



# REBUILD

A STUDY IN  
NEHEMIAH

KATHLEEN NIELSON  
with D.A. CARSON

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## **ABOUT THE GOSPEL COALITION**

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences, we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence, or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom-calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom He shed His life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply His disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so we truly speak and live for Him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. As pastors, we intend to do this in our churches through the ordinary means of His grace: prayer, ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who seek the lordship of Christ over

the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

In its Women's Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition aims for gospel renewal specifically among and through the women of the church. We desire to support the growth of women in faithfully studying and sharing the Scriptures; in actively loving and serving the church; and in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ in all their callings. Women benefit from and contribute to The Gospel Coalition's resources in many ways—on the website, in conference settings, and in various publishing projects. We pray that, through the Women's Initiatives, Jesus will be glorified and the church will be strengthened.

## FOREWORD

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One of the decisions that the Board of The Gospel Coalition made a couple of years ago was to better integrate some of the things we try to do. One of the consequences of this decision was to tie the plenary addresses of our major conferences to Bible study materials that could easily be used by local churches. That is why the 2013 National Conference, which in its plenaries focused on the Gospel of Luke, prepared a short Bible study book on this Gospel, complete with video messages, study questions, and the like. Our hope is that the material will be used in Sunday Schools and small groups. Obviously it can be linked with the video messages and with the videos of the plenary sessions from the 2013 conference—videos that can be downloaded at no expense from our website ([thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org)).

The book you hold in your hand is our attempt to do something similar for the plenaries of the Women's Conference (June 2014). The biblical focus of the plenaries is the Book of Nehemiah. With her experience of providing material for women's Bible studies, Kathleen Nielson was the ideal person to write this study, designed to be used in small groups and Sunday School classes. She provides enough material to plunge readers into the text, to listen to what the Bible actually says, without swamping readers with more material than they can usefully absorb. Once again TGC has provided video messages, and once again these studies will benefit from watching these messages as well as the videos of the plenary sessions.

Above all, we are eager for Christians to know God and His Word better, not least in the framework of the entire Bible, so that they can see for themselves how God in Scripture sovereignly traces out the story of His redeeming purposes in such a way that all the lines of thought, all the trajectories, all the elements of the complex plots, come together in Jesus Christ.

Don Carson

## INTRODUCTION

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In Nehemiah, the curtain is going down on Old Testament history, and we get one last glimpse—one last compelling story. It's the story of a remnant of God's people who returned to Jerusalem after their exile, led by Nehemiah to rebuild the city wall. As Nehemiah tells the story, we see not only the wall rebuilt, but the people of God rebuilt around God's Word. This is the people God promised to bless, and through whom God promised blessing for all the peoples of the earth. Nehemiah shows us that God's promises do not fail. God is faithful, according to His Word.

Nehemiah sounds the call for God's people to live by God's Word. At a weak and struggling point, in a broken-down and deserted city, they are called to walk by the light of the Word. As we read about both their joyful obedience and their frustrating failures, we understand that we are reading our history as God's people now. As we perceive how the story of Nehemiah's time finds its place in the unfolding biblical plotline, we see most of all God's steadfast love in planning redemption for a people who disobey His Word. Reading Nehemiah, we savor more deeply the fulfillment of all God's promises in the coming of His Son to deliver a people fully and finally from the bondage of sin.

The Book of Nehemiah takes us to a crucial point in salvation history, from which we must look both back and ahead. In light of all the Old Testament stories that come before, we see how poor and little is this remnant of the people who grew from Abraham's seed into a great kingdom just as God promised—and who then seemed to lose all their greatness. Now these few are simply subjects of a foreign king. God's promises, however, point not to the greatness of this people among the nations but to the greatness of the One who would come from them to bless all the nations. That One would be an eternal King in the line of David. Here at the Old Testament's close, there is no earthly kingdom in sight. God's people are left with His Word. They must return to it. They must live and worship in obedience to its teachings. As Nehemiah reestablishes this remnant within Jerusalem, restoring their temple worship with its priests and sacrifices, we cannot help but look ahead—to Christ our great High Priest who by means of His own blood secured for us an eternal redemption (see Heb. 9:11-12). The temple and priests point us forward to the One in whom we can draw near to God, through His sacrifice on our behalf. As the curtain closes on Old Testament history, Nehemiah points us right to Jesus.

