



The ALIVE! Bible Study
STUDY AND REFLECTION GUIDE FOR SESSION 4
“Planning and Engagement for Abundant Life in Health”
Nehemiah 1:4- 2:20

OBJECTIVES:

- To trust God and the process for success
- To develop the discipline of careful assessment and planning
- To have an appreciation and joy for the work of making changes
- To invite others to engage with you in a spirit of cooperation

INTRODUCTION:

During September and October through Sessions 1-3 you explored what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God and to trust that God knows you well and will never desert you, that making a commitment is not easy because of the oppositions you may have to face and fears you may have to overcome. In the Mark 1:29-38 you explored the importance of quiet and prayer in order to discern just what your purpose and goal(s) are.

The Book of Nehemiah is largely a narrative written in first person. Thus, it is often referred to as the Nehemiah Memoir. In Session 4 you will study and do some reflecting on the Book of Nehemiah in chapters 1-5. You will journey with Nehemiah through the physical and spiritual preparedness he needed to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that were destroyed with the Babylonian invasion of the Province of Judah and the return of and resettlement of Jews upon returning from exile. Nehemiah knew the work it would take to accomplish this goal and so he maintained a rich prayer life before, during, and after he completed the building of the walls.

Like Nehemiah, you may have already discerned the work it is going to take to accomplish your goals for wellness. Even when you know that you will have to sacrifice some things and be diligent in other arenas, **success will only be attainable if you have carefully thought through all of what must be done to accomplish your goals for ALIVE! or any other serious life change you want to make. The fulfillment of the preparation and follow through on the activities of eating well and getting more movement into your life require careful planning.** Nehemiah is an excellent leader for this venture through Session 4. To God be the glory!

BACKGROUND:

In the opening of Chapter 1 Nehemiah documents what he learns of the poor condition of the Jews who managed to survive the destruction of the province of Judah and the city of Jerusalem after Babylon captured the city. For those Jews who escaped or who avoided exile, there is much hardship living in the destroyed city and shame over the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah also learns that the walls of the city have been destroyed and the wooden gates have been burned. He is heart sick over this news and grieved bitterly about the destruction. **He goes into a time of prayer and fasting. By the time he finishes this time, he has a plan.**

Nehemiah is the cup bearer for the king of Persia, King Artaxerxes. He is, therefore, responsible for selecting the king’s wine and tasting the wine in the cup before the king to assure that the wine is not poisoned. He also is charged with providing companionship for the king. Shortly after Nehemiah received



the news about Judah, the king recognized the sad expression of the face of the man who cared for him. So the king, realizing that his sadness was a “*sadness of the heart*” inquired about the reason for such sadness. Nehemiah, although very afraid, explained, “*May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lays waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?*” When the king asked what he was requesting, Nehemiah replies, “*If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.*” King Artaxerxes not only allowed him to go but sent letters to the governors of the provinces through which he must pass in order to reach Judah. Further, the king sent officers of the army and cavalry with Nehemiah to assure his protection. The king also sent a letter to Asaph, the director of the king’s forest directing him to give Nehemiah all that he needed in timber for the rebuilding of the gates of the temple fortress, the wall of the city, and for the house he would live in while in Judah. Nehemiah recalled with this memoir journal entry that, “*And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.*”

NEHEMIAH, Chapters 1-5

The success of any project requires work – mental, physical, and spiritual – if it is to be successful. Nehemiah’s approach to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall and gates required discipline, prayer, and a spirit of cooperation and commitment to achieve this mighty work. So you, too, will have to persevere in order to accomplish life-giving goals for yourself. You are so worth the effort! The components needed for a successful process include:

- **Prayer – Nehemiah 1:4-11** – Nehemiah’s prayer has distinct components although it is not noticed as any specific genre of prayer. It is similar to “*the communal prayer of lament, but there is no explicit complaint section*”¹ --which most prayer of lament have. Nehemiah’s prayer consists of six components:
 - “V. 5, Address to God
 - V. 6a, Appeal for God to hear
 - VV. 6b-7, Confession of sin by the people and by Nehemiah
 - VV. 8-9, Remembrance of God’s promise to Israel
 - V. 10, Identification of the people who are the recipients of the promise,
 - V.11, Petition for an answer and for the success of Nehemiah’s mission”²

You may have other approaches to prayer when petitioning Our Lord or when interceding for someone. This form is offered because it means that you must consciously consider not only Whom you are addressing (**v. 5**), but you let God know that you are asking for something specific – for God to hear you (**v. 6a**). So often we go to God because we need him to hear our aching hearts or our fears. Asking God specifically for His ear means that you want to engage in a spiritual connection around something very serious for which you need God’s power to act.

It is cleansing to come before God humbly and confess your sins and that of those whom you value so that you claim your part in any sin or disobedience to the God of your creation (vv.6b-7). While your interest is not in God’s promise to Israel (**vv. 8-9**), there are many scriptures where God

¹ The New Interpreter’s Bible, Abington Press, Nashville, 1999, , Vol. 3, Klein, Ralph W., Nehemiah, p. 750

² Ibid, p. 750



tells us of His love, forgiveness, and compassion for us His children, made in His image and likeness. In 2 Chronicles 7:14-15, God promises, *“If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land (their bodies, their relationships, their finances). Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer offered in this place.”* **When it comes to our health, it can be hard for us to admit that we have sinned against God by our inattentiveness to what we do and do not eat, or by the portion sizes we eat. We may be allowing our limbs to stiffen and muscles to get lax because we do not want to take the time or energy to walk for 15 minutes a day or to climb the stairs to your office on the third floor. Even if our health does not allow us to do a great amount of walking or climbing, have we ignored the advice of our doctors regarding those active and passive exercises that we can do to strengthen or maintain the muscle tone we do have and to eat more vegetables and fruits so that our digestive system can stay healthy? It is difficult to admit that we have mishandled what God has “fearfully and wonderfully” made.**

