

# Nehemiah Sermons

## NEHEMIAH SERMONS

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### NEHEMIAH INTRODUCTION: Knowing How to Pray

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I checked my notes and realized that it's been a year since I gave you a Bible quiz. Here's a new test for you. I'll give you a hint – all the questions have to do with the Old Testament.

#### **Who was the greatest comedian in the Bible?**

Samson. He brought the house down.

#### **Who was the greatest male financier in the Bible?**

Noah. He was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation.

#### **Who was the greatest female financier?**

Pharaoh's daughter. She went down to the bank of the Nile and drew out a little prophet.

#### **Who is the greatest babysitter mentioned in the Bible?**

David. He rocked Goliath to a very deep sleep.

#### **Who is the shortest man in the Bible?**

Knee-high-miah

This morning we're kicking off an 11-part series based on the book of Nehemiah that we're calling, "A Time to Build." Nehemiah is one of the great characters of the Old Testament, but perhaps not as well known as some others.

I'd like to give you an assignment at the beginning of the message today. I'd like you to read a tantalizing trilogy – begin with the book of Esther, where you will discover how God first began to move in the midst of Israel's captivity by raising up Esther, a young Jewish maiden, to the throne in Persia. It was her husband who is Artaxerxes in the opening chapters of Nehemiah. Then, read the book of Ezra, which in the Hebrew Bible is linked with the book of Nehemiah as the same book. When you're finished with Ezra, then jump into Nehemiah and read it carefully. Because of the richness of this book, you will get more out of this series if you do some homework each week.

I'm excited about what God is going to teach us as we travel through this book. We're going to learn things that will help us personally, we'll discover principles that will guide us as we move into a time of building here at PBC, and we'll end up understanding a critical part of Old Testament history.

### A History Lesson

Let me briefly set the historical context. In Genesis 12, God called Abram to leave his country and to follow Him to another land. As Abraham obeyed, his descendents multiplied. The Israelites were later enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years until God called them out under the leadership of Moses.

Eventually they were allowed to enter the land God had promised them, Canaan. Hundreds of years passed during which the nation experienced struggles, faithlessness, and wrestling with God. The high point of Israel's history came when David, a godly king, was called to sit on the throne. For forty years David expanded the nation in both breadth of influence and knowledge of God.

But things went downhill from there. After his son, King Solomon died; Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom had ten tribes and was referred to as Israel. The Southern Kingdom had two tribes and was referred to as Judah. Because of their disobedience, the Assyrians conquered Israel and the ten tribes were scattered and became known as the "ten lost tribes of Israel."

Even though the southern tribes saw all this happen, they, too, continued to rebel against God. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were knocked down, and the temple was burned. The people were deported and were forced into slavery again. Their history had come full circle. The city was left in ruins. Here's a picture of some of the devastation of Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped. I imagine Jerusalem looking a lot like this.

It must have been a traumatic thing for the Jews to see death and destruction and then be forced to leave their homeland and travel about 1,000 miles to a foreign country. Many of God's prophets predicted that this captivity would not destroy the nation; it would eventually end and the people would be allowed to go back home. Daniel understood this truth when he was reading the book of Jeremiah.

God did not forsake His people. He allowed the Persians to take over the Babylonians and he moved King Cyrus to make a decree to let some of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished and desolate. Living there was dangerous and difficult and sorrowful.

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After the decree of Cyrus, 50,000 Israelites returned to Judah with Zerubbabel and began rebuilding the temple. Unfortunately, they got discouraged and quit. God then sent them the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them to finish the project. Ezra was also sent to help restore their spiritual fervor.

Finally Nehemiah tells his story in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. By now Persia had replaced Babylon as the region's great power, and the Persians ruled with a very different means of control. The commitment of the Persians was to resettle captured people in their native lands. Conquered peoples could act with a degree of autonomy as long as they supported the state and paid their taxes. As we start the book of Nehemiah, God is about to instigate another movement back to the Promised Land.

The book falls into several divisions. The first six chapters cover the rebuilding of the wall, while chapters 7 through 10 deal with the renewing of Jerusalem's worship with the final chapters addressing the repopulation and revival of God's people.

Are you ready to dive in? I can hardly wait! This morning we're going to begin exactly where we should always begin – with an emphasis upon prayer. Someone asked me this week what I was preaching on. When I told him that it was on prayer, he said, "Didn't you just preach on prayer a couple months ago?" I told him yes but that we can never get enough of it.

Prayer is one of the overriding themes of the book and the secret to Nehemiah's success. The prayer in chapter one is the first of 12 different prayers recorded in the book. It begins with prayer in Persia and closes with prayer in Jerusalem. His prayers are filled with adoration in chapters 8 and 9; thanksgiving in chapter 12; confession in chapters 1 and 9; petition in chapters 1 and 2. There are prayers of anguish, joy, protection, dependence and commitment. It's a story of compassionate, persistent, personal and corporate prayer. Prayer gives Nehemiah perspective; it widens his horizons, sharpens his vision and dwarfs his anxieties.

Nehemiah's public life was the outflow of his personal life, which was steeped in, and shaped by, a lifestyle of prayer. His devotion to God, his dependence on Him for everything, and his desire for the glory of God found equal expression. He knew that only ventures that are begun in prayer and bathed in prayer throughout are likely to be blessed.

## NEHEMIAH 1: The Process of Prayer

I want to suggest this morning that Nehemiah went through a process of prayer that has great application and relevance to us today. Please turn in your Bible to Nehemiah 1.

The first place Nehemiah started was with a concern about the problem in Neh 1:1-4.

### 1. CONCERN About the Problem.

We know from Neh 1:11 that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. His job was to taste the king's wine before the king drank it to make sure it was not poisoned. I jokingly told some of the people in the parade that I was the cupbearer when I was sucking down

a pop-ice while I was walking! I didn't want anyone to get poisoned so I just sampled all 4,000 of them!

As cupbearer, Nehemiah had a great job. He had intimate access to royalty, political standing, and a place to live in the palace. It was a cushy job that provided everything he needed. And yet, when one of his brothers returned from a road trip to Jerusalem, Neh 1:2 says that Nehemiah "questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem." The word, "question" means "to inquire or demand" an answer. Nehemiah was greatly concerned about what was happening in Jerusalem. He could have insulated himself if he chose to, but he didn't. He sought them out and wanted to hear the first-hand report.

This is an important starting point. It's so easy for us to stay uninvolved and unaware. Some of us don't want to even think about stuff that's going on in our own lives, much less take the time to investigate what is happening in the lives of others. Even though Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, he had heard stories about it, and knew that his ancestors had been led away in chains when Babylon destroyed it. He was doing what Jeremiah 51:50 instructed the exiles to do: "...Remember the Lord in a distant land, and think on Jerusalem."

As he thought on Jerusalem, he listened to the report in Neh 1:3 that the survivors were in great trouble and disgrace, that the wall of Jerusalem was in shambles and that its gates had been burned with fire. As he tried to imagine the shame in the city of David, he could barely stand it. The phrase, "great trouble" meant that the people had "broken down and were falling to pieces." Three words summarize the bad news: remnant, ruin, and reproach.

Nehemiah was broken over the complacency of the people of Jerusalem. They were living in ruins and they accepted it. They were willing to walk around the devastation instead of being concerned enough to do something about their situation. Friends, nothing is ever going to change in your life, in the life of this church, or for that matter, our nation, until we become concerned about the problem. Some of you have become complacent about the way your life is going. You're living with rubble and it doesn't even bother you any more. Are you ready to allow God to do some rebuilding? If so, you need to become concerned about the problem by listening to the facts – even if you don't want to hear them.

When he heard this report, he hit the ground and began to weep in Neh 1:4. The meaning behind this word is that he "bemoaned and lamented," much like Jesus did when he cried out in painful tears when he observed the hard hearts of those in Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). He also fasted. In the Old Testament, fasting was only required once a year, but here we see Nehemiah refraining from food for several days. In fact, we know from comparing the different dates in this book that he wept, fasted, and prayed for four months! These are all signs of humility and show his deep concern for the problem. (**See related discussion on Fasting**)

Do you need some rebuilding today? Are your defenses broken down such that you are allowing some practices and sins to control your life? Before you can ask God to rebuild, you must first become concerned about the problem.

## **2. CONVICTION about God's Character.**

After Nehemiah becomes concerned, he next expresses his conviction of God's character in Neh 1:5: "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands."

Nehemiah called God "Lord." He recognized the Lord as his master – in Neh 1:6, he refers to himself as God's servant. He then refers to His Lord as the "God of Heaven." He acknowledged that his God was beyond the earthly realm and above all other gods. He next refers to Him as "great and awesome." God deserves to be honored, revered and feared by all because of who He is. Finally, Nehemiah describes God as the one who "keeps His covenant of love." God is truthful, faithful and can be trusted.

His boss, the king, was the greatest and mightiest on earth, but compared to God, Artaxerxes was nothing. Nehemiah was in Susa and his concern is in far off-Jerusalem, but both cities – one rich, the other poor, one strong the other weak, one proud, the other broken – were like tiny specks of dust under the vast canopy of God's heaven. Friends, when we go to God in prayer, things get put into their proper perspective.

Because of his conviction about God's character, Nehemiah knew that God was not only able, but also willing to respond to his prayer. But he also knew that he did not deserve to have God treat him favorably. That's why the next phase of his prayer is a confession of sin. Like Job, his encounter with an awesome God brings him to the place of repentance and confession. Job writes in 42:5-6: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

## **3. CONFESSION of sin.**

After becoming concerned about the problem, and expressing his conviction about God's character, Nehemiah is now moved to admit his sin and the sins of his people in Neh 1:6-7: "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses."

It's one thing to be concerned and to even have a firm conviction of who God is. It's another thing to actually confess. Many of us never get this far. We might feel bad about our sins or be concerned about how things are going. Our theology may even be correct. We know things are bad and that God is good but we hesitate at this next step.

Nehemiah boldly asks God to hear his prayer, which literally means, "to hear intelligently with great attention." I see at least three key ingredients in his confession of sin.

- **Intensity.** Overwhelmed by concern about sin and in awe of God's character, Nehemiah gave himself to prolonged petition and intercession. He prayed day and night, spending every moment of time in God's presence. This is very similar to Psalm 88:1 where we read, "O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you."
- **Honesty.** Nehemiah made no attempt to excuse the Israelites for their sin and actually owned his part in their culpability. He surveyed the grim record of Israel's past and present failure, and he knew that he was not exempt from blame. Notice that he prays, "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself...we have acted very wickedly...we have not obeyed..." This is remarkable to me. It would have been easy for Nehemiah to look back and blame his ancestors but instead he looked within and blamed himself. It's so easy for us to blame others, isn't it? We need to learn from Nehemiah and confess honestly, "Lord, I am wrong. I not only want to be part of the answer, I confess that I'm part of the problem."
- **Urgency.** Nehemiah recognized that sin is not merely a stubborn refusal to obey certain rules, but is also a defiant act of aggressive personal rebellion against a holy God. He knows that they "have acted very wickedly." He didn't try to candy-coat his sin. He owned it and called it what it was.

The story is told about some Boeing employees who decided to steal a life raft from one of the 747s they were working on. They were successful in getting it out of the plant but they forgot one thing. The raft comes with an emergency locator that is automatically activated when the raft is inflated. So, when they took the raft out on the Stilliguamish River, they were quite surprised by a Coast Guard helicopter homing in on the emergency locator.

Trying to hide our sins from God is impossible. He knows all about them. Numbers 32:23 reminds us that, "...you may be sure that your sin will find you out." Friends, we need to recognize that all sin, those things we have blatantly done or carelessly committed, or those things that we have left undone, must be identified and then confessed. Are you trying to hide anything today? It's better to confess it now than to wait until your sin exposes you!

#### **4. CONFIDENCE in God's Promises.**

While Nehemiah spends time in broken confession, he doesn't wallow in a prolonged introspective examination of his failures and those of his brothers and sisters. He owns what he did wrong and then he quickly expresses confidence in God's promises in Neh 1:8-10: "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.' They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and mighty hand."

In this part of his prayer, Nehemiah recalls the words of Moses about the danger of Israel's apostasy and the promise of divine mercy. His words are a skillful mosaic of great Old Testament warnings and promises, with quotes coming from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Psalm 130.

What was the promise Nehemiah was getting at? It was twofold. First, if Israel disobeyed, they would be sent to a foreign land. That had been fulfilled. The second part was that when the captivity was over God would send them back to Jerusalem. They were still waiting for that to be fulfilled. Nehemiah prayed, "Lord, the first part is true. We've disobeyed and we're in captivity. But Lord, you've made a promise to bring us back home and protect us there – and that has not happened yet. I'm claiming your promise that you'll make it happen."

Someone has calculated that there are over 7,000 promises in the Bible. The better we know the Word of God, the better we'll be able to pray with confidence in God's promises. 1 John 5:14 says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."

Are you as confident of God's promises as Nehemiah was? If God said it in His Word, you can believe it and claim it. Nehemiah knew God would keep His covenant of love with his people. He also knew that, even though God did not need his help, he was ready to make a commitment to get involved.

#### **5. COMMITMENT to get involved.**

Do you see the progression in Nehemiah's prayer? His concern about the problem led him to brokenness. While he was weeping

and fasting, he expressed his conviction about God's character. As he focused on the greatness and awesomeness of His holy God, he was quickly reminded of his own wickedness and therefore cried out in confession. After owning his role in the nation's depravity, he prayed boldly and with confidence in God's promises. This then leads him to a commitment to get involved.

We see this in Neh 1:11: "O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man. I was cupbearer to the king."

It has been said that prayer is not getting man's will done in heaven but getting God's will done on earth. However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer. He didn't pray for God to send someone else – he simply said, "Here am I, send me!" He knew that he would have to approach the king and request a 3-year leave of absence and so asked God for "success," which means "to break out or push forward." He wanted to see God break out on his behalf when he goes in front of the king to make his request. He was claiming yet another promise from Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse where He pleases."

Someone has said that the key word in this book is the word, "so," which occurs 32 different times. Again and again, Nehemiah assesses the situation, is moved to concern and "so" is compelled to action. The true measure of our concern is whether or not we are willing to make a commitment to get involved. Martin Luther said, "Pray as if everything depends on God, then work as if everything depends on you."

## **Conclusion**

George W. Bush had an embarrassing moment this week when a live microphone picked up a private comment. That reminds me of a college choir which was all set to present a concert in a large church which was to be carried live by a local radio station. When everything appeared to be ready, the announcer made his final introduction and waited for the choir director to begin.

A tenor was not yet ready, however, so the director refused to raise his baton. All this time, nothing but silence was being broadcast. Growing very nervous, the announcer, forgetting that his microphone was still on and that he could be heard in the church and on the air, said in exasperation, "Get on with it, you old goat!"

Later in the week, the radio station got a letter from one of its listeners--a man who had tuned in to listen to the music from the comfort of his easy chair. When he heard "Get on with it, you old goat!" he took the message personally. He had been doing nothing to further God's work, and this startling message was enough to convict him and get him going again.

Sometimes we need a wake-up call, don't we? Maybe you've received that call this morning and God is saying to you, "Get on with it, you old goat...or young goat." Where are you in this prayer process right now?

- **Are you concerned about your problems?**
- **Do you have a conviction about God's holy character?**
- **Are you ready to confess your sins?**
- **Do you have confidence in God's promises?**
- **Are you ready to make a commitment to get involved in God's kingdom work?**

You can do that by committing to be involved in our Time to Build Campaign. Our emphasis over the next 10 months or so will incorporate each of the 6 elements of our IMPACT statement. We're asking God to build out through prayer and evangelism – that will take place primarily through the Jesus Video and Lighthouses of Prayer. We're asking God to build up through instruction or discipleship, ministry, worship and caring – our emphasis this year will be on seeking God's direction for the implementation of a second worship service. We're also asking God to build on by preparing us for a commitment to the construction of the Family Life Center.

## **Here are a few ideas that you could implement.**

1. The Jesus Video will be mailed to every home in Pontiac and Livingston County if area churches can raise the needed funds. We're going to take a special offering on October 1st for this campaign. At only \$2.50 each, you can give "Jesus" to someone this December. Related to this, commit to pray for 5 of your neighbors, for 5 minutes a day, for 5 weeks.
2. Commit to pray for the launch of the second service, to be involved if you can, and to invite those you know to attend.

3. Please begin praying daily for the Family Life Center and ask God how he would like you to be involved – through your time, your talents, and your treasures. We could use some help with the parking lot tomorrow morning.

**Brothers and sisters,  
It's Time to Build!**

It's also a time to rebuild. When we have the courage to admit that we've messed up, when we become concerned enough about the way we've been living that we confess our sins, we know that God will do his rebuilding work – He's promised to do so.

## NEHEMIAH 2: How to Tackle a Tough Job

September 17, 2000

I came across some lines from actual resumes this week:

I have learnt Word Perfect 6.0 computer and spreadsheet programs.

Received a plaque for Salesperson of the Year

It's best for employers that I not work with people.

I'm a perfectionist and rarely if ever forget details.

I have become completely paranoid, trusting completely no one and absolutely nothing.

Instrumental in ruining entire operation for a Midwest chain store.

Finished eighth in my class of ten.

References: none. I've left a path of destruction behind me.

Nehemiah had a pretty impressive resume and instead of leaving a path of destruction behind him, he was about to tackle the path of destruction in front of him. His resume would include the following accomplishments: "Cupbearer to the king for many years. Great job stability as long as no one tried to poison the boss. Served in the court and well connected with the power brokers of Persia." Under the section of his resume where he listed personal information, you'd see this:

I'm concerned about problems

I have a strong conviction about God's character

I confess my sins on a regular basis

I have confidence in God's promises

And, I have a commitment to get involved

This is really a summary of what we learned last week in the opening chapter of his memoirs as we focused on "Learning How to Pray."

As we move into Nehemiah 2, I wonder how many of you completed your assignment to read the trilogy of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah this past week? I saw someone here on Wednesday night, reading the book of Nehemiah, as she waited for her child to get done with AWANA. I won't ask for a show of hands and I'll even give you a one-week extension! I encourage you to complete this homework because it will help you get more out of our Time to Build series.

Before we jump into the text, let me remind you of how the Book of Nehemiah fits into Old Testament history.

Nehemiah did not rely on his resume when it was Time to Build. He got out his tools so that he could handle the tasks ahead of him. In Neh 2:1-10, we'll see that he had at least 5 tools in his toolbox and in Neh 2:11-20 we'll look at the 5 tasks that he tackled. Building Block #2 in our Time to Build series is called, "How to Handle a Tough Job."

### **Tools in Nehemiah's Toolbox**

I don't have a lot of tools because I'm not very handy. I would rather buy a book than a belt sander any day. This is a problem for

me, however, when I need to fix something or tackle a project. Fortunately, my dad has an entire Ace Hardware store in his garage and whenever he comes down to visit, he loads up his truck with tools. He's got so many tools that I don't know how he can keep track of them. He was down last weekend to help me do some work in our basement – actually; I'm helping him do the work! He's like the surgeon and I'm his assistant – I just hand him the tools and wipe the sweat off his brow!

Nehemiah had a lot of tools as well. He pulled them out, one by one, just when he needed them.

### **1. Waiting.**

The first tool Nehemiah used was the tool called waiting in Neh 2:1. He was a man of decisive action, and when he prayed it was natural for him to ask God to provide an early, if not immediate, opportunity to speak to the king. Remember the closing verse in chapter one indicates that Nehemiah wanted success "today" in the presence of the king. He waited patiently on the Lord for an answer, just as we're urged to do in Hebrews 6:12: "...imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what was promised." Nehemiah could weep and pray and he could also wait and pray.

Have you had to wait for God to answer a prayer? In Nehemiah's prayer journal, nothing was entered for four months because nothing happened. Friends, waiting time is not wasted time. Quiet reflection may have provided Nehemiah with fresh insight about how to approach the king. God wants each of us to get real familiar with this tool – we're going to have to use it a lot.

### **2. Trusting.**

The second tool he fished out of his toolbox was called trusting in Neh 2:2-3. Nehemiah was "sad" in the last part of Neh 2:1 and this word is used three other times to describe how he looked when he was in the presence of the king. The king asked him a question to find out why Nehemiah was not his chipper self. Nehemiah wiggled out when Artaxerxes asked him this question because he knew the king only wanted to be around happy people. In Neh 2:2, Nehemiah says that he was "very much afraid" which can literally be translated, "a terrible fear came over me."

I think he was very much afraid for at least two reasons. He knew that he was expected to be perfectly content just to be in the presence of the king. Subjects who were sad or melancholy around the king were usually executed for "raining on his parade." Second, he was about to ask the monarch of the Persian Empire to reverse a written policy he had made several years earlier about Jerusalem's reconstruction. This edict was recorded in Ezra 4:21: "Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order." Nehemiah knew it would take the power of God to get Artaxerxes to change his mind. I think I'd be afraid too.

What are you afraid of this morning? Some of you might be afraid of the past. You're worried that something you did long ago will catch up to you. Maybe you're afraid of the present and find yourself crippled by the fear of people, snakes, or confined spaces. Others of you might be fearful about the future and even death. In the best selling book called, "Who Moved My Cheese," the author asks a very penetrating question, "What would you do if you weren't afraid." He points out that fear often keeps us from taking the steps we know we need to take. Fear can paralyze us. There's certainly some fear as we move into the Time to Build campaign – but we can't let that keep us from following God's leading.

Fortunately, Nehemiah's faith was greater than his fear. He did the right thing because he believed the promises of God. Notice what happened, "I was very much afraid, but I said..." Instead of paralyzing him, fear propelled Nehemiah to action. Months of prayer had prepared him for these crucial minutes. Courage filled him when he realized it was no longer possible to hide his grief.