This study opens up the riches of Nehemiah through eight sessions: one introductory session of overview and context, followed by seven sessions that take us right through the book. The study grew out of our planning for The Gospel Coalition 2014 National Women's Conference, and sessions 2-8 follow the breakdown of chapters and titles used in the conference plenary talks, based on Nehemiah. Our prayer has been that the conference would help awaken an interest to dig in further and to dig in with others—hence this study. Three of the plenary speakers from the conference (Don Carson, Nancy Guthrie, and Kathleen Nielson) have prepared the videos that accompany each of the sessions in this study. We hope these video messages will help you do some further fruitful digging into this rich Old Testament narrative. The Book of Nehemiah itself calls us as God's people to come together with minds and hearts focused on learning and following God's Word.

How should this study be used? Following the format of *The Gospel of Luke: From the Outside In* (published in coordination with The Gospel Coalition 2013 National Conference), these sessions are group-friendly—accessible, we hope, both for a person new to the Scriptures and for one with a fair deal of experience. There is huge benefit in the fellowship of such people digging in together. Each session offers a combination of commentary that sets the stage and questions that draw us deeper into the text—to observe what it says, to find its meaning in context, and to ask how we should apply that meaning today. The sessions will be most beneficial if participants do some preparation in advance. However, for the ones who may just come (and for all of us), we can pray that God's inspired Word will do its work of penetrating hearts like the sharp, two-edged sword that it is. The primary focus, then, must be on the process of listening carefully and prayerfully to the Word and going away with it echoing in our hearts and minds.

These sessions will prepare you to dig deeper; they will help with the groundwork. We hope that you will go on to do more in-depth study of the text yourself, searching out its words and themes and shape from beginning to end. Studying the Word is a life-long process, one in which we must continually aim to bring others along with us. May this study contribute to that process in the lives of God's people, by God's grace.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

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### PREPARATION

Group members are encouraged to prepare as much as possible each week in advance—first and foremost by a careful reading of the biblical text covered in that week's session. The **Introduction** to each session leads into the **Scripture** text. You'll want to have a Bible on hand to read the text for the week right at the start and to refer to as you make your way through the lesson. We've used the English Standard Version in preparing this study, but other versions are fine to use. You might want to print the week's text from the internet, so that you can mark it up as you study it ... refer to it often ... meditate on it ... memorize it ... read it with all your heart and mind. We are taking in the living and active Word of God.

The **Commentary** comes next. This section helps explain the text and lays the groundwork for the questions and group discussion. The Commentary can be used in preparation and simply referred to if and when helpful in the group meeting. The same applies to each week's **History Heads Up**, which explores the historical context related to some aspect of the text. Nehemiah is a fascinating piece of geographical, archaeological, sociological, and political as well as theological history!

The previous steps lead to the **Questions to Consider**, which guide you through a careful examination and application of the biblical text. These questions enable you to dig in yourself and discover the riches of the Bible's words. The group discussion, then, will be even more profitable and encouraging.

### GROUP MEETING

Each group meeting should open with prayer, reading of the Scripture text out loud (or selections from it, as you might want to skip some of those long lists of names!), and then the **Warm-Up**, which is simply a question or two to get the group thinking and talking about a central theme covered by the passage (about 10 minutes total).

Next comes the **Video** segment. The videos are personal introductions and guides to the passages—provided by Don Carson, Nancy Guthrie, and Kathleen Nielson (about 15 minutes total).



