Unit 18, Session 2

God Protects His People Through a Cupbearer

Summary and Goal
God is determined to protect and revive His people, and in His kindness, He raises up the right leaders at the right times for the tasks at hand. God used Nehemiah as a catalyst of courage, a man who was burdened, a cupbearer who knew he was called to do something beyond himself for the sake of others. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the Jews rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, providing protection and dignity to the people of God. In Nehemiah’s story we see a framework for how God uses believers to protect, revive, restore, and build up His people for the sake of the gospel.

Session Outline
2. God’s leader unites and strengthens the people for the work (Neh. 2:11-18).
3. God’s leader protects and encourages the people in the face of opposition (Neh. 4:11-14).

Background Passage: Nehemiah 1–7

Session in a Sentence
God provides leaders to strengthen and help protect His people from their enemies.

Christ Connection
Nehemiah led the people to join together to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem and protect the city from their enemies, but that protection was not permanent. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, He made a way for His people to be protected from the enemies of sin and death forever.

Missional Application
Because we are protected and secure in Christ, we join with others to complete the kingdom work God has given us.
Group Time

Introduction

EXPLAIN: Use the paragraph in the DDG (p. 103) to affirm the power of highly emotional experiences.

We often look back at personal experiences not just cognitively but emotionally. In fact, the deeper the emotion associated with a memory, the clearer the details become. I can tell you the date, time, location, and a myriad of other random details from the moment I was told my younger brother had been murdered. Even typing this brings the visuals of 2011 back to my eyes, the details back to my mind, and the emotions back to my heart. Such emotional experiences change everything for us—nothing in our lives will ever be the same.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What emotional experiences have changed everything for you? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

SAY: An emotional moment in Nehemiah’s life involved hearing distressing news from his homeland. God used this news to awaken in Nehemiah’s heart the desire to see the dignity and protection of his countrymen restored so God would be praised among His people and throughout the nations. Nehemiah’s direction in life changed with this encounter, and he took the opportunity to work faithfully on behalf of God and His people.

SUMMARIZE: God is determined to protect and revive His people, and in His kindness, He raises up the right leaders at the right times for the tasks at hand. God used Nehemiah as a catalyst of courage, a man who was burdened, a cupbearer who knew he was called to do something beyond himself for the sake of others. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the Jews rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, providing protection and dignity to the people of God. In Nehemiah’s story we see a framework for how God uses believers to protect, revive, restore, and build up His people for the sake of the gospel.

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For additional teaching options and other resources, please visit GospelProject.com/additional-resources.
Point 1: God’s leader feels burdened for the people and prays (Neh. 1:1-4).


1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the fortress city of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah, and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile. 3 They said to me, “The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem’s wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned.”

4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens.

SAY: There’s a difference between being bothered by something and burdened by something. The difference rests in what that something does to you and what you do with it. Whether good or bad, we can’t sit on burdens; they stir us to the core and move us to action.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 104) to emphasize how Nehemiah’s God-given burden for Jerusalem led him to pray as a first priority.

Nehemiah was burdened by what he heard about the condition of his people and what he knew about the character, promises, and plan of God. It was a burden that came from the Lord. But Nehemiah didn’t just charge out to change things; he petitioned the Lord, seeking His faithfulness and favor to carry out the restoration of his homeland. We shouldn’t move too quickly from the simple yet profound truth that Nehemiah was moved deeply and subsequently moved to pray.

• A burden always moves people from feeling to action. Our standard grid for strategic action is ready, aim, fire. Nehemiah, however, followed a spiritual paradigm. The plan to bring restoration to Jerusalem wasn’t just a good idea from a wise man but God’s idea put into Nehemiah’s mind and heart and anchored in the promises of God. Nehemiah’s example teaches us that when our burdens come from God, it’s imperative we go back to God for what’s next. Nehemiah didn’t take random action or even humanly wise steps; instead, he turned to the heart of God in prayer for wisdom and favor to carry out what he was burdened by God to do.