Then, using wisdom, he affirms his boss by saying, "Long live the king!" He explains why he was sad in Neh 2:3: "Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Did you notice that Nehemiah never mentions the name of the city? Jerusalem's history of independence might have turned the king's thoughts toward questions of politics and national security. Instead of going political, he chose the personal route – that's usually the better choice. What Nehemiah did say was, "I want to honor the burial place of my fathers." This made a lot of sense to the King because the Persians honored their dead as well.

Nehemiah's fear could have led him to be timid. Instead he used the tool of trusting very effectively. In Neh 2:4-5, Nehemiah pulls out another very well-used tool – the tool of praying.

### **3. Praying.**

Neh 2:4 begins with a direct question from the King: "What is it you want?" Before answering the King of Persia, Nehemiah needed to speak briefly with the King of Heaven. I love this. The text says, "Then I prayed to the God of heaven." This had to be a short prayer because it happened between the time the king asked his question and Nehemiah's answer. I picture him sending up an arrow prayer, or in contemporary jargon, doing some "Instant Messaging" with God. He obviously didn't have the time to drop to his knees or even bow his head. If he had done that, the king would have suspected treason. His emergency prayer was backed up by

four months of fasting and intercession.

This is encouraging to me. You and I can pray at any time, in any place by sending up a brief prayer to God. Right before we have to give an answer to our boss, or before responding to our spouse, or when disciplining our kids, or when looking for a way to impact our neighbors for Christ, just shoot up a prayer. It doesn't have to be long or even audible. We need to make good use of these chance moments to send up "popcorn prayers" to God. I'm convinced that this is the only way to fulfill 1Thes 5:17 where we're challenged to "pray continually."

#### **4. The next tool is planning.**

We see this in Neh 2:5-8a. Nehemiah has lifted his heart to God; now he must open his mouth to the king. He practiced both dependent praying and deliberate planning. This is good for us to hear. Some people think that all you have to do is pray; others focus almost exclusively on planning. It shouldn't be an "either/or" but a "both/and" deal. We are called to pray and plan; to worship and work; to make requests and to fill out requisitions.

Notice that he knew how to answer the king's questions. He anticipated the question related to how long his journey would take, so when the king asked, Nehemiah gave him a timeframe. He also knew how to plan the dangerous journey by asking for letters on the king's stationery, which would give him safe passage through the different territories he came across.

He didn't stop there. Look at Neh 2:8. We see here that he wanted permission to take some timber out of the king's own forest -- he was not asking for a gift certificate to Menard's! He had done some research to know that the keeper of the king's lumberyard was named Asaph. This forest was also called "paradise" in Hebrew and looked like a park filled with orchards.

Nehemiah asked for, and received three things from the king: permission, protection, and provisions.

#### **5. The final tool he pulled out in Neh 2:8b-10 was the tool of testifying.**

He gave testimony to the goodness of God in answering his prayers, guiding his mind, directing his speech, and meeting his needs. Look at the last part of Neh 2:8: "...And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests." Only God could have brought about such a dramatic change in the king's mind and the cupbearer's destiny.

Nehemiah knew that what was taking place had everything to do with God's arranging, not human contriving. It's like what Psalm 118:23 says, "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." Nehemiah was meticulous in his planning but it would not have been enough were it not for the Lord's perfect timing, constant guidance, and overruling provision.

As we move into our Time to Build campaign, I am confident that we will see the "gracious hand of God upon us." We must use the tools of waiting, trusting, praying and planning. And then, we'll see God do something truly amazing. When He does, we will testify about His gracious provision.

Neh 2:10 introduces some bad guys – I'll come back to them later. Suffice it to say that they cast a long shadow over the story.

#### **Tasks for Tackling a Tough Job**

I asked Beth this week if she could think of any projects that I have tackled recently that didn't go quite right. It didn't take her long to point out one I wasn't even aware of. Several months ago, the handle broke on our microwave and I ordered a new one. When it arrived, I searched the house until I found a screwdriver and installed it. I was pretty proud of myself. Beth wasn't going to tell me – but since I asked, she informed me that I had put it on upside down! She put it on the right way several weeks ago and I hadn't even noticed!

I admire my dad for many things but I'm always amazed at how he seems to know how best to tackle a job. He can look at a project and determine what needs to happen first. Sometimes he'll think about it for a while, and even lay awake figuring everything out – but he always knows the steps that need to be taken before the project can be completed.

Nehemiah was a master builder as well. As we move to the second half of chapter 2, we'll see that he tackled five tasks.

#### **1. Nehemiah first replenished his resources in Neh 2:11.**

When he arrived in Jerusalem, he could appreciate why his brother Hanani was so bummed out. As he looked at the city's shattered walls and useless gates, he was overwhelmed. But, before he could examine them more closely, there was a greater priority. Nehemiah needed a nap!

The journey of four months took its toll on Nehemiah – he was probably suffering from 'camel lag'! Ezra did the same thing when he arrived in Jerusalem many years earlier when he rested for three days (see Ezra 8:32). Just as Elijah needed rest under the juniper tree, and Jesus withdrew with his disciples for rest, so too, you and I need to make sure we replenish our resources on a regular



basis. Here's a biblical principle: Don't try to make major decisions when you're tired. I know when I'm short on sleep I'm not usually very sharp and I'm usually crabby – sometimes I need to just wait until the next morning to tackle something.

## **2. After getting recharged, Nehemiah assessed the need.**

We see this in Neh 2:12-16. Nehemiah knew that in order to lead this project, he would need a firsthand picture of what needed to be done. He then scouted out the damage to the walls one dark night. With the moonlight showing the mounds of broken stone and demolished gates, Nehemiah made some notes to himself.

This moonlight journey is one of the most dramatic scenes in the book. I think he discovered at least three things as he did his assessment:

- **It was a demanding job.** The circuit of the walls was more than a mile long, and the new wall needed to be three or four feet thick, and fifteen to twenty feet high. This was not going to be easy but Nehemiah knew that he and his people had to give their best to it. The same is true for us – kingdom work is demanding, but it's worth our energy.
- **It was a hazardous assignment.** Nehemiah went at night because there were enemies lurking around. He said nothing to anyone until the time was right. The careless leakage of information might bring the work to an end even before it started.
- **It was a co-operative venture.** It was only by surveying the walls and gates that Nehemiah could calculate how the work should be divided.

That leads us to the third task.

## **3. After replenishing his resources and assessing the need, Nehemiah now recruited workers in Neh 2:17.**

In some way not mentioned in the narrative, Nehemiah gathered together a large group of prospective partners. Let's look and see how he put his work force together:

First, he identifies with the workers: "Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in.'" Nehemiah is passionately involved in the city's welfare and feels its need as acutely as though he had been living in the desolate city all his life.

Next, he presents spiritual perspectives. They are in trouble – and it's not just because Jerusalem is in ruins. He sees their spiritual disgrace. The sight of those collapsed walls for well over a century has created the impression in the pagan mind that the God of Israel has abandoned his people. He recognizes that there are always spiritual issues involved – a building project is more than just brick and mortar. As His people, we have to be aware of the spiritual opportunities and challenges as they present themselves to us.

Then, he invites immediate action. Everybody knows exactly what is required, "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace," and everyone realizes that the task must begin without further delay. Nehemiah is asking a lot of the people. He's not afraid to ask them to step up to the plate. The sacrifices will be huge. They will have to take time off from work in order to rebuild the walls. Who will protect their families? Before people can respond they need to know that there is someone greater than Nehemiah behind this project.

## **4. That leads to the next task – Nehemiah inspired confidence in the people in Neh 2:18**

While rebuilding the walls is an important job, the central theme in the book is the sufficiency of God. His mind dwells on the greatness of God and he wants his workers to do the same. As we move into a Time to Build at PBC, the Family Life Center is important, but the central thrust must be the sufficiency of God.

Listen to Nehemiah's testimony:

"I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me."

He didn't reach Jerusalem because he was a skillful persuader, or because the queen was possibly a compliant helper, or because the king was a generous benefactor, but only because God was a sovereign provider. Since God had done all that, He would certainly help them to complete the task of rebuilding the walls.

By telling the people what God had already done, he was firing them up for what He was about to do. His appeal was positive as He focused on the glory and greatness of God. When you think about it, it's amazing that the people said, "Let us start rebuilding." Think about what they could have said. They could have been apathetic – they had been living in the rubble for a long time and could have just stayed there. They could have reminded Nehemiah that the Jews had "already tried that" before in Ezra 4 and were stopped by the authorities.

We often face those same two obstacles within the church. Either “we’re content with the way things are” or, “we tried that before and it didn’t work!” I’m thankful that this church responds much like the wall builders did in this chapter. Someone has defined leadership as “the art of getting people to do what they ought to do because they want to do it.” I’m proud to be your pastor and want to do all I can to help us do the things we ought to do because we want to do them – because the gracious hand of our God is upon us.

##### **5. The fifth task comes almost immediately after the decision to make an impact takes place: He Handled opposition.**

Whenever we get serious about kingdom work, Satan will oppose us. The first two enemies have already been identified in Neh 2:10. Now Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite are joined by Geshem the Arab. In Neh 2:10, the opponents are “very much disturbed,” now this troublesome trio becomes highly vocal in their attacks on Nehemiah and his work crew. Let’s look at their tactics:

First, they derided the efforts of the workers. Neh 2:19 says that they “mocked and ridiculed” them. Verbal onslaughts have always been part of the enemy’s demoralizing tactics. They laughed at the workers and belittled both their resources and their plans.

Next, they suggested that they were rebelling against the king – that weapon had worked once before in Ezra 4: “What is this you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” This was a cutting allegation to the timid workers.

I love how Nehemiah deals with these bad guys. He doesn’t answer their lies or engage in a conversation with them. Nor does he just ignore them. He first exalts the God who called him to do the work in Neh 2:20: “The God of heaven will give us success.” He wasn’t concerned about their fictitious insinuations – he was concerned that God would get the glory in the project.

Nehemiah wanted his people to know that God had everything in control. Even though Geshem controlled the southern approach to the city, and the other two thugs patrolled the north and east, Nehemiah was not ruffled. In his reply, he made three things clear:

- Rebuilding the wall was God’s work
- The Jews were God’s servants
- Their opponents had no part in the matter.

The last part of Neh 2:20 says it rather strongly: “We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” Their opponents had no past right, not present prerogative to be there, and no future role in the city.

Let me just say that as believers we should expect spiritual opposition and even be thankful for it. It’s a sign that we’ve angered the enemy and encroached on some territory that He thinks is his. If there’s no conflict or opposition, then we’re probably not disturbing the enemy enough. Remember, Satan only shoots at moving targets!

The tools are now out of the toolbox – waiting, trusting, praying, planning, and testifying. Are you ready to pick them up and start using them? It’s not enough to just rely on your “religious resume.” And the tasks are ready to be tackled – replenish your resources, assess the need, recruit workers, inspire confidence, and handle opposition. This is a continual commitment and a long term-task. God wants us fully engaged for the long haul.

That reminds me of two guys in a pickup who drove into a lumberyard. One of the men walked into the office and said, “We need some four-by-twos.”

The worker said, “You mean two-by-fours, don’t you?”

The man said, “I need to check with my buddy. I’ll be right back.” When he came back, he said, “Yeah, that’s what I meant. I need some two-by-fours.”

The worker then said, “Alright. How long do you need them?”

The customer paused for a minute and said, “I better go check.” He came back in a few minutes and said, “We need them for a long time. We’re gonna build a house with them!”

If we’re going to be part of God’s construction project here at PBC, and if we want to see God rebuild some things in our own lives, than we’re going to need to rely on Him for a very long time. As Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”

Brothers and sisters, it’s time to build!

## NEHEMIAH 3: Working Well With Others

September 24, 2000

Have you been watching the Olympics? NBC isn't very happy with their ratings but it's been fun to watch the different sports. As the athletes compete, they're all seeking a medal and the recognition that comes with it. Those who win a gold are held up as heroes.

While most of us have a desire to be recognized, our chances of competing at the Olympics are pretty slim. This week I read about a guy named Stefan Sigmund from Romania, who has been trying for many years to get his name in the Guinness Book of World Records. His recent attempt went up in smoke. Using a contraption that looked like an air filter for a car, Sigmund managed to smoke 800 cigarettes at one time. Only later did he discover that Guinness no longer accepts these kinds of "accomplishments."

Another time he ate 29 hard-boiled eggs in four minutes. Unfortunately, Guinness quit printing gluttony records many years ago. He also jumped into a lake from a 135-foot cliff only to find out that the record for diving from a fixed point had already been set at 176 feet.

People like to hear their name mentioned in a positive way. Our text for today is basically a list of people who achieved some pretty major accomplishments. Alongside the medal winners, there are a few who are listed because they never joined the team. And, it's interesting that Nehemiah is not mentioned at all. I think he wanted to keep the attention on others.

At first glance, Nehemiah chapter 3 looks a bit dry. One commentator refers to it as a "colorless memorandum of assignments." It reads much like the book of 1 Chronicles with its long lists of names that are difficult to pronounce, information that seems redundant, and a chronology that seems meaningless. It's hard to muddle through. I'll never forget Tim Tuley reading genealogy lists during our Bible Reading Marathon! He did it with determination – and good pronunciation! While it may be tempting to skip this chapter, it contains some great insights and principles that have direct application to our lives today.

Let me briefly set the historical context in case you've missed the last couple weeks. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were knocked down, and the temple was burned. The people were deported and were forced into slavery and Jerusalem was left in ruins.

But God did not forsake His people. He moved King Cyrus to make a decree to let some of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished and desolate.

By way of review, through Nehemiah's prayer in Chapter One we learned that he was concerned about the problem of Jerusalem's desolation, he had a conviction about God's character, he confessed his sins, he was confident about God's promises, and he was committed to get involved. Last week we journeyed with Nehemiah back to Jerusalem and discovered that as Contractor he had 5 tools in his toolbox – waiting, trusting, praying, planning, and testifying. He also tackled five different tasks – replenished resources, assessed the need, recruited workers, inspired confidence, and handled opposition.

Let me make two preliminary observations:

### **1. Nehemiah 3 reveals Nehemiah's extraordinary gift of administration and organization.**

He was able to mobilize and empower 44 separate groups of people for the ingenious task of rebuilding the walls. This no doubt came about because of his careful assessment of the need during his moonlit reconnaissance mission in 2:13-16.

Let's take a visual look at how Nehemiah organized his troops.

### **2. This passage shows how people working together can accomplish more than if just one person tried to do all the work.**

Underline in your Bible every time you see the following phrases: "next to him," "next to them," "after him," and "after them." These expressions are recorded 28 times in this chapter! The biblical principle is this: every person is to be involved in ministry because everyone has a job to do.

It's hard to find the right job, isn't it? Some of you are doing exactly what you need to be doing – both in your career and in kingdom work. Others of you are struggling to find your niche. It might help you feel better if you hear someone else's job history. Listen to this guy's story:

- My first job was working in an orange juice factory, but I got canned because I couldn't concentrate.
- Then I worked in the woods as a lumberjack, but I just couldn't hack it, so they gave me the axe.

- After that I tried to be a tailor, but I just wasn't suited for it. Mainly because it was a so-so job.
- Next I tried working in a muffler factory but that was exhausting.
- I wanted to be a barber, but I just couldn't cut it.
- I attempted to be a deli worker, but any way I sliced it, I just couldn't cut the mustard.
- I studied a long time to become a doctor, but I didn't have any patients.
- I became a professional fisherman, but discovered that I couldn't live on my net income.
- I managed to get a good job working for a pool maintenance company, but the work was just too draining.
- Next, I found being an electrician interesting, but the work was shocking.
- After many years of trying to find steady work I finally got a job as a historian until I realized there was no future in it.

I heard another guy say, "I like work -- it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours." When it comes to the work of the Lord, there is no place for sitting on the couch and watching Award Ceremonies. As we will see in this chapter, the wall workers accomplished an incredible task – and in the process, smashed a world record for teamwork.

### **The Purpose of the Work**

Nehemiah was able to build his team around a central rallying point. He pointed them to the purpose of the work – the glory of God. They weren't just working on walls, they were worshipping their worthy God. The workers were bummed about the conditions of the city and disgraced in the presence of their enemies. It was difficult for them to sing out the truth of Psalm 48:2, which describes Jerusalem as "beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth." They longed for God's city to regain its splendor and for God to get the credit.

The purpose of all ministry, and really of life itself is the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 puts it succinctly: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." When we're ready to build here at PBC, we are going to attempt something so big, that unless God is in it, it will fail. But, that's a good thing because we're motivated and mobilized by the relentless pursuit of God's splendor.

Take a look at Neh 3:1: "Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place..." It's no accident that the list starts at the Sheep Gate. [Show Slide of Wall Workers]

It's another way of saying, "Put God first." Close to the wall's northeast corner, this gate provided easy access to the Temple, and was given this name because of all the sheep that entered through it to be sacrificed. By beginning here, Nehemiah is establishing that their relationship with God was central. This was the most important place to start.

They had a time of dedication right at the beginning of the construction project. We must make sure we are dedicated to God before we begin working for Him. This is critical. Don't make the mistake of focusing so much on the work or the task that you forget God Himself. God is not impressed with your labor. He wants your heart. That's why worship must always precede work.

Have you settled that question? Are you sold-out to God, completely committed and totally devoted to Him? If you are, then get ready to work. If you're not, then keep the main thing the main thing and do what 1 Peter 3:15 says, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord..."

### **The People in the Work**

One reason I think the Olympic ratings are suffering is that everything is on tape delay. If you want to, you can find out who won by looking on the Internet, listening to the radio, or even reading the newspaper. If you've already read the Book of Nehemiah you know the final results – the wall was built in a world record 52 days! And yet, just as it's interesting to watch the intricacies of Olympic competition, so too, as we dive into this chapter we're going to see more of the details. We're also going to learn about several individuals – much like the human-interest stories NBC has been airing on some of the athletes.

I see 6 principles from this chapter that will help each of us "Work Well With Others."

#### **1. Leaders must set the example.**

We see this in Neh 3:1. If anybody in the city should have been busy with the work, it was the priests, for God's reputation was at stake. The high priest had no hesitation using his consecrated hands to swing a hammer or push a wheelbarrow. As befitted the

superior dignity of his office, he wore a sacred garment of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet, made out of fine linen. On the upper part he had 12 precious stones set in gold with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel engraved on them. On his head, he wore a dark blue turban with the phrase, “Holy to the Lord” engraved on a diadem of pure gold.

And yet, here he was picking up rubble and laying brick. I bet he had to have his clothes dry-cleaned after this! I take seriously my joyful responsibility to be involved in the work of the ministry as well. While you’ll never catch me dead in a robe and a turban, I don’t have a problem getting my hands dirty. When we’re ready to move ahead with the Family Life Center, I commit to being involved with my time, my talents, my treasures, and my tools – though I may need to borrow some of yours because I don’t have very many!

Our leaders have been, and will continue to set the pace here at PBC. The elders, deacons, and staff will be giving sacrificially to the Jesus Video offering next Sunday. We will be completely on board – all of us. That’s exactly what happened last December when we did the Bible Reading Marathon. The leadership was completely committed to it, and signed up for large blocks of time and recruited others to do the same.

Sad to say, Eliashib did not remain true to his calling and later partnered with the enemy to create some serious problems for Nehemiah in 13:4-9. This serves as a good reminder to us – it’s not as important how we begin a project, it’s how we finish that counts. Some people who enthusiastically begin a job or a ministry may drop out or even turn against it for one reason or another.

## **2. God uses all kinds of people.**

Take a look at Neh 3:8: “Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that...” The Lord didn’t need a thousand masons and carpenters to rebuild the wall – he needed ordinary people who were willing to work. People from a wide variety of different backgrounds, trades, and localities gathered to work on the wall. The rulers and priests worked together with regular people, some who even lived 10-15 miles away.

There was a place for everyone, and a job for everyone to do. That’s the beauty of gift-based ministry. One of our purposes as a church is to mobilize people for ministry – it’s the “M” of our I.M.P.A.C.T. statement printed on the back of your bulletin. This bedrock truth is based on the belief that God has gifted each of us and called each of us to be involved in a lifestyle of servanthood. As we use our gifts, we will be fruitful, we will be fulfilled, and the church will be fortified.

One of the key words in this chapter is the word “section.” It is used 13 times. The wall was divided and people were assigned a certain section to work on. Likewise, just as no one person could construct the whole wall by himself, so too, you and I are called to work in a certain part of the kingdom. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Romans 12:6 says, “We have different gifts according to the grace given us...”

Are you serving in your area of giftedness right now? If not, it’s time to grab a brick and jump in. When we take an offering next Sunday for the Jesus Video, will you come prepared to give – not as much as your friend gives, but as much as you can give? When the Family Life Center project needs workers, will you volunteer to work on a section of it?

## **3. Some people will not work.**

Having said that there is a place for everyone, and a job for everyone to do, there will always be those who refuse to exert themselves. Most people worked, but some shirked their responsibility. We see this in Neh 3:5: “The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.” Tekoa was a town about eleven miles from Jerusalem, and while some of the people commuted to the job site; the nobles from Tekoa called in sick. Actually, the text says that they refused to participate in the work of God because they didn’t want to follow orders. They were too proud to submit themselves to the supervisors of the job. They were too important to get their hands dirty.

The phrase, “would not put their shoulders to the work,” suggests that it was pride more than anything else which kept them from pitching in. Nehemiah is using agricultural imagery that describes a “stiff-necked” ox who refuses to be yoked. Any one here today who refuses to roll up their sleeves and work? Feeling like you’re too important to spend time with a hurting person, teach Sunday School, listen to AWANA verses, or help pour concrete? Jeremiah 48:10 is a stinging rebuke to those of us who just sit back, with our arms crossed: “A curse on him who is lax in doing the Lord’s work.”

