

Building For God
Leadership And Life Lessons
From
Nehemiah

H. Carl Shank



Building For God: Leadership and Life Lessons from Nehemiah

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Besides numerous seminars and church related articles, his recently published Bible study contributions include *Living Life God's Way: Reflections from the Psalms, Study Guide and Leader's Guide*, *Romans: The Glory of God As Seen in the Righteousness of God*, *Jonah: A Reluctant Messenger*, *A Needy People*, and *God's Amazing Grace*, *Esther: For Such A Time As This*, *A Study of God's Providence*, and *Church Warnings! The Seven Churches of Revelation for Today*, available from Lulu Press, Amazon and other booksellers. Carl is married to his wonderful wife, Nancy, and has three grown, married children. He lives in the Marietta, PA area and can be reached for consulting, seminars or leadership and mentoring development at

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Foreword

Why Study Leadership and Life from Nehemiah?

A good number of leadership lessons, seminars, papers, books, videos, and podcasts have been written and produced. There are myriads of choices for the new leader, the trained leader, and the mature leader in any field that interests you. Church leadership and general Christian leadership resources are no different in their breadth of availability.

So, why another leadership book on a well rehearsed biblical leader such as Nehemiah? Having been a church and denominational leader for over forty years has taught me something about the ins and outs of good and bad leadership. I have experienced all kinds of leaders, attended all types of leadership seminars and training institutes, and have sat with major leaders in a number of fields of endeavor. In all of that, I have had to come back to the Scriptures for what God wants in a leader. God has given instruction, models and examples of good and bad leaders and of good and bad leadership. Nehemiah was one of the good models of leadership.

I like Nehemiah. He was an unknown servant to a great ancient Near Eastern king, a cupbearer by trade. He was not a famous Jewish prophet, scribe or known leader. Yet, through this man, the torn down and burnt walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in an amazing fifty-two days. He faced opposition and ridicule by the appointed leaders on the ground in and around Jerusalem. He had to deal with recalcitrant people, scared people and lazy, unproductive people. He had to conquer unfair business practices and engineer conflict resolution, all while facing enemies from a secular empire.

Many leadership articles and advice start with what seems to work in

the field. Then, for Christian leaders, Bible verses and stories are found to coincide with what seems to be working in the day to day examples and venues of successful leaders. Consequently, we have books and videos on “Jesus as CEO,”¹ and if we read these books and listen to the videos we can become great leaders like Jesus.

This all seems quite backward to me, especially in searching out what biblically based leadership is all about. Instead of using biblical models like Nehemiah to demonstrate or validate our working models of good leadership, we need to take a step back and learn what they did and how God used them, and then learn from them.

Nehemiah proved to be a great leader, not because he was especially charismatic or naturally skilled or trained by the best Persian leaders of the time. He was trained and honed for leadership by God himself. We need to therefore look for leadership principles from the text of the Bible, from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah itself, rather than insert principles we have gleaned from other sources and try to fit them into Nehemiah’s leadership venue.

Perhaps no other Christian book has impressed me and defined my leadership life so much as Alan Redpath’s *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah*.² When he wrote this book in 1958, Redpath was the pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. In the *Foreword* to the book, he writes:

“Never was there a time when there was a greater need for men of passion, men of principle, men of Holy Spirit vision in the service of the Lord. It is impossible for any of us to become any of these things unless first we have stood in the midst of the work which the Master has given us and have seen the futility of everything that can ever come from our own imagined strength or weakness. These are lessons which most of us learn the hard way, and we learn them in a school from which we never graduate until we enter the very presence of the Master Himself.”³

Certainly, these words apply equally well to today’s men and women leaders. Sixty years later, you and I live in an amazingly similar world, don’t we? Let us humbly learn, once again, from Nehemiah about leadership.

Carl Shank

2018

Notes

1. Such a book would be Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, Hachette Books, Reprint edition (May 2, 1996). While many of the insights from Jones are helpful, this is not a particularly careful book with the Scriptures.
2. Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah*, Fleming Revell, 1958. Reprint available from CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (April 22, 2013).
3. Redpath, p. 7.

Nehemiah's Context

God Is A God of Providence and History

“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

(Nehemiah 1:1–3 ESV)

What's so special about building a wall? Why are the fifty-two days Nehemiah spent building a wall around Jerusalem in 445 BC so interesting and earthshattering for us? The simple answer is that Nehemiah and the people were able to build a 4.5 mile wall around the ancient city of Jerusalem in less than three months after ninety years of trying! That's right—ninety years!

Of the seventeen historical books in the Old Testament, the most recent in date are Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Once thought to be one book in Jewish history, Ezra and Nehemiah are both divided into two parts. The first six chapters of Ezra have to do with the rebuilding of the Temple; the last four discuss the restoration of worship. Sixty years elapsed between Ezra's first six chapters and the last four chapters. In those sixty years occurred the events recorded in the Book of Esther, when the preservation of the entire Jewish race was at stake. The first six chapters of the Book of Nehemiah have to do with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, and the last seven chapters have to do with the re-instruction of the people of God.

Let's review the long and tiring history of this rebuilding. In 587 BC the

Jewish nation went into total captivity under Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem and the Temple are was destroyed in 586 BC. The Persian leader, Cyrus, conquers the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, allowing about fifty thousand Jews to return to their homeland in 536 BC. In their rebuilding effort, they were only able to erect the foundation stones of the Temple. Sixteen years later, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah challenge the people to get busy with the work of rebuilding. The Temple was finally finished in 516 BC. Sixty years later, another group from exile return under Ezra, the priest (459 BC). Rebuilding begins again, but halts in 446 BC (Ezra 4:23). Ninety years later, fourteen years after Ezra's return, Nehemiah comes on the scene and finishes the job.

But who cares about a wall? This wall was not just for defense or security or show, but the “walls” and “gates” (ten of them referenced in Nehemiah 3) signified *salvation* and *praise*. They were signposts to the nations surrounding Israel that Jehovah God was the one true God and was present with his people. It was God's way of saying to the nations, “Here is where you can find restoration and eternal relief. Here is where the blessing of God can come to your life.” “When all our enemies heard about this, 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.” (Nehemiah 6:16)

Today, Christian people are the temple of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament tells us — “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own.” (1 Corinthians 6:19) But what has happened to that temple in many quarters? It is surrounded by walls that are broken down with compromise, walls burned with secular, unchristian thinking and acting, walls torn apart with Christian marriages in disarray and divorce that matches the world about us. Redpath asks some piercing questions here:

“What about the wall of your prayer life and your Bible study? What about the wall of your walk with God? What about the wall of your personal devotional life? The wall of your consistent testimony before others? What about the wall of your Christian life? Do these things lie in ruins? What about the wall of your

church's testimony? What about the impact your fellowship is making on your community today?"¹

Was something wrong with the priest Ezra and his predecessors? Were the people any different back then than those recruited in Nehemiah's day? Not really. The people Nehemiah had to encourage to rebuild the walls and restore the gates were *much more* discouraged and disinclined to work than those under Ezra.

Some say it was just coincidence. Nehemiah "happens" to be at the right place and at the right time to receive God's blessing. That, however, is a lazy and unstudied answer, noting that in the Bible and history, God's sovereign work always moves through willing and ready people. God did not rebuild the walls; the people did! God did not inspire and push on the people; Nehemiah did. God did not automatically move on King Artaxerxes's heart and mind to send Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Nehemiah had to ask, in earnest prayer, not knowing the outcome of his request.

Others say Nehemiah was a wonderful preacher or gifted prophet. That is simply not so. He was just an ordinary layman with a burden and a dream of what could be. God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary tasks!

Still others say Nehemiah recognized the need. It was the desperate need of the hour that drove him into action. True, the need was great, but it was not the need of Jerusalem, nor of the Jewish people that moved Nehemiah to rebuild the walls. Alan Redpath notes in his book, "If you don't have a heart that is burdened with an overwhelming sense of conviction, you will never be fruitful in the service of the Lord. The need never constitutes the call!"²

How was Nehemiah able to somehow mobilize and motivate this discouraged, rejected, persecuted Jewish remnant into completing God's work in record time? What happened to Nehemiah, and what does he teach us today about "building for God?"

Nehemiah's rebuilding of the wall was sovereignly, historically timed and orchestrated by God Himself. We see this in Nehemiah's brief question to his brother, Hanani (whose name means "The Lord has been gracious") in vs. 2 — "I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that

survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.”

God was about to raise up a leader, a “comforter” (“Nehemiah” means “the Lord comforts”), that would encourage, chase out fear and give new hope and vision for His people. We should not overlook the force of Nehemiah’s “comfort” for Jerusalem and the people of God there. That rich and powerful word means more than Nehemiah felt “sorry” for the dire situation back home. It was more than a feeling that drove Nehemiah to prayer. The term for “comfort” is used of the naming of Noah — “Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us relief (comfort) from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.” (Genesis 5:29) It is used of Joseph, who when his erring brothers learned that this Prince of Egypt was really the one they had sold to slave traders years ago, and were afraid for their very lives, said, “Do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones. Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:21) Nehemiah, true to his name, would provide real relief, real practical comfort for his people in Jerusalem.

Let’s learn from Nehemiah those leadership lessons that can help rebuild the wall of testimony around God’s church today.

Discussion

1. Carefully read through Nehemiah chapters one and two. Jot down what God impresses on your heart and mind as you prayerfully read these chapters.
2. Can you think of other movements by God that seemed historically impossible or out of reach?

Notes

1. Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah*, Fleming Revell, 1958, p. 21.
2. *Ibid*, p. 31.

A God-Given Burden

The Need Never Constitutes the Call

“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

(Nehemiah 1:4–11 ESV)

The need never constitutes the call of God, so says Alan Redpath. When Nehemiah heard how God’s Name and God’s city and God’s people were being harrassed and ridiculed, and that nothing was being done, and nobody took the situation to heart, something inside this leader broke! Inwardly, he said “enough is enough.” God took hold of this unknown man and said, “You’re the man for the hour!” And Nehemiah said, “Yes, Lord, send me!”

God began to fashion inside this man of faith and hope a dream, a vision of the city walls being rebuilt in a matter of days, not years. We live

in a world where God's walls of witness and testimony have to be rebuilt. Christian researcher, George Barna, has noted that the institutional church, in modern society's mind, is as good as dead! Extinct! Finished! It has little to no relevant impact on society. It is not that people are fighting or denying the church. They are simply ignoring it.

When will you say "enough!" Enough violence, enough sexual and moral perversion! Enough passive and permissive cultural Christianity which allows Satan to drive a tractor-trailer load of garbage through the doors of the institutional church! Enough sitting around waiting for someone else to do something! Enough seeing your neighbor or school mate go to work or school week after week, unsaved, doomed and damned! Enough!

Building for God does not come through programs or announcements or flyers or video chats or needs or human abilities or ingenuity. People are transformed, and lives are changed, and God's work moves forward through totally submitted people, people whose hearts and minds have had enough, and have been broken enough by God so that they say, "Enough! Here I am, God. Use me!"

"I sat down and wept and mourned for days," says Nehemiah. Why the weeping? David did such weeping recorded in Psalm 119:136 — "Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed." Paul wept in Acts 19 when he testified to the leaders of the church in Ephesus — "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and tears." Jesus himself, touched with the callousness and rebellion and hard-heartedness of the Jerusalem of his day, wept — "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34; cf Luke 19:41).

This is not just some teary-eyed, overly sensitive man who when he thinks of home can only see the ruin and rubble. This is a man who deeply understands and is moved by God's purposes and God's promises. This is a man who is "cupbearer" (v. 11) to the King, mind you. He is highly gifted, highly talented, highly influential in the Persian court. But more

than that, this is a servant of God, an Old Testament Christian, who was touched by the hand of God to do a great work for God and reestablish those “walls of salvation” and those “gates of praise.”