• As Nehemiah’s prayer records (vv. 5-11), he knew that the trouble and distress of his people in Judah resulted from his people’s unfaithfulness, both past and present. This social-spiritual dynamic impacted how Nehemiah led in every other aspect of his life—one cannot separate societal circumstances from the spiritual consequences of sin.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

Why is prayer the best next step once we have a burden to act for God’s glory and the good of others? (prayer for wisdom and guidance honors the God who gave the burden; if we have a burden from God to act, then it is part of God’s will and He has the plan for how we are supposed to act; to seek affirmation that our burden is what God wants us to fulfill)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 104) to establish the importance of fasting and praying for Nehemiah’s work to restore Jerusalem. Apply the importance of prayer to your group members’ lives of faith.

Nehemiah knew that if the walls of Jerusalem were to be rebuilt and the people of Judah restored, it would take more than him at the helm—it would take the hand of God. So he fasted and prayed day and night for many days (1:4,6). He didn’t go to God one time and then go about his business; rather, he continually went to God as he was doing his business. He modeled a heart of dependence on and subsequent confidence in the Lord that showed up in how he lived and led.

Application: If Nehemiah had led a prayer-less life, he would have had to leverage his own skills to do something necessary for him and his people. Was his track record and relationship with King Artaxerxes strong enough to sway him to be unnecessarily gracious? Was he winsome enough to convince the Jewish people to put their personal well-being aside for a collective good? Prayer-less leaders will always lead in their own strength, but their own strength isn’t good enough to accomplish God’s plans. Thankfully, Nehemiah didn’t live or lead that way; he gave us an example of a more excellent way that Jesus Himself would follow and model to perfection. The pathway of prayerfulness enriches God’s people with God’s power so they can accomplish His purposes.

Commentary: By virtue of being created in the image of God and blessed with His common grace, there’s a lot we as humans can do in our own strength. But because of our sinful nature, our strength leads us toward self-reliance. This is exacerbated by our culture, which cultivates and celebrates doing things in your own strength. Likewise, many expressions of Christianity involve doing “Christian things” with God at the periphery, not the center, and we consult God only when we think it necessary.

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**Point 2: God’s leader unites and strengthens the people for the work (Neh. 2:11-18).**

**READ** Nehemiah 2:11-18 (DDG p. 105).

11 After I arrived in Jerusalem and had been there three days, 12 I got up at night and took a few men with me. I didn’t tell anyone what my God had laid on my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal took was the one I was riding. 13 I went out at night through the Valley Gate toward the Serpent’s Well and the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. 14 I went on to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but farther down it became too narrow for my animal to go through. 15 So I went up at night by way of the valley and inspected the wall. Then heading back, I entered through the Valley Gate and returned. 16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, for I had not yet told the Jews, priests, nobles, officials, or the rest of those who would be doing the work. 17 So I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned. Come, let’s rebuild Jerusalem’s wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace.” 18 I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me, and what the king had said to me. They said, “Let’s start rebuilding,” and their hands were strengthened to do this good work.

**EXPLAIN:** Reference the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 105) as you show how Nehemiah went about bringing the people together and strengthening them with **clarity** for the work of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem.

After securing the favor of King Artaxerxes because God’s gracious hand was on him, Nehemiah set off to do what God had laid on his heart to do (Neh. 2:1-10). This scene ends with the people united and strengthened for the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but in order to bring the people together, Nehemiah needed them to know what they were being brought together for.