By the way, those who are lax in the Lord’s work are not only subject to a curse – they’re also missing out on one of the greatest privileges of all time! I can’t think of anything more rewarding than being involved in kingdom work. You can’t beat it, can you? Beth and I love giving our tithe each week because we know what our giving is used for. We love serving because we believe it makes a kingdom impact. Some of the happiest Christians I know are those who are serving in their area of giftedness. On the other hand, some of the grumpiest Christians I know are those who are “pew potatoes” and are not willing to put their shoulder to the work.

## **4. Some do more work.**

In every church, and in any project, there will always be some who are slack in their serving. At the same time, there will always be those who do more work than others.

Remember the men from Tekoa? In Neh 3:5, we read that they finished their section of the wall, even though their nobles didn't help out at all. Drop down to Neh 3:27: "Next to them, the men of Tekoa repaired another section..." Refusing to follow the bad example of their leaders, these workers went the extra mile. I picture them coming up to Nehemiah and telling him that they finished their job. Nehemiah asked them if they wanted another section and they said, "Bring it on, man. We're in a groove." The men of Binnui did the same thing in Neh 2:18 and 24.

Another guy named Meshullam completed one part (Neh 3:4) and then repaired an additional section (Neh 3:31). In Neh 3:21: "... Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired another section, from the entrance of Eliashib's house to the end of it." After he finished his assignment, he worked on the wall in front of his neighbor's house. When he was done shoveling his sidewalk, he moved down the street to his neighbor's drifted driveway.

There's a tendency within most of us to finish the work we volunteered for and then stop, stretch out our arms and say, "Boy, that was great to do the Lord's work, but I'm finished now." Not so with these guys. They knew that kingdom work is never finished. When we complete one job for the Lord, we can't sit back and think we've fulfilled our ultimate responsibility as a Christian. Friends, as long as there is work to be done in God's kingdom, there's work for you to do. In Matthew 5:47, Jesus addresses each one of us when He asks a very good question, "...What are you doing more than others?" Brothers and sisters, what are you doing more than others?

## **5. Some work with passion.**

In this entire chapter, there is only one guy mentioned who worked zealously. Look at Neh 3:20: "Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section..." The Hebrew word means "to burn or glow" and suggests that Baruch burned a lot of energy. He was not just serving; he was on "fire." This is amazing because in Neh 4:6 we read that "the people worked with all their heart." Everyone was working hard, but in a crowd of committed construction workers, Baruch stood out from the rest. We need people like him who will say, "I don't really care what others are doing, I'm going to do my very best."

I normally resist honoring individuals by name when I'm preaching, but I can't hold back this morning because PBC is privileged to have at least one "Baruch" in our midst. In a church full of hard working, dedicated and devoted workers, Robert "Baruch" Guth stands out above the rest of us. I still hear stories of all the work he did on our parking lot several years ago, and I've been watching him work on the new lot during the past several weeks when no one else is around. He's here at church during the week replacing light switches and light bulbs and is faithfully involved in AWANA and serves as a church deacon. Robert, I know that this is embarrassing to you, and you would say that you serve because of what the Lord has done in your life and He gets all the credit, but I want you to know that I want to be just like you when I grow up!

Anyone else want to be like Baruch this morning? Are you willing to go the extra mile and burn with zeal and passion in your service? Are you tired of just going through the motions? Are you ready to get fired up and work? Friends, let's kick it up a notch. If the truth were known, most all of us could do a lot more, with a lot more passion, than what we're doing right now.

## **6. Some work as families.**

The final principle from this great passage is that some people worked as families – either on a section in front of their home, or on another section away from their neighborhood.

At least six different workers, plus an unknown number of priests, repaired the portions of the wall that were nearest to their own houses. If all of us would follow this example, our neighborhoods would look differently. Friends, look at your neighbors as your mission field. Befriend them. Serve them. Pray for them. Decide as a family how much to give to the Jesus Video Project next Sunday. I want to challenge each of you to identify 5 neighbors that live near you and then commit to do three things – Prayer – Care – Share. As you pray for them, God will give you opportunities to care for their needs, which will open up avenues to share the Good News.

We're called to start at home, but we're not supposed to stay there. In Neh 3:3, the Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenah and in Neh 3:12, the daughters of Shallum worked on the wall. As families, we have the opportunity to be used in our neighborhoods and in our community. Instead of just looking at what you can do as an individual, think creatively about how you can include your entire family in the joyful task of kingdom building.

As a church we are committed to make an impact in our city, in our county, in our country, and on the continents. But, it's got to first begin at home. In John 15:16, Jesus told his disciples that He had appointed them to go and bear fruit. The word "appointed" means that he had "strategically placed them." The key truth that emerges is this: God has placed each of us strategically right where he wants us to be.

## Summary

If God's work is going to get done, we're called to cooperate with one another, not to compare or criticize. We must keep the main thing the main thing by never forgetting that God's glory is at stake. And, we won't all give equally, but we can all make equal sacrifices. Remember that nothing has ever been done for God without hard work.

In order to work well with others on a job that is much bigger than we are, at a task that demands everything we have, we need to recognize that:

- Leaders must set the pace
- God uses all kinds of people
- Some will not work
- Some will do more work
- Some will work with passion
- Some will work as families

## Conclusion

I love this time of year when the geese start making their way south. One of the fascinating things about geese is that they normally fly in a V-formation. Have you ever noticed that one side of the "V" is usually longer than the other side? Do you know why that is? It's because there are more geese on that side!

Geese often cover thousands of miles before reaching their destination – and they can only get to where they're headed if they work together. Here are some facts about their flight patterns:

- By flying as they do, the members of the flock create an upward air current for one another. By flying in a V-formation, the whole flock gets 71% greater flying range than if each goose flew on its own.
- When one goose gets sick or wounded, two fall out of formation with it and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with the struggler until he's able to fly again.
- The geese in the rear of the formation are the ones who do the honking. It's their way of announcing that they're following and everything's going well. The repeated honks encourage those in front to stay at it.

As I think about all this, one lesson stands out above all others -- it's the natural instinct of geese to work together. Like swimmers on the United States Olympic relay team, everyone has to do their part if they want to win a medal. Whether it's flapping, helping, or simply honking, the flock is in it together...which enables them to accomplish what they set out to do.

## NEHEMIAH 4: Defeating Discouragement

October 1, 2000

Are you familiar with Murphy's Law? The original "Murphy" was an engineer who conducted an experiment to test human acceleration tolerances. Unfortunately for him, he installed 16 motion sensors the wrong way, leading to the now famous quotation, "If anything can go wrong, it will." I guess the corollary is also true: "If anything can't go wrong, it will anyway."

Here are some other laws blamed on poor Mr. Murphy:

- Left to themselves, things tend to go from bad to worse.
- Matter will be damaged in direct proportion to its value.
- You will never find a lost article until you replace it.

- Everything goes wrong all at once.
- If everything seems to be going well, you've obviously overlooked something.

As we come to Nehemiah 4, everything seems to be going wrong all at once. In chapter one we looked at how Nehemiah prayed, in chapter two we saw how God moved him from the prosperity of Persia to the desolation of Jerusalem. Last week, we were introduced to the wall workers and discovered that in kingdom work, no one can do everything, but everyone can do something. And, because some worked harder, and Baruch worked with more zeal than anyone else, the construction project was really zipping along.

But when we come to chapter 4, things start to get more complicated for Nehemiah. Mr. Murphy shows up and reminds Nehemiah that when everything seems to be going well, you've obviously overlooked something. That reminds me of a situation that took place several years ago in Darlington, Maryland. Edith, a mother of eight, came home one Saturday afternoon from her neighbor's house, only to discover five of her youngest children huddled together in the living room intensely concentrating on something. As she slipped in behind them to see what they were doing, she couldn't believe her eyes. Smack dab in the middle of her kids were several baby skunks. She screamed at the top of her voice, "Children, run!" So each kid grabbed a skunk and ran to their bedroom!

If anything can go wrong, it certainly will!

## DISCOURAGEMENT

Did you know that there is a plague sweeping the country today? It's not the Beijing flu, or cancer, or even the common cold. This outbreak, however, can be just as deadly as the most dreaded disease known to man – it's called the epidemic of discouragement. At least three things make it such a potent problem.

- **It's universal.** None of us are immune to discouragement. Everyone you have ever known has been discouraged at one time or another.
- **It's recurring.** Being discouraged once does not give you an immunity to the disease. You can be discouraged over and over again. In fact, you can even be discouraged by the fact that you are discouraged a lot.
- **It's highly contagious.** Discouragement spreads by even casual contact. People can become disheartened because you are discouraged. You can be bummed out because other people are discouraged.

This morning we're going to focus on both the causes and cures for discouragement. Let's begin by looking at the causes.

### External Causes of Discouragement

There are two main types of discouragement – one set of problems come at us from the outside, the other set attacks us on the inside. Let's look first at the external causes. The wall workers were initially excited. They began the work with great anticipation and joy. It says of them in Neh 4:6 that the "people worked with all their heart." Things were going well, the people were excited, and the wall was going up. Then something happened.

Getting the work started on the wall was a major achievement, but keeping the workers working proved to be a much tougher assignment. Someone has said that exhilaration is that feeling you get just after a great idea hits you and right before you realize what's wrong with it.

Where God is at work, the enemy is also at work. Rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem was certainly no exception to this. When people take kingdom priorities seriously, Satan stirs up agitators to block the work of God. These enemies used two types of external forces.

#### 1. The first one was ridicule.

We see this in Neh 4:1-2: "When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews..."

This is the third time in the book that we come across Sanballat, who was Nehemiah's stiffest opposition. Every time we read about him he is standing against the work of God, rejecting and ridiculing everything that Nehemiah is trying to accomplish. Someone has said that ridicule is the "language of the devil." Those who can stand bravely when shot at will collapse when they are laughed at. The enemy often insults the servants of God. Goliath ridiculed David when the shepherd boy met the giant with only a sling in his hand (1 Samuel 17:41-47). The soldiers mocked Jesus during his trial and the crowd taunted Him while he was hanging on the cross



(Luke 22:63-65, 23:35-37).

Sanballat and his cronies had begun to ridicule the workers even before the work started in 2:19: "...they mocked and ridiculed us." Here in chapter 4, he is making a speech before the army of Samaria, intensifying the power of ridicule.

Notice that he called the workers "feeble." That word means "withered and miserable." Next he ridiculed the job they were doing by asking four taunting questions: "Will they restore their wall?" That must have made the Samaritan army break out into laughter. How could a remnant of feeble Jews hope to build a wall strong enough to protect the city from a mighty army? "Will they offer sacrifices?" Sanballat is saying that it will take more than prayer and worship to rebuild the city. "Will they finish in a day?" suggests that the workers had no idea how difficult the task was and would soon stop what they were doing. "Can they bring these stones back to life?" indicates that their building materials were so old and damaged that they couldn't possibly be used to make a strong wall.

In Neh 4:3, it was Tobiah's turn to ridicule the workers when he tried out a joke on them, "What they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" Archeological excavations on these walls revealed that they were nine foot thick – they would need more than a small fox to knock them down. The workers became the punch line of every joke, and everyone got a laugh at their expense. Tobiah hoped that his sarcasm would make the builders cast an apprehensive glance at their hard work and activate within them an avalanche of discouragement.

Friends, whenever you attempt to get involved in the work of God, you will always face ridicule. Expect it and don't stop working.

## **2. The second cause of their external discouragement was repression in Neh 4:7-8**

The enemies have moved from being bothered by the Jews to being very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. Warren Wiersbe writes, "God's people sometimes have difficulty working together, but the people of the world have no problem uniting in opposition to the work of the Lord."

The references in Neh 4:7 are to the four points of the compass. Sanballat and the Samaritans on the north, Ashdod on the west, Tobiah and the Ammonites on the east, and Geshem and the Arabs to the south. The workers were surrounded and lived in constant fear of being ambushed.

## **Internal Causes of Discouragement**

Pressures from without often create problems within. Opposition outside the ranks can lead to depression on the inside. It wasn't the voice of the enemy that was the most pervasive; it was the voice of God's own people. And, just like today, it's so easy to internalize the words of the enemy and feel like giving up.

Notice the first part of Neh 4:10: "Meanwhile the people in Judah said..." Discouragement started first within the royal tribe of Judah. They had David's blood in their veins and you would think they would have had more faith and courage than the rest of the people. They were looked upon as leaders and pacesetters. If the tribe of Judah was bummed out, then the other tribes would be more inclined to give up the project as well.

### **1. The first cause of internal discouragement was fatigue.**

Neh 4:10 reads, "Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out...'" Simply put, the workers were tired. They were hitting it hard and needed some rest. The phrase "giving out" carries with it the idea of "staggering, tottering, and stumbling."

When you are physically drained, it is very easy to become discouraged at the slightest problem. It's also interesting to notice when the workers became fatigued and discouraged. Neh 4:6 says that the wall was built to half its height. Many times when we start a new project the first half goes quickly because we're excited about accomplishing the goal.

But, when the newness wears off and the work becomes routine and boring, then it's easy to become fatigued. And when you're tired it's easy to become discouraged and to begin to think that you will never finish the job. Neh 4:10 says: "...we cannot rebuild the wall." They were ready to throw in the towel. These are the same people who were described in Neh 4:6 as those who worked with all their heart.

If you're feeling fatigued today, watch out. Tiredness can lead to discouragement. Remember what God did when Elijah was tired – he sent an angel to give him some bread and something to drink and then told him to go back to sleep. You cannot burn the candle at both ends on a long-term basis. Sometimes the most spiritual thing to do is to go to bed.

### **2. The second thing that can happen is that you can get frustrated**

Neh 4:10 continues by saying that there is “so much rubble” that they cannot rebuild the wall. They became discouraged because they were so aggravated with the situation. I’m sure they were encountering old broken rocks, dirt and dried-out mortar, and other debris that was underfoot. This junk was everywhere. And it was frustrating.

Just as they lost sight of their goal, so too we can lose sight of our goal when we have too much garbage in our lives. Hebrews 12:1 challenges us to get rid of anything that causes us to be frustrated in our pursuit of godliness: “...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with endurance the race marked out for us.”

I don’t know what the rubble is in your life but it may be television, it might be a possession you’re holding on to, or even an unhealthy relationship. Is there a sin you’ve been playing around with too long? Do you have a drinking problem, or are you involved in some other kind of entanglement that is tripping you up? Something you’ve been doing in secret that you think no one else knows about? As the writer to Hebrews says, “Throw it off so you don’t get tripped up.”

### **3. Another cause of discouragement is fear.**

The enemies of the Lord’s work had struck fear in the hearts of God’s people and they felt like giving up. Remember what they said in Neh 4:10: “We cannot rebuild the wall.”

Did you notice in Neh 4:12 who gets afraid the quickest? “Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over ‘Wherever you turn, they will attack us.’” Those most affected by fear are those who lived near pessimistic people. If you want to limit the depressing thoughts that bring fear into your life, then it’s best to not hang around with negative people. It’s like the old saying, “If you’re going to soar with the eagles, you can’t run around with turkeys.”

Fear puts us in a frame of mind where we cannot only become discouraged, we can also be deceived. I don’t want to spoil the ending, but since most of you have already completed your assignment to read the book of Nehemiah, I’m going to give it away – the enemies never do attack Jerusalem! In the book, Scared to Life, Douglas Rumford cites a study that shows why we shouldn’t let fear rule our lives (Marriage Partnership, Vol. 12, no. 2):

- 60% of our fears are totally unfounded
- 20% are already behind us
- 10% are so petty they don’t make any difference
- 5% are real, but we can’t do anything about them
- 5% are real, and we can do something about them

## **The Cures for Discouragement**

Now we know some of the causes of discouragement – ridicule and repression can lead to fatigue, frustration, and fear. Let me tell you definitively that discouragement is a curable disease. This is good news – you don’t have to live with a chronic condition anymore! Let’s look briefly at three cures for discouragement.

### **1. The first cure is to request God’s help.**

In the jungles of Africa, a man was being pursued by a roaring, hungry lion. Feeling the beast’s hot breath on his neck, and knowing his time was short, he broke out into prayer as he ran like crazy, “O, Lord, please make this lion a Christian. Please make him a Christian!” Within seconds, the frightened man noticed that the lion had stopped chasing him. When he looked behind him, he found the lion kneeling and moving his lips in obvious prayer. Greatly relieved at this turn of events, he got close enough to the lion to hear him pray, “And bless, Oh Lord, this food which I am about to receive.”

Nehemiah requested God’s help in chapter one for Jerusalem. In chapter two, he prayed a “popcorn prayer” while he was in the presence of the king. Now, in chapter four, he prays two different times. He looked up before launching out, he prayed before proceeding. Take a look at his first prayer in Neh 4:4-5: “Hear us, O God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.” This was quite a prayer – he wasn’t praying for his enemies to become believers but instead for God to judge them. This prayer was not nice, but it was understandable and honest. He knew that the enemies were really fighting against God and so he asks God to deal with them. He didn’t give lectures to the workers, organize raiding parties

against the enemies, or create propaganda campaigns to put a different spin on things. Here's the principle we can learn from Nehemiah: When people talk against you, don't talk back – talk to God. Neh 4:9 tells us that they prayed to God and posted a guard. When their enemies started talking, Nehemiah continued to pray, and the people continued to work.

## **2. The second cure is to reorganize your priorities.**

In Neh 4:13 Nehemiah said, "Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest point of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows."

Nehemiah had already organized the people in chapter 3 and they had finished half of their task. Now, however, a new situation had come about that required a change in organization. If the enemies were going to attack they would most likely do so at the weakest places. So Nehemiah put guards at all the vulnerable spots. This served two purposes – it discouraged the enemy and it encouraged the people because it dealt with their fear.

When we're discouraged, one of the things we can do is to reorganize our priorities. You can look at your life. You can adopt a change in approach instead of becoming so discouraged that you quit. Do you have a problem in your marriage? If so, don't bail on your spouse! Change your approach. Adopt a new attitude. Get some help. Do you have a problem in your job? Don't give up! Change your priorities. Do you have a problem in your walk with God? Don't stop following Jesus! Reorganize your schedule so you can meet with Him on a regular basis. Plug into a small group. Don't be overcome by discouragement. Do something about it!

In Neh 4:16 the workers reorganized again by dividing responsibilities – half worked and the other half kept watch. Those who worked used one hand for pushing the wheelbarrow, and with the other hand, they carried a weapon. And, they worked together as a team.

## **3. If you want to defeat discouragement, the third thing you can do is to remember who God is.**

After looking everything over and sensing the discouragement within his team, Nehemiah rallied his troops in Neh 4:14: "...Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome..." Nehemiah knew, even in the face of opposition, that the success of the wall was wholly dependent upon God who inspired its beginning. Neh 4:10 was true – the people could not rebuild the wall on their own. They needed to remember God and what He had promised.

I don't know about you, but it's easy for me to forget God when things are tough. I need to be reminded that He is always there for me. How do you remember the Lord? By remembering that He will always be there for you. We're to remember that He is great and awesome. God is more than able to deal with your discouragement.

So, when you're down, turn your attention from your discouragement to the One who is able to do something about it. God has been faithful to you in the past. He is faithful to you today. And He has promised to be faithful to you in the future. Remember the Lord. Remember His promises. Remember His goodness. Remember His power. Our God is great and awesome! Remember Him.

The people complained about all the rubble in Neh 4:10. Question. Wasn't the rubble there in the beginning? Of course it was. The difference was that when they started the project they were focused on God and His character. Now, they had become rubble-gazers. Friend, if you focus on all the junk in your life, and in the lives of others, you will become discouraged. Let's determine to be God-gazers instead of rubble-gazers, OK?

## **Our Security Net**

At the time it was completed in 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge was the longest suspension bridge in the world. During the first phase of the project 23 men fell to their deaths in the icy water. Murphy's laws were in evidence! Things were going from bad to worse because there were very few safety devices. And so, when it was halfway completed, they decided to take another look and make some changes.

Do you know what they did? They reorganized and built the largest net ever made, and attached it under the area where the men were working. Was it worth the cost and the time it took to do this? Ask the ten men who fell into it without being injured! Not only did it save those ten lives, I'm told that the work was completed in three-fourths the time because the workers no longer lived in fear of falling.

Friends, God's great net of security spans this globe. No matter where we live. No matter what we've done. No matter how discouraged we've been. He's stretched out His everlasting arms beneath us. As a result, we can live and work freely and without fear, knowing that we are protected, safe and secure. Discouragement can be defeated as we request His help, reorganize our priorities, and remember who He is.

## **Communion**

When you think about it, most of us are just halfway, if even that, in our Christian lives. We're well aware of the rubble and the mess. And, like the wall workers, it's so easy to get discouraged and not remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

Jesus knows that we have a built in capacity to forget and that many of us default to discouragement. I truly believe that is why he commanded us to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. We're to do it "in remembrance of Him" so that we don't forget Him.

As we prepare to meet Him at His table this morning, I want to show you a clip from the Jesus Video. This section of the film, based on the Gospel of Luke, will help us recapture the reality and significance of what He did for us.

