



Life Group Study Guide  
Sunday, September 20, 2009  
Key Scripture: Nehemiah 2:11-20  
Key Topic: Accepting the Challenge and  
Handling the Criticism

## Introduction and Background of Nehemiah

The central purpose of Nehemiah, like Ezra, was to show that God had fulfilled his promise by Jeremiah to restore his people to the land of promise. God brought about this restoration of his people by moving members of his exiled community to act and by stirring the hearts of reigning kings to support Israel's. The book of Nehemiah emphasizes the importance of purity in the restoration community.

## Nehemiah

Nehemiah was in leadership during an extraordinary time in Israel's history. He faced opposition from all sides—both from his own people and from outside forces. A little background will help set the stage for understanding the pressures Nehemiah faced.

From antiquity, Ezra and Nehemiah have been considered almost as one book. The two books cover a period of about one hundred years. In 587 B.C. Judah was removed from the land of Israel and deported to Babylon with only a few left in the land. In 538 B.C. Cyrus sent some of the people back to rebuild the temple. Nehemiah's second return would be around 430 B.C. Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah are all wrapped up in this history. Zerubbabel built the temple, Ezra brought the Law back into Israel's life and Nehemiah rebuilt the wall that made Jerusalem secure.

The amazing thing is that Israel had more autonomy and distinctiveness than at any time of their existence as a sovereign state. The Persian Empire allowed the people to practice their religious convictions with seriousness, and this probably accounts for why Israel had such a pristine religious life at this time.

Though Zerubbabel and Ezra worked more in the religious realm, Nehemiah was really sent to Judah to be governor of the land, and that gave him considerably more ability to make some lasting changes in the life of the people. The people needed Nehemiah's strong leadership to handle the opposition to their work.

There were three primary opposers: Sanballat, Geshem and Tobiah. Sanballat was probably governor of Samaria and was not interested in Judah becoming an independent nation again. Geshem is thought to have been a leader of a powerful block of Arab communities. Tobiah was probably governor of Ammon and a member of an influential Jewish family.

The two centuries of the Persian empire were among the most formative periods of Jewish history. Out of the ruins of the little kingdom of Judah there had emerged the small community whose concern to be the people of God by pedigree and practice shaped it into the nation which meets us in the New Testament. Already the future prominence of the Temple and its priests, of the law and its scribes, as well as the enmity between Jew and Samaritans, could be seen developing. Throughout this time the Persian régime was given a substantial part to play, both in sending and subsidizing the three expeditions, of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and in backing their authority with its own. It was not the first empire, nor the last, to be allotted such role.

The Israelites living in the land were fairly passive at this point in history. They had to adapt to the culture around them because they were such a small remnant. Their intermarrying and political ties made this considerably worse.

Nehemiah's gifts in administration and perseverance enabled him to mold this people back into the "people of God" so they could obey God's commands and have a distinction from the people around them. This is where Nehemiah shines through. It was not enough just to build the wall—he had to build a people that would once again stand on their own as God led them. Putting some "backbone" back into the people was a large part of what Nehemiah had to accomplish—even if it required him to be harsh with them at times. God has called each of us to important tasks, both as leaders and as followers.

Reading Nehemiah will help us to have the courage we need to follow through even in the face of difficulty and persecution. God be with you as you study.

**Icebreaker:**

1. Have any of you experienced a situation where your home (or someone close to you) has been destroyed? How did it feel? If not, how do you think you would feel if you were on vacation, and got word that your home had been destroyed?
2. Talk about a situation in which you have been overly critical or a situation where you stood in the way of progress (it could be good or bad).

**Dig:**

3. What did Nehemiah do when he first arrived in Jerusalem? (Neh 2:11-12)
4. What strategy did Nehemiah use in surveying the state of the city? (Neh 2:11-16) Why do you think he chose this strategy?
5. Why do you think Nehemiah says the Israelites were in disgrace? (Neh 2:17)
6. Why did Nehemiah experience opposition to the work of rebuilding Jerusalem? (Neh 2:19)

**Reflect:**

7. What made Nehemiah a good leader?
8. How can Christians protect themselves from developing a critical attitude?
9. How can you prepare yourself to deal with criticism better in the future?
10. What techniques do people often use to cope with fear?
11. What do you think sometimes causes people to be overcritical of others?