What about you? Has God moved you to weep over the indifference of Christian people?! To weep over the masses of people who scorn and laugh at and mock the impotence of the Christian church in this day and age? To weep over the accommodation to the world’s ways and desires seen in many congregations today? Why weeping? Redpath again says it well—“You never lighten the load unless first you have felt the pressure in your own soul.”¹ Weeping indicates submission to God and his will and compassion toward those outside of God’s will and ways. This is where strong and successful leadership for God begins.

Then Nehemiah prayed. What is real leadership prayer? We see it here in Nehemiah. It is not just words that sound religious, nor merely formulations or formulas he was taught as a Jewish boy. But this is deep, intense, gut-wrenching and God-centered cries to the only One who could possibly save Jerusalem—the God of heaven and earth! “The Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God . . .” (v. 5) This is not just prattle, not just asking God to bless the work and to keep us plugging along, and to keep the work going. Real prayer engages in a spiritual battle. Real prayer is rooted in God’s purposes and God’s promises and in the covenant mercies of a covenant-keeping God. Real prayer understands the God of history, that it is *his-story*. Real prayer is grounded in the Word of God. Note the leading elements of this prayer.

Nehemiah knows God — “And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments . . . They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” (1:5, 10, 11)

One commentator has pointed out that the prayer “deliberately postpones the cry for help, which could otherwise be faithless and self-

pitying. It mounts immediately to heaven, where the perspective will be right and it reflects on the character of God.”² The term, “LORD” means Jehovah God, a term indicating personal relationship. “God of heaven” indicates God’s sovereign government of the world. Warren Wiersbe comments on “the great God” — “If you are ... about to undertake a ‘great work’ (4:19; 6:3), then you need the ‘great power’ (1:10), ‘great goodness’ (9:25,33) and ‘great mercy’ (9:31) of a great God.”³

The words, “awesome God,” show us that Nehemiah rightly feared and adored God. Awesomeness is “the impression that God’s total character and person leaves on all who encounter Him (cf. Ex. 15:11; here an allusion to Deut. 7:21; 10:17; Neh. 4:14; 9:32; Ps. 47:2; 99:3; 68:35; Dan. 9:4).”

This was total dependence and reliance on the One true God. An old writer, Arthur Pink, has pointed out that true prayer is nothing less than complete dependence upon God. It is not God plus my efforts, not God plus my money, not God plus my talents, not God plus my ingenuity. It is God alone! Real prayer engages in a spiritual battle. Real prayer is rooted in God’s promises and mercies. This is prayer that moves mountains and a wicked, secular ruler’s heart.

Such praying shows total trust in God’s ways and will. This prayer is based securely on the written Word of God, the revealed will of God, as indicated in passages in Deuteronomy. He pleaded the promises of God.

Such prayer also shows us that Nehemiah identifies himself with his people in their sins and waywardness. Notice the use of “we” here — “let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules pthat you commanded your servant Moses.” (1:6, 7) Nehemiah understood his place in Jewish history.

In modern leadership parlance, Nehemiah exhibited profound *self-awareness and was deeply surrendered to God*. The illustration used is that of an iceberg.⁴ Like iceberg’s, some of who you are and what you do is

visible to other people. These include things such as many of your habits, your career, the imprint you leave on your followers, and so forth.

However, there is a point where iceberg's meet the surface of the water. Choices are at the surface. Some of your choices are visible to the surrounding world, and many others are not. Like icebergs, most of who you really are is below the water line. Many of your choices, whether they be private or secret, are below the water line. Private is acceptable for Jesus followers, but secret is certainly not. Below choices, things like your feelings, intentions, desires, motivations, your history, pain points, lessons learned, your character, goals, dreams, and more are hidden from sight. At the very bottom of the iceberg is the orientation of your heart. The direction your heart is pointing, the core of who you are, functions as the primary motivating factor behind your values and everything else beneath the waterline. (Note Jeremiah 17:5–13; Luke 6:37–49; Matthew 12:22–37).

This passage also shows Nehemiah was *deeply surrendered* to God. The importance of being deeply surrendered to the person, Word, and will of Jesus Christ cannot be underestimated. Deep surrender is not what many church goers do, which is a combination of therapeutic moralistic Deism and external behavior modification. Deep surrender to Jesus is when you say “yes” to Jesus on the deepest levels of who you are, in your thinking, being, and doing. At the core of your being, you do not find your identity primarily in your gender, your sexual orientation, your biological family, your town or country, your past, your mistakes or achievements, your successes or failures, your knowledge or position, or in the opinions of others or your reputation.

Instead, who you are is a Jesus follower. Where Jesus leads, you go. What Jesus says, you do. When you are convicted, you repent and trust and depend on and cooperate with the Holy Spirit in living differently, in obedience to Jesus. Jesus' loves are your loves. Jesus' priorities are your priorities. Jesus' motivations are your motivations. Oh, and your timeline also, your goals at work, at home, in culture, and even your entire life, have been really and wholly surrendered to Jesus Christ. This does not mean you do not have goals. However, you realize that even in the selection of

goals and the timelining of progress towards those goals, you hold all of that loosely enough in your heart. God is God, and I am not. Humility is the core here. (Note Matthew 5–7; Matthew 23; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Jim Collins, *Good to Great* and his companion book, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*).⁵

Many writers have pointed out that Nehemiah was especially gifted and skilled for this task of rebuilding. He was obviously a man of influence and tactfulness, as needed to be “cupbearer to the King.” That a Jew held such a high honor in a foreign court speaks of his character and abilities. But here he becomes thoroughly transparent and humble before God and the people. He knew his vast limitations and trusted God in spite of them.

Nehemiah recalls back to God his purposes and promises — “Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.” (1:8–10) Note the historic parallels to Deuteronomy in these verses (v. 8 = Deut. 4:27; 28:64; v. 9 = Deut. 30:1-4; 12:5, etc; v. 10 = Deut. 9:29).

Nehemiah showed confidence that God would raise up additional people to carry out this great task — “They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.” (1:10) “Great leaders are not only believing people who obey the Lord and courageously move ahead, but they also challenge others to go with them.”⁶

Finally, and importantly, note that Nehemiah talks to God before he talks to non-Christians about God and God’s work (1:11ff). On July 1, 1857, a quiet and dedicated Christian businessman, Jeremiah Lamphier, began ministering as a lay-missionary in downtown New York City. He faced a massive task of reaching a changing neighborhood with his church dwindling in membership due to the exodus to the suburbs.

Something inside this man, like Nehemiah of old, broke. Burdened

by the vast need, he decided to invite others to join him in a noon-time prayer meeting, to be held on Wednesdays once a week. He distributed a flyer advertising the prayer time. On September 23, the door was opened and the faithful man took his seat to await the response. Five minutes went by. No one appeared. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes drifted by, and he was yet alone. Twenty minutes, twenty-five minutes came and went, and then at 12:30 PM a step was heard on the stairs and the first person appeared. In total, six people were present. On the following Wednesday, forty were present. By the first week of October, it was decided to hold daily prayer vigils. Within six months, ten thousand businessmen were gathering in New York City, and within two years a million converts were added to American churches. Thus began what is known historically as the Second Great Awakening. All from the heart burden of one man.

Christian leadership starts with a God-given burden, which through prayer, becomes a vision of what God wants you to do. What is God saying to your heart today? What will you do with Nehemiah's example and burden? What will you do to build for God here and now, and in your community and area? Building for God begins with a passion and a brokenness before the God of heaven and earth, the awesome God, the only One who can turn a nation and a world back to Himself. Let's begin today!

Discussion

1. Do you agree with Redpath when he says, "The need never constitutes the call" from God? When does a "need" become a leadership burden?
2. What do you learn about prayer from Nehemiah's prayer in chapter one?
3. Do you have a leadership burden? What is it? How did it occur in your life and spiritual journey?

Notes

1. Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah*, Fleming Revell, 1958, p. 19.
2. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*, IVP Academic, 2009, on Nehemiah chapter 1.
3. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined (Nehemiah): Standing Firm in the Face of*

Opposition (The BE Series Commentary), David C. Cook, 2nd Edition, 2009.

4. I am deeply indebted for the next few paragraphs to Brian Rice, D. Min., currently Senior Pastor of Living Word Community Church, York, PA and founder/co-founder/former executive of Leadership Connexions International (LCI), as well as to my son, Jeremy Shank, pastor of Bright Hope Brethren in Christ Church, Middletown, PA for his synthesis of Rice's teaching.

5. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, HarperBusiness, 2001 and *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer*, Harper Collins, 2005. Pay attention to the fact that Level 5 Leaders have, as Jim says, a profound combination of deep humility and professional will. Level 5 Leaders are Transformational Servant Leaders who are laser-focused on the mission, who practice what they preach, who want to help all those they are responsible for achieve success as the overall organization achieves its goals, particularly its mission critical goals (and hopefully the mission important goals as well).

6. Wiersbe.

Prevailing Prayer

Seeking God Successfully

“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

“Pray without ceasing.”

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.”

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

(Nehemiah 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Romans 12:12; Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 6:18; Hebrews 11:6 ESV)

Prevailing prayer. It is no mistake or misprint or just the way biblical writings start that Nehemiah begins with prayer that gives him a vision of what could happen to the walls of Jerusalem. We think, of course, that we should indeed “pray about this and that” before we really start planning and strategizing. But we need to take a step back to look into what it means to seek God successfully in prayer.

Prayer became a key element in Nehemiah’s life and vision — “let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants . . . O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. . . Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. . . Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. . . Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin

be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. . . And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. . . Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. . . For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands. . . Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. . . Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service. . . Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. . . Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.” (Nehemiah 1:6, 11; 2:4; 4:4, 5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29)

If you become bored or skim over the above litany of prayers of Nehemiah, you have already missed the point of seeking God successfully. Nehemiah was absolutely dependent on God and his grace, or favor, in accomplishing the task of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Even though he knew how to lead courageously, he did not lead stupidly or merely asked God for a bit of help now and then. He engaged in what we call prevailing prayer. What is prevailing prayer?

It is *remembering that God Is!* — “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6) This is a statement of biblical and personal certainty for Nehemiah and for all those who would prevail in prayer. “God exists” is not a statement requiring proof. It is always assumed. The fact that “God is” means several things as we approach God in prayer. It means He has spoken finally and decisively in his written Word. We can trust our Bibles. We do not need extra revelation or more revelation. We may need eyes to see and ears to hear what God is saying in his Word, but that is our dilemma, not God’s.

It means that God is always near us, even if we don't always sense that truth (Acts 17:27) The theological truth of the "immanence" of God must be maintained as strongly as the "transcendence" of God in our prayers. It means that God responds in love and holy justice to our prayers — "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar." (Psalm 139:2) "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." (2 Cor. 1:3) "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17) Prevailing prayer also requires faith in approaching him. The old Puritan, Thomas Manton, quaintly pointed out that we need to "revive this fact (that God is) upon our memory and affections." Such "holy exercise" will help to drive away Satanic doubts and fears.

Prevailing prayer is prayer with *hopeful certainty*. Faith, Hebrews 11 tells and shows us, is the "substance of things hoped for." "Hope" is not wishful thinking or a "hoping beyond hope" type of attitude. It is part of God's saving grace to us — "We are saved in hope" (Romans 8:24). Our God is a "God of hope" (Rom. 15:13). Hope is the anchor in the certain goodness of God in the future. It is because of hope that Nehemiah could pray over Jerusalem. Prayer with faith is prayer with an inner conviction, an assurance, that God will not disappoint us. It is God's way of guaranteeing his promises to us, in the depths of our soul, in the midst of affliction, or in Nehemiah's case, captivity.

Prevailing prayer is prayer with *dynamic certainty* — "the evidence/certainty of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). It is being convinced of the reality of things God has promised or ordained, without seeing them or feeling them at the moment. It is this kind of certainty that propels the Christian believer to stretch out his hand and lay hold on God in persevering prayer and seeking (cf. 1 Cor. 9:26; 2 Tim. 4:8; Heb. 11:13). Noah built an ark in the expectation of God's deliverance. Moses turned down the temporal riches of Egypt for the progress of the plan of God's redemption of his people. Nehemiah would re-build the walls of Jerusalem.