- Nehemiah surveyed the work in front of them, assessing the condition of the walls and gates. His account of the survey reveals him to be a man of intentionality and precise planning, even advanced planning, as he had requested material aid from King Artaxerxes prior to his departure for the rebuilding project. Nehemiah’s foresight and focus were evident, but these were used to serve the purpose of unifying the people for the work.
- After his assessment, Nehemiah communicated the burden of his heart with integrity and passion, inviting the residents of the city to do what seemed impossible but was absolutely necessary. Many factors contributed to the unity that followed, but an undeniable one was the presence of **clarity** regarding both the situation and the plan. In order to bring people together, you, and they, have to know what you’re bringing them together for.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How does the gospel bring clarity and unity to believers? (it is clear that we are all sinners in need of a Savior from the judgment we all rightly deserve; we are unified in the one family of God through one faith in Jesus Christ; knowing the grace we have received, we are unified and clear on our mission to share the good news of Jesus with the world)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 105) to point out how Nehemiah encouraged and strengthened the people for the work with his testimony of God’s hand upon him.

Nehemiah’s clear communication and call to action was more than a marketing ploy or a tug on the heartstrings; he firmly believed in a greater reality and connected the people to it, to the very heart and mission of God. He gave the residents of Jerusalem an honest assessment of the state of the city: “We’re in trouble; we’re a disgrace!” But then he moved from what they knew to be true and focused them on the hand and heart of God with his testimony.

- Nehemiah told the people how God’s hand had been on him in his interaction with the king, which was an answer to his prayer (2:1-9, see 1:11). And now he invited them to share in the story of what God was doing in and through him. Hearing Nehemiah’s testimony, the people were roused, strengthened, and ready to work.

- What had been a faint aspiration in their hearts was stirred by a new vision of what God could do with them based on what He had already been doing. Nehemiah connected the people and their work to a transcendent reality that spoke to their hearts—their great God and a great mission. This allowed the strength of God to flow into them, encouraging them for the work and the trials ahead.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways your strength and work are connected to God and His gospel mission? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)
Point 3: God’s leader protects and encourages the people in the face of opposition (Neh. 4:11-14).

SAY: In the strength of God, the people of Jerusalem took up their tools and began rebuilding the walls and gates (Neh. 3). Great progress was being made, but along with their progress came an escalation in mockery and threats (4:1-12). Their enemies mobilized to attack the Jews living nearby and the people working on the walls.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 4:11-14 (DDG p. 106).

“11 And our enemies said, “They won’t realize it until we’re among them and can kill them and stop the work.” 12 When the Jews who lived nearby arrived, they said to us time and again, “Everywhere you turn, they attack us.” 13 So I stationed people behind the lowest sections of the wall, at the vulnerable areas. I stationed them by families with their swords, spears, and bows. 14 After I made an inspection, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord, and fight for your countrymen, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes.”

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 106) to address how Nehemiah sought to lead and help the workers when they faced discouragement and danger.

The workers faced real discouragement and danger. As a godly leader, Nehemiah’s response wasn’t to ignore their fears or concerns; rather, he protected them strategically and encouraged them deeply. The goal of his strategic plan of protection was to help alleviate some of the fears that would empty the workers of their courage. Furthermore, Nehemiah encouraged the people with the character of God, leading to confidence in His power and assurance of His presence.

• Protected Them Strategically: Nehemiah stationed armed people at the vulnerable parts of the wall by families to protect the inhabitants of the city (4:9,13). He also split the workforce in half so people could continue working on the wall while surrounded by an armed guard (4:16,21).

• Encouraged Them Deeply: Nehemiah sought to encourage the people’s hearts. He wanted to keep them from losing courage with the protection, and he wanted to fill them up with courage once again by pointing to the great and awe-inspiring Lord, who was on their side. The great and awesome Lord is the gracious and covenant-keeping God committed to His people, to those who love Him and obey His commands (Neh. 1:5). He’s the God of Moses, the God of the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea. He’s the God of Joshua and the conquest of the promised land. He’s the God of the return from exile and the God of His people’s protection.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How have you been encouraged by remembering the great and awesome God? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 106) to compare the camaraderie that Nehemiah led the Jews to experience with the unity that Christians have together as the body of Christ.