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**Editor Addition: Given that Christian (Biblical) Contentment is the Converse of Christian Discouragement, here are some discussions of contentment for your edification in the Lord...**

- Contentment - Multiple Quotes and Illustrations
- Contentment- overview of
- Contentment-more in depth discussion
- [Stealth Attack Study Guide-Ray Pritchard, Brian Bill](#)

## NEHEMIAH 5: How to Stop Strife

October 8, 2000

As we continue in our series through the Book of Nehemiah, we've learned that Nehemiah confronted a different challenge in each chapter:

- In chapter one, he was faced with a personal challenge. When he heard about what was happening in Jerusalem, he sat down and wept and then broke out into prayer.
- In chapter two, his challenge was political. When the King asked him what he needed, he prayed a "popcorn prayer" and boldly made his requests.
- In chapter three, he confronted an administrative challenge by positioning the right workers in the right place for the right reasons.
- In chapter four, he dealt with the challenge of discouragement. The workers were afraid of the enemies and convinced they couldn't work anymore. Nehemiah rallied the troops to come together under pressure.

As we come to chapter five, this same community is starting to self-destruct because of some festering grievances. The workers now face a new enemy who is harder to conquer than the previous ones. The timing could not have been worse because the walls are almost done! Nehemiah has to put down his hard hat and turn his attention from the construction of the wall to the walls that were being put up between his workers. While their external enemies helped to rally the people, internal conflict threatened to divide and destroy them.

I'm told that when a group of thoroughbred horses face an enemy attack, they stand in a circle facing each other, and with their back legs, kick out at the foe. Donkeys, on the other hand, do just the opposite. They make a circle and face the threat while using their hind legs to kick at each other!

It's much easier to conquer and subdue an enemy who attacks us than it is to forgive and restore a friend who hurts us. Psalm 55:12-14 puts it this way: "If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God."

### Complaints Nehemiah Heard (Neh 5:1-5)

There's a word in Neh 5:1 that sets the tone for Nehemiah 5 – it's the word, "against." Strife was brewing, tension was mounting, and horns were locked. Let's look at the complaints Nehemiah heard in Neh 5:1-5.

In the midst of a "great work" in Neh 4:19 for a "great God" in Neh 1:5, in Neh 5:1 "the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers." This was not just a little disagreement or a minor problem. They weren't crying out against the Samaritans or the Ammonites, but against their own people!

Do you remember when hurricane Andrew tore through southern Florida several years ago? After the storm we got a glimpse of the greed of some people. While there were many who reached out to help, there were others who saw this as an opportunity to take advantage of those in need by price gouging and stealing. That's similar to what we see in our text. The city of Jerusalem lies in ruins and people are powerless to help themselves. Taxes are high and because of a long drought there is a bad famine. Most everyone has been working with all their hearts to build the walls but there are others whose alarming acts of greed resulted in widespread poverty and injustice.

There were four different groups of people who were involved in the community crisis:

- People who owned no land but needed food (Neh 5:2). The population was increasing, the families were growing, there was a famine, and the people were hungry. They were working so hard on the wall that they didn't have time to plant or take care of their crops.
- Landowners who had mortgaged their property in order to buy food (Neh 5:3). Inflation was on the rise and prices were going higher and many had their homes repossessed by the moneylenders.
- Another group complained that taxes were too high (Neh 5:4). Many people were forced to borrow money just to pay their tax bills – some of us might have to do the same thing in a couple days!
- Those who were exploiting others (Neh 5:5). The wealthy were making loans with exorbitant interest rates and taking land and even children as collateral. Families had to choose between starvation and servitude. When the crops failed because of the famine, the creditors took away their property and sold their children into slavery.

While it was not against God's law to loan money to one another, they were not to act like pawn shop owners or bankers who charge high interest when lending money to fellow Jews. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 23:19-20: "Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the Lord your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess."

### **Steps Nehemiah Took (Neh 5:6-13)**

Nehemiah heard their complaints in the first five verses. Now, in Neh 5:6-13, we see the steps that he took to stop the strife. Notice Neh 5:6: "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry." This lit him up! It wasn't just that Nehemiah had a short fuse or a bad temper. This is what the Bible calls "righteous anger." Moses expressed this kind of anger when he broke the stone tablets of the Law in Exodus 32 and Jesus was filled with holy rage when he saw the Pharisee's hard hearts in Mark 3:5 and when he cleared out the Temple in Luke 19.

While Nehemiah was very angry, Neh 5:7 says that he took the time to "ponder" the charges before he accused the nobles and officials. The New English Bible puts it this way: "I mastered my feelings." The Hebrew literally means, "My heart consulted within me." Instead of just "going off" on the people in the heat of the moment, Nehemiah paused, took a deep breath and thought about it for a while. He did what Proverbs 16:32 challenges us to do: "It is better to be slow-tempered than famous; it is better to have self-control than to control an army."

After thinking things over, Nehemiah decided to publicly confront the people whose selfishness had created the strife. Since it involved the whole nation it demanded public rebuke and repentance. This rebuke consisted of six different appeals:

#### **1. He appealed to their love (Neh 5:7).**

Nehemiah reminded them that they were robbing their "own countrymen," not the Gentiles. He uses the word, "brother" four different times in his speech. Psalm 133:1 must have been echoing in his mind: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

#### **2. He reminded them of God's redemptive purpose (Neh 5:8).**

While God's people had been redeemed from Egypt and most recently from Babylon, and Nehemiah himself had bought back some of the Jews who were in slavery, their fellow Jews were returning people into bondage just to make money.

#### **3. His appeal was based on God's Word (Neh 5:9a)**

Nehemiah calls them on the carpet: "What you are doing is not right..." As we've already learned, they were going against God's clear commands.

#### **4. They needed to remember their witness (Neh 5:9b).**

Israel was to be a light to the nations but their behavior was dark and shady. They were to “walk in the fear of the Lord in order to avoid the reproach of their enemies.” Because they weren’t right in their relationship with God they weren’t able to make a positive impact on those around them. Instead of making people thirsty for God, they had lost their saltiness.

#### **5. He appealed to his own actions (Neh 5:10-11).**

Nehemiah lent money but he didn’t charge interest. He had integrity ([Integrity- The Ultimate Virtue - by Dr. Ray Pritchard](#); See also **Integrity - A Few Thoughts**) when he told the other moneylenders to stop what they were doing: “Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them.”

#### **6. Finally, he appealed to the judgment of God (Neh 5:12-13)**

I love Neh 5:12 because it shows that they really wanted to do what was right and didn’t have to wait and think about it: “We will give it back and we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.” Since the brokers promised to obey, Nehemiah made them take an oath in the presence of the priests. This was a way of saying that the promise was not just between the bankers and the builders but between them and the Lord. Nehemiah then concluded this special business meeting with three actions in Neh 5:13 that lifted up the seriousness of what they had decided to do:

- Nehemiah shook out the folds of his robe, which symbolized what God would do if they broke their vow.
- Next, the congregation responded with a collective “amen” which was a solemn assent to what had been said. The word literally means, “So be it” and it made the entire assembly a part of the decision.
- Then they praised the Lord in unison. What started as a great cry of outrage led to a confrontation which led to a commitment to change and concluded with shouts of praise in a corporate worship service.

#### **The Example Nehemiah Set (Neh 5:14-19)**

In describing his own lifestyle during this period, Nehemiah’s memoirs tell us how he behaved. He was motivated by two biblical principles during the 12 years he was the governor in the land of Judah. He was devoted to the Great Commandment as spelled out later by Jesus in Mark 12:30-31: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Before thinking about how he could make a profit, he considered what was pleasing to God. In Neh 5:15 he describes how previous governors got wealthy at the expense of the people. When comparing himself with what others did, Nehemiah stated, “But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.”

In Neh 5:17-18 we see that he did not live extravagantly but instead lived generously by providing meals for others and not using his expense account to do so. Because he loved and revered God, he also loved the people he was called to serve.

That’s a great example for us to follow as well. Start first by focusing on God and your relationship to Him. As you do, you will have more love and compassion for others – even for those you have conflict with.

#### **Principles to Ponder**

Having walked through a brief exposition of this passage let me draw out some principles to ponder.

##### **1. There is a direct correlation between the effectiveness of our mission and how we treat each other**

We must be the church before we can build the church. We must care for one another before we can hope to reach this community and county for Christ.

##### **2. Relational problems are inevitable and we can’t ignore them.**

Even though it’s painful and it may seem easier to avoid or deny relational ruptures, we must face conflict head-on. If we don’t, we’ll pay because it will go underground, grow deep roots, and bear bitter fruits. One of my pastor friends puts it this way: “The first price you pay is always the cheapest.” It’s painful to stop strife but it will only get more difficult the longer you wait.

##### **3. We must take the initiative to restore relationships whether we want to or not.**

Don’t wait for the other person to come to you. You need to go to them. Be tenacious about this one. If you’ve been hurt, go and talk it out as Jesus commanded in Matthew 18. If you’ve hurt someone else, go and confess what you did according to what Jesus said in Matthew 5. We’re covered either way.

#### **4. God's reputation is at stake when we have conflict.**

In John 17:23, Jesus prayed that lost people would know God's heart of love when brothers and sisters in Christ are brought together in complete unity. Let's be like Nehemiah and walk in the fear of God to not only avoid the reproach of unbelievers but to also make God attractive to those who need Him – and we can do that by living in loving community with each other.

#### **Action Steps for Stopping Strife**

I came across something this week called, "How to Turn a Disagreement Into a Feud." I wonder how many of us have done these things? I know I have:

- **Avoid conflict so that your feelings build up and then you explode.**
- **Be vague and general when you share your concerns so the other person cannot do anything practical to change the situation.**
- **Assume you know all the facts and that you are totally right.**
- **Avoid possible solutions and go for total victory and unconditional surrender.**

I want to focus our remaining minutes on some practical action steps you and I can take to stop strife – these come right out of Nehemiah 5.

#### **1. Make sure it's a moral issue.**

Nehemiah was very angry because of the injustice he saw in Neh 5:6. If you've been wronged and sinned against, your anger is justified. On the other hand, if you're ticked off at someone just because they've done something that you don't like, and it's not a moral issue, then cut them some slack and give some grace.

#### **2. Think before speaking.**

If you've been sinned against, take some time to ponder what was done and how you feel about it. That's exactly what Nehemiah did in the first part of Neh 5:7. Anger is a gift from God that motivates us to action but it can just as easily backfire if we just let things fly out of our mouths.

#### **3. Meet face-to-face.**

Someone has said: "Confrontation is caring enough about another person to get the conflict on the table and talk about it." Just as Jesus commanded in Matthew 18, we are to be direct with the people we have strife with. Nehemiah went right to the source in Neh 5:8 and confronted the people with what they had done wrong.

When we ignore this critical step we often end up talking to someone else about how we've been offended by someone else. When you go to a third party you create a "communication triangle." So go directly to the person you're upset with. If someone comes to you to express anger at another person, your first question should always be, "Have you talked to him? Have you met with her?"

#### **4. Seek Resolution.**

Our goal in stopping strife or confronting conflict should always be resolution and restoration of the relationship. We shouldn't be set on proving ourselves right and the other person as wrong. We're not to vanquish our brothers and sisters but to build them up and have the issue resolved so that we can all get back to kingdom work.

Woodrow Wilson once said, "If you come at me with your fists doubled, I think I can promise you that mine will double as fast as yours; but if you come to me and say, 'Let us sit down and take counsel together, and, if we differ from one another...we will find that we are not so far apart after all, that the points on which we differ are few and the points on which we agree are many, and that if we only have the patience and the candor and the desire to get together...we will.'"

When the workers took these steps, the team was able to get back to the job they were commissioned to do. If we allow strife and discord to go on, kingdom work will come to a standstill. If we would follow Nehemiah's example, my guess is that 95% of our relational problems would be solved. If we have an issue with anyone in this church, let's follow these four steps: #1: Make sure it's moral; #2: Think before speaking; #3: Meet face-to-face; and #4: Seek resolution.

In an old monastery in Germany, I'm told you can see two racks of ancient deer antlers permanently interlocked. Apparently the animals had been fighting fiercely, and their horns became so tangled that they could not be disengaged. As a result, both of them died of hunger.



Anyone here this morning who is tangled up with someone right now? Is there strife in your life? In your home? In your workplace? With someone in the church? Don't let it fester any longer. I love how the people responded to Nehemiah's challenge in Neh 5:13 when it says that the "people did as they had promised."

**What about you?  
Are you willing to make a promise  
to stop strife in your life – and in our (your) church?**

## NEHEMIAH 6: Dealing With Distractions

10/15/00

[Drama] Do you have any unfinished projects lying around collecting dust? It's so easy to get sidetracked isn't it? It takes tenacity to finish what we start because there are always so many competing distractions.

One thing that clearly emerges from our study in the Book of Nehemiah is that life is a battle from beginning to end. In Ephesians 6:12 the Apostle Paul warns, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against the powers of this dark world." We meet these powers of darkness in our text today.

Here in Nehemiah 6, as in many other places in Scripture, we learn that the devil has two main ways of working. The first tactic is fear. Satan is prowling around, as Peter says in 1 Peter 5:8, "like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

But he has another battle plan as well. He not only uses fear, he also utilizes flattery. 2 Corinthians 11:14 reveals that Satan "masquerades as an angel of light." He comes with enticing promises and flattering words, assuring us that what he proposes will cost us nothing.

Whatever method the evil one employs, whether it be fear or flattery, his aim is to distract and destroy us. We need to be on guard against each of these approaches. That is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:11 that "We are not unaware of his schemes." We need to be on guard because Satan is both a lion that devours and a serpent that deceives.

Let me give you a simple outline of chapter 6 that will help us get a better handle on how to deal with distractions:

- The Intrigue (Neh 6:1-4)
- The Innuendo (Neh 6:5-9)
- The Intimidation (Neh 6:10-19)

### **The Intrigue (Neh 6:1-4)**

Since Sanballat and his sinister buddies failed in their attempts to stop the wall builders, they decide now to concentrate their attacks on Nehemiah himself by changing their tactics and resorting to subtle persuasion. We might call this political softball. You will experience this as well when you try to correct some things in your life. Many people today are faltering in their Christian pilgrimage because they listen to the advice and temptations of those closest to them.

Let's take a look at Neh 6:1-4: "When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it -- though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates -- Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.' But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?' Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer."

These enemies suddenly become Nehemiah's friends and invite him to a conference down on the plain of Ono. The first four verses look like a political concession speech – they want to meet with Nehemiah and cut their losses – or so it seems. Ono is located on the seacoast near the Gaza strip. It was a beautiful resort area. But Nehemiah senses danger: "they were scheming to harm me." So Nehemiah said, "Oh, no!" to Ono.

Some commentators suggest that they were trying to trick him into leaving Jerusalem, where he had armed support, to come to a conference where they could ambush him. Nehemiah evidently senses this. He firmly declines, saying, "I am carrying on a great project, and I cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

That is a great answer even though it sounds rather blunt. But Nehemiah sees through their scheme by refusing their invitation four



different times. You, too, may experience continuing pressure to change your mind and go along with something that is wrong. Some of us give in to repeated pressure. We might decline the first invitation but find our defenses weakened as the enticements continue. But Nehemiah persists in his refusal because he knows what his priorities are: "I am doing a great work. I have a great calling. God has committed a tremendous project to me, and if I leave, it will be threatened."

Sometimes these distractions come disguised as harmless options or even good things. In staff meeting this week we were discussing this passage and Geoff and I mentioned that we both recently turned down speaking engagements elsewhere because of the work we're involved with here. Those speaking opportunities were good, but they could have become distractions. As we discussed during our meeting, there are many things that distract us from what's really important – things like meetings, TV, sports, reading, and even email.

That's one of my biggest distractions. I like to get up early so that I can read and pray and jump into sermon prep while I'm still fresh. Lately however, when I arrive at the office, I've been turning my computer on and checking email before praying and reading. While that's not really bad, it does serve as a distraction, especially when I take the time to respond to my emails. Unfortunately, when I start my morning this way, I don't give God His proper place in my schedule – and sometimes neglect meeting with him altogether.

One of the most helpful things that we can do to resist temptation is to remember that God has called each of us to a great task. This is true of every believer in Christ – whether you're just joining PBC today or you've been here for many years. We are called to make a kingdom impact. Our priorities as a church are summed up in the IMPACT acrostic printed on your bulletin – and they are to be personal priorities as well:

- Instruction in God's Word. We are called to read, study, and apply the Bible. We are to do this on our own and also by listening to the Word as it is preached and by being involved in one of our small groups.
- Mobilized for Ministry. We are to be involved in using our time, talents, and treasures in the work of the ministry.
- Praying with Faith. We are to be engaged in regular and fervent prayer.
- Adoring God in Worship. We are to worship God with reverence and with joy both individually and corporately.
- Caring for others. As we mentioned last week, we must be the church before we can build the church. We must be committed to each other. About 50 women experienced this kind of caring this past Thursday at the "Gathering."
- Telling Others the Gospel. We are to look for ways to share the gospel message with those around us.

I read years ago of a missionary in China whose abilities were so outstanding that one of the American companies tried to hire him. They offered him an attractive job with a salary to match, but he turned it down. He told them that God had sent him to China as a missionary. He thought that would end the matter, but instead they came back with a better offer and an increase in salary. He turned that down too, but again they came back, doubling the financial package. Finally he said to them, "It's not your salary that's too little. It's the job that's too small!"

In her book, "A Practical Guide to Prayer," Dorothy Haskins tells about a noted concert violinist who was asked the secret of her mastery of the instrument. This is what she said, "There are many things that used to demand my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, straightened the room, dusted, and did whatever seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. That system prevented me from accomplishing what I should on the violin. So I reversed things. I deliberately planned to neglect everything else until my practice period was complete. And that program of planned neglect is the secret to my success."

Friends, in a similar way, we've been called to a great task – one that we have to prioritize or we'll be distracted from it. If we don't practice some "planned neglect" of other things, even good things, we'll be distracted from God's best. That's what Nehemiah does. He's involved in a great work, and he's not going to forsake it for anything less.

### **The Innuendo (Neh 6:5-9)**

When the enemy cannot accomplish his purpose by offering peace, he switches back to his original scheme of sinister threats. He moves from political softball to political hardball. Take a look at Neh 6:5-7: "Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: "It is reported among the nations -- and Geshem says it is true -- that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."

This arm-twisting tactic is designed to pressure Nehemiah to yield to their request, and thus fall into their trap. But he resists

because he sees it for what it really is, an enticement based upon lies. Note that it was an “unsealed letter.” In other words, it was designed for everyone to read, so that the lie would be spread around that Nehemiah was trying to make himself king.

Have you ever noticed that rumors regularly cite people of distinction as sources? That’s what happened here – “and Geshem says its true.” Someone has said that gossip is news you have to hurry to tell somebody else before you find out isn’t true!

Nehemiah responded three different ways – he denied the rumor, he prayed to God for strength, and he went back to work. Look at Neh 6:8: “I sent him this reply: ‘Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.’” That’s the best way to respond to a charge like this -- just a flat denial. He doesn’t try to disprove the accusation but merely states, “That is a lie. There is no truth in it.”

And then, invariably, as was his practice, he responds with another “popcorn prayer” in Neh 6:9: “They are all trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.’ But I prayed, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’”

Their tactics were to get the people to think that Nehemiah had some hidden motive -- his own glory -- for rebuilding the wall, hoping that the workers would thus become discouraged and quit. Nehemiah simply prays, “Lord, do not let that happen. Strengthen me to work all the harder.” They were on the last lap of the race and the finish line was in sight. He took care of his character and trusted God to take care of his reputation.

### **The Intimidation (Neh 6:10-19)**

Once again the enemy switches his game plan in Neh 6:10: “One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, ‘Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you -- by night they are coming to kill you.’”

This false prophet claims to have hidden knowledge. That is suggested by the phrase, “he was shut in” at his home. He was secluding himself for some religious reason. This is frequently the case with those who claim to be psychics who are in touch with the invisible world. They sit behind curtains in semi-darkness, trying to create a sense of mystery, as though they know more about inscrutable things than others.

What he says sounds logical: “Some people are out to get you. They are going to kill you.” Nehemiah certainly believes that! The man suggests, “Come on up here and we will go into the temple and shut the doors. They will not dare attack you there.” That sounds good, but immediately Nehemiah detects that something is wrong. He knows that he is not permitted to go into the temple, for only priests could enter the holy place.

So he answers in Neh 6:11: “But I said, ‘should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!’” He realizes that a prophet who was really from the Lord would say nothing contrary to God’s commands. In Neh 6:3 he said, “I cannot come down.” Now he says, “I will not go in.”

Having right priorities gave Nehemiah the courage to do what was right. Courage isn’t the absence of fear but instead it’s the tenacity to do what is right no matter how much we’re afraid. You see, it’s not just a matter of saying ‘no’ to distractions. We have to first say ‘yes’ to the right things, so that our priorities match up with God’s priorities. As we keep the main thing the main thing, we’ll be able to deal with distractions the way Nehemiah did.

God gives Nehemiah some insight in Neh 6:12-13: “I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.” It was all part of a plan to discourage and distract the people from following Nehemiah’s lead. Fueled by jealousy and ambition, these enemies slandered him and tried to trick him into yielding to their demands.

We must be aware of this kind of attack in our lives as well. Don’t take someone’s advice or do what a friend asks you to do just because they seem like a nice person. Don’t let anyone or anything distract you from God’s priorities. The best response to such an approach is what Nehemiah uses here -- a deep sense of his true identity as a believer. “Should a man like me run and hide and try to save his life by wrong approaches and unlawful practices?” He falls back upon his clear understanding of who he is and what his priorities are. He is a believer in the Living God and as such need not resort to trickery to save his life.

Nehemiah meets this attack of the enemy by going to prayer once again in Neh 6:14:

“Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also that prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.”