Prevailing prayer does not depend on how strongly we pray, but how close to God we are. Such prayer comes through uninterrupted

and vital contact with God in and through Jesus Christ, our Advocate and Intercessor. A strong and close dependence on God in Christ is the bottom line secret of prevailing prayer. We live with a continual sense of need of him, and we have, as the old writers say, an “abiding perception” of God’s all sufficiency and glory. Little faith is consumed by worry about what may happen. Strong faith knows Christ’s provision is sure and certain — “The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” (Psalm 118:6) Charles Spurgeon once said, “There is no elevation of grace, no attainment of spirituality, no clearness of assurance, no post of duty, which is not open to you if you have but the power to believe.”

Prevailing prayer requires *diligent seeking of God*. Hebrews 11:6 reminds us that it is those who “diligently seek” God through Jesus Christ who will receive the rewards of praying in faith. This is exactly what Nehemiah did. Notice his “prayer and fasting” in Nehemiah 1:4. “Seeking” God means to search for, to scrutinize, to investigate, to crave and to beg. It means we pray with godly passion or zeal. The point of “fasting” with prayer is to create an atmosphere of complete dependence on God in prayer, to humble ourselves, and to do a great task for God in times of great need and calamity. Fasting stresses intensified communion with God. Until we let go of what we think we can add to the situation, until we really, really depend upon God and God alone, we cannot have prevailing prayer.

Faith relies on the sovereign purposes and plan of God. Spurgeon again says, “faith standeth in God’s power, and is robed in God’s majesty. It weareth the royal apparel and rides on the King’s horse—for it is the grace which the King delights to honor.” Nehemiah knew about the covenant promises of God — “the great and awesome God who keeps covenant . . . Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’” (Neh. 1:5, 8, 9)

“Covenant” was an important concept for Nehemiah, and it should

be an important biblical and theological concept for us. (Deut. 4:27; 7:9, 21; 9:29; 28:64; 30:1–4) All believers operate under God’s covenant of grace. We are part of the covenant family of God. God is pledged to us, and we are pledged to him. God will always keep his covenant promises as we fulfill our covenant obligations. If and when we do not, He will chastise us, discipline us and force us back to himself. As we willingly come back to him, all those covenant blessings and promises become ours once again.

This is what Nehemiah’s prayer is founded upon, not on kind and good feelings of God or toward God or God’s vague love for us, but upon the covenant concept of loyalty and faithfulness. Thus, we can prevail in prayer based on the covenant. Effective, prevailing prayer is based on God’s Word, pleads his promises and regards his commands. Such prayer faces a secular, unbelieving world not presuming upon God and not assuming any earthly authority would favorably hear our case or request. “If you are about to undertake a great work, then you need the great power, great goodness and great mercy of a great God.”¹

Finally, prevailing prayer is “listening” prayer. Carl George has noted in the prayer of Nehemiah that prayer is not so much of an effort as it is communion with God. He says, “If I do not give God as much time to talk to me as I spend in talking to him, I am off balance.”² He goes on to make the point, “When you learn to pray in such a way that you listen, you will not only find out what God wants to be done, you will begin to learn the by whom, the how and the when. As a result you can proceed with enormous boldness. . . . When you are doing God’s work God’s way and in God’s time, then you are God’s person and you are the most invincible force on earth.”³

Discussion

1. Do you engage in prevailing prayer? Why and how?
2. Of the marks of such prayer in this chapter and indicated in Nehemiah’s praying, on what aspects of prevailing prayer do you need to improve? How will you begin to do so today?

Notes

1. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined (Nehemiah): Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition (The BE Series Commentary)*, David C. Cook, 2nd Edition, 2009.
2. Carl George, *How to Break Growth Barriers: Revise Your Role, Release Your People, and Capture Overlooked Opportunities for Your Church*, Baker Books, 2017 revised edition, p. 39.
3. *Ibid*, p. 41.

Confession and Repentance

The Gift of Tears

“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.”

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah.”

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”

(**Nehemiah 1:4–7; Psalm 32: 1–4; 51:1–4 ESV**)

Our venerable Puritan forefathers called repentance the “gift of tears.” It is in vogue today to treat sin glibly and say that confession and repentance are only about turning your life around, as if it’s just a matter of choices. What we fail to see in our modern age is the recasting of the heart toward God in confession and repentance.

Many people know the famous prayer acronym ACTS — Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Yet, we are but children when it comes to “confession” in that listing. We know the definition of “confession” — “saying the same thing that God does” about our sins. Yet, do we really get that? How many of us know what God *really says* about our sins?

God knows the total corruptibility of sin — “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” (Genesis 6:5, 6 *and* 8:21) This was a pre-Flood and post-Flood determination and description of humankind’s sinful nature by God. He knows the deceitfulness of sin — “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) He hates sin with a holy and just passion — “The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.” (Proverbs 8:13; Isaiah 61:8)

Sin is not a trivial matter to God. It is an affront to his holiness and love. Sin separates us from God, any sin and all sin. Confession of sins means, or should mean to us, that we take these words of the Lord into account. “Believers must be taught to recognize and hate sin, and to recognize and resist the devil. But they also need to learn how to practice the disciplines of confession and repentance, or their way will always be obstructed by indwelling sin in their quest for the knowledge of God.”¹ I believe that is what Nehemiah did in his prayer.

Confession and repentance deal honestly with sin. Confession of sin is much more than a mental choice we may make. True confession is not interested in just saying “I’m sorry” to God and others. It is not superficial, hurried, or reactionary in its description. One pastor I know described the type of confession many people practice as throwing a basketball against the basketball backboard. You just keep throwing it until it goes in the basket. That is not true confession.

Confession is a whole-souled admission of the ugliness and desperation of sin against a good and loving God. It is true sorrow for sin

along with the pangs of the effects of sin upon the mind, heart, emotions and body. While we worry about becoming depressed and forlorn, God is concerned with the state of our inner being, not merely our mental choices or even lifestyle renovation.

Guilt for sin can be good and healthy and refreshing when it leads to true confession and change of heart and life. We shy away from this in modern Christianity and evangelism. We need to go back to the Scriptures on these matters, rather than assuage our up-to-date psychologies.

True confession and repentance of sin involves five principles. It is honest with God in that it is personal, pointed and practical. Note the accountability and personalization of Israel's sin in Nehemiah — “. . . confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.” (Nehemiah 1:6, 7) In Psalm 51 notice the “me's” and “my's” in vv. 1-3 — “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

Confession leading to repentance is intensely inward and deeply felt. True repentance is not merely a “change of mind and direction” but also a deep, penetrating sorrow for sin — “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10). It truly and really owns the sin. It is God-centered, not me-oriented.

This is not simply remorse, and Nehemiah's tears were not merely “feeling sorry” for Israel and Jerusalem. Confession does not mean being down on myself or driving me into morose feelings or destroying my self-image. It is therefore full of gospel hope (Psalm 51:8, 12, 15).

True repentance asks for inward purity and loyalty once again to God alone — “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10). R.A. Torrey once said we lose the felt presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives in one of seven ways:

“When we go back on personal separation of self from the sinful patterns of this age, self-indulgence, greed for money, pride, neglect of prayer, neglect of seriously studying the Word, or what he calls the ‘incoming of sin’ into our lives.”

True repentance appreciates the just discipline of God in our lives. God is both good and just. His severity tempers his goodness, while his goodness is displayed in his severity. Repentance does not erase the consequences of sin. For Nehemiah that meant exile and slavish service to a foreign, godless king and empire. For David, that meant that his firstborn son dies (READ 2 Samuel 12).

Confession and repentance assume that the greater our responsibility, the greater our accountability to God — “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” (James 3:1) But with this, confession and repentance know that no sin is too great to be forgiven!

Psalm 32 was Augustine’s favorite Psalm. He read it frequently and had its words inscribed on the wall by his sickbed before he died. He noted that “the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner.” True happiness comes from thorough confession of sin (Psalm 32:1, 2, 10, 11). The full dimension of sin is referenced here—“transgressions,” which are sins of rebellion against God, a breaking away from God, a tearing loose from his care and hold on one’s life. “Sins” refer to deviation from the path God has laid out for us, a missing the mark. “Iniquity” is the perversion or distortion of the will of God, an absence of respect for God’s will in our lives.

Relief and wisdom come from confession of sin (vv. 5-9), while unremitting pain and anguish come through refusal to confess our sins before God (vv 3, 4). Physical and emotional sickness can be the result of impenitence. “While you may be found” may refer to a time of distress or simply a season of finding God there for you — “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” (Isaiah 55:6) “My hiding place” is my protective garment, my refuge, my shelter — “For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.” (Psalm 27:5) “I will

instruct...teach...counsel” shows us that God’s wisdom walks with those who freely confess their sins before Him.

True and substantial happiness comes from forgiveness. God in forgiveness grants us an official verdict of pardon, not based on our deeds but on his great mercy (v. 10). In his sight, forgiveness means our sins are forever concealed or hidden from view. Such blessing of forgiveness acts as a blanket which “surrounds” (v. 10) or “enfolds” (v. 7) the repentant heart.

True repentance always ends with an eager and joyful outlook (Psalm 51:12–19). A “willing” spirit is what David desires, which is a free, noble, inspired and liberal feeling and sense of God’s presence. Note Psalm 51:8b–“let the bones dance which you have broken” (Hebrew translation). Such a spirit results in infectious faith (v. 13) and restored worship (vv. 18, 19). How does a person know when he or she has a “willing spirit?” Think of a saturated sponge. We can tell what is on the inside by what comes out under a bit of pressure. Nehemiah’s “willing spirit” drove him to take decisive action to rebuild the walls around the Holy City. It inspired him to boldly make an amazing request to the king to do so.

Confession and repentance take into account what we call “generational” sins — “Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.” (Nehemiah 1:6, 7)

“Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.” Calamities can befall us for many reasons; sin can be one of them. In the case of Israel, David had to make things right with the Gibeonites. When he did this, God removed the famine, and Israel again was prosperous. When you feel you lack God’s blessing on your life, ask the Lord if there are any past – generation sins that you may need to repent of. He may be waiting on us before He can release His blessing on our lives.”²²

Generational sins. This is a vast topic, little understood in evangelical circles today. There are extremes on all sides of this topic. Some claim God holds us accountable for sins of our fathers. Thus, if my ancestors committed some heinous crime in the Name of the Lord, then my present sufferings from the descendants of those people require repentance from me on behalf of my ancestors. Some have applied this thinking to the American Indian tribes, whom our ancestors killed and plundered and massacred. Consequently, some leaders have called for national repentance from the people of God to cover the sins of our military ancestors.

The problem here is that in the New Covenant, under which we operate, the sins of the fathers are *not* our sins (cf. Jer. 31:29ff; 2 Kings 14:6). But what do we do with passages such as these: “The Lord ... visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7 = Deuteronomy 5:8-10), and “Because of their iniquity, and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them.” (Leviticus 26:39) There is no contradiction of Scripture here, nor sleight of hand that would devalue what the Bible says. John Piper has pointed out that careful understanding reveals that “The sins of the fathers are punished in the children through becoming the sins of the children. (cf. Ex 20:5; Num 14:18). Because of God’s grace, which is finally secured by Christ, the children can confess their own sins and the sins of their fathers and be forgiven and accepted by God (Lev. 26:40-42).”³

Sin is both personal and may be generational. Asking for forgiveness and cleansing by the blood of Christ is what is required for any and all sin. If there is a *pattern* of sin in your life, perhaps rooted in your ancestors, then repentance for that pattern and accepting the forgiveness offered by Christ is important to break that pattern. The good news is that in Christ we are declared forgiven and free of our sin, whatever the source. Nehemiah looked forward to God’s redemption as well — “But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell

there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.” (Nehemiah 1:9, 10)

Oswald Chambers reminds us that “the foundation of Christianity is repentance. Strictly speaking, a person cannot repent when he chooses—repentance is a gift of God. The old Puritans used to pray for ‘the gift of tears.’ If you ever cease to understand the value of repentance, you allow yourself to remain in sin. Examine yourself to see if you have forgotten how to be truly repentant.”⁴

The “gift of tears.” In our positive-driven age, we undervalue and underestimate the gift and experience of repentance. We are told that mistakes are commonplace, that failure is normal, that we are not perfect, so we should not worry about it at all. We commit conscious and unconscious sins, sins of commission, and sins of omission without even blinking an eye, let alone having the “gift of tears.” Our “I’m sorry” is too easy, too slick, too unfeeling too many times.