Leave ample time for the **Questions to Consider** (about 25 minutes total). As you discuss them together, these questions are designed to lead you into the biblical text—making observations, exploring the context, and drawing appropriate applications. Many of the questions involve looking at specific Bible verses, and it will often be helpful to have volunteers read aloud before you discuss. Don't worry if you don't get to all of the questions. Make as much progress as you can—and be ready to go back and study some more! Note: Depending on the dynamics of your group, from time to time you may want to switch the order of the Questions and the Video.

The **Wrap** is simply a time to “sum it up” and “pray it in”—whether using the prayer provided or simply praying in your own words, or both. In any case, do take time to pray about what you have studied as well as about the praises and requests you share with one another (about 10 minutes total).

As you leave, the **Looking Ahead** segment helps make the transition to the next chapters—hopefully inspiring thought and preparation in the intervening week.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study lays the groundwork for approaching Nehemiah. It is offered with prayers that those using it will press on to know and share God's Word with wisdom and fruitfulness. May we all grow in the Word, by the Spirit, to be mature disciples and make more disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks goes to P&R Publishing, who gave permission for me in this study to build on work begun in the Living Word study, *Nehemiah: Rebuilt and Rebuilding* (P&R, 2011).

I am thankful for all those around me who have encouraged me to keep on studying and sharing the Word—from the leaders of The Gospel Coalition, to local church pastors and leaders and friends, to my loving family—especially my husband, who shows me the love of Christ.

# MEETING

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# NEHEMIAH

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## SESSION 1

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We are made to love stories—and Nehemiah draws us into a powerful one. It's a true story, all about God's faithfulness to His people and the call for their faithful response to Him. As Nehemiah leads the returned Jewish exiles to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, it is clear God is watching over His people as He promised in His Word—and calling them to walk in light of that Word.

To get into this story, we need context. The Book of Nehemiah is not just about a leader who masterfully accomplishes the rebuilding of Jerusalem's broken-down wall. Nehemiah's people and city have a history. These are the people to whom God has made promises—promises that reach back to the beginning of the biblical story, as we'll see in this session.

The promises reach forward, all the way to us today. The Book of Nehemiah tells a crucial part of the story of redemptive history—our history, as Christians saved by the promised Christ who in the fullness of time was born of this people's seed. Nehemiah's restoration of a worshiping people tells our story, for the Old Testament system of worship points straight ahead to our Lord Jesus, through whom we have access to God. We must take this story personally. This lesson will help us get ready to take it in.

## **THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH**

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Each session after this one will simply include a key verse from the week's passage, and you will then read the passage from your Bible. For this introductory session, find the Book of Nehemiah in your Bible and do a quick initial read-through of the entire book. Don't stop to analyze; we'll come back in more detail. For now, just aim to get a sense of the book as a whole.

## **COMMENTARY**

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Nehemiah gives us the Old Testament's final glimpse of God's gathered people. It's a personal glimpse, containing Nehemiah's own recorded words—compiled and expanded by an unidentified author, probably the author also of Ezra.

This final glimpse reveals a struggling remnant of Abraham's seed, his offspring. Through the generations after Abraham, that seed had grown into a great people just as God promised, in the land God promised (see Gen. 12:1-7). They had become a magnificent kingdom, and God had made a covenant with King David that in his line would come an eternal throne (see 2 Sam. 7:12-17). God's presence had dwelled with His people in the temple in Jerusalem, where according to the Law, priests regularly offered sacrifices to atone for the people's sin and people gathered joyfully on the prescribed feast days. But this chosen people had turned away from following the Lord and His law. In answer to their sin, God used the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to conquer first the Northern Kingdom of Israel and finally the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, and the people were overthrown and dispersed as slaves into exile.

Ezra and Nehemiah both tell of the years following King Cyrus' decree in 538 B.C. releasing the exiles to return to their land. Three waves of Jewish exiles returned—the first led by Zerubbabel (recounted in Ezra 1–6), the second over 70 years later led by Ezra (see Ezra 7–10), and the third soon

after, led by Nehemiah and described in his book. Ezra and Nehemiah, then, overlap: we will find Ezra in Nehemiah's story.