This brings us to the end of this first phase of Nehemiah’s work in Neh 6:15-16: “So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this and all the surrounding nations saw it, our enemies lost their self-

confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.” Even their enemies had to admit that God was at work! This entire project was finished in just 52 days! What a beautiful picture of the power of Christian witness in a community! Even their foes must agree that God is at work among them. But the enemies are still not through. In these closing verses we see how they continue their tactics of opposing and distracting: “Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah.” (Neh 6:17-18)

That is simply saying that Tobiah had intermarried with the Israelites. Taking advantage of that relationship, he was seeking to undermine Nehemiah’s influence by nothing more than mere gossip. As Nehemiah says in Neh 6:19: “Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.”

Brothers and sisters, here’s one of the overriding truths from this book: the devil never quits. He is never going to give up while we are still alive. God has wonderful blessings and much encouragement and joy for us along the way, but we must never cease battling against the world, the flesh and the devil until we get to heaven. The enemy of God will never quit. If he cannot distract you with fear and flattery, he will use gossip and false accusations.

## Action Steps

As we close this morning, let’s ask God to apply this passage to our lives. I see at least two action steps:

### 1. Practice saying, “yes” to God’s priorities.

The best way to not be distracted is by being attracted to those things that are on the heart of God. Once we’re aware of what those are, and are attracted to them, we need to commit ourselves to a life of full devotion and complete commitment.

I heard a story about a Native American who left the reservation to join his cousin who lived in the city. One day, as they were walking down a busy street, the Native American said, “I hear a cricket.” His city cousin was amazed because all he could hear was the traffic. After a short search, the man reached down and picked up the cricket. When he stood up, he pulled some change out of his pocket and dropped it on the sidewalk. The noise was no louder than the cricket’s, but immediately several pedestrians stopped and turned toward the sound. The man then turned to his cousin and said, “See, people hear what’s important to them.”

What are you hearing today? What is it that’s important to you? Are you locked into God’s kingdom purposes or are you focused on a bunch of other things?

### 2. Practice saying, “no” to the devil’s distractions.

I don’t know what distractions you’re faced with but it might be television. I read this week that the average American spends three hours and 46 minutes watching TV every day. That equals 52 days of nonstop TV watching per year. By the age of 65, the average American will have spent nearly nine years glued to the tube.

Let’s take some time right now and ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify those things that are distracting you from God’s priorities. Is it a friend? An activity? Your money? Your possessions? Your thought life? Your career? When the Spirit makes it clear, decide how you can begin to say “no” to those things that are derailing you from what’s most important. Maybe you can practice saying, “no” like Nehemiah did – “I will not come down” and “I will not go in.”

Someone sent me this fictional report of a worldwide convention that Satan and his demons participated in. In the devil’s opening address to his followers, he said, “We can’t keep Christians from going to church but we can steal their time. Let’s keep them busy in the non-essentials of life and invent innumerable schemes to occupy their minds...keep them busy, busy, busy! And when they meet for spiritual fellowship, involve them in gossip and small talk so that they leave with troubled consciences and unsettled emotions. Let’s crowd their lives with so many good things that they have no time to seek the best things.”

## Conclusion

Friends, the enemy will act to distract you. But while he blasts away, God is building His kingdom. Satan is subtle but God is sufficient. Remember, when God’s priorities become our priorities, God’s kingdom work will advance. When the wall was completed, Neh 6:16 says, “...All the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.” May that be said of us!

10/22/00

I received an email this week from Janelle Becker, one of our missionaries serving in the Philippines. She's been there for about 10 weeks and is learning the language and beginning to understand the culture. In her email, she forwarded what her co-worker wrote about a shared experience in a recent church service:

I heard my pastor announce that we were going to take up an offering to purchase some "sin" for another developing church. The pastor made this compelling announcement: "Their church building is nearly finished, and they are in desperate need of more "sin." If you would like to make a donation toward the purchase of more "sin" or if you would just like to go out and buy "sin" to give them yourself, let us know as soon as possible. If you aren't going to be here next Sunday and would like to leave your donation for "sin" with us, that would be fine. I know the Lord will bless you for your generous gift toward this project!

Janelle's friend Marilee continues: "At that point I was nearly unable to contain myself! I leaned over and whispered to my friend [who I think was Janelle], 'So, you can actually go out and purchase "sin" here in the Philippines? What a shame they don't have enough "sin" in their church already!"

Later on, they figured out what was going on:

### **The Cebuano word for "tin" is "sin"!**

They were in fact, needing more tin to complete the roof of the new church building. Could it be said, then, that they were in sin over their heads?"

My guess is that most of us have plenty of sin to deal with in our lives – we certainly don't need to purchase any more! What Janelle is experiencing in another culture is very common. Due to the difficulty in understanding a new language, she's faced with some misconceptions.

Just as there are many misconceptions when trying to learn a new language, so too, many of us have some misconceptions about the Bible. Here are three that come to mind:

- It's too confusing to read
- It's too boring to study
- It's impossible to apply

These myths are demolished in Nehemiah 8. In the first half of the book, in chapters 1-6, the focus is on reconstruction.

#### **Chapter 1 Knowing How to Pray**

#### **Chapter 2 How to Tackle a Tough Job**

#### **Chapter 3 Working Well With Others**

#### **Chapter 4 Defeating Discouragement**

#### **Chapter 5 How to Stop Strife**

#### **Chapter 6 Dealing With Distractions**

The emphasis shifts in Nehemiah 7, as the focal point becomes reinstruction in the rest of the book. We move from rebuilding the city, to rebuilding the people.

I want to use these myths, or misconceptions, as an outline this morning.

#### **The first myth is that the Bible is too confusing to read.**

In Neh 8:1-8, we'll see that the Bible, instead of being confusing, is actually a book that you and I can comprehend – You can understand it!

#### **The second myth is that the Bible is too dry and boring to study.**

What we'll discover in Neh 8:9-12 is that the Bible is anything but dull – You can rejoice in it!

#### **The third misconception is that the Bible is impossible to apply.**

What relevance does a book this old have to do with my world today? Neh 8:13-18 show us that there are many ways we can apply its truths – You can obey it! You Can Understand It

Take a look at Neh 8:1: “When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.”

The Bible is not a “magic book” that changes us just because we read it – God’s Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power. The word, “understanding” is used six times in this chapter, which shows that the Bible is not meant to be confusing, but to be understood.

Ezra was the ideal man to conduct this outdoor Bible conference. He had come to Jerusalem 14 years before Nehemiah and was a priest, scholar, and teacher of the Law. Ezra 7:10 gives us some insight into what kind of man he was: “For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” He was committed to personal study of the Word, he looked for ways to apply the Bible to his life, and then he taught it to others. This is one of my favorite verses – I consider it a personal challenge because I want to do the same. I’m committed to study and personal application so that I can teach the Word accurately and with integrity.

They came together on the first day of the seventh month, which was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year’s Day. During this month, the Israelites celebrated the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. It was the perfect time for them to get right with God and make a fresh start. Notice that this seems to be a spontaneous gathering. No invitations were sent out. No public notice was given. They came together as “one man,” eager to understand God’s Word. They met before the “Water Gate.” In the Bible, water is a picture of the Word of God.

Instead of waiting to hear what Ezra wanted to preach on, “they told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law…” Like an impatient audience at a concert, the people were probably chanting, “We want Ezra. We want Ezra. Teach us the Word. Bring it on!” The Book of the Law was the Torah, which contains the first five Books of Moses.

Neh 8:3 tells us that he started reading at dawn and read until lunch. The people listened to the Word of God for over six hours! We know from Neh 8:18 that this continued for a week. And, they didn’t just sit in their pews – they “listened attentively.” There’s no greater thrill to a preacher than when people listen alertly to the Word of God. When I was candidating here at PBC, the search committee told me that this church really responds to biblical preaching. They were absolutely right – thank you for your attentiveness and compelling desire to understand God’s Word. In an effort to follow Ezra’s example, we’re going to have six-hour services beginning next Sunday! Just kidding.

In Neh 8:4 we read, “Ezra stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion” so they could see and hear him better. Some churches in Scotland have high pulpits, with 20 or 30 steps leading up to them – they probably got the idea from this passage. Thirteen men stood with Ezra while he read.

When Ezra opened the Book in Neh 8:5, the people honored God by standing up. They knew this was not just a man speaking; they were about to hear the very Word of God. After Ezra praised “the great God” in Neh 8:6, all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” No one fell asleep in this service. Everyone listened attentively and everyone responded. Then they “bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

The people went from sitting to standing. Then, they raised their hands, shouted out their agreement by saying “Amen” and then bowed down and worshipped by putting their faces to the ground. The anticipation of hearing the Bible in a way that they could understand totally gripped them. They were locked in, focused, and ready to hear from their great God.

In this spirit, please stand as I read the rest of this chapter.

In Neh 8:7-8, the Levites join Ezra in helping to instruct the people. They “made it clear” and gave the meaning “so that the people could understand what was being read.” Their task was twofold. First, they had to translate from Hebrew into Aramaic because the language would have undergone some changes since the days of Moses. By the way, the reason we need new translations of the Bible is not because the Bible changes, but because our language is undergoing change all the time.

Second, they had to spell out the application, so that the listeners would know how to flesh out God’s truth in their own lives. They probably mingled with the people and, when there was a break in the reading, answered questions and told them how to apply the Law. There was both a public proclamation of the Word in a large assembly and the face-to-face interaction of a small group.

### **Myth #1 is that the Bible is too confusing to read.**

What we learn from Neh 8:1-8 is that the Bible is designed to be understood. Let me give you four hints to help you better

comprehend the Word of God.

- Find a contemporary translation and read a chapter of the Bible every day. Grab a notebook and write down one verse that impacts you. Saturate yourself with Scripture.
- Be attentive during the preaching time. Read the passage I will be speaking on during the week. Bring your Bible and follow along. Take notes.
- Participate in an IMPACT class on Sunday mornings. These classes are designed to help you understand more about the Bible.
- Plug into a small group. Like the Levites with Ezra, our small group leaders are trained to help you better understand the Bible. If you're ready to join a group, pick up some information in the hallway or call the church office.
- **(Editorial Note:** inductive Bible study is a very productive and powerful "technique" for reading and understanding Scripture. Try it!)

## You Can Rejoice In It

### **Myth #2 is that the Bible is too boring to study.**

The truth of the matter is that you can rejoice in it! We see this in Neh 8:9, 10, 11-12.

As Ezra read and the small group leaders explained the Word, the congregation's first response was one of conviction and grief in Neh 8:9. The natural reaction to the Bible is guilt. The people wept because they knew they had been neglecting God's Word. Another reason they were broken up is because their hearts were convicted by what they heard. As Romans 3:20 says, "...through the Law we become conscious of sin." The ministry of Scripture caused them to see the beauty of God and the ugliness of their own hearts.

Though weeping is necessary and important, it's not the final message God has for us. Assisted by the Levites, Nehemiah convinced the people to stop mourning and start celebrating. The Word of God brings conviction and leads to repentance, but it also brings us joy; for the same Word that wounds also heals. Jeremiah 15:16: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight..." Psalm 19:8: "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart..." Friends, it is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us, as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us. Grief for sin, and joy in God's forgiveness are not far from each other. The God who convicts of sin is the God of grace and mercy.

It isn't enough for us to read the Word, or receive the Word as others explain it; we must also rejoice in the Word.

Look at Neh 8:10-12:

Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.' Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Did you catch that? When people understand the Word of God, it brings them joy. We can have joy because God has found a solution to the sin problem.

Notice how the people are urged to share what they have with others. This is significant in light of what we learned in chapter 5 when the rich were taking advantage of the poor. When we understand God through understanding His Word, we will have a contagious joy as we invite others to experience the same thing. As someone has said, "Joy is magnified when it's shared." That's one of the points Nehemiah makes: Eat something good, drink something sweet, and give some to people who don't have any. This is a sacred day, so be joyful. Reverence and rejoicing go together. Philemon 6 challenges us to "be active in sharing our faith so that we will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." We can't have true joy unless we share what we have with others.

Friends, the Bible and the truths within it are far from dry or boring. If we understand Scripture, we will come to the place of joy. Every effort to make Christianity seem sad, heavy, strict, and boring comes up short. The people who know the story of redemption the best are the most free, the most joyful, and the least likely to keep it to themselves.

Let me give you a couple ways to demolish this second myth so that you can rejoice in what you understand from the Bible:

- Instead of focusing on how you've messed up, draw your attention to what God has done on your behalf. Some of you are

crippled with guilt and paralyzed with shame. If you've confessed it, the Bible says you are forgiven and free. It's time to move on with joy. Isaiah 44:22 is a great verse to treasure if you're struggling with guilt and shame: "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

- Look for ways to share what you have with others. Someone this week stopped by my office because she wanted to give a meal to a homeless person. She was passing along her joy to someone else. Who can you give something to this week? Think of someone you know who is a pre-Christian. Ask God to give you an opportunity this week to share your joy with him or her.

## You Can Obey It

### **Myth #3 is that the Bible is impossible to apply.**

This myth says that God is just out to make life miserable for us by giving us things to do which are unattainable. While it's certainly true that we can't obey everything in the Bible because of our sinfulness, we can live out its truths and principles on a daily basis. In fact, God's Word was given in order to transform our lives. We don't have to make the Bible relevant because it already is. Our challenge is to follow what we know to be true as we ask the Holy Spirit to empower and fill us. As James 1:22-25 reminds us, it's not enough to just hear the Word of God; we must obey what it tells us to do.

You see, as we understand the Bible, we will debunk myth #1, which says that it's too confusing to read. As we celebrate with rejoicing and disarm myth #2, which says that it's too boring to study; we will be ready to obey and destroy myth #3 which says that it's impossible to apply. Matthew Henry, a Bible commentator once wrote: "Holy joy is oil to the wheels of our obedience." To the believer without joy, the will of God is drudgery; but to the believer who is strengthened by the joy of the Lord, the will of God is nourishment.

In Neh 8:13-18 we see how the Israelites found great joy in their obedience. As they paid attention to what they heard, Neh 8:14 says that they discovered they were not fully following the Lord in all areas. While they had celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles at different times in their history, they were supposed to set up booths made out of branches. They were doing part of what God wanted, but weren't following all the directions. There are times in my life when my problem isn't that I'm not following the Lord, it's that I'm not obeying Him completely.

The Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths, was a reminder that they were called as a people out of Egypt. When they got into the desert, God told them to collect branches and limbs of trees in order to have shelter. God then told them to do this every year, even when they had their homes to dwell in.

God told them to live in shacks for a week. They were to go out, fetch some branches and sticks, and make booths for their families to live in. They may have wondered why this was so important, especially since the wall was now complete. Sanballat and Tobiah must have just shaken their heads in amazement. They made fun of the wall's construction and now the people were busy building little shacks. These little lean-tos were scattered all over Jerusalem.

There were three main purposes for this festival. It was a time for looking back and remembering the nation's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when the people were homeless and lived in temporary shelters. It helped them remember where they had come from and how far God had brought them.

This "Fall Festival" was also a time for looking around at the harvest blessings from the hand of God. That's one of the reasons we are going to meet tonight at our Fall Fest – to celebrate the harvest from our fields and to thank God for the spiritual harvest that God is blessing our church with.

The Feast of Tabernacles was also an occasion for looking ahead. These believers may have been tempted to get comfortable with their new city and their new homes. But the Word of God says, "Remember, your home is not in this world. You are always going to be pilgrims here. Your home is in heaven." After the walls were up, God wanted to make sure they didn't count on the walls, but instead, count on Him. We need that reminder – don't sink your roots too deep into this world because our true home is in heaven.

As the people applied God's truth, they did it with an attitude of joy. Look at Neh 8:17: "And their joy was very great." When God gives you insight, no matter how strange or difficult it appears to be, cultivate an attitude of complete commitment and unreserved obedience. When you obey Him, you will have the deep satisfaction that you are doing the right thing, no matter how hard it is. If we are truly a people of the Book, we'll live by the Book. Let me suggest three action steps that will help you develop an application orientation to the Word of God. The Bible is not impossible to apply – you can obey it!

- Pray and ask God for personal transformation as you read and understand the Bible. Ask Him to reveal what it is He wants you to do as a result of what you've read or heard. Avoid the temptation to just "study" the Bible, compiling information as if that's the

only goal. Expect to hear something that God wants you to apply.

- When God reveals something to you, don't put it off. Don't bargain with God. Don't go halfway. Don't settle for spiritual mediocrity. Determine to be obedient.
- Ask someone to help hold you accountable. When you know what God wants you to do, and you're not sure if you're going to be able to do it on your own, ask for some help.

## Two Invitations

I want to close this message by first addressing those of you who are believers. In every genuine revival in history, there have always been two major thrusts:

- Proclamation and preaching of the Word
- Responsive mobilization of God's people

As you've listened to God's Word this morning some of you are ready to be renewed. You want to respond because you know you need to be personally revived. It's so easy to slip, isn't it? Our natural tendency is to head south spiritually. Some of you have lost your joy and feel a bit dry. You can relate to the psalmist when he asked in Psalm 85:6: "Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?"

Are you ready to repent and turn from your sins? There's a town in Canada called Wabush that was completely isolated for many years. Recently they cut a road through the wilderness to reach it. It now has one road leading into it, and thus, only one road leading out. If someone would travel the 8 hours it would take to get to Wabush, there is only one way they could leave – by turning around.

Some of you have been spending too much time in a town called **SIN**. As with this town, there is only one way out – a road built by God himself. In order to take that road, one must first turn around. Are you ready to turn from your sin and experience the power of the Lord again in your life? Are you ready to commit to full obedience?

If so, commit to understand, rejoice, and obey the Word of God.

My second invitation is for those of you who have not yet put your full faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. You have no need to purchase more sin in your life because you have plenty already. The Bible says that each of us are stained by sin and because of that, we have been separated from God. Jesus, when He died on the cross, paid the price for our sins so that we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Let me illustrate. This week I was having lunch with a recent visitor to our church. During lunch I got up and said "hi" to another couple I knew. When we were done eating, the waitress came over and said that this other couple had paid our bill for us. I couldn't believe it. I didn't do anything to deserve their kindness.

That's exactly what Jesus has done for you. He's paid your sin tab because of how much He loves you. All you have to do is accept His payment and receive Him into your life. But it takes a response on your behalf. Max Lucado has said that there are a thousand steps between us and God and that God will take all of those steps, but one. He's leaving the final one for us. The choice is ours.

Are you read this morning to take this final step? You see, if you want spiritual renewal in your life, you first need to be regenerated. Just as Nehemiah listed a bunch of names in chapter 7, which proved who the true believers were, so too, there is another book that is full of names. It's called the Lamb's Book of Life. Is your name in it? Are you ready to take the step you need to take?

I want to give you the opportunity right now to respond to God's Word. If you're a believer and you need revival, I invite you to come forward. If you're not yet a believer, and you need regeneration, I invite you to slip out of your chair and come forward.

Someone has said this about repentance:

"If we put off repentance another day, we have one day more to repent of, and a day less to repent in."

## Prone to Wander

It was a bright Sunday morning in 18th century London, but Robert Robinson's mood was anything but sunny. All along the street there were people hurrying to church, but in the midst of the crowd Robinson was a lonely man. The sound of church bells reminded him of years past when his faith in God was strong and the church was an integral part of his life. It had been years since he set foot in a church—years of wandering, disillusionment, and gradual defection from the God he once loved. That love for God—once fiery and passionate—had slowly burned out within him, leaving him dark and cold inside.



Robinson heard the clip-clop, clip-clop of a horse-drawn cab approaching behind him. Turning, he lifted his hand to hail the driver. But then he saw that the cab was occupied by a young woman dressed in her Sunday best. He waved the driver on, but the woman in the carriage ordered the carriage to be stopped.

“Sir, I’d be happy to share this carriage with you,” she said to Robinson. “Are you going to church?” Robinson was about to decline, but then he paused. “Yes,” he said at last. “I am going to church.” He stepped into the carriage and sat down beside the young woman.

As the carriage rolled forward Robert Robinson and the woman exchanged introductions. There was a flash of recognition in her eyes when he stated his name. “That’s an interesting coincidence,” she said, reaching into her purse. She withdrew a small book of poems, opened it to a ribbon-bookmark, and handed the book to him. “I was just reading a verse by a poet named Robert Robinson. Could it be...?”

He took the book, nodding. “Yes, I wrote these words years ago.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” she exclaimed. “Imagine! I’m sharing a carriage with the author of these very lines!”

But Robinson barely heard her. He was absorbed in the words he was reading. They were words that would one day be set to music and become a great hymn of the faith, familiar to generations of Christians:

**Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,  
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace’  
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,  
Call for songs of loudest praise.**

His eyes slipped to the bottom of the page where he read:

**Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it—  
Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,  
Seal it for Thy courts above.**

He could barely read the last few lines through the tears that brimmed in his eyes. “I wrote these words—and I’ve lived these words.

**‘Prone to wander...  
prone to leave the God I love.’”**

The woman suddenly understood. “You also wrote, ‘Here’s my heart, O take and seal it.’ You can offer your heart again to God, Mr. Robinson. It’s not too late.”

And it wasn’t too late for Robert Robinson. In that moment he turned his heart back to God and walked with him the rest of his days.

And, it’s not too late for you! Are you ready to turn your heart back to God right now? I’m going to ask Susan to play this hymn and as she does, if you need revival, or if you need regeneration, come up front and I’ll pray with you.

**Spurgeon** said it plainly:

Oh, dear friends, you may rejoice. God has laid no embargo upon rejoicing; he puts no restriction upon happiness. Do believe it that you are permitted to be happy. Do believe that there is no ordinance of God commanding you to be miserable.

## **NEHEMIAH 9: Putting First Things First**

10/29/00

Earlier this week I was sitting in my office when I received an email from my youngest sister. She and her husband have been attending a church for a while and have become interested in spiritual things. We’ve been praying for both of them for quite some time and have known that they’ve been close to making a spiritual commitment to Christ.

