

CORNERSTONECONNECTIONS
NOVEMBER302024

getting it right

Scripture Story: Nehemiah 5; 6.
Commentary: *Prophets and Kings*, chapters 54; 55.
Key Text: Deuteronomy 15:11.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

Nehemiah's work on the walls and the gates of the city had progressed amid interpersonal challenges as well as adversity from outside the camp. Through it all the faithful governor and prophet to the people managed to negotiate through the problems. But one particular issue surfaced that stands out as a lesson for all.

God had placed clear guidelines on proper treatment and resources for the poor, but after the exile this counsel went ignored by some who had more means. The wealthy lent money to the poor but charged high interest, sending their own people further into debt and greater poverty. Ellen White states: "Many had been forced to sell their sons and daughters into servitude; and there seemed no hope of improving their condition, no way to redeem either their children or their lands, no prospect before them but ever-increasing distress, with perpetual want and bondage. Yet they were of the same nation, children of the same covenant, as their more favored brethren" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 647).

Nehemiah reflected on the news: "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry" (Nehemiah 5:6, NIV). Nehemiah and others rallied the resources to buy back their brothers and sisters from bondage and set a lesson that seemed to sink deep in the hearts of the Jews: If they had obeyed God's law, the poor would always have hope and relief. Nehemiah 5:12, 13 shows the penitent response of the landowners, demonstrating that the people can be transformed by the mercy of God. Our lesson this week is about setting people free from their burdens and their hopelessness, and is one in which we can celebrate the mercy God has given us.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- Know that God's law sought to dispense tangible reminders of mercy. *(Know)*
- Sense the freedom of giving and forgiving. *(Feel)*
- Choose specific ways to set people free as God commanded. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

Stewardship, Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs, no. 21: "We are God's stewards, entrusted by Him with time and opportunities, abilities and possessions, and the blessings of the earth and its resources. We are responsible to Him for their proper use. We acknowledge God's ownership by faithful service to Him and our fellow human beings, and by returning tithe and giving offerings for the proclamation of His gospel and the support and growth of His church. Stewardship is a privilege given to us by God for nurture in love and the victory over selfishness and covetousness. Stewards rejoice in the blessings that come to others as a result of their faithfulness." (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15; 1 Chronicles 29:14; Haggai 1:3-11; Malachi 3:8-12; Matthew 23:23; Romans 15:26, 27; 1 Corinthians 9:9-14; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; 9:7.)

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? *section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.*

This week's activity posits a question that may be surprising. Galatians 6:10 challenges us to do good to all people, *especially* to those who are believers. This may seem backward to the students. In fact, this may be surprising to those who are only young at heart. Have the students discuss which will have a more enduring impact over time.

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

"I was visiting my wife while she worked on developing a remedial program for students. I found myself spending lunchtime in the first grade. I enjoyed watching the students rustle around the classroom with their lunch pails and small boxes of milk. I noticed one boy with bright-red, curly hair who remained in his seat. My heart sank into my stomach as someone announced out loud what was obvious to anyone watching, 'Billy doesn't have a lunch.'

"At first I thought the remark was cruel. Before I could react the room full of students scurried into action. What I saw seared the most beautiful image of community into my mind. Each student began breaking off pieces of their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and placed them on a tray that was being passed around the room. I never saw who started the tray around. Bags of chips popped open and littered the brown plastic cafeteria tray with samples of every flavor known to first graders across the land, a half of a banana, tons of carrots and celery, and a bounty of cookies broken in half. As the tray filled with food was set before the hungry lad a grin crept shyly across his sweet freckled face. Embarrassed? A little. Tickled to death at the feast fit for five first graders looming before him like a small mountain? No question. Actually, I had many questions. Who started the tray? When did they learn to do this? Why didn't *I* forget *my* lunch? I asked the teacher, 'Where did they learn to do this?' He smiled. 'It happened a few years back when one of my students would share his lunch with anyone who forgot theirs. Everyone joined in, and then it just became kind of an unspoken rule in the classroom. When someone forgets a lunch, everyone helps.' I was stunned by the simple way the kids created community in their classroom" (Troy Fitzgerald, *Christwise Discipleship Guide* [Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002], p. 71).