Nehemiah led the people to remember the God on their side, which would encourage the Jews to stand strong for those around them, for their countrymen and their families. Similarly, this is what it means to be the body of Christ. Jesus leads the church as its head, and as believers know and follow their great God and Savior, they fight for the well-being of their brothers and sisters in Christ, pursuing their holiness and encouraging them in the fight against sin. They also join together for the Great Commission, which is beyond any human ability to accomplish.

- Led and strengthened by the Spirit of Christ, Christians don’t fight against their human enemies but share the gospel with them to turn enemies into family members. Regardless of these overwhelming challenges before us, Jesus, our great leader, has promised to be with us, so let us overcome our fear and act with courage for the sake of the gospel.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 106).

Body of Christ: The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ’s representative here on earth, with Christ as its head. This means that the church is an extension of Christ’s ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission.

Essential Doctrine “Body of Christ”: The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ’s representative here on earth, with Christ as its head (Col. 1:18). This means that the church is an extension of Christ’s ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). In addition, the picture of the church as the body of Christ shows us the interconnectedness of individual Christians, with each member dependent upon one another for growth and sanctification (1 Cor. 12).
My Mission

EXPLAIN: The great and awe-inspiring Lord stirred the heart of Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls for the dignity of his people and the glory of his God. The Lord also paved the way for Nehemiah to act on this burden of his heart. Nehemiah led courageously and strategically, and the people were successful, rebuilding the walls in fifty-two days, and all the glory went to the Lord (Neh. 6:15-16). Yet this leader and this work were temporary; Nehemiah would die and the walls would eventually fall once again because of sin. But Nehemiah and his walls were a shadow of a greater leader and protection to come. Jesus came with the burden of compassion for sinners and the determination to die on behalf of sinners to save them from sin and death. But He rose from the dead and now protects His people with His presence for all eternity. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39). This is great and awesome news to share with the world.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 107), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we are protected and secure in Christ, we join with others to complete the kingdom work God has given us.

- What burden has the Lord placed on your heart for you to obey in faith?
- What rhythms can your group follow to encourage each other to continue the work of God?
- For whom will you labor and share the gospel that they would know our great and awe-inspiring Lord—Jesus Christ?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, who exemplified what it means to be a humble and sacrificial leader by doing everything necessary to protect and sustain us through His life, death, resurrection, and ongoing intercession. By the Spirit, shape us in the image of Your Son and strengthen us to lead well in our churches and communities as we seek first Your kingdom. Amen.

PACK ITEM 13: THE CALL TO SERVE: Cut out these bookmarks and pass them out to group members to remind them that our calling to serve, wherever that is and wherever we are, is a call to share the gospel.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 108-110), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 111) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 108-110) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 111) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 108-110) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 1 as a part of point 1 in the session: All of Nehemiah’s petitions were shaped by his confession about his good and sovereign God. Adoration of the Lord fuels the faith we express in our prayers to Him.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 2:** “Weakness is only a liability if we hide it and don’t go to God for strength.”
- **Day 5:** “Our plans may fail, but God’s never do; so seek His kingdom and trust Him to fulfill His plans in the face of opposition and intimidation.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 111) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- Encourage group members to find ways to support and care for the leaders in their local church and how they can promote truth and unity alongside them.
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

Point 1: God’s leader feels burdened for the people and prays (Neh. 1:1-4).

“The book of Nehemiah opens with a statement that serves as a heading for the whole book: ‘The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah’ (Neh. 1:1). This is the only heading of this nature in the book, so even though the narrative will later switch to a third person narration of what Nehemiah did (e.g., 8:9), no new heading is supplied. Since no new heading is supplied, it is more likely than not that Nehemiah himself switched to the third person … In the rest of verse 1 Nehemiah prepares his audience for the report that he received from Jerusalem by stating his own location and the time of year. ‘Chislev’ corresponds to what we call November/December, and Artaxerxes began to reign in 465 BC, so ‘the twentieth year’ is 445. Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year, which would be 458 BC (Ezra 7:8).”

