

# *The Effect of Cooperation*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2<sup>nd</sup> in a four-part series

October 29 & 30, 2016

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*Luke 5:1–11 (CEB)*

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. <sup>2</sup>Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup>Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. <sup>4</sup>When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."

<sup>5</sup>Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets."

<sup>6</sup>So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting.

<sup>7</sup>**They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink.** <sup>8</sup>When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!" <sup>9</sup>**Peter and those with him** were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. <sup>10</sup>**James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too.**

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people."

<sup>11</sup>As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

*Nehemiah 2:9–20 (CEB)*

[Nehemiah, a Jewish exile and cupbearer to the king of Persia, has asked the king that he be allowed to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the walls of the city. The king agrees, gives him letters of safe passage, and even gives Nehemiah the needed building materials.]

<sup>11</sup>When I reached Jerusalem and had been there for three days, <sup>12</sup>I set out at night, taking only a few people with me. I didn't tell anyone what my God was prompting me to do for Jerusalem, and the only animal I took was the one I rode. <sup>13</sup>I went out by night through the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring to the Dung Gate so that I could inspect the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down, as well as its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.

<sup>14</sup>Then I went on to the Spring Gate and to the King's Pool. Since there was no room for the animal on which I was riding to pass, <sup>15</sup>I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and returned by entering through the Valley Gate.

<sup>16</sup>The officials didn't know where I had gone or what I was doing. I hadn't yet told the Jews, the priests, the officials, the officers, or the rest who were to do the work. <sup>17</sup>So I said to them, "You see the trouble that we're in: Jerusalem is in ruins, and its gates are destroyed by fire! Come, let's rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we won't continue to be in disgrace." <sup>18</sup>I told them that my God had taken care of me, and also told them what the king had said to me.

"Let's start rebuilding!" they said, and they eagerly began the work.

<sup>19</sup>But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and made fun of us. "What are you doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

<sup>20</sup>"The God of heaven will give us success!" I replied. "As God's servants, we will start building. But you will have no share, right, or claim in Jerusalem."

*Cooperate, cooperate, cooperate ~ that is God's way!*

One of the hardest things for us to come to understand about our faith is that it is principally about the "we" not the "me." Americans have always been an individualistic lot and, despite cultural changes, still are. I suppose it reflects that, as a nation, we were born out of England, where nearly four hundred years ago, John Donne had to remind his fellow

Englishmen that “no man is an island.”<sup>1</sup> I do know it is always eye opening for Christians to learn that in his correspondence, the apostle Paul spoke mainly to the communities of believers. His “you” is almost always a “y’all” and his letters should be read that way.

### Hearing God

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't tell anyone about his mission. But he's got one and he's confident that God is behind it: “I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.”

When I read the stories of the Old Testament prophets, I'm sometimes a bit envious. They have such a strong sense of purpose. Their dreams and visions fuel them and the work they do. I wonder what the visions were really like. What did Isaiah and the rest see? What would I have seen had I been there with them? And the visions of the prophets provided vision for the people. The prophets brought the people purpose and direction from God. Their prophetic vision kept the people from wandering aimlessly in life, from casting aside all restraint and living only in the moment. The prophets called the people back to God, back to God's way and a life lived before God.

Nehemiah was not a prophet. His mission to Jerusalem was not born in a vision. He prayed and, in his own words, God put it on his heart. Nehemiah was sure what God wanted from him and seemed sure of the best way to go about it. Whatever Nehemiah felt in his heart, it emboldened him to ask a lot of the Persian king.

What I like about this story is that, frankly, I can identify with Nehemiah more than I can with the visions of the OT prophets, such as Isaiah's commissioning in Isaiah 6. I've never had a vision or a dream remotely like Isaiah describes. But God has placed purpose and direction into my heart as God placed it into Nehemiah's heart.

This story helps us to see that perhaps God doesn't really speak so differently now than he did in the Old Testament. It's a mistake to read the Old Testament depictions of people's experiences and see them as completely foreign to our own. Abraham heard God. Moses heard God. Nehemiah heard God. You and I can hear God too.

We see this even in Jesus' call of Peter in Luke 5. It is easy to see the entire story as being about Peter. What will he do? Will he do as Jesus says? Will he follow Jesus? But it isn't just about Peter; all those with him are involved too. They rush to help him pull up his nets with the miraculous catch. They too are amazed at what they see and hear. These men were not just random passers-by. They were Peter's partners and co-workers and may have been so for some time. They may even have been relatives of Peter.

The point is that they worked *together* and they would continue that cooperation as Jesus' disciples, for James and John, the sons of Zebedee and Peter's partners, joined Peter in becoming part of Jesus' closest disciples, the “Twelve.”