Here’s part of her letter: “I have joined a women’s Bible study through church. We met for the first time last Monday and I really liked it...The books were on back order so last week we just sort of talked and the women answered a lot of my questions. I seem to have so many. By the way, I never made it through the first Left Behind book. The first 100 pages scared the pants off me and I got the

point quickly...the message came to me loud and clear.

I've probably asked the Lord to come into my heart and change my life 50 times, and Pastor Glenn said that asking once would do just fine. I do not want to be left behind and I want my son and husband to grow together with me. I get worried about the change thing cuz I sort of like my life, but I'm getting the drift and the women in the Bible study will really help me. Honestly, you and Beth have been my inspiration, it has just taken me a while."

As tears rolled down my face and splashed onto my keyboard, I could barely contain my excitement. I called Beth and we rejoiced together about my sister's new birth. After praying for her, we hung up and I went back to crying. Just then Chuck Cunningham came to my door, and I noticed that he had tears in his eyes as well. He explained to me that his aunt was dying and would probably not live through the day. He then noticed that I had been weeping. Here we were, two grown men, one rocked by the grief of death, the other impacted by the joy of the new birth. His grief, though deep and real, is tempered by the fact that his aunt is a born again believer. The angels were rejoicing over a new birth, and an aunt was getting ready to spend an eternity filled with jubilant joy. This underscores the truth that there are times when we are pumped up and there are other times when we are bummed out. In fact, in our spiritual lives, we often experience indescribable joy when we contemplate God's amazing grace, and we also grieve and mourn over our own tendency to tube out spiritually. Paul linked joy and grief together in Romans 7:22-25:

"For in my inner being I delight [that's joy] in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! [that's grief]. Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

As we learned last week, God's people were told to stop mourning and start rejoicing. It's now later in that same month, the "branch booths" and "tents of twigs" have been taken down. God's Word is given central attention once again, but instead of jubilant praise, there is a mood of repentant sorrow. Nehemiah 8 focused on God's Word as it was read, interpreted and applied; in chapter 9, the people respond in prayer with genuine sadness about their sins. Listening to God through His word and responding to Him in prayer are twin aspects of every believer's experience. There can be no spiritual growth without the regular cultivation of this dual privilege and discipline.

Here's another way to compare the two chapters. In chapter 8, Ezra and Nehemiah comfort the afflicted. In chapter 9, the comfortable are afflicted. Joy and grief are two sides of the same coin. After a thrilling encounter with God, which causes them to break into celebration, the believers now come face to face with their own depravity.

Interestingly, if you want to study three of the most powerful prayers ever written, they are all found in chapter 9 – of Ezra, Daniel and Nehemiah. Nehemiah 9 records an extended prayer, which is in fact, the longest prayer in the Bible outside the Psalms. D.L. Moody once asked someone to pray during a church service. The man began his prayer and was still droning on after ten minutes had gone by. Finally, Mr. Moody stood up and said, "While our dear brother is finishing his prayer, let's turn to number 342 and sing it together!" This prayer in Nehemiah is not that long, but it's a great model for us to study so that we can learn to put first things first.

This prayer is a brilliant mosaic of biblical quotations, recollections, images and phrases. The Levites, who led the people in this prayer of confession, knew Scripture by heart and relied on the language of the patriarchs, prophets, priests and psalmists. This confession accurately expresses the people's disappointment with themselves and their confidence in God. In other words, this declaration has two elements – they confess who God is and they confess their sins.

I've been helped in my study of this passage by Warren Wiersbe's treatment of the text – I'm going to borrow his outline this morning:

- The Greatness of God (Neh 9:1-6)
- The Goodness of God (Neh 9:7-30)
- The Grace of God (Neh 9:31-37)

## **The Greatness of God**

Neh 9:1 indicates that the Israelites gathered together on the twenty-fourth day of the month – on our calendar, that would have been October 31st. They were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads. These were common signs of mourning that were often done when Old Testament believers were in deep sadness because of a loss or when they were ready to repent and recommit their lives to God.

Neh 9:2 tells us that they had separated themselves from those who would have a bad influence on them. As they heard the Bible

read, they no doubt came across Leviticus 20:26: “You are to be holy to Me because I, the Lord, am holy, and have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” Israel’s history tells the tragic story of what happens when believers don’t make a break from the “world.” Some of us are too cozy with the things of the world as well – God wants us to live distinctive lives that draw people to the Savior. Someone has said that separation without devotion to the Lord can become isolation, but devotion without separation is hypocrisy. Notice that they stood up and confessed, not only the sins of their fathers, but their own sins as well. There was a solidarity in their guilt.

As we learned last week, they couldn’t wait to hear the Word of God. In Neh 9:3, we read that they spent three hours reading the Bible and then three hours in confession and worship. The order here is significant – when we read the Word we will then see how far we come short. Once we contemplate our own sinfulness we will begin to understand more about God’s greatness. As we do, we’ll break out into worship.

Neh 9:4 and 5 explain how they conducted this service. The Levites divided themselves into two groups. Some were standing on the stairs on one side of the assembly and the other group stood across from them. These two groups called back and forth to the congregation, one group confessing the sins of the people, the other praising God for His greatness. It’s like an antiphonal chorus. The first group “called with loud voices.” This literally means that they “cried out.” The second group focused on God’s character as they sang. In fact, the rest of this chapter gives us the actual words they used. Cries of guilt are followed by shouts of praise for God’s greatness, goodness, and graciousness. Tears of grief form the lyrics of lament while tears of joy transpose the anthem of adoration.

In Neh 9:5, the “worshippers” invite the people to, “Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.” Before they come to a time of necessary confession, they must first praise the one who alone can hear, pardon and change them. He never changes and will never go back on His word because He is eternal.

Their prayer continues in the last part of Neh 9:5: “Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise.” In this chapter, the believers reflect on God’s nature and character as well as His mighty works in history. Adoration is really the heart of true prayer. If you’re struggling with your faith this morning, it may well be because your view of God is too small or too narrow. Or, it may be that your theology is fine, but you don’t think God has much to do with your life today. David Wells, a theologian, refers to this view as the “weightlessness of God.” He writes that our sense of inadequacy or ineffectiveness can be traced to our limited understanding and experience of God: “God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace too ordinary, his judgment too benign, his gospel too easy, and His Christ too common.”

Friends, we must glory in the incomparable magnificence of our grand God. Neh 9:6 starts off with a clear statement of God’s greatness that is grounded in the opening verses of Genesis: “You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything and the multitudes of heaven worship you.” There is no one like God – the evidence for His greatness is seen in His works of creation as Psalm 19:1 clearly states: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.”

During the French Revolution, many people wanted to get rid of Christianity forever. On one clear night an atheist boastfully proclaimed his beliefs to a poor peasant: “Everything will be abolished – churches, Bibles, and the clergy. Yes, even the word “God” itself! We shall remove everything that speaks of religion.” The peasant gave a quiet chuckle. The atheist wanted to know what the believer was laughing about. The peasant then pointed to the stars and replied, “I was just wondering how you’re going to manage to get all of those bright lights out of the sky!”

It’s always best to begin with the greatness of God. If we focus too much on what He gives to us, or on what we want Him to do for us, we may find our hearts becoming selfish. Do you see God as great this morning? Or, is your God too small?

## **The Goodness of God**

The bulk of this chapter focuses on the goodness of God in Neh 9:7-30. God is very clearly the focal point, as the word “you” is used over 50 times. In Neh 9:7-15, He is the subject of every sentence and the word “give” is used in one form or another at least 16 different times.

This part of the prayer rehearses the history of Israel, revealing God’s goodness to His people and their repeated failure to appreciate His gifts and obey His will. George Santayana, the Spanish philosopher has said, “He who forgets the past is condemned to repeat it.” Romans 15:4-**note** helps us see the value in studying the Old Testament:

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

**God’s goodness is seen in at least four ways in Nehemiah 9.**

### **1. Forming (Neh 9:7-18).**

In Neh 9:7-18, the prayer begins with how God formed the nation of Israel. He chose Abram and brought him out of Ur and made a covenant with him. Then, when God's people were suffering in Egypt, Neh 9:10 says that God made a name for Himself by dividing the sea and releasing His people from bondage. In Neh 9:13, they recall God's goodness in the giving of the Law and in Neh 9:14, 15, they praise God for how the newly formed nation was given possession of the land that was promised to them.

After this protracted praise time where the focus is on God for His goodness, the choir of confession sings out words of guilt in Neh 9:16: "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands." This is followed by a reply from the other side of the choir loft in Neh 9:17: "But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them." They are guilty – but God is good...all the time!

### **2. Leading (Neh 9:19-21).**

After forming the nation, God was committed to lead His people on a daily basis – even when they disobeyed Him. We see that in Neh 9:19: "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, not the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take." Neh 9:20 says that God gave His Spirit to the people to provide for their spiritual requirements and food and water to meet their physical needs. Neh 9:21 tells us that for forty years, as the children of Israel wandered in the desert, their feet did not swell and their clothes did not wear out.

### **3. Providing (Neh 9:22-25).**

God's goodness is seen through His forming of the nation and by how he led them on a daily basis. He also provided them with everything they needed. He helped them defeat their enemies and gave them kingdoms and nations. He multiplied their numbers by blessing them with children. Neh 9:25 is a good summary of how God showed His goodness by providing for their needs: "They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness."

Did you catch that? God gave them much more than they deserved. The land was fertile. Their houses were already furnished. The water was already running and the fruit was just waiting to be picked. They had everything they needed. They "reveled" in God's great goodness, which literally means that they "luxuriated" in God's provision.

In a similar way, God has given us everything we need as well. 2 Peter 1:3: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness." That leads to a question. Are you "luxuriating" in God's goodness today? Or, are you taking Him for granted? Are you focused more on what you don't have?

### **4. Correcting (Neh 9:26-30).**

After singing God's praises for His wonderful provision, the other choir hangs their heads and sings in a dirge-like manner. They remembered how their forefathers acted in the Book of Judges: "But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put their law behind their backs. They killed your prophets...they committed awful blasphemies." This is called defiance. They knew what God wanted because He had made it very clear. Even though every one of their needs was met, God's people exhibited a rebellious spirit and tried to eliminate both the message and the messengers. Instead of praising God for his goodness, they blasphemed Him. As a result, Neh 9:27 tells us that God corrected them by handing them over to their enemies.

I want you to notice how God's goodness pervades His personality. I picture the "Praise Choir" singing the last stanza of Neh 9:27 fortissimo: "...But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies."

As they hold their final note, the "Confession Chorus" rises to its feet and sings what sounds like a requiem in Neh 9:28: "But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them." The Maranatha singers answer this way: "And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time. By the way, aren't you glad that God delivers each of us "time after time?"

The sad singers then belt out these somber words in Neh 9:29 and 30: "You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances...stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen." God corrected them by sending their enemies to rule over them. God used successive world powers to both punish and correct them. First, it was Assyria, then Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome.

But all of this was done because He is a good God. He demonstrates that fact clearly through His forming of the nation, by leading them, by providing for them, and even by correcting them.

Corrie Ten Boom writes: “Deep in our hearts we believe in a good God. Yet how shallow is our understanding of His goodness. How often I have heard people say, ‘How good God is! We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic, and look at the lovely weather!’ Yes, God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister Betsie to starve to death before my eyes in a German concentration camp.”

I want to pause here to address something that is very relevant to us a church. Last Sunday night, at the Fall Fest, Shawn McGee fell off the hayrack ride and one of the wagon tires ran over his leg. It was a scary time. As we waited for the X-ray results, most of us thought that something really bad had happened. When the results came back, and they showed no significant damage, my first thought was to thank God for His goodness to Shawn.

One year ago this Tuesday, little Brian Sledgister had his “heavenly birthday” (that’s the phrase his parents like to use). When I met with Rich and Melody this week I told them that I admire them for how their theology, or understanding of God and His character, has kept them strong during this long year. I’ll never forget both of them stating clearly on the night that Brian died: “God is still a good God.” That continues to be their testimony today – and I know it will be tomorrow as well.

Shawn was run over and is fine today – and God is a good God. Brian was hit by a car and died – and God is a good God. God is good...all the time. Some of us mistakenly thank God for His goodness only when things go the way we want them to go. The real challenge and test of our discipleship, is to thank Him for His goodness even when we experience pain and loss.

God is great and He is good. There’s one more part of His character that is given prominence in this chapter – He is gracious.

### The Grace of God

The “praise team” sings out again in Neh 9:31: “But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.” God does not treat His people as they deserve – and that’s a good thing because He is a great, mighty and awesome God! Because He is a God of grace, He is good to His people even when they are not good to Him. In His mercy, God didn’t give them what they deserved; and in His grace, He gave them what they didn’t deserve.

Drop down to Neh 9:33: “In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong.” The “grief team” finishes this chapter by singing about the wrong things the people had done, and how they are slaves to others because of their sins. Did you notice the change in pronouns here? Instead of focusing on “their” sins, the people now say, “we did wrong.” Until we can personally own our specific transgressions, we will miss out on experiencing the grace of God.

The closing stanza ends on a jarring note, “We are in great distress.” The people recognize that generation after generation; the same sin problems seem to come back. Some of you here this morning are brave enough to admit that you are in great distress. You have your own history of good intentions that fell apart. You’ve seen the cycle of sin in your life where you mess up, and then repent and confess, and then walk with God and then sin and repent and confess all over again. And God delivers you time and again.

God doesn’t just offer help from heaven. He offers help from the inside to those of you who are born again. It is possible to change. God himself invests in us in ways that we discover over a lifetime. We don’t have to stay in the sin cycle any longer. Jesus has joined us in the process, and that’s the indescribably good news. We have a royal, a divine, permanent Companion.

Listen to how the writer of Hebrews describes Jesus’ ministry to us in Heb 4:14-16:

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Instead of sinning and confessing and sinning and confessing over and over again, when we’re struggling, failing, being tempted in the midst of the battle, let’s draw near to him. Let’s covenant together. God isn’t sitting back waiting for us to fail. There is grace, mercy, companionship and strength through Jesus – not just when we have tears of gladness; but when we have tears of grief. So let’s draw near to Him.

This entire chapter speaks of grace. God demonstrates His greatness and His goodness and what do the people do? They turn from Him. They run from His word. They persist in doing things their own way. In short, they sin repeatedly. At any point, God could have said, “That’s it. You’ve messed up too much. You’re on your own.” While He did send some correction into their lives, He never stopped loving them. When they sinned, God exhibited His grace. Or as Romans 5:20 puts it: “But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.” The King James Version is even more graphic: “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”

**Max Lucado** tells a story about a young girl from Brazil who wanted to see the world.

Discontent with a home having only a pallet on the floor, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove, she dreamed of a better life in the city. One morning she slipped away, breaking her mother's heart. Knowing what life on the streets would be like for her young, attractive daughter, Maria hurriedly packed to go find her. On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to the city.

Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search in bars, hotels, and nightclubs, any place with a bad reputation. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture—taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village. It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." She did. ([Max Lucado, No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, Multnomah Press, 1986, pp. 158-9](#))

Friend, no matter what you've done or who you've become, it doesn't matter. Jesus wants you to come home. In Neh 9:38, it says that the people made a "binding agreement" and put it into writing. That means it was personal. It was practical. And it was public.

1. **Personal.** What do you need to do this morning? First of all, do you personally see God as great, as good, and as gracious? If not, determine to lock into these theological truths and to never doubt them again. Personalize your faith by making it real.
2. **Practical.** Secondly, based on who He is, what is the Holy Spirit prompting you to do right now? What practical step does He want you to implement?
3. **Public.** Thirdly, how can you make your decision public? If you're in a small group, and I hope you are, you could tell your group this week. You could call a friend and tell him or her. If you're a believer and have never been baptized, you could take that step. Or, you could slip out of your chair during our closing song and come forward – for confession or for conversion.

I believe so strongly in the Word of God and in the Holy Spirit's ability to apply His Word, that I'm going to allow the closing this morning to be open ended. Let's see how God wants you and me to respond.

If tears of tender joy fill your eyes, don't hold back. And if sobs of sorrow ambush you, follow the Holy Spirit's promptings.

As Mary comes to sing, I invite you to allow the words to penetrate your head and your heart so that you will live out the truths of what you've heard today through your hands.

Give Me Jesus

## NEHEMIAH 10: Making Investments That Last

11/5/00

I heard about this man who bought a parrot. It was a beautiful parrot but he had a really bad mouth. He could swear for five minutes straight without repeating himself. The man was embarrassed because the bird was driving him crazy in front of people.

He tried to appeal to the bird by asking him to clean up his language. The parrot promised to change but nothing happened. In fact, his swearing increased in both volume and frequency.

It finally got to be too much, so the guy grabbed the bird by the throat and started shaking him and yelled, "Quit it!" But this just made the parrot angry and he swore more than ever.

Then the guy got really mad and locked him in a kitchen cabinet. That really aggravated the bird and he started clawing and scratching and making all kinds of racket. When the guy finally let him out, the parrot let loose with a stream of swear words that



made the man blush.

At that point, the guy was so ticked off that he threw him into the freezer. For the first few seconds the bird squawked and screamed and thrashed around. And then there was silence.

At first the guy just waited, but then he started to wonder if the bird was hurt. After a couple minutes of not hearing anything, he was so worried that he opened the freezer door. The bird calmly climbed onto the man's outstretched arm and said, "I'm really sorry about all the trouble I've been giving you. I make a solemn promise and vow to clean up my language from now on."

The man was astounded. He couldn't believe the transformation that had come over the parrot as a result of being in the freezer for only a couple minutes. The parrot then turned to the man and said, "I just have one question...what did the chicken do?"

## Vow Making

This morning we're going to learn about 4 vows, or promises, that the people of God made in Nehemiah 10. We'll tackle these in Part 2 of the message a little later on. While God's people weren't thrown in the freezer, they did feel the sting of God's spoken Word in chapters 8 and 9. After hearing what God wanted from them, and owning their own persistent rebellion, Neh 10:38 says that the people made a "binding agreement" to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. They put it in writing and sealed it. Putting a seal on a document is a serious matter because it meant taking a solemn oath before the Lord. Those who agreed to this covenant are listed in Neh 10:1-27.

The law governing oaths and vows is found in Numbers 30:2: "When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said." Ecclesiastes 5:4 says, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow." Since an oath involved the name and possible judgment of God, it was not to be taken lightly. Jesus also warned against using empty oaths in Matthew 5:33-37.

The Bible contains many examples of people making vows and covenants with God, only to break them later on. In Exodus 24, the Israelites promise to do "everything the Lord has said." But in less than six weeks, these same people construct a golden calf and bow down in worship before it. In Mark 14:29, Peter promises Jesus, "Even if all fall away, I will not." Hours later, Peter responds to a servant girl's questions by swearing in Mk 14:71: "He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'"

That leads to a question. Are vows of any use today? I think they are for at least two reasons. First, they help us focus. When you make a vow, you are saying that you are going to do something specific. We can say, "Lord, I need to witness more" or we can say, "I'm going to invite my neighbor to the Christmas cantata and I'm going to give a book to him so that I can open up a conversation with him."

Second, vows allow us to express our love. That's why couples make vows during a marriage ceremony. They're the language of love. Love is more than just a feeling, it's a commitment or promise to be married until death do us part.

God is a covenant-keeping God, even when we don't keep our end of the deal. You may have made some promises to God in the past that you haven't kept. You may have broken some vows. If you have, you're not alone. Jeremiah 31:32 says that God's people broke the covenant on a regular basis. Jer 31:33 says that He will one day make a new covenant in which he says, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Jesus inaugurated this new covenant. Listen to what He said in Mark 14:24: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." In the Old Covenant, we are expected to live up to our end completely – everything comes from us. In the New Covenant, nothing comes from us, and everything comes from Jesus. Because of His grace, we can surrender, submit and obey out of love, not fear.

While it may be helpful to make a vow or an oath to God today, remember this: We don't succeed as Christians because we make promises to God, but because we believe the promises of God and act upon them.

Having said that, many of us never come to the point of getting serious in our walk with God simply because we never get specific with Him. We hear sermons and sense the Spirit's tug at our heart, but until we decide to be completely committed to Him, we won't be. As we celebrate communion this morning, I invite you to use this time to think through any decisions the Lord wants you to make. Perhaps you've been challenged or convicted by the Lord during this series. Listen to Him and decide right now to put into practice what you know you need to do. If you've broken some promises with Him or with others, confess it right now. 1 Corinthians 11:28 tells us to examine ourselves before we eat the bread and drink the cup of communion.

While Jeff Troyer comes to sing, I invite you to use this time to both examine yourself (Read 1Cor 11:27, 28, 29) and to express yourself in prayer to God.

## [Above All \(with lyrics\)](#)

Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-24 and then distribute bread.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:25-26 and then distribute cup.

### **Vow #1: Submission to God's Word**

As a result of hearing God's Word, the Israelites made four decisions. The first one is found in 10:29: "All these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God."

This is vow #1: Submission to God's Word. They were totally serious in their desire to devote themselves to everything that is spelled out in the Bible. This week I went back and re-read my very first sermon here at PBC. This is what I said then, and it bears repeating today:

"Who does God use to make an impact? Super saints? Heroes? Pious religious people? No. Listen to the words of 1 Chronicles 16:9, "For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him." The key is devotion. We need to remember that the depth of our devotion determines our impact. God is not looking all over the earth for strong people, for great people, for perfect people, or even for religious people. This morning, as He scans the congregation at PBC, He's looking for devoted disciples, for men and women, and boys and girls who are fully committed to Him. He's looking for a regular person who He can pour His strength out on. In order for that to happen, we need to be completely committed and dangerously devoted."