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Share the following in your own words:

In the same way the class had rules about how to act if someone forgot their lunch, God had rules to make sure the poor had help. It was during the rebuilding of the walls that a heinous truth came to Nehemiah and stirred his anger to action. Read through the story and respond to the questions in the *Out of the Story* section.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story *section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them.*

- This week's story occurs while the people of God are trying to rebuild the walls but can't contribute financially because of their poverty.
- Briefly describe what you see happening to God's people in this story.
- *Circle* the words "we," "our," and "us" as they recur in this passage. How do these words reveal a sense of solidarity against injustice?
- What is Nehemiah's reaction to injustice in verse 6? Explain how this kind of anger is good.
- How did God's original instructions serve to prevent this kind of tragedy? (Read Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 11; 23:19.)
- How do Nehemiah and the faithful people respond to the injustice? How do they begin to remedy the problem?
- Reflect for a moment on the significance of buying the slaves back in verse 8.
- What is the response of the nobles and the wealthy in this story to Nehemiah's rebuke?

Extra Teacher's Questions

- Why do you think this passage is in the Bible?
- What is the message God has for you in this story?
- In a sentence write what you think the good

news is in this passage?
- What other stories or events in Scripture does this passage remind you of? In what way(s)?

Use the following as more teachable passages that relate to today's story: Matthew 21; Luke 13:13-18; Deuteronomy 15:15; Galatians 3:14; Isaiah 62:12.

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

Nehemiah's role in Judea was not simply that of a general contractor; he functioned as a spiritual change agent; and the locals responded well to his leadership. Nehemiah had brought a radical transformation to the region and the attitudes and perceptions people had about the God Jehovah.

The timing of this story is difficult to mark in the context of the rebuilding of the walls and gates. It is possible that this story took place during the building process, but it is hard to say. Ellen White describes the incident in this week's lesson as taking place during the rebuilding process.

As the Jews were released from exile, those who returned to the Judean countryside established themselves economically. But severe doubts and seasons of disaster took a toll on many people. The poor had to borrow from those who had means and were charged severe interest for their debt. Furthermore, when the debts could not possibly be paid, their children became slaves to try to repay what was owed.

The Jews had forgotten the laws that Moses had given them to protect the poor and increase their understanding of the significance of their own deliverance. In the law God commands:

"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. . . . There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 11, NIV).

During that time the taxes required were paid by those who had means, and those who did not had to borrow from their own kinsmen in Judea. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* states: "Like other Persian provinces, Judea was annually required to pay a tribute, partly in money and partly in kind, to the Persian treasury. In ordinary years this burden may not have seemed oppressive, but in lean years the appearance of the tax collector often foreshadowed great misery. To meet the taxes debts had to be contracted, and without hope that they could be repaid" (vol. 3, p. 413).

In *Prophets and Kings* Ellen White observes that "the Lord had commanded Israel, through Moses, that every third year a tithe be raised for the benefit of the poor; and a further provision had been made in the suspension of agricultural labor every seventh year, the land lying fallow, its spontaneous products being left to those in need. Faithfulness in devoting these offerings to the relief of the poor

Teaching From . . .

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite the students to share the key text with the class if they have committed it to memory.
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* Prophets and Kings. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that speaks most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quote in Further Insight *conveys the point of the story in this lesson.*

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

RABBI 101

The Story Beyond the Story

Getting students to connect the little events to the larger story is key for learning and spiritual transformation. The fiery furnace and David defeating Goliath are only great stories to tell if they don't say something about the larger story of God and people. The incident in this week's lesson of the wealthy enslaving their poorer kinsmen speaks to the deeper problem of forgetting that how you received your freedom causes you to forget who you are and who God is. Each incident and story in Scripture is part of The Big Story. One teacher asked the students to give a descriptive title to the Bible the same way we would title the story of Moses and the Red Sea. Students need to see the big picture and how the parts fit the whole.

and to other benevolent uses would have tended to keep fresh before the people the truth of God's ownership of all, and their opportunity to be channels of blessing. It was Jehovah's purpose that the Israelites should have a training that would eradicate selfishness, and develop breadth and nobility of character" (p. 646).

