

# Living the Story

## A Study through Scripture

### *Introduction:*

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The catfish is what I remember the most. I have mentioned in these lessons that my grandparents (now my extended family) have a lake cabin on Possum Kingdom Lake. Every summer my sister and I would spend a week with my grandparents at the cabin. Granddaddy and I would always bait the trotline and then check it early morning. (Early morning to me. I think he had probably been up for several hours!) If we had something on our line, we would come back and clean it, then Grandmother would fry it up—in an old-fashioned cast iron skillet with real oil—for us to eat for lunch. The Duck Commander would be pleased!

I have searched my entire life for catfish that tastes as good as my grandmother's did and have never even come close. At some point, I determined that perhaps that catfish really wasn't as good as I thought it was, but instead it was really the memories and the moment I had in mind. In all honesty, it really was disappointing to come to that realization. I wanted—I still want—to be able to have those moments back.

Every time I read the book of Nehemiah, I think about my disappointment in discovering those catfish memories are just that, memories. I recognize it is not exactly the same, but I cannot help but think that Nehemiah felt some similar feelings as he looked around the city. I wonder if he saw a gate and thought about the arrival of someone he was expecting to see. As he saw a house where a friend had lived, if he thought about some great late night conversations that happened in that house. Everywhere he looked, nothing but bygone memories of a better time.

What stands out to me is Nehemiah's response, his prayer to God as he prepared to act. I want us to look at that prayer and perhaps find some themes we can use as we face those moments when we discover we or someone we love are no longer living in the glory of God.

### *Summary of the Text:*

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Notice that Nehemiah's first response to the news from his bother is to weep. Nehemiah is moved by the news he has heard. Even though, it appears, he has found favor in the eyes of the king, he heart longs for Jerusalem. To hear that Jerusalem is in disgrace is heartbreaking to Nehemiah. We discover in his prayer that he understands the reasons for Jerusalem to be in ruin. "We have acted very wickedly toward you" (1.7) he says. This is not an economic issue, a leadership issue, or even a happenstance; Nehemiah sees this completely as the people sinning against God.

Notice also that Nehemiah mourns, fasts, and prays. Obviously mourning ties closely to the weeping, but fasting is not often one of the ways we react to sin or problems. When is the last time you said: I am concerned about the moral fiber of today's youth, I think I need to spend a week fasting about that? Interestingly enough, we have just seen someone who does just that. (Well, fasts, not wrestles with the problems of today's youth.) Esther, when she decides to go in and see the king, does what? Has Mordecai have the nation fast. Fasting allows for a time of focus and preparation. In the case of Nehemiah, he not only was concerned about what he saw, he had a desire to do something about it. I believe that his time of fasting (and of prayer) allowed him the clarity to focus on the problem at hand, but more importantly, the solution that was needed.

Finally, we see that Nehemiah prays. The wording of the text indicates that he prayed in mourning and he also prayed as he prepared to move toward action. The prayer recorded in Nehemiah 1.5-11 gives us an insight to his thinking. First, Nehemiah calls on the power of God and *his* faithfulness. God, he says, you are great and awesome, and you keep

### LESSON #22

**Date:** 2/17/2013

**Text:** Nehemiah 1

**The Story:** Chapter 21

**The Big Picture:** Nehemiah serves as a great example of how to react to the news of someone in sin, as well as giving us a good plan for how to prepare to address that sin.

**Materials Needed:** none

the covenant of love. I do not think God needed Nehemiah to remind him of all of these things. Pretty sure God remembers when he makes a promise. But, for Nehemiah, it is a statement of faith, a reminder for Nehemiah and the people who God was. God, we know this is who you are and this is what you do.

Nehemiah then confesses his sins and the sins of the people. We could spend much time arguing the theology of confessing for other people and whether or not that "counts." In reality, Nehemiah is not trying to create a theological truth, he is simply trying to express that the people of Israel have fallen short of their part of the covenantal relationship they had with God.