[William Booth](#), the founder of the Salvation Army was once asked what his secret was to his incredible ministry. This is what he said, "God has had all that there was of me. There have been men with greater brains than I...but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and caught a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with me and them, on that day I made up my mind that God should have all of William Booth that there was."

In Nehemiah 10, the people are saying that they are so seriously submitted to God and His Word that they are willing for the curses of God to fall on them if they do not carefully obey what He says. I wonder if we have that same submission and dangerous devotion today? Does God have all of you?

### **Vow #2: Separation From the World**

After submitting themselves to God and His Word, the believers make a second vow to be separate from the world in Neh 10:28, 30: "We promise to not give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or to take their daughters for our sons." When you think about it, separation is simply total devotion to God, no matter what the cost. When a man and woman get married, they separate themselves from all other possible mates and give themselves completely to each other. We separate from others to the one who is our life mate. The Israelites separated from the peoples around them and to God and His Word.

This was not about ethnic pride or a sense that the Israelite gene pool was superior to that of other peoples. Rather it had to do with how they worshipped God and honored Him. Wrong relationships can nullify a believer's distinctive witness. God wanted his followers to be a missionary people and so it was vital that their message not be corrupted. In declaring this prohibition, the Lord was concerned about both the purity of their faith and the holiness of their lives. They had been entrusted with the most wonderful message in the world and nothing was to be allowed to corrupt it.

There were at least two reasons why marriages with pagan people were disastrous.

First, there were clear biblical warnings. When two people in the ancient world made a marriage agreement, they normally confirmed their commitment in the presence of their gods and gave each other's idols a prominent place in their new home.

Joshua 23:13 says that heathen spouses would become "snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes..."

Secondly, there was abundant historical evidence that unequally yoked marriages led to a decline in Israel's spiritual and moral life. Nehemiah 13:26 asks the question, "Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by His God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women."

We are more influenced by other people than most of us care to admit. Mixed marriages were a danger then, and they're a danger now. God's concern is that when a believer marries a non-believer the stage is set for conflict, compromise and at times outright conformity.



2 Corinthians 6:14 very clearly states:

**Do not be yoked together (present imperative with a negative)** with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

Let me be clear. I know some of you are married to an unsaved spouse. I respect and applaud your commitment to Christ and your determination to live out the teaching of 1Peter 3:1-6-**see notes**. The New Living Translation puts 2Pe 3:2, 3 this way: “Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior.”

I want to address those of you who are not married yet. Perhaps you’re dating someone who is not a believer. It may seem harmless to date a non-Christian, especially if you’re a teenager, but watch out. God cares about your spiritual life and He cares about your ability to be a clear witness to Him. On the authority of God’s Word, don’t deliberately disobey God in this area. The question is not, “Will this relationship work out?” but, “Will this relationship enjoy God’s best blessing and fulfill God’s will?” I know this is not easy for some of you to hear but if you are truly submitted to God and His Word, you will honor Him in all your relationships as well. If you put Him first, don’t enter a marriage relationship with someone who does not also put the Lord first.

### **Vow #3: Sabbath for God’s People**

After pledging themselves to submit to the Word of God and to live separated lives, the believers renew the covenant with a third vow: the Sabbath for God’s people in Neh 10:31: “When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.” In Nehemiah’s time, it was necessary for God’s law about the Sabbath to be clearly understood.

First of all, this day was set aside to honor God. It was distinctive from other days and given to God so that they might offer their worship to Him without being distracted by the demands of everyday life.

Secondly, it was a day of rest. Relaxation is a vital ingredient in effective living. God set the pattern for this in Exodus 20:11: “He rested on the seventh day.” The Israelites worked with no breaks in their weekly schedule when they were slaves in Egypt – God did not ever want this repeated again.

One man challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man ate a leisurely lunch and took several breaks throughout the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other guy had chopped a lot more wood than he had. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did.” To which the winning woodsman responded, “Didn’t you notice? I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest.” If you’re feeling a bit dull today, perhaps you need to schedule some rest into your schedule so that you can get ‘sharp’ again.

Thirdly, it was a day to help others. Israelite employees had a compulsory rest day automatically written into their employment contracts. This helped others enjoy the blessings of rest.

Fourthly, the Sabbath was a day to declare truth. It was a silent witness to God’s supremacy and gave the Israelites multiple witnessing opportunities. To their unbelieving neighbors it proclaimed, in very practical terms, the truth that God comes first.

This is an important paradigm or model for us today. From the very beginning of the church, Christians made the Lord’s Day their appointed day for worship, rest, service, and witness. While avoiding the legalism that the Pharisees fell into, most of us can do a much better job of looking for ways to keep Sunday special.

The Israelites also promised to observe the “Sabbatical Year.” Every seventh year, they were to let the land lie idle so that it might restore itself. To obey God in this way, they certainly needed to trust Him with their needs during the seventh year. It seems to me that obedience to God always involves trust. We cannot always see what’s coming up, but if we are doing what God says, He will never disappoint us. Their commitment to commemorate the Sabbatical Year was a great step of faith and is a beautiful illustration of Matthew 6:33-**Note**:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Notice that they also canceled all debts in Neh 10:31. They promised that every seven years, they would live out a renewed scale of values that people matter more than money. The keeping of the Sabbath and Sabbatical Years were ways of saying “no” to a life of maximum acquisition. My highest goal is not to make the most I can and then spend my life trying to keep everything that I have.

### **Vow #4: Support For God’s Work**

That leads to their fourth pledge: support for God’s work in Neh 10:32-39. The phrase “house of our God” is used nine times in this section and refers to the restored temple. The people were promising to follow God’s priorities by submitting to Him, by separating

from the world, by keeping the Sabbath, and by supporting the work of God. Neh 10:39 sums up their commitment: “We will not neglect the house of our God.”

The temple in Jerusalem stood at the heart of the country’s religious, moral and spiritual life. In symbolic terms it proclaimed the presence and power of God among His people and the centrality of spiritual matters.

This passage covers an impressive series of promises to support God’s work in a variety of different ways and gives us 7 insights into how our giving can support God’s work today.

### **1. It was responsible giving.**

Look at Neh 10:32 and Neh 10:35 where the people say that “they assume responsibility...” They owned it and gave what they owned because they saw it as their privilege and their responsibility.

### **2. It was obedient giving.**

They didn’t practice “impulse giving” but instead gave as an expression of practical obedience. Those who love Him will do what He says. They were “carrying out the commands to give” (Neh 10:32), as it “is written in the Law” (34, 36). God had been good to His people, and generosity was expected from them. There was nothing remotely optional about the support of God’s work. Everyone was required to give in one form or another. This was yet another way to demonstrate that God came first in their lives.

### **3. It was systematic.**

There was nothing haphazard about their giving. Neh 10:32 says that they were to bring a third of a silver shekel each year. Neh 10:34 states that lots were drawn to determine when families were to bring a contribution of wood at set times each year. Neh 10:35 tells us that first fruits were brought each year. There was an orderliness about these offerings and a system that was followed. The people knew precisely what was expected of them. The New Testament teaches systematic giving as well in 1Corinthians 16:2: “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income...”

### **4. It was proportionate.**

The reference to the wood offering suggests that many poor people in Israel had an opportunity to make a gift to the Lord that would demand time rather than money. The temple needed a regular supply of firewood to keep the sacrificial fires burning. Everyone, regardless of income, could gather wood and take it to the temple.

In addition, Israel’s sacrificial system recognized that not everyone could make the same kind of offering. If someone could not afford the cost of a young bull, a male goat or lamb, they were able instead to offer two doves or young pigeons. If they could not even afford that, Leviticus 5:11 allowed them to bring some fine flour as an offering. It is not the amount that is given which is important; it is the spirit in which we make our offering. We should give in proportion to how we’ve been blessed. The New Testament echoes this principle in 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8-9.

### **5. It was sacrificial.**

They were to bring to God’s house the “first fruits” of their crops “and of every fruit tree.” (Neh 10:35) To offer the first of their crops was to declare that God was the giver of all things, that everything belongs to Him, and that He is worthy of the best we can offer Him. Here’s a helpful principle to remember: while not everyone can give the same amount, everyone can make the same sacrifice. Not equal giving, but equal sacrifice. It was Mother Teresa who said, “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.”

C. S. Lewis put it this way,

“I don’t believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I’m afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”

### **6. It was comprehensive.**

They were to not only bring their crops and their money; they were to also bring their first-born sons and their animals to the Lord in Neh 10:36. God is not just interested in our money, He wants our hearts. Actually, He wants everything.

### **7. It was prescribed.**

They were not only to bring their “first,” but also a “tithe” of their crops to the Lord in Neh 10:37. Giving a tenth of their produce or income to the Lord has a long and dignified history among believers and is an appropriate guide for Christian giving. As someone has said, “the tithe is a great place to start.” I’m convinced that the tithe is the minimum we should be giving to further the Lord’s work.

Tithing can be a great blessing, and I practice it and recommend it highly, but there are at least three dangers:

- It's easy to give with the wrong motives. We can give out of a sense of duty or fear, or even greed ("If I tithe, God must prosper me!")
- Thinking that we can do whatever we want with the 90% that remains.
- Giving only the tithe and failing to give love offerings to the Lord.

Someone has said that we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:21-**note**: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Let's determine to be like the believers in Nehemiah 10:39: "We will not neglect the house of our God."

When it comes to giving, we can do it for at least three reasons:

- Because we have to – that's law
- Because we ought to – that's obligation
- Because we want to – that's grace

I don't know about you, but I want to give to the Lord. I came across a list of 10 reasons to give 10% or more to the Lord's work. A guy from the great state of Wisconsin (not me) put these together (Brian Kluth, Dimensions, Vol. 20, Fall 1997, pp. 1-2).

1. It is a tried and true pattern of giving (Malachi 3:7-15).
2. It will help you revere God more in your life (Deuteronomy 14:23).
3. It will help you harness the dragon of materialism (1 Timothy 6:6-10).
4. It will serve as a practical reminder that God is the Owner of everything (Haggai 2:8).
5. It will allow you to experience God's provisions in incredible ways (Luke 6:38).
6. It will encourage you to trust in God (Proverbs 3:5-6).
7. It will ensure you of treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20).
8. It will strengthen the ministry and outreach of your local church (2 Corinthians 9:12).
9. It will support church staff and missionaries (Galatians 6:6).
10. It will help accomplish needed building projects (1 Chronicles 29:2-10).

### **Are You On the Wrong Runway?**

I'm sure you heard the tragic news this week about the Singapore Airlines jumbo jet that crashed on take-off, killing at least 81 people. Investigators have now determined that the jet was on the wrong runway when it tried to leave for Los Angeles. The pilot realized at the last moment that he was on a strip closed for repairs and plowed into some heavy construction equipment.

Seconds before the jetliner crashed, caught fire and broke into three sections, the pilot swore and screamed out, "Something there." Apparently the pilot knew what runway he was supposed to be on and was not misdirected by the control tower. However, the officials have admitted that there was no barrier set up to block planes from going onto the closed runway. In addition, the lights on this runway were turned on because of the bad weather.

I'm wondering this morning if any one here is on the wrong runway. It might look like everything is going ok in your life, but you actually might be headed for a crash. The Bible is clear – if you do things your way, you're going to have a collision. God wants you and me to make investments that last by:

- **Submitting to God – that answers the question, "Who's the pilot of your life?"**
- **Separating from the world – that covers who we spend time with**
- **Practicing a Sabbath rest – that deals with how we spend our time**
- **Supporting God's work – which involves how we spend our money**

If you're submitted to God, and He has "all of you," then you're cleared for take-off in your relationships, with your time, and with your finances.

Here's another way to look at it. If you could look at a person's friendships, their calendar, and their checkbook, you could determine whether or not they are fully submitted to God and completely committed to His cause.

As Jeff sang earlier, "Jesus is Above All." I'm going to ask him to close our service with this song. If you want to come forward this morning to make sure you're on the right runway, please slip out of your chair and someone will pray with you up front.

## Jesus is Above All

### NEHEMIAH 11-12: Taking Time to Give Thanks

11/12/00

You made a good decision this morning to come to church because I have some inside information about the recent presidential election that you will not hear on CNN. With all the intrigue and controversy surrounding the final tally, coupled with the waiting that we've had to do as a country, I wanted to fill you in on what really happened this past Tuesday.

The election, contrary to what the experts have been telling us, did not swing on the sunshine state of Florida. The outcome was actually determined by a group of relatively unknown, first-time voters who cast their ballots a short distance from here. I have one of the original ballots that I'd like to show you.

It was a landslide and there will be no recount – in a tightly contested race between a cat and a dog, the cat won by a certified margin of 6 to 2!

Mrs. Sancken's kindergarten class at PCS participated in the election by marking their ballots for either the canine or the feline (and there was no confusion about who they were voting for!). Mr. Cat now has a clear mandate since he received 75% of the vote. As far as I know, we are not waiting for any absentee ballots!

I read something this week from Chuck Colson, President of Prison Fellowship that helps us keep the presidential election in perspective. I want to share part of it with you:

"Whichever way things turn out, some people will be joyous, and some people will be dismayed. But one thing is absolutely clear. It should not alter in the slightest the course that we, as Christians, follow in our society...If you're disappointed in the election results when they're finally clear, that's understandable. All of us have partisan choices. Maybe you'll be jubilant over them. If so, you're going to think, 'Well, the culture war's been won.' And if you're discouraged over the results, you'll think, 'The culture war's been lost.' Nonsense!

Cultures are changed from the bottom up. Fads start from the top down. Movements start from the bottom up...what moves America are the 'habits of the heart.' This is the genius of America. We are moved by the tastes and dispositions of the people. We're moved by the way we live with our neighbors around us. People need to see something better, something that they can long for in our lives. That isn't affected by elections. They're not going to look to Washington for that, they're going to look to us.

So we keep living in biblical faithfulness. And remember, too, that God appoints the leaders. And that whatever happens in the election that's now being tallied; we have to accept God's sovereign judgment. We have to pray for those in authority. We have to respect those whom God has put in power over us, and live peaceably in the midst of whatever government we have. The first century church did that; the twenty-first century church ought to be doing exactly the same thing. Don't be overly jubilant, but don't despair. Take a cool-headed perspective and keep your Christian faith and your Christian witness strong." (Break Point with Charles Colson, 11/8/2000)

Colson is saying that we need to keep the main thing the main thing. We need to focus on the most important. As we near the end of the Book of Nehemiah, we're discovering what really matters. As someone has said, "God is large and in charge."

When an election is this close, it shows the value of everyone's vote. When there are only a few votes separating the candidates, some have suggested that we should just flip a coin or have them draw straws. I'm not sure this would be the best way to elect a president today, especially when there's such a difference between their personalities, their platforms and their positions.

In Nehemiah 11, we come across a situation where the people are faced with a national referendum. But instead of taking a vote, they flip a coin to determine what should be done. Actually, the biblical phrase is that they "cast lots." In the Old Testament, the

casting of lots was like throwing dice and was a way of discovering God's will. We even see this used in the Book of Acts when the disciples are trying to figure out who should replace Judas in Acts 1:26: "Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles."

They didn't believe in "luck" or "chance." They actually were so committed to the sovereignty of God that they knew God would direct the outcome of the lots according to His divine providence. Proverbs 16:33-[note](#) says,

"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."

The votes are cast by the people but the election is determined by the Lord.

Since the walls and gates of Jerusalem were now restored, it was important that the builders inhabit their capital city and make the population grow. Some of the citizens volunteered willingly while others had to be "drafted." We see this in Neh 11:1: "Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns." The people had promised to tithe their produce and income in chapter 10; now Nehemiah decides to tithe the people by arranging for 10% of them to move from the suburbs to the city.

These believers exhibited four counter-cultural traits that have application to us today. Regardless of who is the president, this is how God wants us to live.

#### **4 Traits to Emulate**

##### **1. Move out of your comfort zone.**

Most of the families living outside Jerusalem depended entirely on the land for their daily existence. Over the years they had developed a pattern of life as they plowed, planted and harvested their crops. For many of them, the thought of leaving their comfort zone was highly traumatic. But some left their homes, relatives, neighbors, work, friends, and familiar routines to set up a new life in a radically different environment.

Are you willing to leave your comfort zone for the sake of the kingdom? I don't know what God might be asking you to do, but I do know that He wants you to be available. I'll never forget what God did about five years ago, as a result of a prayer I prayed: "Lord, I'm willing to do whatever you want, to go wherever you want, whenever you want it." It was shortly after this that God moved us out of our comfortable routine in Rockford, Illinois to the heart of Mexico City.

What is God asking you to do that may stretch you? Maybe you need to check out a short-term missions trip. As you pray for your neighbors, and look for ways to care for them, God wants to use you to share with them. For many of us, that's outside our comfort zone. Maybe it's as simple as putting the "Jesus is Coming" sign on your front lawn. Or it might be a commitment to start tithing. Whatever it is, tell God you're willing to live outside your normal boundaries. Let him stretch you.

##### **2. Commit to holiness.**

After moving out of their comfort zone, the believers commit to holy living. They didn't just agree to live in a remodeled city; they were coming to "the holy city." Nehemiah was fascinated by the holy and has reminded us that the Sabbath is a distinctive day (Neh 10:31) and that the temple sacrifices are sanctified (Neh 10:33). His ministry partner, Ezra, emphasized that God's people need to be holy (Ezra 9:2). Jerusalem itself was set apart for the Lord's special use. To live in Jerusalem and be given the opportunity to serve God in such a holy place was an immense privilege. This would outweigh their natural sense of disappointment about leaving their friends and families.

To live in the holy city might be a great privilege, but it was also a challenging responsibility. It's one thing to have a home in a holy city; it's another thing to make a home holy. Living in a holy context did not automatically transmit holiness to the individual citizens – they were made holy by giving everything over to God. Have you committed yourself to holiness and purity? Are you living your life separated from the "world" because you're set apart for His use?

##### **3. Mobilize for ministry.**

Now that the people were committed to live outside their comfort zone and wholeheartedly devoted to holy living, they are now ready to be mobilized for ministry. We've already seen that some people were drafted to live in Jerusalem. But there were others who offered themselves freely to this new work in Neh 11:2: "The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem."

In the remainder of Neh 11, we see that God has always used a wide variety of people. I see three different groups in this passage:

- Those with leadership gifts. In addition to the leaders mentioned in Neh 11:1, there were "provincial leaders" mentioned in Neh

11:3. These pacesetters were noble examples to those who were relocating to Jerusalem. If the leaders are out front, then others will follow. Someone has said, "The speed of the leader determines the speed of the team." This is true. As the leaders of PBC commit their time, talents and treasures to kingdom living and kingdom expansion, the environment is set for others to follow that example.

- Those with administrative gifts. As you read this long list of names in Neh 11, there were other people who served as administrators. Neh 11:9: "Joel son of Zicri was the chief officer, and Judah...was over the Second District." These officers made sure the city functioned well and that the infrastructure was sufficient to handle the growing population.

- Those with serving gifts. Neh 11:16 tells us that two guys "had charge of the outside work of the house of God." The temple had to be kept in good repair and these individuals dedicated their practical skills to care for the building. We have been blessed with deacons at PBC who serve with both their hearts and their hands. Thanks, guys for your commitment to this part of the ministry. Actually, this church is filled with people who use their serving gifts on a regular basis. You are appreciated!

Friend, are you mobilized for ministry? As Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 make clear, every believer has at least one spiritual gift that has been given to be used. We are saved to serve. As I like to say: No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Let me encourage you to find your ministry niche and discover the joy of serving in your area of giftedness.

#### **4. Adore God in worship.**

Take a look at Neh 11:17 where we see that Mattaniah was the "director who led in thanksgiving and prayer." In thanksgiving we acknowledge God's generosity. In prayer we seek God's help. These themes were often expressed in song as we see in Neh 11:22: "Uzzi was one of Asaph's descendants, who were the singers responsible for the service of the house of God."

David had commissioned his worship leader Asaph in a similar way centuries earlier in 1 Chronicles 16:8: "Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name." Praise and prayer are central to the spiritual life of God's people. That's what we'll be doing this Friday night at the Concert of Prayer for the Jesus Video Project. We'll praise God in song as we adore Him, as we confess our sins, as we thank Him, and as we intercede on behalf of our community. I hope you can come.

### **Guidelines for Worship**

Worship can be defined as "worth-ship," where we engage our mind, our emotions, and our will to gratefully acknowledge the worth of our God. There is no other human activity as lofty as that of adoring God. As important as electing a president is to our country, the determination to worship God is supreme. Like Colson said, "we must keep living in biblical faithfulness." The Westminster Shorter Catechism states "our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

If we've been made to magnify the Majesty, then we need to know how to do that.

Nehemiah 12 begins with a long list of names. Neh 12:24 helps us see that there were two choirs who stood opposite from each other to "give praise and thanksgiving." I want to spend our remaining moments gleaning 4 worship guidelines from Neh 12:27-47.

#### **1. The Purpose of Worship.**

Let's start by looking at the purpose of worship. In Neh 12:27 we read about a dedication service for the newly constructed wall. The Levites were brought "to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres." Grateful celebration, thanksgiving and dedication are the three main themes, and they take us to the heart of what worship is all about.

Celebration is the primary aspect of worship. It does not begin with us, but with who God is, what God has said, and what God has done. Thanksgiving was a way of marveling at God's generosity. Neh 12:31 tells us that the choirs were appointed "to give thanks." That was their job or purpose. Let me just say that our thanksgiving needs to be specific. I think its best when we can itemize our thanks to God. That's what we'll be doing during our Thanksgiving Service one week from Wednesday. I encourage you to begin thinking about what you want to share that night. By offering themselves in dedication, they were surrendering themselves to God.