As the issue was brought before Nehemiah in this lesson, his response is classic Nehemiah: He became passionately angry, but he took a few moments to pray and gather his thoughts before he spoke to the people. Additionally, he spoke with action, not just words. He gathered the resources to buy out of bondage as many children from the landowners as possible and then challenged them to respond in kind. What is so amazing about this story is that they agreed and followed Nehemiah's example.

III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

Because our only hope to not repeat this behavior in the future is being mindful of our past as we live in the present, we need to think about what this story would look like today. Invite the students to rewrite this story as it might happen in our time. Have them divide into groups of two or three to work on their modernized Nehemiah stories. As students share their narratives, affirm the similar qualities you see in their story that are evident in the biblical story.

Summary

Share the following thoughts in your own words:

It is hard to imagine how only a few years from being slaves in Babylon the children of God forget—not only what it is like, but *who* they are and what they are called to be. It all begins when you fail to remember. Ten times the word "remember" is used by Nehemiah in this book because if you are not deliberate, you will forget. During the exile in Egypt the children of God forgot who their God was and, in turn, lost sight of their own identity. Throughout the years, God has had to remind His people that He gave His laws to us not to confine us, but to keep ever before us the matchless truths of His character. After three years of this slavery there should have been a massive offering taken to ease the burden of the poor. After seven years, everyone should have been set free, according to God's law. They just forgot. When Nehemiah brazenly reminded them of God's commands and their behavior they repented and made it right. This is the response of the faithful who when touched by God's Spirit, obey. What about you? Is today a day for you to turn around and make things right with God?



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *Prophets and Kings* (or *Royalty and Ruin*),* chapters 54; 55.

*A special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings* has been created by the Ellen G. White Estate and the Pacific Press® Publishing Association. Get more info about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net.

LESSON 9

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STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Nehemiah 5; 6.
Commentary: *Prophets and Kings*, chapters 54; 55.

getting it right



THINKSTOCK

keytext

"For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.' "

(Deuteronomy 15:11, NKJV)

flashlight

"We were all debtors to divine justice, but we had nothing with which to pay the debt. Then the Son of God, who pitied us, paid the price of our redemption. He became poor that through His poverty we might be rich" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 652).

what do you think?

We should devote ourselves to acts of kindness and good deeds especially to believers or nonbelievers? Explain your answer.

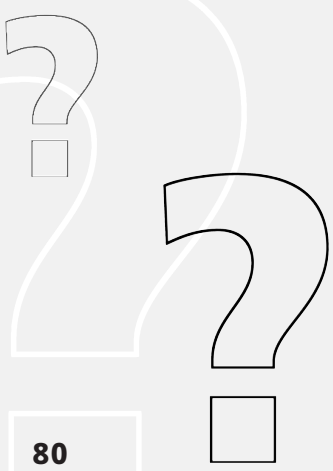
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Read Galatians 6:10 and consider whether you think what Paul is asking is backwards or right on. Why?

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did you know?

He who truly fears God, would rather toil day and night, and eat the bread of poverty, than to indulge the passion for gain that oppresses the widow and fatherless or turns the stranger from his right" (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 651).



INTO THE STORY

"Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, 'We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.'

"Others were saying, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.'

"Still others were saying, 'We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.'

"When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, 'You are charging your own people interest!' So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: 'As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!' They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

"So I continued, 'What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.'

" 'We will give it back,' they said. 'And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.'

"Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, 'In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!'

"At this the whole assembly said, 'Amen,' and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised."

(Nehemiah 5:1-13, NIV)

OUT OF THE STORY

This week's story occurs while the people of God are trying to rebuild the walls but can't contribute financially because of their poverty. Briefly describe what you see happening to God's people in this story.

_____

Circle the words "we," "our," and "us" as they recur in this passage. How do these words reveal a sense of solidarity against injustice?

_____

What is Nehemiah's reaction to injustice in verse 6? Explain how this kind of anger is good.

_____

How did God's original instructions serve to prevent this kind of tragedy? (Read Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 11; 23:19.)

_____

How do Nehemiah and the faithful people respond to the injustice? How do they begin to remedy the problem?

