

WISE COUNSEL FOR TROUBLED TIMES

STUDY SIX

Taking Responsibility

Nehemiah 1:1–4; 2:1–18; 6:15–16

Nothing you do is secular when you consider all the hats you wear as God-given responsibilities.

—Charles R. Swindoll

GOD is at the center of all things and the ruler of all He has made. Whatever He has built, He owns. Regarding how the world works, He sets the rules. And when mapping the course for our lives, He has the decisive say. God is the *final* authority. He is “Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all” (Ephesians 4:6 MSG).

Our role in His cosmic design is to take responsibility for whatever God assigns us. He is the master, and we’re the managers. Thankfully, with divine assignments come divine assistance from God’s Word. Let’s seek God’s wisdom from the account of Nehemiah, a role model for obedience, who followed God’s directive to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Whenever you open God’s Word, remember that the Lord is with you as He was with Nehemiah. Like Nehemiah, you can trust God to help you accomplish whatever monumental tasks await you. Read the psalmist’s declaration of dependence on God and declare your own prayer of trust in God as you study His Word.

*But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD,
I say, “You are my God.”
My times are in Your hand. (Psalm 31:14–15 NASB)*



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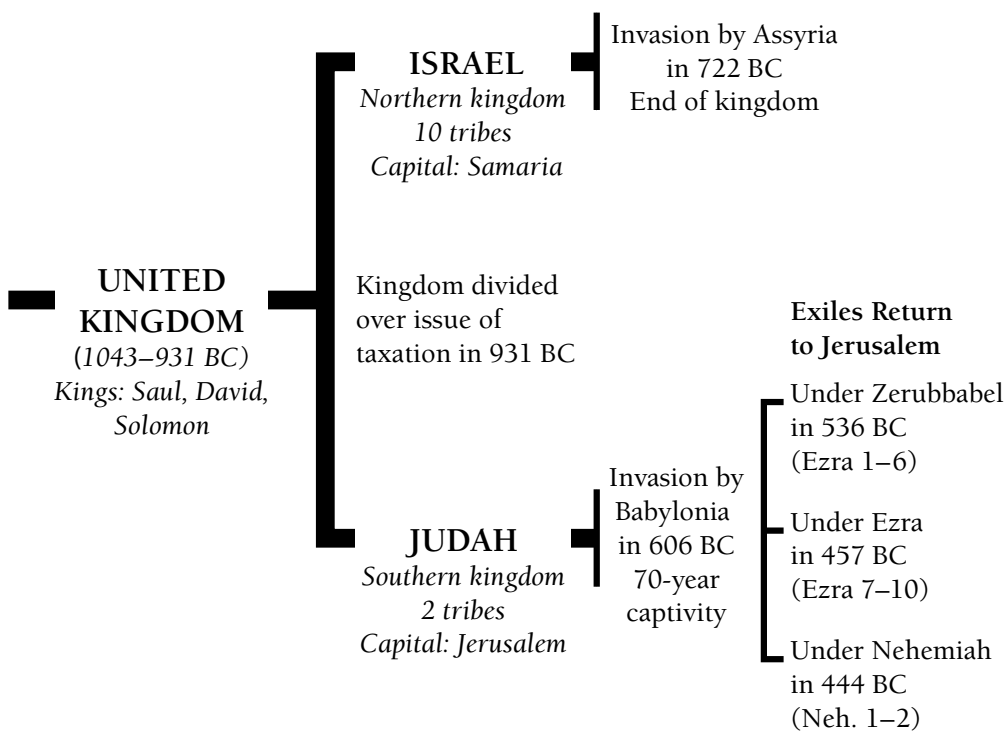
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TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

A key ingredient in the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study is understanding the *historical background* of the passage you are reading.¹ Nehemiah’s story flows out of the events and people that shaped his nation. The chart below diagrams Israel’s history beginning with Israel’s first united kingdom. As you read the chart, note the invasions by Assyria and then Babylonia that sent the Jews into exile for a period of seventy years.



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As you can see from the chart, the kingdom divided in 931 BC, when the northern ten tribes formed their own nation and kept the name Israel. Judah, in the south, preserved David’s kingly line and retained Jerusalem as the capital.

In 606 BC, the Babylonians began deporting to Babylon from Jerusalem young leaders such as Daniel. Judah continued for some time as a vassal state. However, when Judah’s king Zedekiah did evil in God’s sight, God used the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, to conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and deport the Jews to Babylon where they lived in exile.



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Read the account of the destruction of Jerusalem in *2 Chronicles 36:17–20*, which occurred in 586 BC. In the space below, list the devastations inflicted on the capital city and its people.

Imagine the scene from the point of view of the weeping Hebrew people as they stood on the Mount of Olives watching Nebuchadnezzar's war machines break down the city walls. In ancient times, breaking down the walls of a conquered city was a way to break the independent spirit of the people. What did the walls represent to the people of Jerusalem? What losses did the people feel when they viewed the rubble that once was their city?

From the people's viewpoint, their heritage, connection with God, and hope for the future went up in smoke the day Jerusalem fell. And yet God did not abandon His people, nor did He revoke His covenants to Abraham or David. Read God's promise in Jeremiah 29:10–14:

This is what the LORD says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you," says the LORD. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."