What about all of God's promises? That must have been the question asked by many of God's people at this low period in their history. Even when released from exile, they returned only as "slaves" (see Neh. 9:36) of the Persian Empire, to a broken-down city. Rebuilding was hard. Enemies surrounded them. Nehemiah is a great book for any of us who are struggling to walk ahead in faith according to God's Word.

The Book of Nehemiah shows that God's Word stands firm. God's steadfast covenant love to His people shows itself in amazing ways throughout Nehemiah's story. First of all, the fact that there still exists a faithful remnant of Abraham's seed is a great mercy and fulfillment of God's promises. Isaiah and Jeremiah both prophesied that a remnant of the Jews would survive the exile and return to the land. As we look up several Old Testament passages in this session, we'll see God's redemptive hand shaping all of this history.

God's covenant love to His people shows itself not just in their survival but also in His continuing provision of godly leaders who make clear the path of faith. No longer do these people have a king—although Zerubbabel as David's descendant represents God's sure promise of an eternal king in that line. There were post-exilic prophets sent by God: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. There remained faithful priests, as in the case of Ezra, who "set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Ezra led his group back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

And then there were leaders like Nehemiah, called to specific tasks. God provides in Nehemiah a wise leader, from whom we can learn much about effective, godly leadership. Nehemiah's task is to bring God's people together at this point in history to rebuild—the wall, yes, but most importantly the people. Nehemiah aims to bring this people together within the city of Jerusalem so that they can live according to God's law—not just a compilation of rules but a system of worship that provides a means of coming as God's people into God's presence.

The Book of Nehemiah highlights God's merciful provision of that means, through the temple with its priests and sacrifices. There is great joy as the people reassemble within Jerusalem's walls, hear the Law, and reinstitute its prescribed worship. As they repent of their sin, and even as they fall into sin, we understand that we are reading about a God who in His unfailing love provides a way for His people to be forgiven. As we hear of sacrifices for sin offered by priests, we understand that this is the unfolding redemption story—one that culminates in Christ the Promised One who through His life and death and resurrection fulfilled the Law. These people were not able to fulfill it, nor are we; Jesus Christ was able. The Old Testament closes with assemblies of worship led by priests in Jerusalem; the New Testament opens four centuries later with the coming of the one great High Priest, who shed His own blood as the final, perfect sacrifice for sin. No longer do we need priests and sacrifices and temple; Christ has once and for all accomplished the purification of God's people toward which the sacrificial system pointed.

As we open Nehemiah, we can get ready to watch the God of history at work. We are reading the unfolding story of our redemption in Christ the Promised One who came, who died, who rose again, who ascended, who reigns, and who is coming again. In Christ the climax has come, but the story is not over. And we get to live in it, right now. Even in the midst of our struggles, we get to trust and obey the same faithful God and His same faithful Word. Nehemiah helps point the way.

## HISTORY HEADS UP!

To watch these great ancient empires rise and fall helps put our own time in perspective. (It also helps us get Old Testament history straight!) The **Assyrian Empire** was the cruel regional super-power that conquered and dispersed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. But the extensive Assyrian Empire eventually fell to the **Babylonians**, whose great King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah, ravaged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and took the people into exile (the “Babylonian captivity”).

The Babylonians, however, in 539 B.C. fell to the Medes and the **Persians**, whose great empire began with the reign of King Cyrus. The Bible shows us God's sovereign hand shaping all this history according to His grand redemptive plan. Isaiah speaks of Cyrus as one whom God directs and equips, God's servant, even though he does not know God (see Isa. 45:1-6). How might this biblical perspective affect our view of nations in turmoil today?

### WARM-UP

React together to your read-through of the Book of Nehemiah. What stood out to you?

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What questions arose?

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What do you hope to get out of your study of this book in the weeks ahead?

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## SHOW SESSION 1 VIDEO: MEETING NEHEMIAH

In this introductory video, Don Carson helps us sort out Nehemiah's place in history, especially in the history of redemption. Listen together to this informative introduction to the book and then share briefly one or two points you found interesting or perhaps brand new.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you consider and then discuss these questions, aim to listen and encourage one another to listen with care and humility to the Word of God.