These three elements of celebration, thanksgiving and dedication are expressed by our total being. When we celebrate, we engage our minds by recalling what God has said and done. When we give thanks, we express our hearts in gratitude. And, in dedication we employ our wills by surrendering to Him.

#### **2. The Joy of Worship.**

The secret of acceptable worship is not simply what we do but how we do it. The new residents of Jerusalem radiated joyful hearts with jubilant songs of thanksgiving. The opportunity to magnify God was a supremely happy occasion. Recall their response to the reading of Scripture in Neh 8:12: "they celebrated with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made

known to them.” When they made their ‘twig tents’ and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, “their joy was very great” (Neh 8:17).

Worship was never meant to be drab and boring. There was nothing stereotyped or monochrome about this thanksgiving service. A wide variety of musical gifts were used to express adoration and praise. In Neh 12:27 we see that instrumentalists played “cymbals, harps and lyres.” Neh 12:35 and Neh 12:41 tell us that the priests played their trumpets. Choral music was given the most prominent place, as many singers joined the two large choirs to give thanks on behalf of all the people.

This passage is filled with superlatives. In Neh 12:27 they celebrate “joyfully.” The choirs are not just choirs but “large choirs” in Neh 12:31. In Neh 12:43 the priests “offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.” There is nothing half-hearted about their joyful adoration because it is the outflow of supremely grateful hearts from people who have personally experienced the lavish generosity of God.

### **3. The Witness of Worship.**

Neh 12:31-39 tell us that the leaders went up on the top of the wall. The Jews were accustomed to having workers and watchers on the walls, now the people are assigned to be worshippers on the walls. The two large choirs walked on top of the wall, one to the right, and the other one went to the left. Ezra was one of the worship leaders and Nehemiah led the other choir.

This worship service could have taken place at the temple area, but instead Nehemiah wanted it to take place on the walls themselves. I think he did this for at least three reasons.

First, it was important for the people to see and touch the walls during this dedication service. It was a visual reminder of God’s faithfulness.

Secondly, the people were bearing witness to the watching world that God had done the work, and He alone should be glorified. The enemy had said in Neh 4:3 that the walls were so weak that a fox could knock them down, but here the people are marching on the walls! It was another opportunity to prove the truth of Neh 6:16: “...this work had been done with the help of our God.” As they marched on top of the walls, everyone could see what was happening, and for miles around unbelievers heard the sound of praise. Look at Neh 12:43: “The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”

Let me suggest a third reason for this march around the walls. It was a symbolic act by which they stepped out in faith to claim God’s blessing. In that day, to walk on a piece of property meant to claim it as your own. In Joshua 1:3, God said to Joshua, “I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.” That’s one reason we are going to do some “prayer walking” next Saturday as we hand out some publicity for the Jesus Video. Believers will be walking through our entire community, praying and claiming God’s promises. We want to take this town for Jesus! We’re going to meet here at 9:00 a.m. and then scatter throughout all the neighborhoods of Pontiac. And, as we go, we’ll be praising and praying and handing out some popcorn.

### **4. The Response of Worship.**

The concluding verses present us with another aspect of authentic worship: the offering of our money as well as our time and service for the Lord’s work. After the exciting service of dedication was over, provision must be made for the continuing worship of God’s people. Neh 12:47 says, “all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.”

It was organized, specific, grateful, regular and universal. But most of all, the people gave in response to who God is and what He had done on their behalf. Thomas Adams, a colonial Puritan, said this: “Let us do good with our goods while we live...to part with what we cannot keep, that we may get what we cannot lose.”

### **The Valley of Decision**

This has been a crazy week for our country as we wait to hear the final results of the presidential election. We’re kind of in a holding pattern right now. As I think about all this, I’m reminded of a verse I read in my Quiet Time from Joel 3:14: “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”

As important as it is for us to cast our votes in order to elect government officials, we are really faced with an even greater decision. Joel pictures millions of people in a valley called decision. And, one day the Lord is coming back. Those who have cast the ballot of their lives for the Lord will be saved; those who haven’t will face eternal condemnation with no hope of a recount.

- Ultimately, there are really only two questions. The first one is this. Is Jesus resident in your life? Have you ever elected to receive Him into your life by turning from your sins and asking Him to forgive you? If not, that’s what you need to do this morning.

- The second question is this. Is Jesus president of your life? Are you living under His lordship and leadership? Is He on the throne, or are you?

You see, Jesus is Savior and Lord. He is forgiver and leader. He not only wants to be resident, He desires to be your president.

If you are ready for the first time to make Jesus resident in your life by asking Him to save you from your sins, would you please stand up?

If you are ready to make Him president of your life, would you please stand in recognition of lordship and leadership in your life?

## NEHEMIAH 13: Standing By Our Promises

11/19/00

As many of you know, I really like Snicker bars. For the past year, whenever I would go to Dairy Queen, I would always order a Snicker Bar Breeze. All I had to do was walk in and one of the workers would start filling a cup with chunks of tasty nougat. It was automatic for me, until the day I tasted my six-year-old daughter's mint Oreo blizzard!

From that point on, I've left Snickers behind – I guess that makes me a "Snicker Bar Breeze Backslider."

When Becky had her tonsils out, we told her she could have whatever she wanted at Dairy Queen. She didn't feel like eating anything for about a week, but when she was better, she remembered our promise. One day, I stopped and got her a blizzard. I tried every trick I could think of to get as many spoonfuls as I could! She finally made me promise to not eat any more.

When we got home, she put what was left in the freezer to save until she felt better. A few hours later, I remembered it was in there, so I grabbed a spoon and finished it (I didn't think she'd want it because she felt so sick). When she opened the freezer, she saw that it was gone and said, "Dad, you promised!" To make it up to her we went out to Dairy Queen a couple days later and split a large mint Oreo blizzard. I was a good boy but she kept her eye on me to make sure I didn't hog it.

A few days later, Beth bought her another blizzard. Becky once again put was left in the freezer but this time I didn't touch it. A couple minutes later, Becky said that I could finish her tasty treat. I thanked her, opened the freezer and pulled out an...empty cup! She laughed so hard that she fell on the floor.

Well, just this week we went to Dairy Queen as a family and Becky once again ordered her favorite blizzard. I ordered one as well but I could tell Becky didn't trust me. I noticed that she sat as far away from me as she could. I tried to exchange cups with her when mine was empty but she was on to me. She gave me one of her great smiles and said, "Dad, you promised!" I smiled sheepishly and then mentioned that it was funny that I was speaking on the theme of "Standing By Our Promises" this Sunday. To which Lydia, our 9-year-old, said, "Well then you better start keeping yours, Dad." Ouch.

We all fail to keep our pledges, don't we? Our good intentions and plans often fall by the wayside. Sometimes we blatantly break our promises but other times, we just kind of drift away, a little at a time. Someone has said that moral failure and spiritual decline are a great deal like a flat tire. Most flat tires don't occur as a result of a blowout. They get flat because air leaks out over time, often imperceptibly. I'm told that generally speaking, a tire will lose one or two pounds of air per month in cool weather, and even more in warmer weather. Sometimes you don't even know you're going flat until the car becomes difficult to steer.

In our passage for today, we come face-to-face with some backsliders. The dictionary defines the verb "backslide" this way: "To relapse into bad habits, sinful behavior, or undesirable activities." You would think that the last chapter of this great book would contain encouraging and compelling stories of how God's people took their spiritual commitment to the next level. Frankly, this script does not have a happy ending. Within a relatively short period of time, the children of Israel went spiritually flat and returned to their old ways of doing things – violating God's laws and allowing the world's system to press them into its mold. That leads to one of the lessons of the book of Nehemiah: Good beginnings are no guarantee of happy endings.

### Background

Before we jump into Nehemiah 13, I want to give you some background information (**Ed: For review see book chart Nehemiah: Building for Security - Chart**).

1. Nehemiah went back to Persia at the end of chapter 12. In chapter 1 we learned that Nehemiah had a great job in the Persian White House. Sensing God's clear leading, Nehemiah requested and received permission to lead a team of builders to reconstruct the walls surrounding Jerusalem. Nehemiah was appointed governor and served for 12 years in that position. He dealt with the



enemies, organized the people, rebuilt the wall, set up the infrastructure for the repopulated city, and led a great celebration of dedication. When he was done with all this, he returned as a senior advisor to the king of Persia. We don't know how long he stayed but it was probably several years.

When he finally retired from his government job in Susa, he returned to Jerusalem because he wanted to enjoy his retirement years and eventually be buried in the city of his fathers. Nehemiah 13 records what Nehemiah discovered when he returned. I can't imagine what he must have felt. When he left, Neh 12:43 says that the "sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away." Because these same people had violated the covenant they had publicly signed in Neh 9:38, Nehemiah came back hitting as hard as the Pontiac Indians football team. Like Tuley and Cunningham, PBC's own "Thunder and Lightning," Nehemiah attempted to jar team Jerusalem out of their comfortable compromise with the world.

2. There is a literary link between Nehemiah 10 and Nehemiah 13. In chapter 10, the people made 4 vows or promises. First, they pledged to submit to God's Word; second, they vowed to live separate from the world; third, they promised to keep the Sabbath, and fourth, they agreed to support God's work. Sadly, by the time we get to chapter 13, each of these promises are broken. This reminds us that the most spiritual person, and the best church, can find its standards subtly eroded as we gradually accommodate to the pressures of contemporary worldliness. At the dedication in chapter 12, the builders celebrated their moral victory in a battle against secularism and materialism, but they had certainly not won the war.

Since Nehemiah 13 is best understood in light of Nehemiah 10, I'm going to follow the same outline from two weeks ago so that we can look carefully at each one of their four broken promises.

### The Submission Promise

The promises of chapter 10 began with an affirmation of loyalty to the Word of God in Neh 13:29: "...to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God." In Nehemiah 13:1, we read a description of Israel's carelessness about what God had said in the Book of Moses concerning the purity of their worship: "On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God..."

We see again that Scripture was read publicly. Those present realized how sloppy they had been about their exclusive loyalty to God. As they listened to the words of Moses they remembered what had happened to their ancestors when they were on the threshold of the Promised Land. The Ammonites' sin was one of omission: they had not met the Israelites with food and water. The Moabites' sin was one of commission: they had hired Balaam to call a curse down on the Israelites. We don't have time this morning to go into much detail on this but I invite you to read Deuteronomy 23:3-5 to get a better understanding of what happened. The bottom line is that the Moabites and Ammonites were notorious for infiltrating Israel and causing their worship to become diluted.

Here's the good news. When the Israelites heard what God's Word had to say, they obeyed it. Check out Neh 13:3: "When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent." That's a great application for us. Let's admit that we fall short. We break our promises. We mess up. We don't always follow what we know to be true. It seems to me we have two choices. We can continue this pattern of disobedience or we can stop what we've been doing and determine to live out what God says. The Christian life is a series of new beginnings. It's never too late to start taking God's Word seriously.

Is there something you need to do that you've been putting off? Is there a decision you need to make? I suspect that some of you have no question about what God wants you to do but you're afraid to do it because it's difficult. Friend, if God is asking you to do something, He will take care of all the details. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."

### The Separation Promise

While they broke their promise to submit to God's Word, they determined once again to do what God says. The next promise that they did not keep was to live separate from the world. They ignored this vow in two ways.

#### 1. An enemy intruder.

In Neh 13:4-9, we see that one of these Ammonites was actually living in the Jewish temple! Nehemiah was horrified to find that Eliashib, who was the high priest in Israel, had prepared a guest room for Tobiah in the temple. This room was the size of a small warehouse. Unbelievably, an archenemy of God's people had set up residence in the nerve center of Jerusalem. From this position he could influence everyone.

This is one of the first consequences of the breaking of the vow to not intermarry with pagans. Eliashib had become a traitor because one of his relatives was married to Sanballat's daughter (13:28), and Sanballat and Tobiah were friends. Throughout the book of Nehemiah, Tobiah had been an enemy of God and a thorn in Nehemiah's side. Nehemiah dealt with him many times before

and made sure that he was never allowed inside the walls. While Nehemiah was away, the high priest not only allowed Tobiah inside the city, he gave him the keys to a large suite of rooms where the tithes and offerings of the people were stored.

Eliashib had been entrusted with a privileged responsibility but, by cultivating wrong relationships, he misused his office and frustrated God's work. Nehemiah saw Eliashib's act for what it was – an offense against a holy God, a public denial of the priority of spiritual things, and an act of blatant disobedience to Scripture. In Neh 13:7, Nehemiah called it “an evil thing.”

The identification of the problem demanded drastic, public, and immediate action. Take a look at Neh 13:8-9: “I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.” Nehemiah went off on Tobiah! He showed him the door and then threw his furniture, TV, computer and stereo into the street. He then gave an order to have the rooms cleansed. Nehemiah wanted every trace of Tobiah's presence removed from the temple. He had the room disinfected and fumigated so that no one could even smell his cologne after he left. Nehemiah could not live with wrong in a place that was built for right.

The first separation vow they broke was that they allowed a pagan unbeliever to take up residence in their temple. The second separation promise they broke was to allow mixed marriages to take place.

## **2. Mixed marriages.**

You'll recall this vow from Neh 10:30: “We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.” Drop down to Neh 13:23-28. When Nehemiah returned he saw that men of Judah had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. He also heard their children speaking foreign languages, which meant that they would not know how to read the Law of God or participate in temple services. Their sins were damaging their home and family life.

Only a few years earlier, as God's people were repairing the walls, Neh 4:7-8 tells us that the “Ammonites and the men of Ashdod” had “plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem.” Yesterday's enemies had become today's marriage partners. In challenging them about their disobedience, Nehemiah uses arguments from experience in Neh 13:23-24 and from history in Neh 13:26.

This really lit Nehemiah up and he went off on the people! Check out Neh 13:25: “I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name...” By calling down curses on them, he was pronouncing God's judgment on their actions. He was so mad, and his anger so intense, that he smacked some of the husbands and yanked out their hair! When Ezra was faced with a similar situation in Ezra 9:3, he plucked his own hair out. Instead of doing that, Nehemiah pulled the hair of some of the offenders. This may seem like violent and inappropriate behavior for a man of God, but when we interpret Nehemiah's actions against the backdrop of Israel's history, it's easier to understand his intense feelings.

This very sin was the primary reason they were taken into Babylonian captivity in the first place. Nehemiah knew that pagan women led even their wisest king into sin. And, Nehemiah himself had personally experienced the results of Solomon's sin. That's why his grandparents had been carried off to Babylon. That's why he was a servant to King Artaxerxes. There was no way that Nehemiah wanted God's judgment to fall on Israel again. If God did not tolerate it in Solomon's life, he certainly would not allow it now.

## **The Support Promise**

The third fractured vow was that they neglected to support God's work in Neh 13:13. Their final statement in chapter 10 was that they would “...not neglect the house our God.” When we come to this final chapter, Nehemiah discovers that the ministry at the temple was hampered in Neh 13:10 because the Levites and singers had to get jobs in the fields in order to survive. The temple storerooms were empty because people had stopped bringing their tithes and offerings. By the way, this probably explains why the rooms were available for Tobiah to live in.

Nehemiah has to do some tough talking again in Neh 13:11: “So I rebuked the officials and asked them, ‘Why is the house of God neglected?’” Nehemiah then set up a system so that they could once again put God first with their finances. Nehemiah not only rebuked them, he showed them what to do to make some changes. That's exactly what God does for each one of us. He wants the bad removed and the good immediately restored. When the Holy Spirit convicts us, He also prods us to positive behavior. We are to stop doing something destructive and begin doing something constructive.

Nehemiah set up some administrative systems to insure that the tithes would once more start rolling into the temple. The temple officers in charge of the gifts had left their posts because there was nothing coming in or out, so in Neh 13:11, Nehemiah “stationed them at their posts.” In Neh 13:12 we read that the people started bringing their “tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms.” They renewed their commitment to put God first in their finances and brought to God what was rightfully His. He then appointed four men in Neh 13:13 to supervise the treasury and distribute the tithes and offerings. Interestingly, these men represented the priests, Levites, scribes, and laymen. They were all different but they had one thing in common: “they were

considered trustworthy.”

When God’s people start to go flat spiritually, one of the first places it shows up is in their giving. Jesus put it this way: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Just as the Israelites renewed their commitment to honor God with their wallets, so too, you and I need to do an honest assessment of our giving. Are you putting God first in your finances?

### **The Sabbath Promise**

When they signed the covenant, the Israelites promised not to do business with the Gentiles on the Sabbath Day in 10:31: “...We will not buy from them on the Sabbath.” In Neh 13:15-22, Nehemiah discovered that the people were not only doing business on the Sabbath, they were treating it as any other day of the week. They had broken their fourth promise by secularizing the Sabbath. Neh 13:16 tells us that there were men of Tyre who actually moved into Jerusalem and set up their own businesses. The leaders allowed them to operate their shops seven days a week.

Nehemiah didn’t sit back and let this promise be ignored either. He spoke sternly and acted firmly by instituting three action steps. First, in Neh 13:15 he rebuked the Jews who were working and selling on the Sabbath and made them stop.

Second, he rebuked the nobles for allowing business on the Sabbath day by reminding them that the violation of the Sabbath was one of the reasons for their captivity in the first place. We see this in Neh 13:18: “Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

His third step was very practical: He ordered the city gates shut on the Sabbath and he put some of his own guards on duty in Neh 13:19. He threatened those who wanted to sell their goods on this holy day and also ordered the Levites to set a good example and minister to the people in Neh 13:22.

In demanding that the people keep their Sabbath promise, Nehemiah was emphasizing the centrality of worship, the importance of witness, the necessity of rest, and the priority of love. Loving obedience is always better than a full wallet. This command was not intended to be a chore. God never demands anything from us that is not for our own good. When Nehemiah’s people ignored the Sabbath, they were damaging the very fabric of their spiritual, physical and social lives.

### **Nehemiah’s Top Ten**

As we wrap up this chapter, and our series on Nehemiah, I want to give you my top ten lessons from this very practical book.

#### **1. It’s never too late to do what’s right.**

Even though God’s people had messed up pretty bad, it didn’t disqualify them from service or ruin their relationship with God. Don’t let your past keep you from doing what is right. It really doesn’t matter what you’ve done. What matters is that you begin right now to renew your walk with God.

#### **2. Don’t play around with sin.**

Nehemiah dealt with sin decisively and abruptly. Most of us underestimate our sinfulness and overestimate our goodness. Friend, don’t flirt with sin. Don’t get cozy with compromise. Be vigilant. As Romans 12:9 says, “Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good.”

#### **3. Remember who God is.**

He is great and awesome. That means that He is large and He is in charge! He is also good...all the time. Even when bad things happen to us, He is good. And, He is gracious. He doesn’t treat us as we deserve but always grants us grace and fresh starts.

#### **4. Cultivate a lifestyle of praise and prayer.**

God desires for each of us to worship Him with reverence and with joy, both individually and corporately. As we do, we’ll also cry out to Him in confession and supplication. When we pray, we should pray doctrinally and also be ready to shoot up “popcorn prayers” throughout the day.

#### **5. Move out of your comfort zone.**

Most of us are way too comfortable with the way we’re living. We tend to default to what is predictable and easy. God wants us to be available to Him. When He asks us to do something that stretches us, let’s be ready to move!

#### **6. Don’t let difficulties derail you.**

When hard times come, and they will, don’t bail on God. God allows tough times in our lives for a purpose. Use them to get closer to

Him and ask Him to develop your character through the process.

#### **7. Seek to resolve relational ruptures.**

As we spend time with people, we are bound to have conflict and disagreements. Each of us sin against others, and others sin against us. Don't allow this conflict to go underground. Meet face-to-face and seek resolution.

#### **8. Say "yes" to God's priorities and "no" to the devil's distractions.**

God wants us to live purposeful lives, focused on those things that matter to Him. The evil one seeks to get us off track through busyness and selfishness. Commit yourself to God's priorities, specifically as it relates to your time, your talents, and your treasures.

#### **9. Believe the promises of God and act upon them.**

While it can be helpful to make promises, or vows, to God, it's more important to believe the promises of God and act accordingly. We don't have to perform for God. Instead, claim what God has promised to do for you and ask Him to give you the tenacity to take Him at His Word.

#### **10. Allow God to use you.**

God takes great pleasure in using people who are available to Him. You don't have to be a super saint or a spiritual giant. God delights in using ordinary people like us so that His extraordinary power can be unleashed in our lives.

["John Legend's song Ordinary People"](#)

### **Remember Me**

God uses people that will give Him all. Nehemiah prays three "popcorn prayers" for himself in Nehemiah 13.

Neh 13:14: "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services."

Neh 13:22: "Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love."

Neh 13:31: "Remember me with favor, O my God."

He reminded God of His faithfulness and prayed that what he had done would not be blotted out. Nehemiah wasn't pleading for blessings on the basis of personal merit, because He knew that God's favor only comes by His grace and mercy. He is simply asking God to remember Him and what He had done. He wanted God's favor and reward, not the accolades of man.

These prayers reveal an attitude toward life. Nehemiah could have built a monument to himself. He could have written this inscription on the wall: "Built by Nehemiah the Great." He could have looked back at his life and been proud of his accomplishments. Or, he could have been frustrated because the believers had broken their promises. In other words, he could have been impressed with his past accomplishments or discouraged about the present situation.

But he chose neither of those things. He simply said, "Lord, a day is coming when all of this will be over. I want the meaning of my life to be anchored in the future." He knew that there was a time coming when He'd be rewarded by the Lord and embraced by Him. His prayers reveal that He's living for that day, when the Lord will say to him,

**"Well done, good and faithful servant"**

(Matthew 25:21).

**Are you living for that day?**