

# Rising From the Ruins

## Principle and Passion

*Nehemiah 8-13*

### **Leaders Guide**

Finishing the wall gave the Israelites a safe and secure place to live, worship, and fellowship. But physical walls cannot protect people against spiritual threats. For that you need God's protection. The strength of our spiritual walls come from living a passionate life based on Biblical principles.

### **The Gathering**

The High Holy Days of the Jewish calendar occur during the seventh month of the Jewish calendar (in autumn). The month begins with the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah or Jewish New Year). The ram's horn (shofar) is blown at sunset signaling the beginning of the New Year for people, animals, agriculture, and legal contracts. It also symbolically celebrates the creation of man. Ten days later is Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). This is the time when Jews atone for sins and ask for forgiveness from those they have wronged. Five days after that comes Sukkot (the Festival of Booths). The faithful build shelters outside in which to gather, eat, and sleep for seven days. This festival celebrates the harvest. The eighth day after Sukkot is called Simchat Torah (Holiday of the Torah). Traditionally this is the first day of the Torah readings beginning in Genesis and continuing throughout the entire year, finishing the last verses of Deuteronomy by the end of that year. Just like our Christmas or Easter season, this is a very busy and prayerful month for our Jewish friends.

Being able to safely gather after returning to Jerusalem and worship in the way of their ancestral traditions was probably an emotionally charged time for the exiles. Many things had been forgotten or altered and they wanted to finally get it right! What an amazing celebration this was for all of them.

Read Nehemiah 7:73-8:18.

Answer the following questions:

#### Level A

- What activities took place on the first day of the Feast of Trumpets? How did the leaders help the people understand what was being said?
- Who gathered on the second day for further study of the Torah? What forgotten holiday was uncovered during this study? What preparations were needed in order to celebrate?
- How is a passion for your faith connected to celebrations, traditions, and studying God's Word?

#### Level B

- What does this section tell you about the importance of hearing, studying, understanding and applying scripture? (see also 1 Tim 4:7)
- How is celebrating a holiday different when you understand its spiritual significance? Give a modern day example where you have seen the contrast.
- What ways have you found helpful for incorporating reading and studying scripture into your daily life? How does the church support and encourage both personal and corporate connection with God's Word?
- What practices of being a Christian help feed your passion for God, Jesus, and your personal faith?

#### Level C

- "We sometimes base our security in the practices we are used to rather than in the Lord and the teaching of His Word." (W.H.Benn) Discuss the pros and cons of traditional practices and their connection to God's word. What does security have to do with it?
- It is the Jewish custom to read the entire Torah aloud in the synagogue over the course of the year. Then begin again every new year. Compare and contrast this practice with the way you grew up hearing scripture.
- Why are celebrations an important part of connecting with God and His Word? How is passion for our faith encouraged in other ways? How do believers continue to passionately live their faith in between celebrations like Christmas and Easter?

## The Goodness of God

After the celebrations were over, an assembly was called. This was a serious time when the character of God was discussed and shortcomings acknowledged. It was a time to rediscover the God of their ancestors and to begin to take their faith seriously.

Read Nehemiah 9:1-37

Answer the following questions:

- What did the people do during the assembly (verses 1-3)?
- Using the chart below, list the attributes of God and the attributes of the Israelites mentioned in verses 5b-35.
- Choose 3 attributes of God and share with your group why those 3 are special for you.
- Do any of the attributes of the Israelites hit close to home? Personal or cultural? Explain.
- Compare the following verses: Neh 9:17 and James 1:19. What do you notice? To whom are these traits attached in each instance? What does this say about the behavior of believers?

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| GOD        |  |
| ISRAELITES |  |

## A Covenant Community

God had kept his promises to the exiles. Now it was time for them to make some promises to God. If they were going to truly follow the principles of their God, then they had to take Him seriously. So they were going to make a binding agreement, a covenant with him. The Hebrew word used here is *amanah* which means something fixed or certain. Its root word is *amen*, so be it or truth.