_____

Reflect for a moment on the significance of buying the slaves back in Nehemiah 5:8. What is the response of the nobles and the wealthy in this story to Nehemiah's rebuke?

_____

What is the message God has for you in this story?

_____

_____

In a sentence, write what you think the good news is in this passage.

_____

_____

What other stories or events in Scripture does this passage remind you of? In what way(s)?

_____

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punch lines

"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. . . . Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to" **(Deuteronomy 15:7-10, NIV).**

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. . . . Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" **(Galatians 6:2-10, NIV).**

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. . . . They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" **(Acts 2:1, 42-47, NIV).**

further insight

"By deeds of liberality toward His poor we may prove the sincerity of our gratitude for the mercy extended to us."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 652

Sabbath

Read Galatians 6:10.

We acknowledge God's ownership by faithful service to Him and our fellow human beings, and by returning tithe and giving offerings for the proclamation of His gospel and the support and growth of His church. Stewardship is a privilege given to us by God for nurture in love and the victory over selfishness and covetousness. Stewards rejoice in the blessings that come to others as a result of their faithfulness" (Fundamental Belief 21, Stewardship).

Today's Bible verse asserts we should be good to "all people," but read Paul's words and think about why those words are true. What might our church be like if we started with Paul's words and followed Nehemiah's actions? How might these words be relevant for the people in Nehemiah's day?

Sunday

Read Nehemiah 5:1-13.

Read the passage in the *Into the Story* section of the student lesson and respond to the study questions provided. How is the theme of slavery and redemption portrayed in this section of Nehemiah? What provisions did God make to prevent this from happening? What is more surprising: the horrible slavery the rich engaged in or the fact that they obeyed the command of God and immediately made it right?

Monday

Read Nehemiah 5:5, 6.

Consider the message of the *Key Text* in this week's lesson that reveals how the sinful practices of Israel caused Nehemiah to become angry. In every person there is a sense of "ought" that stirs humanity to decry slavery. Nehemiah could not believe his countrymen were taking advantage of the poor seemingly without conscience. When in your life have you witnessed something terribly wrong and didn't know what to do about it? Why is it important that you speak out against evil with effectiveness like Nehemiah?

Tuesday

Read 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Romans 5:17.

In this week's *Further Insight* quote from *Prophets and Kings*, Ellen White connects the way Nehemiah and others purchased back their people from slavery to how Christ redeemed humanity from sin. In fact, "by deeds of liberality toward His poor we may prove the sincerity of our gratitude for the mercy extended to us" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 652). What opportunities do we have today to demonstrate our understanding of what Christ did for us by extending compassion to others?

Wednesday

Read Galatians 6:2.

Read the *Punch Lines* in this week's lesson and choose two verses that you think Christians today need to understand and rewrite them in your own words. (Use the Notes section in the back of this journal to rewrite these verses.) Be sure to paraphrase this passage according to how it speaks to you. Pray that God gives you an opportunity to share these words with someone else this week.

Thursday

Read Nehemiah 5:12.

The positive way the people of God respond to Nehemiah's challenge is comforting. Is there a cause or an opportunity to serve someone in need that you and your friends can do as a group? Nehemiah's individual courage is remarkable, but some of Christianity's finest moments are when a community of people get together and do the right thing. Gather your friends together and plan a small act of liberation for someone in need.

Action Plan

Friday

Read Genesis 6:6-8; 1 Kings 18:36-39; Daniel 3:16-18; Daniel 6:21, 22; John 3:16; and John 15:13.

Throughout Scripture there are those who have stood alone in the way of evil. While true believers are drawn to their side for support, it takes a tremendous amount of courage to stand first. Whom do you recall in the pages of the Bible or history that have made such a stand for the right? How are they remembered?

It is interesting to watch Nehemiah seemingly work alone as a compass for truth and goodness in this story. But equally inspiring is the powerful way the people respond as a unit. Reflect on your journey with Christ and note the great group moments as well as crucial times when you, or someone you know, stood alone for what is right.

this week's reading*

Prophets and Kings, chapters 54; 55.

**Royalty and Ruin* is a special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings*, created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press®. Get more information about it by going to www.cornerstoneconnections.net and clicking on "Conflict of the Ages series." By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages series each year.