As you contemplate what you need to do to be a recipient of God’s promise (v.10) consider what you need to change in your eating or life habits. Here is the chance to be really specific about what you believe is needed. **God already knows what is needed, but you saying and admitting your needs will help you gain clarity on what you need to do. It will also claim and change what you need God to strengthen in you for your journey toward better health (and other) behaviors.**

Asking God for an answer and for the success of your mission (v.11) to better health behaviors, meal planning, release from your addiction to sweets/chocolate, or other *flesh* appetites are ways of opening you to be humble enough to hear and try good ideas from experts in health and from the experiences and advice of others journeying with you in your small group. **Further, asking God for answers to your questions and concerns about better health behaviors opens your consciousness to hear more directly the Spirit of God in you that is wisdom beyond your immediate understanding. Prayer works when done with an open heart and a humble and willing spirit.**

- **Neh. 2:1-5 – Sacrifice --** Nehemiah was willing to give up a fine position with the king to go back to uncertainty, opposition, and danger to rebuild the wall and the gates to Jerusalem. **To accomplish your goals for continued or improved health behaviors, you will have to sacrifice some things. Take to time to consider just what you will have to sacrifice for the sake of improved health. Are you worth the effort?**
- **Neh. 2:6-10 – Humility and Truthfulness to those who might support your efforts --** Nehemiah was fearful when he responded to King Artaxerxes, yet was humble and firm in his request to go back to Judah, to *“the city of my ancestors’ graves...”* King Artaxerxes made a clear way for Nehemiah to travel with safe passage to Judah and for the time needed to complete his mission.

Nehemiah was straight forward in his request to go to Judah for the work he wanted to do. Yet, his approach to the king was with respect. **It is wise to remain humble and grateful as you learn more about how to get and stay healthy by eating healthy foods and movement. Living the example is a better approach to teaching others what they can do to be healthy rather than by lecturing them or trying to force them to do as you do.**

It is also important to be humble and truthful with yourself about your current state of health – body, mind, and spirit. If you are, then you can look the “demon” (e.g., shame, fear, lack of discipline) in the face and say boldly to these demons, ***“No longer can you dominate my spirit, my***



temple of God's Spirit. Be gone!" Calling attention to your behaviors that need help is important so that you know what you must change for abundant life. Then, claim your strengths and supports so that you can move forward with mindful confidence.

- **Neh. 2:11-16 – Planning for what must be done** – When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, he told no one why he was there. In the dark of night he toured the broken wall and the destroyed gates to determine the amount of damage and determined what needed to be done to restore the wall and gates. It was only after the **assessment** did he take the **action** of telling what he discovered and his **plan** for fixing the wall and gates to those whose cooperation he would need for the work to be done. **Careful planning is essential for any sustained success.**

Two essential parts of planning for improved health or any other change are to: 1) **assess what needs to be changed**, and then 2) **decide what action is needed** to make the changes happen. For example, if you want to eat more vegetables and fewer carbohydrates (sugars and starches) and fats, what will you have to **assess** in your kitchen cupboards and refrigerator to promote this dietary change? **What action(s) will have to be done to prepare your kitchen for your new approach to food and meals? What resources do you have to help you know what vegetables are in season so that you can keep your costs low or reduced? Planning ahead will reduce the amount of work and tension around meal planning for success. Pray for the self-discipline you will need to follow through with your plan.**

- **Neh. 2:17-18 – Gaining the cooperation of others** – Nehemiah took the action of telling those whose cooperation he needed about his plans to rebuild the wall and gates only after he had done his assessment. **Whose cooperation will you need for the important life changes you want to make? How will you lay out your plan to them?**
- **Nehemiah 2:19-20 – Handling the ridicule of others** – Nehemiah heard the mocking and ridicule of those who had no vested interest in his work or plans for the rebuilding of the wall and city gates. What was the strength in his reply to them? What will you have to claim to the nay-sayers regarding your new approach to living an abundant life? Like Nehemiah, rest in the sweet assurance of God being with you (Psalm 139). Know who and Whose you are and **CLAIM** your right to be whole, healthy, and vibrant.

REFLECTION:

What are the biggest hurdles to your success in developing new, healthy behavior patterns? What are you excited about when thinking about new possibilities for your abundant life of improved or better sustained health? What are the negative thoughts you are having about this new venture? Think about Nehemiah's first step in considering what he might do to rebuild the wall and gates of the city? Does his approach help you? Why or why not?



CLASS DISCUSSION (Small groups of 2 or 3)

1. Nehemiah was nervous about approaching the king to tell him what he wanted to do for “*the city of his ancestors’ graves.*” What gave him courage? What do you think pushed him past his fears?
2. Discuss a situation where someone you know was nervous, but had to approach someone about a needed change. What advice did you give that person about his/her nervousness or fear of talking to the other person? What advice would be helpful to you in talking to someone important to you about changes you want to take to change your eating (or other life change) habits?
3. What will be your biggest obstacle to meal planning and eating in ways that will support better health for you and others who sit at your table for meals?
4. Do you feel energized or frustrated by what you believe you need to do to organize and keep your resolve to eat healthy meals at least 80% of the time? Why?
5. What did Nehemiah do to get inspired for the work that lay ahead in the rebuilding of the wall and gates? What can you do to keep yourself inspired toward your new life goals?

FEEDBACK FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

CLOSING REMARKS AND PRAYER