“Since the strength of a city’s walls symbolized the strength of that people’s god, people around the city of Jerusalem would see its broken down walls as a sign that the God of Israel had abandoned them. A city without walls was defenseless and too dangerous for occupation. Even more disappointing, this news meant that the expected time of restoration had not yet come, and the Lord had not yet fulfilled His promise given through the prophets. Upon hearing of his people’s distress, Nehemiah wept, prayed, and fasted. Nehemiah’s practice of prayer provides many lessons. He considered God to be his most trusted advisor and turned directly to Him. Not only did Nehemiah attribute the current condition of his people and his homeland to his own sin, but he took responsibility for the sins of the entire Israelite nation. Nehemiah understood that he could not separate himself from his nation and yearned for the restoration and holiness of all God’s people. Amidst mounting frustrations, he turned away from reacting in anger and toward trusting God in prayer. Nehemiah realized his place before God, the power that comes from God, and the peace that flows from an intimate prayer life.”

Point 2: God’s leader unites and strengthens the people for the work (Neh. 2:11-18).

“Before undertaking any work, Nehemiah familiarized himself with the state of Jerusalem and of its inhabitants. This inspection confirmed what he had heard (1:3) and enabled him to draft a realistic plan of action. Having sensed opposition, it seems necessary for him to be prudent. So Nehemiah inspected the walls by night, accompanied by several trusted men. He rode his own mount because, being accustomed to its master, it would make no noise. Discretion in the smallest details is an important element in the success of any undertaking (2:12-16) … Nehemiah had done careful planning, but he attributed his mission and the success he has achieved thus far to God’s support for this project (2:18). The Jews’ response, Let us start rebuilding, is no doubt the most quoted verse in the book.”
“Nehemiah surveys the walls chiefly on the southern and eastern sides, i.e., the so-called city of David and Kidron Valley. The Valley Gate was probably on the southwestern side of the city of David, and the Dung Gate, leading to the city dump, at its southern tip. The Dragon Spring, Fountain Gate, and King’s Pool are unidentified, but were no doubt on the east where the Kidron Valley’s water sources were. The valley is the Kidron Valley, to which Nehemiah has had to descend because he cannot pass close to the walls higher up, since the rubble from their destruction has made passage impossible. He returns by the Valley Gate, having apparently made only a partial circuit.”

Point 3: God’s leader protects and encourages the people in the face of opposition (Neh. 4:11-14).

“The rumors of impending surprise attack added to the discouragement caused by the natural hardships. Of course, that is what the enemies intended. External pressure amplifies internal weakness … Nehemiah took definite action. He had to sacrifice some labor from building the wall, but the precaution was necessary. Grouping them according to families would strengthen the motivation to fight (see v. 14). Nehemiah called the people together (see also v. 15), which had the effect of showing their strength and giving Nehemiah an opportunity to encourage them by emphasizing God’s great delivering power and by appealing to the defense of their families. The language of Nehemiah (‘Don’t be afraid’) is reminiscent of words of reassurance and victory from other leaders in Scripture (cf. Ex. 14:13; Num. 14:9; Deut. 20:3; 31:6; Josh. 10:25).”

“Another possible translation of the second half of v. 12 is, ‘they said to us repeatedly from all [their] places, “You must return to us,”’ suggesting that the Jewish people outside Jerusalem were encouraging the workers from their towns laboring in Jerusalem to leave before the city was attacked. Nehemiah’s skill as a leader is exemplified in these verses. Although enemies surrounded him and the people were discouraged, he took action.”

“The exhortation not to fear (Neh. 4:14) applies to us today, as does the dynamic example of trust and obedience: they prayed and set a guard (v. 9). Nehemiah sums it up: ‘remember the Lord’ and ‘fight’ (v. 14). Our God has fought for us, in Christ, and has won the victory. As we battle on as his people to the end, often despised and rejected, we must always remember our great and awesome Lord and make every effort to guard and strengthen the household of God.”

References
Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatchling that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world’s view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ’s power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God’s faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.