MAIN POINT
There are hurting and helpless people all around us—people who need the hope of Christ. When we let this reality sink in, we are compelled to step up and make a difference.

INTRODUCTION
As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Share a time when you received some great news. How did you respond? Who did you share it with?

Share a time when you received some heart-breaking news. How did you respond? Who did you share it with?

Have you ever been there for others when they received crushing news? How did you respond to their hurt?

The Book of Nehemiah gives the account of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem after the Israelites began to return from their 70 years of captivity in Babylon, also known as the exile. Nehemiah was grieved by what he saw and moved to take action, leading the rebuilding of the walls and the spiritual awakening of the people. He is an example for us of a person who has Christlike compassion for the needs of others.

UNDERSTANDING
Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Have a volunteer read Nehemiah 1:1-3.

Summarize Hanani’s message to Nehemiah. Why do you think this news about Jerusalem affected Nehemiah as it did?

If you heard similar news about your hometown, friends, and family, how do you think you would respond?

Nehemiah became aware of the terrible plight of the Israelites in Judah when the delegation led by Hanani came to see him. Apparently, they came to ask Nehemiah to use his influence with the king to improve life for the Jewish remnant in Judah. Nehemiah showed his interest in helping by asking about the condition of the city of Jerusalem and its people.

Have a volunteer read Nehemiah 1:4-11.
What does Nehemiah’s response in these verses reveal about his character and his relationship with God? What can you learn from Nehemiah’s response?

Based on Nehemiah’s prayer (vv. 5-11), how should we be praying for the people around us? What should we be concerned about? What should we trust God for?

What was the key problem Nehemiah grieved (vv. 6-7)? Why might the people’s spiritual struggle have kept them from rebuilding the city, or vice versa?

The true problem wasn’t a broken-down city filled with broken-down people. The true problem was a broken-down relationship with God. Nehemiah was called to rebuild a city and a community of people in shambles. Because of the exile, Jerusalem was in need of both physical and spiritual renewal. One can hardly deny that our world needs the same.

HAVE ANOTHER VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 2:1-8.

In these intervening months, what do you think Nehemiah has been doing?

What evidence did Nehemiah give that he was not half-hearted in service to God?

Why is it important to be whole-hearted in service to God? What risks do we run when we do God’s work halfheartedly?

Nehemiah invested his whole heart fully in the service of God. As we step up to serve, we must do the same. Half-hearted, indifferent activity does not suffice. His message is one of commitment, hope, and renewal. He did what he did in order to build up the people of God. He wasn’t building a wall, a church, or an army. Nehemiah was building biblical community and glorifying God in the process.

HAVE A FINAL VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 2:11-18.

What points did Nehemiah make publicly to rally the people to rebuild? Which one do you find most convincing?

What are the key points of Nehemiah’s message (both his words and the way he lived) that stand out to you?

What would a similar message to our world sound and look like?

Nehemiah identified with and made himself part of those he wished to enlist in the project. The work required a team effort—something that would honor God and bring blessing to all the Israelites in the city, not merely to Nehemiah. Nehemiah’s impassioned plea, coupled with his assurances about God’s work on the people’s behalf, planted new zeal in the hearts of Jerusalem’s leaders. They were encouraged to do this good work Nehemiah put before them.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

When you survey the physical, cultural, and spiritual landscape of our community, what do you see?
What do you think a usable person looks like based on Nehemiah's example? What areas of your life need to change to make you more capable of making an impact on the brokenness you encounter?

Are you more likely to give of your time, your talents, or your financial resources to be used by God? Why do you think God wants us to give in all of these areas?

How grieved are you about the physical and spiritual state of God's people? Are you grieved enough to follow Nehemiah's example of prayer, fasting, and action? What place can these disciplines have in your life this week?

PRAY

Ask each person to share one small area where they desire to be used by God to bring physical and/or spiritual restoration this week. Then close in prayer. Pray that God would radically disrupt our lives and fill our hearts with a passion to change this world. Pray that the broken will be healed, the hungry will be fed, the homeless will be sheltered, the impoverished will be lifted up, the slave will be freed, and the lost will be found.

COMMENTARY

Nehemiah 1:1-11

1:1 In both the Hebrew and the Greek Old Testament, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single book. Yet the connection between them is rather abrupt and without any real transition. Nehemiah, whose name means "Yahweh has comforted," is identified as son of Hacaliah, to distinguish him from other people named Nehemiah (Neh. 3:16; 7:7; Ezra 2:2) in the same era.

1:2 Hanani is described by Nehemiah as one of my brothers. While this could be used loosely to refer to his Jewish companions, it probably means his literal brother due to the mention of Hanani in 7:2.

1:3 The people in the province of Judah (v. 2), which the Persians called Yehud, were suffering because their city was in such terrible condition. Many scholars maintain that Nehemiah's response (v. 4) suggests this was a recent development, possibly referring to Rehum's opposition (Ezra 4:9-16). The translation of the verbs here, has been broken down... have been burned, reinforces this understanding of the passage.

