



Nehemiah: Overcoming Challenges
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First Responses When Challenges Hit

NEHEMIAH 1–2

We all know about reflexes. You sit on a table covered with white paper and wait with anticipation as the doctor takes a small, rubber-tipped instrument and gently taps your knee . . . *boing!* Your leg pops upward . . . almost by itself. This is a reflexive response. You don't think about it, you don't plan for it, you can't seem to stop it. It just happens.

In a very similar way, most of us have a reflexive response when life's challenges hit. We don't think about it, we don't plan it, we just respond . . . *boing!*

There are many possible reflexive responses to the challenges of life. When struggles come, some people respond by giving up. They just curl up in a ball and say, "I can't take it!" Others do the opposite; they get angry and lash out. Tough times in life bring out the worst in them. Still others respond to life's challenges with a cool indifference. They have developed a protective shell around their heart and nothing seems to bother them. And finally there are some who thrive on challenges, who say, "Bring it on." Such types love to figure out a way to press on even when life seems to press in against them.

Nehemiah was a normal human being who felt the same feelings all of us do. When the challenges of life came knocking at his door, he had some very specific responses. His reflexive actions helped him press through and propel him out on the other side with greater health and fruitfulness in his life. As we look at the ways Nehemiah responded to the challenges he faced, we can learn actions and patterns that would serve us well as we face the trials and tribulations that are part of our own everyday experience.

Making the Connection

1. What is one challenge you are facing during this season of your life?
2. Describe your reflexive response when challenges enter your life.

Knowing and Being Known

Read Nehemiah 1:1 – 11 and 2:1 – 20

3. What were some of the challenges Nehemiah encountered in these two chapters?
4. How would you describe the different ways Nehemiah responded to the challenges he faced?

Honest Emotions

Nehemiah was a strong, confident, and competent man. He was a gifted leader. And he had a tender heart. When he received the report that Jerusalem—the homeland of his ancestors—was in ruins, it grieved him deeply. Imagining the remnant of his people being persecuted and disgraced, scraping by in a city with no protective wall around it, he could not help himself; he wept and mourned.

Nehemiah's first response to the challenging news he received was an honest outpouring of emotion. He held nothing back. What an example for us as we face struggles and heartache in this world. We don't have to "act strong" or "be tough." Those who follow Jesus are free to express authentic feelings that well up inside us. Even Jesus, our perfect example in all things, wept when he heard that his friend Lazarus had died and when he saw Lazarus' sister, Mary, in mourning. God does not ask us to hide our emotions in times of pain and struggle. He invites us to express them to him and to others.

Read Nehemiah 1:1 – 4 and 2:1 – 3

5. For what reasons might we try to hide or bury our emotions when we face difficult times?

What are some potential consequences if we stuff our honest emotions and refuse to express them?

6. Name some appropriate ways we can express our emotions in times of struggle and challenge.

How can such expressions of emotions be healthy for us and for others?

Passionate Prayer

Along with tears and honest expression of emotion, Nehemiah prayed. He cried out to God with a passionate heart. All through the book of Nehemiah we will see this pattern in Nehemiah's life. A challenge would surface and he would pray. Before he took action, before he talked with others, before anything else ... prayer was his reflexive response.

How might our lives be different if our natural disposition was to pray when challenges came our way? Too often we find ourselves complaining or becoming discouraged. Sometimes we move into action, trying to solve the problem ourselves before talking with God. It is quite common to process our struggles with friends, getting lots of advice and counsel (and there is nothing wrong with this solution in its right time). But before we do anything else, prayer should be on our lips and in our heart. Once we have prayed, our actions can be directed by the hand of God, and then the counsel of others has a foundation on which to build.

Read Nehemiah 1:5 – 11

7. As you consider Nehemiah's prayer, reflect on *one* of the following:
 - How Nehemiah saw himself
 - What Nehemiah knew about his people and their relationship with God
 - Nehemiah's understanding of God
 - What Nehemiah wanted from God in his time of challenge

8. Using what you have learned from Nehemiah's prayer, take a moment to write a prayer in response to an area of challenge you are facing:
O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God . . .

How does praying help you in times of struggle and difficulty?

Share one aspect of the prayer you wrote and lifted up to God. What does your prayer reveal about what you understand about God or yourself?

9. What specific ways could your group members pray for you as you face this challenge?

Strategic Planning

After a time of mourning and honest expression of sorrow, Nehemiah poured his heart out to God in prayer. Then, as a natural response to the huge challenge he faced, Nehemiah began to make a whole series of plans. His heart was broken over the shameful condition of his people and the city of Jerusalem; he was not about to sit by idly and do nothing. But first, he would go through an intentional and strategic time of planning that would include himself, the king, and the people of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah models something every follower of Jesus needs to emulate. He was honest with his emotions and he prayed passionately. But he was also committed to move into action. Rather than just hope things would work out, Nehemiah thought through the implications, made a plan, and began to rally people to the cause. What a powerful picture of the partnership we all face every day! We pray for God to do what only he can do, and then we get ready to receive God's power to be instruments of his will in this world.

Read Nehemiah 2:1 – 18

10. Describe the focus and content of Nehemiah's plans in *one* of the following areas:

- How he communicated and worked with the king to set a process in motion for rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem (2:1–10)
- How he studied and assessed the situation in Jerusalem (2:11–16)
- How he communicated with the people in Jerusalem and motivated them to take part in the project (2:17–18)

11. Write down three or four simple actions or steps you could take to face your challenge with wisdom and strength. Let this be the start of your strategic plan.

What one item in your strategic plan could your group members keep you accountable for as you seek to implement it?

Celebrating and Being Celebrated

Read the following passages as a group:

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:32–36)

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “*Abba*, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:32–36)

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.” (Luke 10:21)

Pray together, thanking God that Jesus revealed what it meant to communicate authentic emotions. Ask God to give you courage to embrace and express emotions to him and to others.

Loving and Being Loved

Make a list of the prayer needs shared by your group members. Commit to make space at least three times in the coming week to pray for those in your group. Pray in the following ways:

- For them to express their feelings openly to God and to others
- For them to seek God's face consistently and passionately in prayer
- For them to receive the power of the Holy Spirit to stand strong in times of struggle and difficulty

Serving and Being Served

In Galatians 6 the apostle Paul writes:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for *each one should carry his own load*. (vv. 2–5, italics added)

In this short passage we learn that we are to carry our own *load* and also that we are to help carry each other's *burdens*. What a beautiful picture! None of us is to face our challenges on our own. As we carry what we can, and other followers of Jesus come alongside and carry what we cannot, we gain hope to overcome.

As you consider other group members' strategic plans to press through their challenges, how might you help carry any burdens that may be beyond a load they can bear?