Chambers and the old Puritans are right—repentance is a gift of God, a divine light to the soul that causes us to see ourselves in the light of the glory of God and power of his Word of truth. We need to pray for such a gift. We want joy, peace, trust and all the good things God can give. True confession and heart repentance are also good things to desire and possess.

Repentance is not being “down” on ourselves, or depressed, or worse. It is always the other side of faith or trust, the other side of the coin, so to speak. True repentance always leads to true faith. If you are feeling badly about something, that may be just you feeling badly! Repentance from God is when I deeply and thoroughly recognize that I have sinned against the One who loves me, who died on the Cross for me, who keeps me everyday. It is a deep and, yes, painful recognition that I have transgressed against a good God. It is not merely feeling badly and making some mental note to do that act no longer.

Nehemiah was propelled to positive, decisive action for God out of this season of confession and repentance. We should look for similar marks from our confession and repentance over sins committed and done away with in the redemption that is found in Jesus Christ.

Discussion

1. Define “confession” and “repentance” from your own church and theological background. Do they line up with the descriptions in this chapter? Why or why not?
2. What do you think about “generational” sins? Can you pray the prayer of Nehemiah — “Even I and my father’s house have sinned?”
3. Read through Psalm 32 and 51 several times. What do you learn about confession and repentance from these Psalms?

Notes

1. T. M. Moore, *Pastor to Pastor*, commenting on Romans 7 and Calvin’s Instruction on Faith (1517), Sep. 13, 2016 reading. See his further comments on God hating sin on the site <https://www.ailbe.org/>.
2. Os Hillman, TGIF, May 31, 2014, on 2 Samuel 21:1ff, <https://todaygodisfirst.com>.
3. John Piper, “Can My Life Be Plagued by Generational Sins, Hexes, or Curses?” <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-my-life-be-plagued-by-generational-sins-hexes-or-curses>.
4. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, Dec 7 reading, Discovery House, 2017, Classic Edition.

Wait!

The Faith To Wait

“In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire? Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.” And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.”

(Nehemiah 2:1–10 ESV)

Nehemiah had what Martin Luther described as a “living, daring confidence in God’s grace.” This confidence was “so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.” Nehemiah had living, hopeful faith. In the words of Warren Wiersbe, as he looked at Nehemiah chapter 2, Nehemiah had the “faith to wait,” (vv. 1–3), the “faith to ask,” (vv. 4–8), and the “faith to challenge others.” (vv.

11–20)¹

Making a difference for God, or building for God, demands patient, intelligent waiting for God's timing and the faith to see it through. Many leaders I have known never seem to get this aspect of biblical leadership. They think that because they have this God-sized burden, and have thoroughly prayed the vision through, that they should step up to the plate and proceed immediately. After all, this is what God wants. But the Bible tells us in Hebrews 6:12 to “imitate those who through *faith and patience* inherit what had been promised.” Psalm 46:10 tells us to “be still and know that I am God.” Nehemiah exemplified both faith and patience in his growing burden and the vision for the wall to be rebuilt.

The month “Nisan” (2:1) (our March-April) indicates a waiting period of four months (cf. 1:1 “Kislev” — Nov-Dec). Nehemiah kept waiting and praying for four solid months from the time God gave him this burden for Jerusalem. Why wait for four months, if this is what God wanted? Why not just trust God and take it immediately to the King? Let's learn from Nehemiah about leadership waiting.

One of the important exhortations of the Bible is the call to “wait on the Lord.” Psalm 27:14 says, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” Psalm 33:20 tells us, “We wait in hope for the Lord; He is our help and our shield.” Psalm 37:7 adds, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him . . .” Even though God promises special blessing for waiting, waiting is one of the most difficult exhortations of Scripture. Why is it so hard? It is hard because, as a part of fallen humanity, we are so prone to take matters into our own hands, to follow our own schemes. Yet, over and over again, we are told in Scripture, “wait on the Lord.”

We don't like to wait. When we think of waiting, what comes to mind? We might conjure up visions of an airport terminal, a doctor's waiting room, the line at the supermarket, or being stuck in rush hour traffic. The facts are, most of us are waiting for something most of the time.

Ours is a society that has grown accustomed to immediate gratification. Due to modern technology and all our conveniences like cell phones, internet cafes, and so forth, we have many things immediately at our fingertips. Just think of the speed of the latest computer technology

in comparison with the computers of only a few years ago.

Perhaps you are in a job situation that's really tough to endure and you are waiting and hoping that conditions will change for the better. Maybe you are without a job and waiting for news on an application. Maybe you are ill (or have a loved one who is) and waiting for health to improve. Maybe you are on a diet and waiting for your weight to drop a few pounds. A single person may be waiting for Mr. or Miss Right. Or, maybe you are waiting for your spouse or child to become interested in spiritual things. Waiting has a number of benefits, especially for the biblically based leader.

First, God's timing is rarely ours. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord, As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8,9) God's timing is always perfect and can never be rushed.

God's initiative had to be kept in place here. Remember this work of rebuilding the walls was God's idea, not Nehemiah's! For God to get the glory, and God to get the praise and adoration, and for the world to see that God was with his people Israel in the rebuilding project, Nehemiah had to wait and pray, and learn to trust and hope.

Third, God's preparation of the King's heart took time. The King had to be convinced Nehemiah's concern was not of "evil intent." So, four months pass by until the King notices Nehemiah's "sadness of heart." Actually, the phrase could refer and does refer in the book of Nehemiah to *either* "heart-sickness" *or* to "mischief, wickedness, or an evil report" (6:2,13; 9:28,35; 13:7, 17,18,21). The reason why the Bible says in 2b — "I was very much afraid!" — is that from a human standpoint, to hear the King describe his condition as "sadness of heart" means that he was very much displeased, and Nehemiah could be killed for insulting the King's presence.

God had evidently prepared the way, and had prepared the King's heart that day and that time to see Nehemiah's sadness as true "heartbrokenness" and to have mercy on him. "The good hand of my God upon me" (cf. 2:8, 18) This phrase was used in Nehemiah's time to indicate a sense of royal bounty, so here the king's grant is merely a channel for the bounty of the

King of Kings to reach his people (cf. I K 10:13; Esther 1:7; 2:18). “The King’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a water-course wherever he pleases.” (Proverbs 21:1) (cf. Old Testament unbelieving Kings whom God used such as a Pharaoh [Ex. 6:1:10:1; 14:4; Rom. 9:17]; a Cyrus [Isa. 45:1–7]; a Caesar [Luke 2:1–7])

Finally, the Spirit-given burden Nehemiah carried had to be developed, as Alan Redpath noted, “to the maximum.” “Recognition of need has to be followed by earnest, persistent waiting upon God until the overwhelming sense of world need becomes a specific burden in my soul for one particular piece of work which God would have me do.”² Nehemiah, in God’s timing, got to the point that he could not hide his burden or conviction inside any longer. A Christian leader, notes Redpath, operates with that “indescribable, undefinable pressure of the Holy Spirit that has put me there.”³ Nehemiah had to share it now!

What kind of waiting did Nehemiah exhibit in his leadership drive to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem? It was, first of all, *active waiting*. We usually think of waiting as wasting time, as passive inactivity. This was not the case for Nehemiah. He had thought through what he was going to say to the King, asking God for the strength of the moment to do so (cf. 4b). He had prayed and planned out what he would need to take on such a massive project — letters to governors of surrounding provinces (“satrapies”) for safe conduct (v. 7) and a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forests for needed timber (v. 8). John White says, “Prayer is where planning starts.” Note the powerful and excellent meshing of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. God must act before we can act, but we must act before God will act!

Second, this was *intelligent waiting*. Nehemiah knew what kind of man this king was, and what he could and could not do in a royal court situation. There was no “brashness” here (boldness—yes!); no “high-handedness” as evident in Nehemiah (“You have to let me do this because I’m following God!”) It was just a submissive, deep driving concern the King saw and respected. Don’t confuse passion for God with foolishness or human impatience. Keep the place God has assigned you and trust God for opening the right doors at the right time!

Third, this was *visionary, expectant waiting* — “And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it. . . Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.” (2:5, 12) Nehemiah had a God-given and God-inspired picture of the future of Jerusalem that required faith, courage and stamina to achieve. It drew and moved people to join him.

Finally, this waiting was *waiting that moved Satan!* — “But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.” (2:10) We meet in this verse two key enemies of Nehemiah that he will have to face throughout the whole project— Sanballat and Tobiah. These were probably the same men who had stopped the building of the wall earlier in Ezra 4:4 with letters of complaint to the Persian Court. Sanballat (2:19; 4:1ff; 6:1ff) was a Babylonian governor of Samaria, probably a descendent of an Israelite family who had not gone into captivity. He had “designs” on Judaea. He proved to be a very persistent and harsh opponent of Nehemiah. Tobiah (2:19; 4:3ff; 6:1ff) was a freed slave who had risen to power and become governor of Ammon. His name means “the Lord is good” and had apparently won support of some of the nobles and officials in Jerusalem. He was especially dangerous because of his inroads to local Jewish leadership.

Redpath says it well when he comments: “There is no concern in the mind of Satan about the church at all until he sees a selfless Christian seeking only the glory of God, determined to challenge the Satanic grip upon men’s hearts and lives in the name of the Lord.” And then he goes on to challenge us: “Does your service for God cause Satan any worry at all? How much overtime has the devil to do in hell because of your church?”⁴

Benjamin Reaves comments on this kind of expectant waiting:

“Living expectantly means more than just believing in church doctrines; it means more than just trusting my life to God. Living expectantly is faith on tiptoe. Living expectantly means believing

with God that life is worth living, believing that ministry will never become routine for me, believing that in God I will never experience the dullness of the daily. I live in the expectancy that in my life God will do a new thing that will transcend the past.”

So, the questions for today’s Christian and today’s Christ-centered leader are as follows:

- Are you actively, intelligently, expectantly waiting on God today?
- Do your plans include this kind of patient waiting for God to move?
- Are you willing to submit your plans, your timing, your needs to God’s plans, God’s timing, and God’s will?

Let’s learn to wait!

Discussion

Go through the above questions honestly and prayerfully.

Notes

1. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined (Nehemiah): Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition (The BE Series Commentary)*, David C. Cook, 2nd Edition, 2009.
2. Redpath, p. 31.
3. Redpath, p. 34.
4. Redpath, p. 38.

Detailed Planning

Investigation, Cooperation and Determination

“So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.” And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”

(Nehemiah 2:11–20 ESV)

Leadership can be described as the art of getting people to do what they ought to do because they want to do it. Dennis Hollinger has written *Head, Heart and Hands*, a book that helps believers bring together their thoughts, passions and activism. In that book he notes the fragmentation in many Christian lives and churches and ministries. One group will stress a head-knowledge of God and his Word and focus mainly on theological rightness. Another group will stress the heart aspect

of Christian living and want us to feel and sense the Spirit of God deep within before we build anything for God. Still another group will say that doing God's work is a "hands-on" task, that what counts is taking care of the poor, the disenfranchised and meeting physical and emotional needs.