In addition, the leaders in Jerusalem also needed a large enough community in order to thrive. Unfortunately, the numbers returning from exile fell short of what was expected. And with the wall taking so long to finish, many had moved out to the countryside to build farms, orchards, and olive groves to sustain their families.

Read Nehemiah 9:36-38 and 10:28-39 and 11:1-4.

Answer the following questions:

#### Level A

- What did the Israelites decide to do to repair the rift between themselves and God? How did they show they were serious?
- What were the six promises of the covenant they made?
- Why did they need to move more people back into the city of Jerusalem? Why might people have moved out of the city?

#### Level B

- God had initiated the covenant with Abraham. This time the Israelites were initiating the agreement. What does this tell us about their zeal, enthusiasm, and passion for reconnecting with God?
- The six promises listed in verses 10:28-39 were not new. They come straight from the law of Moses, the Torah. Why was it important for them to emphasize these six?
- Finishing the wall was not enough, they had to build a healthy community within the city. What does 11:1-4 tell us about the difficulties they were having in creating that community?

#### Level C

- Does your growth group or your church or your business have any kind of “binding agreement” or covenant with the people involved? If so, what is its value? If not, would having one help? Explain.
- What is the significance of the six promises included in the covenant the people made? What is the connection to previous chapters in Nehemiah?
- Building a strong faith community often requires sacrifice and moving to a place (physically, mentally, spiritually) that is uncomfortable. For Jerusalem to be strong, it needed enough people to provide security, jobs, businesses, and religious staff for the temple. Why would some people volunteer and others need to be chosen by lot? How would you feel if your faith called you to step out of your comfort zone and serve differently?

## Dedication

Now it was time for the dedication of the wall. Everyone who had participated in the project needed to be celebrated and thanked. But most of all, God needed to be thanked for his support and provision. The Hebrew word *toda* means thanksgiving—specifically songs of a personal or communal nature that include exuberant praise. This celebration was a true spectacle.

Read Nehemiah 12:27-13:3

Answer the following questions:

- What did the dedication ceremony consist of? If you had been there what would have impressed you?
- Have you ever been to a Christian revival type event? How exuberant was the worship at that event? How does it compare to our worship on Sunday morning? What is your comfort level with loud, exuberant worship services?
- Nehemiah made sure that the temple and its staff were not neglected. (See 10:39, 12:44,47) How do we take care of your church staff? What else might they need?
- Read Hebrews 13:7 and 13:17. How are we to show thankfulness, appreciation, and care for our ministry leaders?

## Final Reforms

Nehemiah leaves thinking everything is in good hands. Leaders have been appointed and given certain responsibilities. Perhaps he is feeling proud of the work he did. But then he gets an SOS that the old problems have returned.

Read Nehemiah 13:4-31

Answer the following questions:

### Level A

- Where had Nehemiah gone? Why do you think he left Jerusalem?
- What three problems did he find when he returned?
- What did Nehemiah do to resolve the issues?

## Level B

- What had happened to Jerusalem while Nehemiah was gone? Any repeat offenders? Surprises? How did he feel?
- What were Nehemiah's solutions to each problem?
- Have you ever had a similar experience to Nehemiah—where you successfully completed an assignment, turned responsibility over to others only to find out much later that things fell apart after you left? How did you feel? Did you have a chance to return and restore it?

## Level C

- Why do things tend to fall apart when the leader is out of town? Had Nehemiah failed? What had gone wrong?
- Nehemiah could have sent someone else, he could have thrown up his hands and decided it wasn't worth the effort, but instead he returned. What does this tell you about his character? How might Christians follow his example?
- Read Neh 5:19, 13:14 & 22. These are Nehemiah's own words. What do they tell us about his motives, his focus? What does this say to us about commitment when we are sent to accomplish a task?