

**SESSION 4****Nehemiah****MEETING AIM**

To remind young people that God's promises endure, even in times that feel hopeless.

**BIBLE PASSAGE**

Nehemiah 1-2

**BACKGROUND**

Judah's exile has lasted decades, and for those left behind in Jerusalem, times have been tough. Jerusalem is a shadow of its former state. The walls lie in ruins, thanks to the invading army and subsequent rule of the Babylonians, and then the Persians. Nehemiah, one of God's people in exile in the Persian Empire, hears about the terrible state of the city of God and knows that he has to do something about it. He remembers the promises God made in the past. God wants to restore his people - what does this promise of restoration mean to young people today?

**+ GATHERING TIME**

**You will need:** refreshments; a comfortable place to sit and chat

As the young people arrive, serve them the refreshments you have provided. Try to have something other than squash and biscuits. If you have the facilities, you could make toast and tea. Could you provide a healthy option? Chat together about the events of the week, and ask if anyone has any successes or failures to share! Ask the group if they have ever had to make a comeback from a bad place. Share a story from your own life, if you have an appropriate one.

**+ BUILDING GAME**

**You will need:** building blocks - wooden ones, Lego, Duplo or other makes of construction toy (have a range of different kinds and enough for each young person or pair to build a tower); sponge balls

Give each young person or pair a set of building blocks. Challenge them to make a sturdy tower that will withstand an attack! Allow a time limit of five minutes for the group to do this. Then compare the towers.

One by one, attack the structures by throwing sponge balls at them. Which ones

stand firm? The ones made of connecting blocks will last longer than those made of simple wooden blocks. How did the young people feel if their tower collapsed?

**+ BIBLE EXPLORATION**

**You will need:** Bibles; large sheet of paper; marker pens

Give out the Bibles and ask the group to turn to Nehemiah 1. Remind the young people about where the people of God are. Use this paragraph or describe it in your own words:

The people of God ignored him. They said they followed him, but their actions didn't match their words. God offered them a way back to him, again and again, but they turned their backs on him. In the end, God let them be conquered by the mighty Babylonian Empire. Thousands of people were taken into exile in Babylon, leaving only a few people behind in Jerusalem. The city was a mess. The people of God were a mess. Had God completely abandoned them?

Introduce Nehemiah to the group, and describe what happened when his brother Hanani told him about Jerusalem. Then read Nehemiah 1:4-11 together. Chat together about what Nehemiah prayed and why they think he prayed that.

On your large sheet of paper, write "Turn away from God" on one half, and "Turn back to God" on the other. Ask one half of the group to read Deuteronomy 4:25-27 and write on the paper what God says will happen when his people turn from him. Ask the other half to read Deuteronomy 4:29-31 and write what will happen if God's people turn back to him. These are the promises Nehemiah talks about in Nehemiah 1:8-9. What can the group remember of God's promises to Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon?

Read Nehemiah 2:1-10 and ask the group what emotions Nehemiah must have been feeling as he spoke to Artaxerxes. Why might he have felt like this? If the young people are struggling to think about this, get them to write out lots of different emotions on the reverse of the large sheet of paper and then choose some ideas from this list.

Finally read Nehemiah 2:11-20. Ask the group why they think it was important for Nehemiah to rebuild the walls.

**+ CHATTING TOGETHER**

Ask the young people these questions, making sure everyone has the chance to contribute:

- What's your favourite part of this whole story?

- What's important about this story?
- How is God restoring his people?
- Have you done anything that needs restoration?
- What do you want to do after hearing this story?

**+ CREATIVE RESPONSE**

**You will need:** art materials; paper

Show the group the art materials you have gathered together and give everyone a sheet of paper. Encourage the young people to use images and / or words to create a picture that reflects their response to this story and God's desire to restore his people. Allow as much time as you can, so that the group can fully respond to the story.

As everyone is working, chat about the story, about God's desire to restore his people and what that means for the young people today. Once the group has finished, give space for people to share what they have done, but don't force anyone to speak.

**+ PRAYER**

**You will need:** different kinds of crosses - holding crosses, a cross from your church, ones made from branches or sticks, jewellery - whatever you can get hold of

Lay out the different crosses around your space. Ask the young people to go around the room and look at the crosses. Encourage them to pick them up, compare one with another and to think about what the cross symbolises. Remind the group of the big rescues God undertook - from Egypt, from exile - as well as the smaller ones - Daniel and his friends, Joseph in prison, baby Moses from the anger of the pharaoh.

Say that the cross represents God's ultimate rescue. Describe something of what Jesus did on the cross means to you, how you turned to God and he restored you. Have a time of reflection for the group to consider what this means to them. If anyone wants to share, then give space for them to do so. Then finish with a time of prayer, thanking God for restoring his people after their exile, and for restoring them.

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