Think about Nehemiah as one whole book, one unified story. What main theme(s) do you find?

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How does the plot seem to develop from beginning to end? For example, is there a climax, or high point, that stands out?

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Evaluate the following suggested outline as a group. Would you change it? If so, how?

- Action Initiated by a Crisis (Chapters 1–2)
- Walls Rebuilt Physically (Chapters 3–6)
- People Rebuilt Spiritually (Chapters 7–10)
- Results of Revival (Chapters 11–12)
- Unraveling at the End (Chapter 13)



What are your initial observations of the man Nehemiah as you've encountered him in this quick read? What words and phrases would you use to describe Nehemiah?

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We can't jump into Nehemiah without reminding ourselves of who these people are whom Nehemiah leads in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. As you read the following verses, jot down notes and comments concerning the history and identity of these people:

Genesis 12:1-7 (to Abraham):

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Exodus 19:3-6 (to Moses):

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2 Samuel 7:12-16 (to David):

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1 Kings 9:1-9 (to Solomon):

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In one sentence, summarize who these people are.

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God called out this people, multiplied them, redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, gave them His law, and made them a great kingdom in the promised land. Yet in Nehemiah we find they've fallen far from such stature. Review the Northern Kingdom of Israel's fall in 2 Kings 17:5-15 and the Southern Kingdom of Judah's fall in 2 Chronicles 36:11-21. Using some words from these texts, how would you sum up what led to their kingdoms' fall?

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God's hand was on this people through whom He had promised to bless all the nations of the world. Look through Isaiah 44:24-45:7 and Jeremiah 25:11-12 in order to marvel at God's sovereign plan foretold through His prophets. In these passages, what specifics of this plan emerge?

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Now we're ready to see Ezra and Nehemiah in context. Read 2 Chronicles 36:20-23 and Ezra 1:1-5. From a human perspective, at this period of history a Persian king frees the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. In fact, history shows us that Cyrus permitted many captured peoples to return to their respective homelands. But from the larger perspective of God's purposes, in what ways might you describe what is happening here?

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As you've moved through this introduction to the Book of Nehemiah, what aspects of God stand out to you? List those attributes below, take time to meditate on them, and consider what difference it might make this week to focus your thoughts on the Lord God.

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## WRAP

- We've encountered Nehemiah as one whole book, one unified narrative.
- We've glimpsed Nehemiah's historical and scriptural context.
- We've begun to grasp the significance of Nehemiah as our story—about our faithful, redeeming God.

## **PRAYER**

One of the best things to do with Scripture you've studied is to "pray it in." Take time to pray together about what you have studied, using either the following prayer or your own words.

*Thank You, Lord, that You are the God whose promises never fail. Thank You for showing us in Your Word that You direct human history from beginning to end, for Your redemptive purposes. Every nation and every life is in Your sovereign hand. Thank You for preserving Abraham's seed according to Your promises. Thank You for providing a place and a way for Your Old Testament people to come to You, through the sacrifices of priests to make atonement for sin. We acknowledge before You that we are sinful and stiff-necked, just like Your people in the Old Testament. We repent of our sin and thank You for Your mercy in sending Your Son, who took on Himself the punishment for that sin so that we Your people can live finally forgiven, by faith in Him. We come to You now not through priests in a temple but through the blood of Christ who laid down His life for us. As we study Your Word, please help us to see You more clearly and to follow You with growing faith and prayerful obedience. In the name of Jesus we pray, and for His glory, Amen.*

Share one specific way you can pray for one another this week. Finish by praying for one another, as you carry the blessing and challenge of God's Word into your lives this week.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

Session 2 will take us into the book, where we meet Nehemiah in action—not from a distance but up close, as he tells his story and lets us see his personal relationship with the God he serves. What do people reveal when they tell us their stories? Watch for what Nehemiah the narrator will reveal.

## NOTES