Nehemiah then commits to return to God. Again, this is not to remind God of something he has forgotten as much as a statement of confession (think of confession as a synonym for proclamation). This is also a hint of the action to come. This is key, I think. How many times do I fall short of God then come up with my own plan for restoration. Or worse, how often do I blame God or someone else and then simply wait for God to take care of my issues. Think of it: Nehemiah affirms the promise of God to restore the people who return to him and then Nehemiah has the people do just that. Nehemiah knows what result he is looking for (one might even say he begins with the end in mind) and he knows this because he knows God is faithful to do what he has promised. When we live within God's reality, things tend to go the way God has promised. It is when we decide to create our own solutions that we find ongoing struggles.

I am hoping, by the way, that you and your group are familiar with the rest of Nehemiah. If you are not, please read it before group time. While we are not looking at the entire book in group, our group discussion makes fuller sense when we remember that which Nehemiah did. This includes rebuilding the walls and city, facing opposition, renewing the covenant, and also repenting as a nation for their sins.

*Preparing for the Group Time:*

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How do you react to areas of sin in your life and in the life of your group or church or nation? When is the last time you have wept over your sins or the sins of your "people?" (I use people here to mean you, your family, your group, church, and fellow employees. Any group that you identify yourself as a part.) Have you ever been depressed because of sins in your life?

How did you move forward from these? Have you ever fasted in preparation to address an issue in your life?

I would encourage you to spend some time looking at the ways Nehemiah's life can help shape how you live life with your group.

## Living the Story

Lesson #22  
Text: Nehemiah 1

### *Lesson Outline:*

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To start group, ask members to describe a place—perhaps a vacation place or family reunion—that they would like to return because of the joy they experienced at that place or event.

Now ask them if they have an example of a time when they returned to such a place only to discover it was nothing like they remembered it, perhaps it was rundown, or had become overpopulated. What feelings did they have to discover this “treasure” had been “ruined?”

Go through Discussion Questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

### *Discussion Questions:*

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What do you do when you hear bad news, for instance, something you see on a newscast or perhaps read in the paper? How does your reaction vary based on how “close to home” it is?

What do you do when you hear the sad news of someone you love who has fallen to sin?

Read Nehemiah 1

Given what you thought about in the above questions, how do you think Nehemiah would have handled this(these) situation(s)? How does this differ than your response?

What principles from what we see here in Nehemiah do you think can serve as an outline for you to respond to bad news in the future?

Can you address the sin you see in the lives of those you love if you do not mourn for that sin? [NOTE: We are assuming you are addressing the sin of someone you have a relationship with more than a sin you hear about in the life from someone halfway around the world.]

How does fasting affect the way you respond to times of sin in your life and in the life of others?

In what ways does a prayer affirming the goodness of God allow you to be better equipped to address sin in your life?

How does knowing the promises of God allow us a better understanding of the ways we move toward restoration when we have times of sin in our lives? How do these promises outline what our next steps might be?

### *For the Children:*

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For our children, an approach that focuses on “What do you do when you hear about other people doing bad things” may serve as the discussion starter. You might start with this question for your under-18 crowd, then be sure to point out highlights as you discuss the story of Nehemiah as you go through the text.

### *Living the Story:*

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I think that living out this story has to include a couple of things. First, we need to see and react to sin in the same way Nehemiah did. Too often I think we are willing to just allow things to go by without any sense of notice. This does not mean we berate everyone we feel are falling short of God’s call on their lives, but I think we all have had situation in

our lives and that we have heard about in the lives of others that we knew we should address, but chose to ignore it. If nothing else, the story of Nehemiah teaches us to notice and mourn the sin of our lives and the lives of others.

Then, we need to fast and pray as we prepare to address the situation. Too often we make plans and go boldly into places we should have only gone into covered with the prayer of God.

*Next Week:*

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Next week we return to the New Testament and look at several gospel stories of the beginning of Jesus' ministry (*The Story* chapter 22).