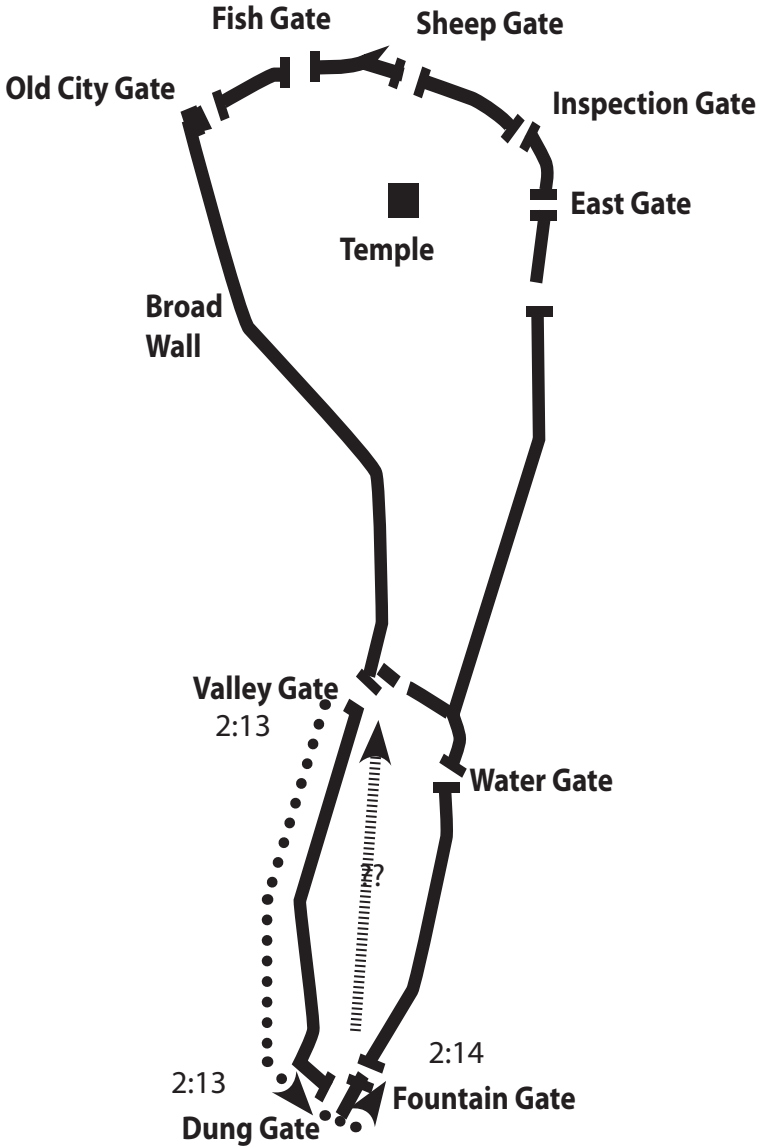
What is really needed, says Hollinger, is a "whole faith for the whole person . . . We get our Christian heads on straight not merely by thinking good thoughts, but also by hearts attuned to God and in actions that reflect the glory and purposes of God."¹ Nehemiah evidenced a whole faith for the whole person in his rebuilding and leadership project. He had an evident heart passion for God, a head knowledge of what was needed, and a hands-on commitment to get the job done. An old organizational adage says "plan the work and then work the plan." This is what Nehemiah does in chapters 2 and 3.

After a four month journey (cf. Ezra 8:32), Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. Some biblical scholars note his "rest" of three days in verse 11. This seems quite reasonable after traveling such a long time, but also gives us some insight into Nehemiah's carefully crafted preparations for rebuilding the wall. Nehemiah needed his "three day" rest. Leaders need to take care of themselves if they are going to effectively serve God and accomplish his vision. Nehemiah needed to care for family and personal concerns. He needed to familiarize himself with the general context and environment of the work. He had to become acclimated to his surroundings.

Detailed, personal investigation is always needed (vv. 11–15). The biblical model of leadership always requires a "waiting" period of some time before plunging into the work. Here God was refining the vision and burden He had given Nehemiah — "what my God was putting in my heart..." (v. 12; present participle) Before this great work was attempted, Nehemiah himself had to be ready. How do you start implementing your God-given vision or work?

He counted the cost! Jesus talked a lot about "counting the cost" to become a his disciple. In Luke 14:28-30, He says, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation

and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Jesus is making a point here that to be his disciple requires pre-planning. Again, in Luke 9:62, Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." We need to determine exactly what this great work of God will cost us personally, in terms of time,



commitment, materials, resources and people. Note the extensive and detailed wall-mapping done by Nehemiah (preceding page).

He also needed to work smarter, not harder. That's another reason why he conducted the tour of the gates and walls (2:13–16). Mervin Breneman points out that “hard work is good, but to insure success, it must be the right work at the right time and done in the right way.”² Nehemiah had to be careful of making a premature start. He needed to gauge the size of the problem, decide how to tackle it, and he did not want to prematurely stir up trouble. This might be obvious to many leaders, but I have seen so many Christian people trying to tackle well-intentioned projects for God without this necessary pre-planning. They then pay for it in terms of emotional and spiritual stress and strain along the way. If God has been telling you to build for Him, investigate in a personal, cost-counting way.

Another reason for the detailed investigation was the need for a “deeper planting” of God’s burden in Nehemiah’s heart and mind. Alan Redpath notes that “whenever a real work for God is to be done, a real work, not something superficial, but real, some faithful, burdened servant has to take a journey such as Nehemiah took to weep in the night over the ruins, to wrestle in some dark Gethsemane in prayer.”³

The second lesson of planning is found in Nehemiah 2:16–18. It is the lesson of cooperation. In Nehemiah 4:6 this great leader of God says, as all great leaders do, “So *we* built the wall . . . for the people had a mind to work.” Building for God is *team work*, requiring cooperation on all fronts to get the job done for God.

How did Nehemiah motivate the people? How did he find volunteers? How did he get them to work together? He found out *who* he needed, and he targeted his message and vision to them in particular — “And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.” (2:16-17)

He realized that not everyone would buy into the vision — “And next

to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.” (3:5) Not all the people who could work joined in with the work. Some people will do more work than others (3:11, 19, 21, 24, 27, 30), and some will work harder than others (3:20 — Baruch worked “zealously,” or “earnestly,” which means to glow with energy and vigor). That apparently did not grieve Nehemiah or stop the work from moving forward. Other leadership writers have noted what is called the “Pareto Principle,” that 20% of the people do 80% of the work, or that we need to spend 80% of our time and energies with 20% of the people.

He *invited* them to join him in this great work of God; he *identified* with them (the trouble “we” are in), and he stressed the utter *seriousness* of the situation — we are a “disgrace,” a reproach, a scorn (used 70 times in the Old Testament; Nehemiah 1:3; 2:17; 4:4; 5:9; Jeremiah 24:9). This was an honest, forthright and realistic facing of the facts of their situation. People will do what they see needs action. The status-quo can only be overcome by people seeing or sensing the desperate need of their situation. It is the “disgrace” of their situation, not the insecurity of their position that moves Nehemiah and the people.

Let’s flesh this out. At least four (4) things are generally needed to motivate people you need and want to get the vision or goal or work accomplished:

- (1) Identify with your followers (“the trouble we are in” – 2:17).
- (2) Stress the utter seriousness of the situation (“and we will no longer be in disgrace” – 2:17).
- (3) Commit to taking definite action (“Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem” – 2:17).
- (4) Use your own personal testimony to assure others of God’s favor on your vision or mission or project (“I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me” – 2:18).

Then he applied the *team* principle. Chapter 3 is a divine record telling us that *most everyone* is needed to build God’s wall of praise and blessing for the world to see. Thirty eight individual workers are named and forty-two different groups are mentioned. God uses and needs all

kinds of workers, from priests, to men and women, to craftsmen. There was a place for everyone, and a job for everyone to do.

The “hard work” principle was employed. Baruch in 3:20 “zealously repaired another section.” The Bible everywhere commends hard work — “Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you,” (Romans 16:6) and “Greet those women who worked very hard in the Lord.” (Romans 16:12)

Investigation, cooperation and determination are the keys to effective leadership and getting the job done for God. We shall consider how godly determination works in the next chapter.

Discussion

1. Are you willing to sacrifice to see God’s will and work accomplished?
2. Are you patient in gathering the facts and planning the work?
3. Do you enlist the help of others? Do you motivate others?
4. Do you motivate people on the basis of the spiritual realm, what God is doing, or on the basis of personal need or success?

Notes

1. Dennis Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands: Bringing Together Christian Thought, Passion and Action*, IVP, 2005.
2. Mervin Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Broadman-Holman Publishers, 1993, on Nehemiah 2.
3. Redpath, pp. 44, 45.

Godly Determination

Facing Opposition

“But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. . . . Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!” Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.”

(**Nehemiah 2:19, 20; 4:1–6 ESV**)

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58). Dr. Raymond Edman said, “It is always too soon to quit!” The wall is half-way completed by chapter four and just about done by chapter six. It is at these two places that the Enemy throws opposition, external and internal, at Nehemiah. It is at these two critical junctures that Nehemiah shows himself the true, Christ-centered leader he, in fact, is. What kinds of opposition a Christian leader faces and how he or she overcomes them requires godly determination.

Christian leadership expects and handles opposition. The enemies of God's work reappear here — Sanballat, Tobiah and "Geshem the Arab" (a powerful chieftan over a confederation of Arab tribes to the south and east). Here the approach of the enemy is ridicule and scorn. Why do people ridicule Christian work? Ridicule is used when God's enemies have no legitimate basis for opposition.

Why is ridicule so hard to face? It attacks the very impetus for action, and the recipients are usually in the minority. Every true Christian leader must face ridicule of some kind (for example, Jesus jeered at the cross; Jews scorned as being drunk at Pentecost (Acts 2:13); Paul a babler in Acts 17:18). When we think of opposition, we need to first of all remember the words of Jesus when He said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). The famous preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, said, "God had one Son without sin, but he never had a son without trial." Opposition is not only an evidence of God's blessing. It is also an opportunity for us to grow. We need to say "Amen" to the prayer of H.G.M. Williamson when he prayed, "Grant us, O Lord, to remember that it is not the undertaking of any great matter, but the continuing of the same until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth true glory."

In chapters four and six, Nehemiah faces his greatest obstacle to completing the wall and fulfilling the vision God had given to him. In these chapters, we see five (5) different kinds of attacks on the people, and four (4) separate attacks on Nehemiah and his leadership. Nehemiah not only faces this opposition, but, by God's grace, overcomes them and moves ahead in spite of them. Let's look at the nature of the external opposition and how Nehemiah handled it.

Attacks Against the People

Opposition by ridicule (2:19, 20; 4:1–6). Thomas Carlyle called ridicule the "language of the Devil," while Shakespeare noted that ridicule consists only of "paper bullets of the brain." Yet these "paper bullets" have slain many a Christian and Christian leader. Note that Sanballat is "greatly" angered here (4:1). Why are unbelievers so angry and upset

with Christian advances and victories?

Two reasons surface for such anger and ridicule — (1) Christian victories challenge the world’s godless viewpoint and values, and, (2) there are often personal reasons for opposition. Sanballat wanted to rule Judaea as well as Samaria, and if Nehemiah failed, he could have possibly done so.

Notice the type of ridicule used in 4:1–6. He first of all ridiculed the workers as “feeble” (withered; miserable) (v. 2). Then he ridiculed the work itself. Next, he made fun of their faith and their God (“Do these feeble Jews think prayer will make the wall grow?!”), and finally he ridiculed the materials used in the project — (“stones...burned”— everybody knows limestone loses its durability in the heat of a fire! But only a “half-truth”). Tobiah in 4:3 exaggerated Sanballat’s first argument, and he scorned the finished product (Even though excavations have yielded the fact that this rebuilt wall was 9 feet thick!). How do you deal with opposition by ridicule?

First, cite your authority for the vision — God Himself — and commit the ridicule and the ridiculers to his justice (2:20; 4:5, 6). “The God of heaven will give us success.” (2:20) “Hear us, O our God...” (4:4,5) Nehemiah refers to a higher authority than the Persian King and court. He cites authority for the project from the Almighty, sovereign God, and he commits the ridicule and the ridiculers to prayer. In other words, he is saying to his gainsayers that God is not only his Lord, but their Lord, their Master as well. They will have to deal with God! He leaves the opposition in the hands of God. He asks God to act against their vicious attacks. No personal retaliatory measures are taken. Notice that this prayer is actually an encouragement to the workers because Nehemiah, the leader, identifies himself with their plight and remains close to them and the situation.

