



STAGE 8

REBUILDING A NATION



PERSONAL PREPARATION DAY 1—RETURN FROM EXILE

Read Nehemiah 1.

What can you discover about the historical setting of the book?

Nehemiah is a high-ranking Jewish official in the court of the Persian king (1:11). What is the news that he received that makes him weep and pray?

As we've worked through the Old Testament, we've often been reminded about the significance of God's promises to Abraham. These promises were given in the form of a 'covenant' or pledge. [see Genesis 15:17-21]. What does Nehemiah say about his covenant?

Read Deuteronomy 30:4-10. What promises did God make back then for the specific situation Israel is now in?



PERSONAL PREPARATION DAY 2—A NEW RESOLVE?

In chapter 2 Nehemiah gain's the blessing of the Persian king to return to Jerusalem and help supervise the rebuilding project. Under his leadership, the huge project of rebuilding the city walls is soon under way. For Nehemiah at least, the walls are a concrete reminder of God's covenant promises to Abraham – the promise that the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem will be the impregnable home of God's faithful people. "If the people repent, I'll bring them back to the land and bless them", said God. And Nehemiah is taking God's promise seriously.

After 52 days of hard work, the walls of Jerusalem are finally completed. By the end of chapter 7, God's people are secure in the promised land, each in their own town. God's promise to restore his people has been fulfilled. But the question remains – will the newly settled people of Israel be as faithful to God as God has been to them?

In Nehemiah 9, the Levites lead a public assembly in prayer and recount the whole sorry tale of God's covenant blessing and Israel's repeated unfaithfulness. **Read Chapter 9.** And jot down some the stages in the history of the Old Testament that are summarised here.

eg. Stage 1: Creation v6

How is the nation of Israel described throughout it's history?

How is God described throughout it's history?

The people of Israel are obviously cut to the heart by the account of the sins of the forefathers. As they call out to God to save them once more from their bondage they decide to make a binding contract with God (v.38). What do the Israelites now promise? (10:29). List the three key issues this will involve:

10:30

10:31

10:32-39

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - A NOT SO HAPPY ENDING



Review: Who is going to get the prize for having a go at summarising the past seven weeks of our journey through the Old Testament?! As we've discovered, each stage along the way shows us that the Old Testament is one coherent story about God's purpose to have 'God's people in God's place, under God's rule'.

Congratulations – we've made it through our journey through the Old Testament. There story has had some ups and downs, but there's nothing like finishing on a high note. There's nothing like bringing everything to a close with a happy ending. But is a happy ending something we're going to see with the nation of Israel?

As we work our way through Nehemiah, things are looking promising. The new walls are dedicated in a glorious celebration that recalls the great age of King David (Notice how often his name is mentioned in 12:27-471) The temple store rooms are full to overflowing. What's more the Israelites have promised that they will again become the holy and unique people God intended them to be, obeying his laws. It certainly seems like things are finally sorting themselves out. So after 12 years hard work, Nehemiah returns to Babylon to report to the King. He spends some time there, then makes the long trip back to Jerusalem. You'll never guess what he discovers when he returns!

1. What has happened in Nehemiah's absence?

13:10-11

13:15-16

13:23-24

2. How does Nehemiah react? See 13:11, 17-22, 25-28

After building the wall and struggling to re-establish a faithful Israel, all Nehemiah's efforts are laid to ruin by the absolute inability of the people of Israel to keep God's covenant. Yes, the city walls have been rebuilt – but the city's people have not. And so, the account of the history of Israel ends on a dismal note, with Israel following in the sinful footsteps of Solomon. Nehemiah is left begging God for a pardon. The Old Testament closes, not with a bang, but a whimper.

The Old Testament and Jesus Christ

The great tragedy of the Old Testament, is that, although there is nothing God wants more than to gather a people to himself – God's People, Living in God's Place, Under God's Rule – humanity keeps pushing him away. The rebellion started with Adam and Eve, and it has persisted all throughout the history of the Israelites, and even pervaded throughout their kings. Rather than maintain their national distinctiveness – holiness – they play 'mix-and-match' with the surrounding nations.

The Old Testament therefore points to the need for God to do something definitive about sin. If God is ever going to be able to reverse the Fall and keep his promises to Abraham, sin has to be dealt with once and for all. It is with this thought in mind that the curtains of the New Testament open and Jesus Christ steps into history. The Son of God dies in our place on the cross and so takes the punishment we deserve. We are given a fresh start.

What's more, we're given a fresh *heart*. Through God's Spirit, our lives are changed so that we actually want to do his will in a way the Israelites could never experience. That's not to say that our obedience to God is automatic – until we reach perfection in heaven, it's still a struggle. And yet we have the resources we need to meet the challenge.

How Nehemiah would have loved to have known the blessing we enjoy through Christ!

Read Hebrew 8:6-13 and Hebrews 9:15

3. What is the problem with the old covenant? (8:8)

4. What did God promise to do?

5. In what way is the new covenant different?

6. How does Christ's death make this possible?



7. How do you take part in this new covenant?

8. If God's people in the Old Testament were called to be unique, even though their laws were only written on stone, what about us?