Q4:** When the king asked, "What are you requesting?" Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven" before answering (2:4). When have you prayed a quick prayer in a tense moment?

**1.3 Q5:** Nehemiah had a detailed plan ready: how long he would be gone, which letters he needed, and where the timber would come from (2:6–8). How do careful planning and trust in God work together?

Section 1.4

# Movement 2: The Night Inspection and the Builders (Nehemiah 2:11–3:32)

### Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Nehemiah 2:11–16** (focal passage) — After three days Nehemiah inspects the broken walls and burned gates by night, telling no one what God had put in his heart.
- **Reader 2: Nehemiah 2:17–18** (focal passage) — Nehemiah calls the people to build so they will no longer suffer derision; he tells of God's hand and the king's words, and they say, "Let us rise up and build."
- **Reader 3: Nehemiah 2:19–20** (focal passage) — Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem mock and accuse them of rebellion; Nehemiah answers that the God of heaven will make them prosper.
- **Summary of Nehemiah 3:1–32** — The builders are listed section by section around the city: the high priest and priests at the Sheep Gate, families, goldsmiths, perfumers, district rulers, one man with his daughters, and many repairing the wall in front of their own houses. Only the nobles of Tekoa refused to join the work.

### Anchor Verses (ESV)

**Nehemiah 2:17:** Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.”

**Nehemiah 2:18:** And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

**Nehemiah 2:20:** Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”

### Teaching Narrative: Everyone Has a Part

#### 1. By Night (Nehemiah 2:11–16)

Nehemiah sees the problem for himself before asking anyone to act.

#### 2. You See the Trouble We Are in (Nehemiah 2:17)

He names the problem honestly and says "we." He invites the people to join the work rather than merely commanding them.

#### 3. Let Us Rise Up and Build (Nehemiah 2:18)

He shares what God has done, and the people respond together.

### 4. Mockery Answered (Nehemiah 2:19–20)

Nehemiah does not argue; he points to God.

### 5. Everyone Builds (Nehemiah 3:1–32)

Priests, craftsmen, rulers, families, and daughters all take a section. Many build near their own homes.

### 6. Some Would Not Stoop (Nehemiah 3:5)

Not everyone helps. The list is honest about that.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

**1.4 Q1:** Nehemiah inspected the walls quietly at night before he spoke to anyone (2:12–16). Why is it wise to understand a problem well before calling others to fix it?

**1.4 Q2:** Nehemiah said, "You see the trouble we are in ... Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision" (2:17). What makes this a good way to call people to action?

**1.4 Q3:** The people answered, "Let us rise up and build," and "strengthened their hands for the good work" (2:18). What helps a group move from agreeing to actually working?

**1.4 Q4:** When the opponents mocked, Nehemiah replied, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build" (2:20). How can we respond to mockery without being drawn into a fight?

**1.4 Q5:** Many repaired the wall near their own houses (3:23, 28–30), and one man worked "he and his daughters" (3:12). What ‘section of the wall,’ meaning what responsibility or area of service, might God be placing in front of you?

Section 1.5

# Canonical Horizon: The Servant Who Weeps and Builds

### Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

Nehemiah wept over Jerusalem, left the Persian court, and identified himself with his people's disgrace in order to rebuild the city. His ministry points forward to Jesus, who wept over Jerusalem, humbled himself, bore our reproach, and is building his people. Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

### 1. He Wept over It (Luke 19:41–44)

Nehemiah wept for Jerusalem's ruin; Jesus wept over Jerusalem as he approached it.

### 2. He Left the Palace (Philippians 2:6–8)

Nehemiah left the king's presence to rebuild his people's city; Jesus left the glory of heaven and humbled himself to rebuild his people.

### 3. I Will Build My Church (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus is building his church, and every member has a part (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:16).

### 4. Outside the Gate (Hebrews 13:12–13)

Nehemiah sought to remove his people's reproach; Jesus bore reproach outside the city to make his people holy, and calls us to go to him there.

### Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Nehemiah 1:4:** As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

### Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

**1.5 Q1:** Luke writes that when Jesus "drew near and saw the city, he wept over it" (Luke 19:41). How does Nehemiah's grief help you see Jesus' heart for his people?

**1.5 Q2:** Paul describes the church as a body in which every part is needed (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). How is that like the builders of Nehemiah 3?

**1.5 Q3:** Hebrews calls us to go to Jesus "outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured" (Hebrews 13:13). How does Jesus' willingness to bear disgrace change how we view our own?

### Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

| | |
|---|---|
| HEAD | Nehemiah grieved, prayed, asked the king, inspected the ruins, called the people to build, answered mockery, and everyone took a section of the wall. |
| HEART | Jesus wept over his city, left heaven's glory, and bore our reproach, and he is building his church. |
| HANDS | Faith lets God break our hearts, prays before acting, plans wisely, and takes up its section of the work. |

Section 1.6

## Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

### Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

**1.6 Q1:** What need in your family, church, or community breaks your heart, and how will you pray about it this week?

**1.6 Q2:** What is one practical step you could take toward that need after you pray?

**1.6 Q3:** Who could you invite to "rise up and build" alongside you?

### Looking Ahead to Next Week

**Recap:** In Week 1, Nehemiah grieved, prayed, and led the people to rise up and build.

**Transition:** The work is underway, and so is the opposition: mockery, threats, discouragement, and trouble from within.

**Week 2 Overview — The Work Is of God (Nehemiah 4:1–6:19):** Movement 1, Opposition Without and Within (4:1–5:19), covers threats from outside and injustice among the people. Movement 2, Plots Resisted and the Wall Finished (6:1–19), covers schemes against Nehemiah and the wall finished in fifty-two days. The Canonical Horizon traces the God who fights for his people and the Christ who finished his work.

### Focal Readings to Preview

- Nehemiah 4:1–23
- Nehemiah 5:1–13
- Nehemiah 6:1–16

#### My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

### Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

**Closing Group Prayer**

Great and awesome God, you keep covenant and steadfast love with those who love you. Thank you for hearing our prayers, both long and short. We confess that we have sinned, we and our families. We pray for those who grieve, and for those who are anxious about their work or the authorities over them. Give us courage to take up our own section of the work. Thank you for Jesus, who wept over his city, left heaven's glory, and bore our reproach. Give us success in the work you have put in our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.