Second, ignore the ridicule and get back to the task at hand (2:20; 4:6). “So we rebuilt the wall...” (4:6) Even though “busyness” is not next to “godliness,” it blocks out ridicule and re-focuses our attention on the vision and the work. Ignore the complainers and whiners!

Third, refuse to compromise (2:20). Unbelievers and mockers have “no share” in God’s purposes and God’s blessings. They have no legal

or otherwise claim , and no “right” to participate in the true worship of God.

I recall in Army ROTC summer camp officer training in college that I would grab the few off-times we had, and I would take my Bible to go to a quiet place on the base at Indiantown Gap, PA to read and pray. It was, after all, a tough summer away from home and with complete strangers and an angry cadre sergeant who made our lives very difficult. Coming back from one of those times, the sergeant saw my Bible on my bunk and told me to put it away, and that he would find something more suitable for me to do. He mocked me and my faith and dared me to go to the Inspector General’s office to complain so that he could force me out of the training. I did not comply, finished the summer camp and received my commission as a second lieutenant, now *his* commander! My response to this opposition by ridicule was to pray for him and for myself to treat him well.

Opposition by threats of force — “But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.” (4:7–9) Jerusalem was indeed surrounded by her enemies. Sanballat, Tobiah and the Arabs and people from Ashdod to the west escalated the stakes, and the opposition took on a more sinister tone. Although they could have posed a real threat and readily could have defeated the Jews, this was only a ruse since their superiors, bound to the Persian King, would have forbidden an actual attack. Dealing with threats of force involves two actions — (1) know where your true strength lies, in God by prayer (4:9), and (2) take the necessary precautions — “posted a guard” (4:9).

Opposition by creating discouragement and fear (4:10–23). The enemies’ taunts and threats did get to the people of Judah (v. 10). How they responded is actually a Hebrew lament ditty — “We shall never be able to finish now!” was the point of the lament. But Judah, of all

people! The cream of the army, the crack regiment, now was filled with discouragement and fear and ready to run.

Their discouragement was simply enhanced (vv. 11–23) by instilling fear in the people. Rumors of an impending surprise attack (vv. 11,12) fed this fear along with the repeated rumors among the people in the home towns (“ten times over” – v. 12). How do we respond to such opposition and the discouragement and fear that it brings?

Take definite action — “So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.” (4:13) Swift and biblically incisive action must be taken against discouragement and fear. Nehemiah grouped the families together, strengthening their motivation to fight if it came to that.

Replace the fear spawned by others and circumstances by a healthy fear and love for God — “And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” (4:14) Nehemiah uses very familiar words (“Don’t be afraid!”), reminiscent of the assurances and victories of earlier leaders — Moses (Ex. 14:3; Num. 14:9) and Joshua (Josh. 10:25). “Our God will fight for us!” (cf. Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30; Josh. 10:14, etc) Nehemiah appeals to what they knew and trusted and worked in their past spiritual history to face present danger and discouragement.

Additionally, ask the question, Why is there fear here? The answer often is that there are some people who live too close to the enemy! This can be spiritually true as well — “They were not in touch with the glow of spiritual force and power. Not living sufficiently near to the center of things to share the thrill and joy of battle and the victory, and to see God at work. All they were conscious of was the opposition.”¹

Get rid of the rubbish! — “In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” (4:10) Excavation must come first. Alan Redpath incitefully says, “Let me say to you with deep conviction

that the work of excavating must come first; the rubbish must go, and every part of the life of any church which is not directly evangelizing, and which is not now a real soul-winning factor, cannot justify its existence by mere history.”² Then, he moves on to talk pointedly about the lives and hearts of Christian people:

“The Lord is speaking, however, not only about rubbish in the church, but rubbish in the hearts of Christian people. “. . . know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?” (1 Corinthians 6:19) There is a building going up today in each one of us, and there is much rubbish. . . I confess to you that almost every day a fresh heap of rubbish is discovered in my life which I hardly knew existed. Points in which we thought we were strong — when we are honest with ourselves in the presence of God — we discover are the very points in which we are weak. . . All the rubbish: pride, unbelief, anger and temper, despondence, self-importance, evil desire — the rubbish of a careless, dry, barren life — what a foul heap it all is, and the building of the temple of the Holy Spirit has been retarded because of it.”³

Fourth, we need to bring people together as a united force against such opposition — “So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.” (4:13) Clans look out for one another. Clans are willing to die for one another. Clans practice real, heart felt concern for one another. Consequently, Nehemiah stations people by clans.

Finally, be in a state of constant readiness for such opposition — “From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. . . . Our God will fight for us.” (4:16–20) Nehemiah trusted God but also took the necessary defensive postures needed. “Till the stars came out” (v. 21) indicated constant readiness and

dedication to the work. “Readiness” is a mark of God’s people always — “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” (Matthew 26:41) “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:18)” “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Peter 5:8, 9) Are you ready for such opposition in your building for God? If not, get ready!

Attacks Against the Leader

There was finally opposition by personal attacks on the leader himself (6:1–14). When the Enemy fails to frustrate the work of God, he comes after the leaders. The Bible tells us that Satan is a never-tiring enemy (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). In chapter 6, the main purpose is to generate fear in Nehemiah and his followers (cf. 6:9,13,14,19), to place such pressure on Nehemiah so that he will “crack,” and the work will dissolve. There are four strategies used by the Devil here.

The first strategy is *compromise* — “If you can’t whip ‘em, join them and then take over!” — “Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. And I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you? And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner” (6:1–4)

When do you compromise and when do you as a leader stand your ground? Where possible, Nehemiah avoided direct challenge (2:10ff) by using either conciliatory words (6:3) or outright rejection (6:8). He exercised both discernment and determination here (6:4). He made a distinction in his own leadership and life between opinion and conviction,

between preference and principle. Warren Wiersbe has pointed out, “Decisions based only on opinion might be reconsidered, but decisions based on convictions must stand unless those convictions are changed. Otherwise, decision becomes indecision; and the leader who ought to be a guidepost becomes a weather vane.”⁴

Nehemiah rejected compromise as an option based on three reasons:

- (1) He knew they were lying and wanted to kill him (v. 2) The plain of Ono was remote and isolated, in the extreme northwestern part of Judah. That aroused Nehemiah’s suspicions;
- (2) He remained convinced of the greatness of the work God had given him to do (v. 3); and
- (3) There was no common ground for cooperation with Sanballat (cf. 2:20; 2 Cor 6:14–7:1). To have met with Sanballat could have been taken as a partial admission of guilt and at the very least would have compromised his position and stand.

If Satan cannot defeat a leader through compromise, he will go to *slander and gossip* — “We’ll tell everybody what we know about you!” — “In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.” Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.” (6:5–9)

Nehemiah is here accused of promoting sedition in the empire. This letter was an “open” letter (NOTE!) because Sanballat wanted the public to know the contents. One writer has described “gossip” as “news you have to hurry and tell somebody else before you find out it isn’t true!” How did Nehemiah respond to these rumors? He did three things: (1) He outrightly denied them (v. 8); (2) He identified what their real

purpose was (v. 9); and (3) He prayed for inner and outer strength and encouragement (v. 9) — “Now strengthen my hands” (cf. Deut. 1:38; 3:28; 2 Sam. 11:25; Isa. 35:3).

Satan will then go to *threats and intimidation* — “We will protect you!” — “Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.” But I said, “Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.” And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.” (6:10–14)

Tobiah tried to drive a wedge between Nehemiah and the priests. This new attack comes from people Sanballat and Tobiah used within the community who were not in favor of the building project. This so-called prophet, Shemaiah, was a fraud found out by Nehemiah because of two fundamentals in his life. A true shepherd-leader cannot leave his flock in the lurch (cf. John 10:12, 13), and what Shemaiah suggested was contrary to God’s Word (cf. Deut. 18:20; Isa. 8:19, 20). Nehemiah cannot go against the Word of God, even perhaps to save his own skin.

A final strategy used by Satan is *intrigue* — “We will not give up!” — “Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah’s letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.” (6:17–19)

Warren Wiersbe notes that “many a careless Christian has won the war

but afterward lost the victory.” Andrew Bonar said, “Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle.” Here the Enemy displays his tenacity and culpability. He simply refuses to give up on Nehemiah, even when the wall has been completed. Even when Christians get the victory, we must never think that the war is over and that victory is really completed. Tobiah continues to use his non-Christian influence to get to some of the priestly families in Judah. Tobiah continues to attempt to intimidate this godly and determined leader. The solution is to continue to do what you have found successful. Continue to watch and pray!

As a pastor and church consultant, I have faced many of the same attacks of the Devil against building for God in my life and ministry. I recall one church within the denomination I served. It was a church that had refused to move forward and had plateaued with two very identifiable subgroups. One group wanted the “old ways,” while the other group wanted the church to break out and reach their area for Christ with new worship styles and methods. The bishop of our region had asked me to go there and seek to resolve the tensions and grow the church. After much prayer and wrestling with God as to what to do, I went with a vision from God to this place.

It was a difficult ministry from the very first. I had to deal with an associate pastor who I was convinced had not done a good job shepherding all the flock. A few families were cared for, while the rest were ignored. This pastor took my admonition badly, and after a time resigned. The church board had two men who were placed there by vote of the dissidents trying to get rid of me. They opposed every suggestion I made, and sought to derail every effort to move forward. Every board meeting was a battle. There was even a “secret” meeting called by church dissidents, calling the bishop to replace me as the pastor of the church. Key deacons resigned, calling me a dictator and an autocrat. Rumors and false stories about me were being circulated. I often went before the Lord, seeking for Him to let me resign, and all the answer I got back from God was to persevere.

Like Nehemiah, I believed that God had called me to build a wall of testimony and praise in the community through this church. And like Nehemiah, I ignored the ridicule, refused to compromise, sought to

get rid of spiritual rubbish, and proclaimed God's Word of purpose and promise. Several God-given results came out of such a stance.

The church grew, both spiritually and numerically. We added a second service to Sunday mornings. We had a successful building campaign for a new addition, which included a large gym for recreational use by the community. We made friends with the local fire department and helped them in their fund raising by doing puppet shows and lending them our church grounds for car shows and parking. We added more staff for our growing youth and children's ministries.

The two complainers on the church board were finally told by other church board members to either get with the vision and church mission or resign, which they did. New deacons were trained and installed. Even a major deacon couple who had left in anger, apologized to me and came back and served the Lord faithfully in the church. The wife took over a growing VBS ministry. When I finally left to serve in a denominational role, the church was a strong, growing community of people seeking to be a wall of praise and promise to the community and area.

Every church, every ministry and every leader committed to what God wants to accomplish in a certain place and time will face opposition. It is how we biblically handle such opposition that wins the day.

Discussion

1. Have you faced opposition to working for God? How so?
2. Do you believe opposition from internal forces to be more difficult to resolve than from external forces? Why?
3. Do you believe persecution is necessary for a God-centered movement or ministry to flourish? Why or why not?
4. Which of Satan's strategies have you come across the most in your ministry? Why these?

Notes

1. Redpath, p. 99.
2. Redpath, p. 87.
3. *Ibid.*

4. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined (Nehemiah): Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition (The BE Series Commentary)*, David C. Cook, 2nd Edition, 2009.

Internal Problem Solving

Dealing With Internal Problems

“Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.” There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.” I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.”

(Nehemiah 5:1–6 ESV)

We have seen the enemy, and he is us! Nehemiah chapter five records another kind of opposition to Christian leadership and the carrying out of a God-given burden or vision. Sometimes our greatest obstacles are with those among whom we are ministering. Nehemiah’s diplomatic skills and discernment gifts are fully put to the test. J. Oswald Sanders says it well when he notes, “A cross stands in the way of spiritual leadership, a cross upon which the leader must consent to be impaled.”¹

The external opposition as well as the wall building put a strain on the economic substructure of the Judean society. These problems culminated near the end of harvest, where creditors demanded year end payment. Heavy taxation and debt slavery forced several classes of people (vv. 1–5) to cry out for justice and relief (cf. “outcry” — v. 1). Human sin and selfishness among supposedly God-fearing people come to the foreground, revealing internal pressures. These could easily disrupt the wall building if Nehemiah left that project to try to resolve these

problems. Nehemiah, rightly angered by what he heard and saw (v. 6; cf. Mk. 3:5; Eph. 4:26), responded to this new round of internal pressures and problems. His method of response teaches us how to respond to internal problems and yet continue to follow the vision God has given us.