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Highlight the “I will” statements that the Lord makes. In the space below, reflect on what this promise must have meant to the people in exile, and reflect on what it means personally as you consider God’s faithfulness then and now.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian empire fell to the Medes and the Persians. King Cyrus of Persia allowed the first group of Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel in 536 BC to rebuild the temple. Jeremiah’s seventy-year prophecy was fulfilled! God reserved a final task for Nehemiah . . . rebuild the walls!



Observation: What Were Nehemiah’s Responsibilities?

Read *Nehemiah 1:1–11*, noting Nehemiah’s job in the court. Beginning with his humble position as cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah played three essential roles in fulfilling God’s calling.

Nehemiah as Cupbearer

In the capital of Susa, Nehemiah was serving King Artaxerxes I when the King of kings tapped Nehemiah on the shoulder through a message from Nehemiah’s brother:

“Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”
(Nehemiah 1:3)²



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According to Nehemiah 1:4–11, what was Nehemiah’s response to the news which arrived in the winter (Kislev on the Jewish calendar)?

Read *Nehemiah 2:1–6*. How did God answer his prayer when Nehemiah approached the king in the spring (Nisan)?

Nehemiah as Construction Supervisor

Read *Nehemiah 3:11–18*. Nehemiah traded his cupbearer’s apron for the clipboard of a construction supervisor. What was the purpose in his nighttime tour of the walls, and how did he inspire the nobles and officials to join his plan?



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Against all odds and in the face of intense opposition, the people under Nehemiah’s leadership completed the wall. Nehemiah wrote in his record:

So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God. (Nehemiah 6:15–16)

Nehemiah as Politician

Once the construction was complete, God had a new role for Nehemiah: governor. In this role, he confronted the wealthy nobles who were taking advantage of the poor (*Nehemiah 5:14–19*). He also restored the reading of Scripture and observance of holy days (*8:13–18*).

In whatever role God gave Nehemiah, whether cupbearer, construction supervisor, or governor, he modeled the qualities of a great leader:

- He pressed on despite strong opposition.
- He motivated the workers who grew tired.
- He rallied the people when they were fearful.
- He handled himself with sacrificial integrity, unlike former leaders.
- When the mission was accomplished, he gave all the credit to the Lord.



Interpretation: A Word about Interpreting Promises

God made specific promises to the Jewish people about their exile and return. The *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study teaches us to exercise care when interpreting and applying the promises in the Bible.

The promises in Jeremiah 29:10–14 are good examples of *historical* promises made to specific individuals in a particular era. God fulfilled His promises when the Hebrews returned from Babylon seventy years after the initial invasion.³ Be cautious when applying a historical promise to your current situation. Don’t assume, for example, that God’s promise to “restore your fortunes” is meant for you when it was clearly directed to His people in exile.



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However, you can apply what you learn about the *character of God* who kept His promise to the Jews. The same God who was faithful to His covenant with David will be faithful to the new covenant in Christ. We do have a future and a hope in Christ (Romans 5:1–5). That’s a promise you can claim!



Correlation: The Land and the Covenant

After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Jewish capital, he removed the people from their homeland by sending them into exile. What did the land represent to the people spiritually? Read [Genesis 17:1–8](#) and [Joshua 1:3–6](#) to understand the connection between the land and their covenant with God.

Along with the promised land, the Jews also lost the promised throne of David. Read [Psalm 132:11–18](#) and the messianic prophecy in [Isaiah 9:6–7](#). What were the implications of losing Jerusalem regarding God’s plan for Israel’s future?

Nehemiah fit perfectly into God’s timeline for Israel and the fulfillment of His promises. How important was it for Nehemiah to rise to his calling and take responsibility to do what God asked? Extremely important! Even though we may not be in Nehemiah’s position of influence, we still can follow his lead in taking seriously the job God gives us . . . no matter what our field of employment may be.



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Application: What Are Your Responsibilities?

What are your God-given responsibilities? We tend to view our roles and responsibilities in categories of secular and sacred. Assembling parts at the factory, that's secular work. Leading a children's choir, that's serving God. But God views all of life as spiritual. We serve God at our 9-to-5 job as much as we serve Him by ushering at church on Sundays. "Whatever you do or say," Paul urges, "do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17). And he reminds us that Jesus is our true boss,

Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. (3:23)

Wrap up this study by asking yourself, "What difference would it make to see all my responsibilities as God-given?" How would that perspective change your work ethic, attitude, and vocational goals?

Remember, you don't work for a company or a church. You don't have a job. You have a calling to fulfill as you work for your master, Jesus.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I am a simple cupbearer in a world filled with Your presence. Forgive me for seeing my job as anything less than a sacred calling from You. Help me to work as if I was clocking in on Your shift and You were giving my review. May my work, attitude, and goals please You. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Hanani and the men from Judah who gave Nehemiah this alarming report were probably referring to an attempt to rebuild the walls that had failed due to opposition from local officials (Ezra 4:12–16, 21–23). The walls lay in ruins once again, as they had when Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed them more than 140 years earlier.
3. Some Bible scholars also see Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled with the rebuilding of the temple in 516 BC, seventy years after the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 BC.



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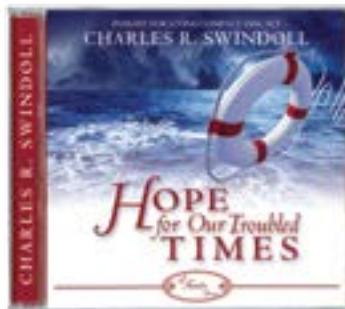
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For the 2020 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Pastoral Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

