



NEHEMIAH

Renewal

Money Problems Follow Up

- ❖ How does God view your money?
- ❖ What does solidarity with others look like in times of economic stress?
- ❖ How can money be an obstacle to a deepening relationship with Jesus?

Recap Nehemiah 6 & 7

Sanballat and Geshem attempt to denigrate Nehemiah's reputation through a series of personal invitations followed by a scandalous and misleading open letter to the nation.

Nehemiah prays for God's strength and is protected from being further misled by an individual working as a plant for Sanballat and Tobiah.

The wall is completed in fifty-two days.

Tobiah attempts to manipulate Nehemiah through various common acquaintances.

The doors to the city are installed and defensive plans are put in place.

Nehemiah gathers the people who have returned from exile and lists the families based on the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return.

After being counted and registered, the people return to their home towns and villages.

Read this passage to your group, and then discuss it based on the questions below:

More than three-quarters of Americans believe the Bible is literally the word of God or inspired by the word of God, according to a trio of Gallup surveys, with 19 percent saying the Good Book is a compendium of myth and legend.

The three surveys found that an average 31 percent of the respondents said that "the Bible is absolutely accurate and should be taken literally word for word," according to Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallup Poll. Forty-seven percent said the Bible was "the inspired word of God," and 19 percent said it was a book of ancient fables, history and "moral precepts" recorded by man.

Beliefs vary among religious groups. Among non-Catholic Christians, 45 percent take the Bible literally, while 46 percent say it's inspired by God. The figure is 40 percent and 48 percent, respectively, among Protestants, and 21 percent and 61 percent among Catholics.

"It is interesting to note, however, that 10 percent of those with no religious identification still believe the Bible is literally the word of God, and another 26 percent say it is inspired," Mr. Newport said.

The highest percentage of literal believers—54 percent—was found among those who attend church weekly, followed by high school graduates (42 percent) and Southerners (41 percent). The three polls of 3,010 adults were conducted in May 2005, 2006 and 2007, and have a margin of error of two percentage points. *Washington Times*, May 30th, 2007

- ❖ What is the difference between "literally" and "inspired" as it applies to scripture?
- ❖ How does that answer affect our response to the Bible?
- ❖ How does our society reflect these beliefs about the Bible?
- ❖ Which statistic was most surprising to you?
- ❖ Why is the Bible such an important text?
- ❖ What role does scripture play in your life?

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1:22 NIV

Study the Scriptures

Nehemiah 8:1–10 NLT

¹Now in mid autumn, when the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled together as one person at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey.

²So on October 8 Ezra the priest brought the scroll of the law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. ³He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people paid close attention to the Book of the Law. ⁴Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. To his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaijah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah. To his left stood Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. ⁵Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet.

⁶Then Ezra praised the LORD, the great God, and all the people chanted, "Amen! Amen!" as they lifted their hands toward heaven. Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁷Now the Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Peliaiah—instructed the people who were standing there. ⁸They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.

⁹Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "Don't weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the LORD your God." All the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law.

¹⁰And Nehemiah continued, "Go and celebrate with a feast of choice foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!"

A People of the Book

Picture it: a vast, hushed crowd watching as Ezra ascends a newly built platform in the square. As he opens the book, they rise. They praise God, hands lifted high; then they bow down, faces in the dirt. Ezra begins to read. His helpers circulate in the crowd, explaining and interpreting what God's Word says. The people listen attentively. And then a strange sound begins to rise, spreading through the multitude. It is the sound of weeping.

The Law Ezra read was very ancient, but that day marked something new. The Jews were becoming, in a way they had never been before, a people of the book. They were being rebuilt, with material as strong as the stones in their newly built city wall.

Throughout their history, they had drawn strength from two sources besides the Law. One was the temple, where they worshiped God. It was a magnificently beautiful building in which they met God. The other was their leadership—first Moses, then Joshua, then the judges, and finally David and his offspring, the kings.*

- ❖ Why was it important to have helpers in the crowd to explain God's Word?
- ❖ Why did the people weep?
- ❖ How were the Jews being "rebuilt"?
- ❖ How has God's Word affected your life?

The Disappointing Reality

But these realities had not saved them from disgrace. The temple? For all its splendor it had become a meaningless symbol to most Jews. They had even put idols in it. God had finally allowed the Babylonians to burn the temple down.

After the exile, the Jews had made rebuilding the temple their first priority (see Ezra 1–6). But it was no longer an automatic insurance policy. They could never again see the building as a substitute for real devotion to God.

Their leaders? Not one king, over hundreds of years, had come close to matching God's ideal. Most kings had been scoundrels—descendants of David in name only. After the exile, Israel had no king of its own. The Israelites were under the thumb of a Persian, who was determined to keep all power to himself.*

- ❖ What are examples of some church practices that have lost their meaning over time?
- ❖ How does scripture connect us with God?
- ❖ How have church leaders in America been a help or hindrance in connecting people to God and his Word?

The Power of the Word

They turned to another source of power: the Word of God. The great gathering of chapter 8 stands in contrast to the temples and kings. The splendor of jewels and crowns is replaced by a single man atop a wooden platform, reading from a simple scroll. Yet the words he reads, carefully explained to all, show their power in the way they affect those who hear them. The people are moved to praise God, to weep over their sins, to change their behavior, and to make renewed promises to God.

From this time on, the Jews were known as the people of the book. They lived under foreign domination, so their political leadership became secondary. Their temple, while important, was never again a guarantee of God's presence. Increasingly they studied God's law and tried to obey it. A new kind of leader emerged, following Ezra—the scribe, a student of Scripture. The nation we see at the end of Nehemiah looks very much like the nation we find, after 400 years of government nor in worship rituals, but in reverence for God's written Word.*

- ❖ What impact has God's Word had in your life?
- ❖ Which of the four responses mentioned in the last sentence of the first paragraph are most difficult? Explain.
- ❖ What are the benefits of studying scripture?

Homework: Challenge your entire group to read the book of James during the next week; paying special attention to instances where they were, "moved to praise God, to weep over their sins, to change their behavior, and to make renewed promises to God." Share your insights the next time you meet.

* *NIV Student Bible*, Zondervan