Christian leadership deals with internal problems with integrity and insight. The very first thing Nehemiah did was to *take control of himself!* “My heart consulted within me” (v. 7 lit.) Nehemiah gained control of his thoughts and feelings so he could give constructive leadership. Even righteous anger at the sins of God’s people is no excuse for “losing it,” and throwing your vision away! Self-control and self-discipline are key marks of godly leadership — “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32) “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22, 23) “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7) “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness.” (2 Peter 1:5, 6)

This is a very personal lesson I had to learn in my first church. It was a small, house church, a church planting in Wilmington, Delaware. You could call it a store front church, since we met in the employees lounge in a Christian bookstore in the city. Things were going badly for my co-pastor friend and myself. We had endless elder meetings, going sometimes until two or three o’clock in the morning. We couldn’t seem to get off the ground, no matter how hard we tried and prayed. Deep anger and resentment kept boiling away inside me. I finally lost it one Sunday morning and decided to use the sermon time to “chastise” the small congregation.

It was the worst time in my ministry career, and the worst sermon, if you could call it that, that I ever preached. What I recall were the words of the store manager as he and his wife left that morning — “We are never coming back. You had no right to lose your temper. You are supposed to be our leader.” The work dissolved shortly after this outburst. Thankfully, God was not finished with me in church ministry, but I learned a very

hard and humbling lesson of ministerial leadership. Self-control is not an option for a leader having trouble in his ministry or congregation. It is a basic requirement of dealing with internal complaining and problems.

I once again faced this issue of self-control in ministry while working as a Field Associate for the denomination in which I minister. One of our conferences or regions had an outlying church near Rochester, NY. It was rarely visited by the bishop of the region because it was so far away. But internal schism and problems forced the denomination to care for a very thorny situation. I took several days and drove up to meet with the pastor and the church board. In meeting with the church board, I learned of the pastor's intransigence against what the leadership board wanted and needed to do to put the church on a healthy track once again. The pastor blamed the board, the congregation, the denomination and even Satan himself for causing these internal problems and conflicts. He became incensed that all fingers pointed to him as the source of many of the internal conflicts. He yelled at me, and his wife ordered me out of the house. He lost it. Soon thereafter, he resigned in disgrace and shame. Self-control is not an option for a godly leader, no matter the seriousness of the internal squabbles and complaints. This is the very first lesson Nehemiah teaches us here.

Learn and practice conflict resolution — “I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will

restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.” (Neh. 5:6–13)

Notice that Nehemiah could have done what was popular, or what was safe, but instead he chose to do what was right! He rightly accused the “nobles and officials” (v. 7) and called a public meeting (cf. Prov. 14:20,21; Luke 14:12–14; Jas. 2:1–9). In dealing with these officials, he had to both appease the people and keep these leaders “goal-oriented” and involved in the work of the wall. Notice his “conflict resolution” techniques:

- (1) Separate the people from the problem. Instead of letting this problem fester as a “class” conflict, make it a “community” problem (v. 8) that affects witness to the nonChristian world (v. 8).
- (2) Focus on interests, not positions (v. 9).
- (3) Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.
- (4) Insist the results be based on the objective standard of the Word of God. (“Walk in the fear of our God” — v. 9; cf. Deut. 10:12; 2 Chr. 6:31; Lev. 25:36)

Nehemiah demanded the property and proceeds be returned (v. 11). They did so and Nehemiah sealed their words with an Old Testament symbolic oath-sign (“I also shook out the folds of my robe...” — v. 13a; cf. Isa. 49:22; Acts 13:51; 18:6; Matt. 10:24).

As a church health consultant, I have had to deal with a number of church problems and internal conflicts. One church with which I worked had a problem with what natural church development calls “loving relationships.”² The newer people of the congregation were being ostracized from the established people of that congregation. The long term members were bothered by their new ideas and resentful they did not see things their way. In fact, they sat on different sides of the church aisle to emphasize their separation and disagreement.

What aggravated this internal unhealth was the attitude of one of the long time leaders of the church. As I did a church health analysis of the problems, and recommended to the church board steps that could help resolve the issues, this leader spoke up. He said, in the presence of the pastor and myself and the entire church board, that he did not have to love these people! In fact, he claimed his fellowship was with Christians *outside* of that church body. He said all he needed to be concerned about was that the doctrine or teaching of the church was biblical and right. The pastor could not believe what he said, and just laid his head down on the meeting table.

I suggested a church wide meeting to seek some relationship resolution. All of the church board, except this one fellow, agreed. We met, and true to form, the newer members sat on one side of the church and the longer entrenched members sat on the other side of the center aisle. I physically went back and forth in the front seeking to find out what the root of the problems were. The newer side claimed that the older side did not appreciate them and excluded them from fellowship. The older side claimed that the newer side refused to come to their traditional and stated fellowship times. The one recalcitrant church leader sat with folded arms.

In the middle of the very tense discussion, the pastor sat me down in the front pew and asked me if this was unsolvable. I said that no problem is unsolvable with God's help and insight. It was then that God gave me a thought. I stood up and asked the long term member side of the church what they did as a young starting church for fellowship. They said that after every Sunday morning service they would gather at Frank's farm down the road for ice cream and fellowship. They would have a grand time.

I then walked over to the other side and asked the newer church members if they had ever been to Frank's farm for ice cream, and would they like to do so. With one voice, they said they had never been to the farm and would love to do so. Then I went to the other side of the aisle and asked the long time members if Frank still attended and his farm still makes ice cream. They said, "Yes." I asked this side if they would like to

invite the newer people of the church to Frank's farm for ice cream after church services. They liked the idea. Ice cream at Franks farm broke the relationship ice, and all the people started talking with and loving one another.

Notice the four principles from Nehemiah that I used. I made the internal problem a community-wide problem inside of a "sides" issue. I focused the people on common interests, not their positions. I sought to generate a variety of possibilities before we landed on gathering together at Frank's farm after Sunday services. I based the result on John 13:34, 35 — "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

A third way to deal with internal problems is to *model unselfish, God-honoring integrity and unselfishness* — "Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." (5:14–19)

While some commentators translate Nehemiah 5:10 as indicative of owning up to his own offensive practices of lending, and thereby gaining the unity of the community by his personal and family confession ("I, likewise my brethren and my servants, have lent them money and corn; let us, I pray, remit this loan!"), it seems more appropriate to the context

to see Neh. a model of unselfishness and godly generosity (vv. 14, 17, 18). Nehemiah operated with two motives — the fear of God (v. 15), and intense compassion for the people of God. Mervin Breneman says that “the depth of one’s reverence for God will determine one’s decisions.”³ Several lessons surface in these verses.

A leader at necessary times gives up his personal rights for the needs of others. Leadership means going further than those one is leading. Nehemiah gave up what was rightfully due his person and his office to help meet the economic needs of the times (v. 14). At times leaders must sacrifice personal gain for the spiritual good of others (cf. Acts 20:33–35; 1 Sam. 12:3). Modeling active generosity helps resolve internal pressures and problems. Not only did Nehemiah forfeit his legal and normal rights as governor, but he helped feed the people (vv. 17,18).

Nehemiah lived by absolute dependence upon God as a model to his followers (v. 19). Verse 19 is not only not a reference to vanity or pride, but an emphatic way of claiming he has acted in good faith and for the right motives. “It is a statement of confidence that God is judge, and judges favorably those who sincerely seek to do his will.” (McConville) Nehemiah here shows his tremendous dependence upon God and his high standards of integrity and godliness. D. L. Moody has written, “A holy life will produce the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns; they only shine” (cf. Phil. 2:1–13).

Discussion

1. Have you ever lost self-control over a difficult or thorny internal church matter?
2. Have you been trained in “conflict resolution?” What have you found most helpful in the training?
3. How many times have you thought of quitting due to internal problems? Have you? Or, what kept you where you are?
4. Have you ever had to give up your personal or professional rights to quell an internal church or ministry squabble? Cite as many of the details as would be helpful to your group.

Notes

1. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence For Every Believer* (Sanders Spiritual Growth Series), Moody Press, 2017 reissue, p. 105.
2. “Loving relationships” is one of eight universal health characteristics or qualities of a healthy church or ministry. These eight qualities have been thoroughly researched, biblically based and field tested in over 65,000 churches worldwide of various sizes and denominational affiliations. They are the result of what is called “natural church development,” first promoted and introduced to the United States from Germany by Christian Schwarz in the 1990s. The author is a licensed and trained NCD consultant, working with churches and ministries mainly in the Northeast USA. He can be contacted for a church health consult at carl@carlshankconsulting.com. (See his website at www.carlshankconsulting.com for more details.)
3. Mervin Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Broadman-Holman Publishers, 1993.

Real Encouragement

The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength

“They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.”

(Nehemiah 8:8–12 ESV)

Mission accomplished. The wall around Jerusalem had been completed in a record fifty-two days. It was an amazing feat of leadership prowess, godly determination and team work. Over 40,000 people had returned from captivity. Nehemiah appointed faithful and loyal Hanani (mentioned in 1:2) and Hananiah because they were God-fearing men who shared the same values as Nehemiah (7:2). The issue was, as had always been, Israel’s security from her many enemies which surrounded the city. People needed to feel safe and secure as they began their new life in this rebuilt walled city. External gates and guards could not finally or fully guarantee their long term safety. There had to be a wholesale re-commitment to the covenant that God had made with Israel long ago, but had fallen into neglect and ignorance. Chapters 8 – 11 record this covenant renewal.

The beginning of the renewal process was a reading and clarification of the Law of God — “And all the people gathered as one man into the

square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.” (8:1–3)

Several key features of this congregational reading are important for us to note. First, men, *women and children* were gathered together for the reading of God’s Word. Unlike some secret religions and sects who favored superstition and learning behind closed doors, Israel was to learn from the youngest to the oldest, all genders, about what God demanded and wanted. I favor the practice of many churches today that when the Scriptures are read in the order of service, children are encouraged and expected to be present. They as well as adults need to hear and hearken to God’s clear Word of grace and power and love.

Then notice this reading did not occur in the restored Temple. Indeed, the fact that the reading of God’s Law took place in the common area — “facing the square before the Water Gate” (8:3) — signaled that the Word of God, read and explained, took precedence over the Temple and its trappings — “In the choice of site we have Ezra’s deliberate proclamation that the Torah was greater than the Temple and its sacrifices, indeed that the Torah as such was above anything it might contain.”¹The clear reading and interpretation of the Word of God was foremost in the re-establishment of the covenant between God and his people. I highly favor clear exposition of the Word of God in preaching and teaching God’s people today. Such practices are quickly falling by the wayside in favor of a more “contemporary” style of chatting about a relevant subject with some Bible references thrown in for good measure. Let us never forget that it is the inspired Word of God that has the power to change lives — “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is

hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:12, 13) Our human opinions and inventions are never a match for the Word of God.

Finally, there are other lay people on the platform with Ezra reading and interpreting the Law of God (8:4). These apparently were not priests or Levites or men of power or position. Their presence indicates that the Word of God is to be held in honor and can be communicated to others through ordinary and unordained lay people. We need to be careful to involve all kinds of people in reading the Word in our public services.

A number of the Levites (8:7) provided clarification and interpretation for the people as God’s Law was read. In Reformation Europe from the 16th century onward, in Protestant churches the pulpit in churches was built on a platform above the congregation, and beside the platform were benches where the elders of the church would sit. They would have in their possession a Bible and a copy of their confession of faith to examine the preacher’s words as he spoke. This acted as a guard and shield to the congregation, seeking to prevent heretical or offline teaching that the preacher might give. While such practices are hardly current today, except in the most high Protestant churches, they indicated that the Word of God is to be taken seriously and with reverence, something we might have forgotten along the way.