### *The “we”*

From our beginning, the people of God have been a community of those who worship, trust, and obey the Lord God. There are countless stories across Scripture that demonstrate the cooperation that should mark God's people in all we do. This is easily seen in some of the largest undertakings, the building projects.

People are builders and always have been. Not long after Noah and the flood, the humans began building a great tower that would reach upward to the heavens (Genesis 11). This tower would enable them to climb into the sky with the gods, symbolizing their rebellious determination to be like gods themselves. I guess we could say this was a story of cooperation run amok!

When God revealed himself to Moses and gave Israel the Law at Mt. Sinai, God also gave them instructions to build a home for God, a holy place in which God would dwell with them (see Exodus 25). This tabernacle, a moveable tent, was the home for the ark of the covenant, but it also symbolized the Israelites' covenantal life with God.

Hundreds of years later, God told his people that the time had come to build him a proper home, a temple of marble and gold, in Jerusalem. And the Israelites poured everything they had into it (see 1 Chronicles

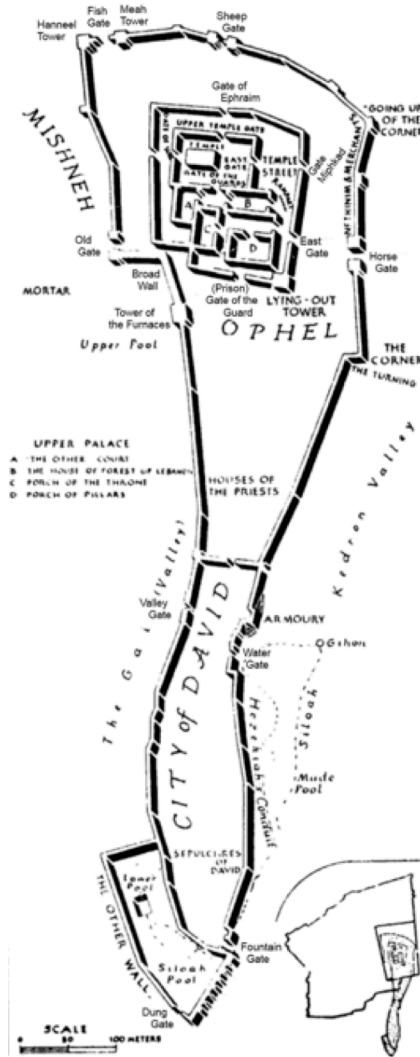
<sup>1</sup> From Donne's Meditation XVII written in 1623. His point in these famous paragraphs is that our lives are always and everywhere bound up with the lives of others, in life and in death.

29). They understood the significance of transforming the tabernacle into a permanent home for God.

### *The walls of Jerusalem*

Tragically, when Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem in 587/6 BC, he not only tore down the city walls, he destroyed the temple. The walls symbolized Jerusalem's political independence; the temple was the center of the conquered Israelites' religious life. When tens of thousands of Jews went off into exile, a burning hulk of a dead city was left, populated only by the poor and least educated.

Yet, about five decades later, in 539BC, King Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered the Babylonians, issued a decree that the Jewish exiles begin returning home. For the biblical writers, Cyrus's decree was not a lucky turn for the Jews. Rather, it was God using Cyrus to send God's people home.



Jerusalem post-exile,  
with Nehemiah's walls

Persian king. He was even accused of plotting a revolt. That, of course, wasn't what Nehemiah had in mind. He simply wanted to restore Jerusalem to a city suitable as the home for God's temple. So he prayed for strength and resolve.

And, under Nehemiah's leadership, God's people built new walls, just as they had rebuilt a temple under the leadership of Ezra. Sure, there was opposition, but there was far more cooperation and, more importantly, God saw to it that his people would have a place to live and to worship; that would be the net effect of Nehemiah's return.

But God wasn't done there. When the people began to rebuild the temple, their work aroused suspicion, anger, and opposition from their neighbors. The "enemies" of Judah understood quite well what the rebuilding of the temple would mean. Yet, Darius, the Persian king at the time, eventually gave orders that the temple project must be allowed to proceed (520BC; see Ezra 5-6).

Which brings us to Nehemiah, who went to the Persian king at the time (444BC), Artaxerxes, and asked permission to return to Jerusalem and oversee the rebuilding of the city walls. In a move that again angered the Jew's neighbors, Artaxerxes, not only gave the ok, he ordered that help be provided to the project.