1:4 Nehemiah's response was like that of his predecessor, Ezra (Ezra 9:3-5), who humbled himself before God.

1:5-11 Nehemiah's prayer, while shorter than Ezra's (see Ezr 9:6-15), is also written in late biblical Hebrew style found in other penitential prayers of that era (Neh. 9:5-37; Dan. 9:4-19). Like them it reflects the language of Deuteronomy, acknowledging that Israel's adversities had resulted from the nation's covenant unfaithfulness and that their present survival was due solely to God's abundant mercy.

1:5-6 Addressing God as Yahweh, the God of heaven is not common in the Old Testament, but it does occur several other times (Gen. 24:7; 2 Chron. 36:23; Jonah 1:9). This description of God is similar to the opening verse of Daniel's prayer: "the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps His gracious covenant with those who love Him and keep His commands" (Dan. 9:4). Like Ezra (Ezra 9:6), Nehemiah also identified with the sin of his people, confessing that both I and my father's house have sinned.

1:8-9 Nehemiah alluded to Moses' warning (Deut. 4:27; 28:64) that God would scatter Israel among the peoples if they were unfaithful to the covenant, and then he summarized God's promise through Moses (Deut. 30:1-5) that repentance would bring restoration (Neh. 1:9). Repentance is described as return to Me, using the primary Old Testament term for repentance that depicts a turning from sin toward God.

1:10 Just as Moses had interceded for his sinful people, reminding God that Israel was His people whom He had brought out of Egypt (Ex. 32:11), so too Nehemiah reminded God that they were His servants and His people whom He had redeemed.

1:11 The reference to this man has led some scholars to suggest impropriety on Nehemiah's part for referring to King Artaxerxes in such a way. But the context here is a private prayer addressed to God who knew very well who “this man”
was and that Nehemiah would need divine help in dealing with him. The Persian rulers were famous for the irrevocability of their laws, as Daniel discovered when the “law of the Medes and Persians” (Dan. 6:8,12,15) was brought against him. Nehemiah faced the daunting task of asking Artaxerxes to reverse his previous proclamation (Ezra 4:23) stopping all construction in Jerusalem. Only at the end of the prayer does it become clear why a Jewish man like Nehemiah thought he would ever get to address the Persian king. The cupbearer was not only responsible for choosing appropriate wines for the king, but he tasted them himself to assure they were not poisoned.

Nehemiah 2:1-18

2:1-3 It is not clear why Nehemiah waited nearly four months to bring his request to King Artaxerxes. It is possible that the king spent the winter in Babylon rather than in Susa. Ancient records attest to this happening occasionally. Nehemiah’s explanation for his sadness was carefully expressed. He did not mention Jerusalem by name, since it may have carried negative connotations from the past (Ezra 4:12), but he referred to it as the city where my ancestors are buried. The Persian rulers went to great expense building tombs for their ancestors. Nehemiah’s concern for the condition of his ancestors’ tombs would certainly strike a sympathetic chord with the Persian king.

2:5 Nehemiah’s request to rebuild Jerusalem was bold in light of the king’s earlier decision (Ezra 4:12-16) to stop all construction on the project.

2:7-8 Nehemiah needed not only time away from Artaxerxes’ court, but also official royal documents for the governors who were opposed to any building in Jerusalem (v. 10). His request for timber for the gates of the temple’s fortress probably refers to a military structure north of the temple that provided protection for the temple and its worshipers, and probably included the two towers mentioned in 3:1.

2:12 Nehemiah probably limited the number of men and animals during his night-time reconnaissance of Jerusalem to avoid detection by those who were sympathetic to Sanballat and Tobiah.

2:13-15 Nehemiah’s description of his inspection of the city in this passage, along with the more detailed account of rebuilding in chapter 3, provide the best written information for reconstructing the dimensions of Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C. Nehemiah’s inspection tour began on the western side of Jerusalem and proceeded counter-clockwise around the city. Nehemiah and his men headed south from the Valley Gate toward the Serpent’s Well. Nehemiah continued south to the Dung Gate at the lower tip of the city. This gate led to the Valley of Hinnom where garbage was dumped and burned. Nehemiah followed the ruins of the wall north to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool (probably the same place as the “Pool of Shelah” mentioned in 3:15). With the ruined walls on his left and the steep Kidron Valley on his right, his way was blocked and he dismounted.

2:16 While some assume the officials here were Persian officials, it probably refers to the various leaders mentioned among the Jews, priests, nobles, and officials.

2:17 The word disgrace, often translated “shame” or “reproach,” is the same word used to describe the state of the people in Jerusalem when Nehemiah’s brother and his friends gave their report (1:3). The present sad state of the city was a “disgrace” to the city, its people, and above all, its God.

**READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

Nehemiah 3:1-32