If you read today's Scripture passage closely you'll see that Nehemiah wants to rebuild the city wall so that the people will "no longer suffer disgrace" (2:17). After all, how could the city that God had chosen be left in ruins? City walls were enormously important in the ancient world, in that they kept prospective conquerors out or at least forced them into maintaining a lengthy siege. It was the custom that when a king visited a city, he would be met outside the city walls by a delegation and then escorted through the city walls and into the city.<sup>2</sup>

Given all that, it isn't surprising that some saw Nehemiah's rebuilding work as signifying Jewish independence from the

<sup>2</sup>This was exactly what the crowds did with Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

*Even now, we build*

Jerusalem needed city walls for protection. We at St. Andrew build because we need a place to worship, to learn, and to meet. To meet our growing needs, we reconfigure some of the space we have and then build more. It has been that way for thirty years; may it be that way for the next thirty.

But, like Jerusalem's city wall, our campus also symbolizes dreams and hopes. It is a statement about what we think matters. Though many churches are built without them now, I like that St. Andrew has a 175-foot high steeple, beckoning the world to this place and to the risen Christ. The attention paid on our campus to the beauty of our natural surroundings proclaims our confidence that such beauty and order bears the fingerprints of God. As in all else that we do, when we build, we strive to be the people that God has called us to be and to do the job he has set before us.

And we do all this *together*.

### The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

In our Bibles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are placed right after 1 and 2 Chronicles, for all four books tell one long story: the story of Israel, from Adam (the first person in the lengthy genealogies that begin Chronicles) to the exiles' return from Babylon and the rebuilding of their covenantal life in Israel. The books end the story in about 430BC.

But the four books are not really four books at all. 1 and 2 Chronicles are merely two halves of a single book, Chronicles. Similarly, Ezra and Nehemiah are two halves of a single work. And it's likely that all of it was compiled and written by a single author or a single writing team. The author pulled together a variety of materials in compiling the work: royal decrees, various lists, letters, and first person narratives from Ezra and Nehemiah themselves. For example, most of Ezra-Nehemiah is written in Hebrew, but some is in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the day, as the book's author simply copied in some official Aramaic documents.

Not only does Ezra-Nehemiah preserve important history from the century after the return from exile began in 539BC, the books teach that the return was God's doing. God moved Cyrus to order the Jews return to Jerusalem. God used Darius the Great to order the rebuilding of the temple. And God used Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. A good question to consider is whether and how God uses world powers today to further his purposes. It is always tempting to see much of the Old Testament as completely foreign to our own experiences and even to the way God works in the world. But perhaps, we need to learn to see that God still works in surprising ways today.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Nehemiah took a lot of risks in returning to Jerusalem and leading the rebuilding project. Anytime we undertake a large and important project, such as our next building program, we take risks. What does risk-taking really have to do with being a Christian, with being a genuine disciple? How does risk-taking help us to become more trusting and faithful? What role does cooperation play in this? Can it help to lessen the risks?
2. You might begin this week by making a list of risks that you think God might expect Christians to take. What are some? What do we risk? What do we not risk as we seek to be genuine disciples? If you have trouble coming up with a list, consider whether we might be blinded to some of the risks. If you think that being Christian is about no more than being happy and being nice, then it might be hard to see much risk in it. Yet, the Bible is replete with stories of people who had to take big risks if they were to stay true to God. Just remember Nehemiah going to the king or Daniel in the lions' den. We are not going to be asked to climb into a den of lions, but still, how can we go about learning how better to discern the risks that God hopes we will take?

## *Weekly Prayer List*

During the week, jot down the names of people who need your prayers.  
Such prayers bind you to them in the presence of God.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, Nehemiah 1:1 – 3:32</b> Nehemiah prays for help and returns to Jerusalem to begin work.	<b>Tuesday, Nehemiah 4:1 – 5:19</b> Providing for the defense of the city and dealing with internal threats
<b>Wednesday, Nehemiah 6:1 – 7:73a</b> The wall is completed.	<b>Thursday, Nehemiah 7:73b – 9:37</b> Ezra reads the Law and the people share a great day of repentance.
<b>Friday, Nehemiah 9:38-10:39</b> The people make a firm agreement to keep the Law.	<b>Saturday, Nehemiah 11:1 – 13:31</b> The climax of Nehemiah's work and related matters

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Monday Evening Class

**We have just begun the book of Genesis**

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

**We are studying the Gospel of Luke**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

These classes will not meet the week of Oct 30, as Scott will be leading a trip to Israel.

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## Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

### The Current Series: *Our Family Tree*

The story of Christianity and its denominations

While Scott is in Israel, the class will be taught by Len Wilson, our new Creative Director. He will be teaching a three-week series based on his book, *Think Like a Five Year Old*, which presents a theology of creativity. Len's series will continue through Nov 6.

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Sermon Notes

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