But what was meant to be joy and glad instruction was received with weeping and sadness — “For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” (8:9) Conviction from God had settled into their hearts as the Law of God was read in their presence. This should not surprise us, but Nehemiah speaks up and seeks to turn a day of mourning into a day of joy and gladness — “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” . . . Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” (8:9, 10)

As the Ten Commandments and Levitical laws were read, as the Bible was read, conviction settled in and the people felt like, “Here we go again! We have failed again to please God. We have forgotten His Word, we have

messed up. This is a day for sadness, for weeping and repenting.”

May I point out that to many unchurched people when the Bible is read, even the quaint Christmas story or the thrilling Easter story, the reaction is not joy, not praise, not happiness or comfort but sadness. Often the reaction is, “I am not good enough, not religious enough, not whatever enough for God to be pleased with me.” Alan Redpath says it well:

“When a deep spirit of conviction of the Spirit of God comes to us, and we see our breakdown and our failures and sins in the light of the Word of God, we may be tempted to feel ‘It’s no use. I might as well forget it altogether. I am just a hopeless sinner, and I might as well give in.’ That’s what Satan likes to say to us! When he has caused us in some particular issue to fail, he then whispers to us, ‘I told you so—this Christian life is no use. You can’t live it.’ Having got us down, there is nothing he likes more than to keep us down. But true conviction of the Holy Spirit is not intended for that—of course not. It is intended to bring us to the end of our own strength that we might discover infinite resources in Christ our Lord.”²

What is this “joy of the Lord?” Williamson puts it this way: “The joy of the Lord” was the joy each Israelite felt at these festivals as he identified himself afresh with the community of God’s people and so appropriated in his own generation the salvation once bestowed upon his ancestors. In this act of identification—which took the form of joyful celebration and worship—lay his protection from the judgment that might otherwise fall on those outside of the covenant.”³ The sacredness of the day was meant for celebrating and sharing with others the bounty of God’s amazing grace and salvation.

Clearly, such joy was not mere hilarity or feeling happy in a giddy kind of way, nor cheap emotionalism. Bob Kauflin, a worship director for a movement of churches not far from us, draws attention to the three S’s that often surround Bible reading of well known stories like the Christmas story and overshadow or even take away the amazement and joy of the incarnation—God with us. He says the awesome amazement and joy of

God's Word can be blunted by *sentimentality*. For instance, Christmas, can lose its real joy by so focusing on the "sights, sounds, and smells of Christmas that give us good feelings: dazzling decorations, fresh baked sugar cookies, poinsettias, family get-togethers, gift shopping, twinkling lights, Christmas carols, cards from friends, tree-cutting expeditions, and wrapping presents."

Or we can *sanitize* Bible reading and lose its impact in reciting the Christmas story— "we only present a picture-perfect, storybook rendition of what took place in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Kind of like the manger scenes that dot the landscape. The straw in the manger is fresh and clean. There's no umbilical cord to cut and no blood. It's a "silent night." The surroundings are strangely free from the pungent odor of manure. Joseph and Mary are calm, cool, and collected. Everyone gets a good night's sleep. There's no controversy or gossip surrounding the birth."

Or, we can so *spiritualize* the Bible story of Christmas by "ignoring Christmas as earth-shattering history and use it simply to promote general virtues like brotherhood, peace, joy, generosity, and love. And tolerance, of course."

Redpath suggests such "joy of the Lord" consists of several truths. It is joy based upon forgiveness; it is joy nourished in affliction; and it is joy dependent upon obedience to God and not upon successful Christian service. And, finally, it is joy independent of circumstances.⁴ Nehemiah's wall was finished! The people were victorious over the taunts and threats of their enemies. But in Christian life and service, it is when the wall is built, the building project is completed, the new nursery or sanctuary is dedicated, that Satan can attack with all of his subtlety and craftiness. Redpath again says, "It is ever true that the great moment of achievement in Christian work is perhaps one of the most dangerous moments in a man's life."⁵ The power of the Enemy of our souls is greatly underestimated. Joy that lasts, that overcomes the attacks of the Enemy, that shares with others, is deeper, wider, God-given satisfaction in grace.

The old Heidelberg Catechism of the Reformed Churches of America and Canada puts it well — "What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life

and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.”⁶ Knowing Christ this way gives ultimate and real and lasting joy.

The people of Nehemiah’s day “got it!” For the first time in many years, many dozens of years for the older folks, they understood God’s favor, God’s grace, God’s provision for them. And the result of joy was to serve others — “And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” (8:12)

The old adage is just as true today as when it was first penned — JOY is Jesus, Others, Yourself, in that order and in that way. It is the fruit of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22, 23). It is contagious and infectious. Today know and share that the “joy of the Lord” is your strength and secure protection!

Discussion

1. Why is Christian success not a guarantee of victory or lasting security?
2. Have you ever felt conviction by God when you either read the Bible or had it read to you? When? What did you do with that conviction?
3. Do you experientially know the “joy of the Lord” as your strength?
4. Can you with a full heart and free conscience recite the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism? If not, why not?

Notes

1. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah, Volume 16 (Word Biblical Commentary)*, Zondervan, 2015, p. 287, quoting H. L. Ellison, *From Babylon to Bethlehem*, Baker, 1984, p. 47.
2. Redpath, pp. 140-141.
3. Williamson.
4. Redpath, pp. 141-145.

5. Redpath, p. 137.

6. Scripture “proofs” for these sublime statements are as follows: I Cor. 6:19, 20 Rom. 14:7-9. I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14. I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2. John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8. John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5. Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18. Rom. 8:28. Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14. Rom. 8:14.

Reformation Needed Again

It's Not Over Until It's Over

“Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.”

(Nehemiah 13:4–8 ESV)

Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after a hiatus of about fifteen years. He had gone back to the Persian court per his agreement when he had been given permission to go to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of its walls (Neh. 2:7). Before he had left his home city, however, there had been great joy and a recommitment of the people of God to the covenant — “And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.” (Neh. 12:43) Songs were sung, two great choirs gave thanks (12:31), trumpets were sounded (12:35), and the rights and privileges of the Levites along with a restoration of offerings and gifts were reinstated. All seemed well, but not all was well.

Why is it that after all these Jews went through with the rebuilding of the wall and their rededication to the service of the One true God, they fell back into old and sinful patterns? Williamson hits the nail on the head when he says: “Without such routine, the author seems to imply, the joy

of a single day can never be sustained. Although it is usually the high-points of success which impress themselves on the memory, the true gauge of spiritual progress in the individual as much as in community life is the extent to which what might be passed by as ‘the normal’ has been transformed. . . . It is as though the book is pointing to its own failure, reminding us that, however important good structures and routines may be (as was pointed out immediately above), nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart.”¹

Their internal sinful inclinations overcame the external successes. This is a hard and sobering lesson for all of us. Spiritual and organizational highs are too often followed by sinful lows. Jesus warned us about not following through with our supposed high points of faith — “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (Matthew 7:24-27)

Alan Redpath puts their failures this way — “They were three in number. In the first place, there was mingling with other nations—failure in separation. In the second place there was a desecration of the Sabbath day—failure in service. And in the third place there were marriages with heathen people—failure in sanctification.”² The old saying that we should keep our friends close to us, and our enemies closer, does not really apply to biblical relationships. We once again meet with Tobiah. Remember Tobiah? (2:19; 4:3, 7, 8: 6:1, 12, 14, 17–19) He was one of the first opposers to the work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

This man had won support of some of the nobles and officials in Jerusalem and the surrounding territories. We see here in Nehemiah 13 why this man was so dangerous to Israel and to the true faith. He was related to Eliashib the priest, who allowed Tobiah to live rather lavishly in one of the storerooms of the Temple — “prepared for Tobiah a

large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. . . and [I] came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.” (Neh. 13:5, 7) One of the rooms dedicated for receiving tithes and offerings from the people in worship of God was now used to house one of the enemies of God! Amazing! How can this happen? There are three reasons. First, Tobiah was the priest’s relative, and deference was given to that human relationship over service and devotion to God alone. Second, Tobiah had inroads to the leadership of Jerusalem and connived his way into accommodations. Third, Nehemiah was out of town and could not interfere with this move.

Syncretism is always an enemy to true faith in God. There are many who claim that all religions at base are the same and that all worship and serve God. We just need to be “kind” with and to one another. If we all get along well, then everything will be fine. Such thinking runs counter to the plain words of Jesus — “Jesus said to him [Thomas], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) There is no place in Christ-centered faith for another way to God. Nehemiah was horrified with the situation and threw Tobiah and all his belongings out of the Temple area. Righteous anger was God’s response through Nehemiah for such syncretistic transgression of the house of God.

I recall a very important lesson in my development and training for the ministry of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of my mentors came to the seminary and told us the story of how two Jehovah Witnesses had come to the gathering area of his church and were pleasantly talking with his people. This man of God immediately saw the danger and ordered the two out of the church. He was not going to expose his people to plain error and heresy. While this seems like a strong and crude response to these men, it was the appropriate response. Do you remember Jesus and the Temple moneychangers — “And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables

of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." (Matthew 21:11–13) The gentle Jesus with a whip! That's how godly leaders are to treat obvious enemies of the faith. This was not a personal vendetta against false religious teachers, but a leadership decision protecting the community of faith.

Redpath applies this incident from Nehemiah this way: "What Tobiah has wormed his way into the center of your life and sits there comfortably enthroned where the Lord Jesus ought to be? What furniture is cluttering up the temple which the Holy Spirit ought to fill, and causing loud cheers in hell? Is it not a fact that in so many instances Christian people have so little room for the Holy Spirit because they have allowed so many other things to crowd into their lives?"³ He goes on to say:

"These are no times for half-measures. Has there been failure in your separation, failure in your service, failure in your sanctification? Is there great glee in the regions beneath, because the channel which God intended to use in your life is choked? Yes, the Lord Jesus comes to the Jerusalem of your heart and He understands. Would you let Him throw out the idol, silence the traffic which disturbs the peace and rest of your heart? Would you be willing for Him to break off the unholy alliance?"

Remember the God of Nehemiah is our God. Disobedience to Him always brings punishment. Sin brings slavery, but repentance always brings the outpouring of His mercy and blessing. And the Holy Spirit filling the life that has been emptied of furniture always brings victory for He is the Victor. To be quick in understanding the fear of God and the will of God is always to be merciless to everything that is contrary to the will of God, no matter how much it hurts."⁴

Williamson concludes his remarks on the book of Nehemiah this way: "The Christian church continues to face these issues, albeit in different forms. The principles for appropriate response remain the same: a strong core of leadership and a clear line of demarcation at the fringes. From a position of strength and security it is possible to extend a hand of

welcome and forgiveness to those outside. From a position of weakness both parties would sink together.”⁵

So, let us all sing and say together:

“Lord of every thought and action,
Lord to send and Lord to stay,
Lord in speaking, writing, giving,
Lord in all things to obey.
Lord of all there is of me
Now and evermore to be.”⁶

Discussion

1. How can people so blessed by God fall back into sinful patterns and habits?
2. Do we profane the Sabbath in our day? How so? Should we change our Sabbath habits?
3. “Unholy alliances” such as the priest Eliashib with Tobiah ruin the witness and testimony of the Church. What unholy alliances do you see in the church world today?
4. Are there what Redpath calls “half-measures” in your love for and obedience to God? What will you do about them today?

Notes

1. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah, Volume 16 (Word Biblical Commentary)*, Zondervan, 2015, p. 441.
2. Redpath, p. 182.
3. Redpath, pp. 183, 184.
4. Redpath, pp. 187, 188.
5. Williamson, p. 441.
6. Redpath, p. 177.

Afterword

More Than Revival Needed

It was one of those “closing-the-doors” meetings for what was left of this congregation. After an opening song or two, the denominational moderator carefully shared with the dozen or so people what their church board had painfully come to recognize. Their time and place as a local church in that community was over. The pastor had resigned. They could not afford the minimal upkeep of the church facility, let alone think about hiring another pastor.

As the moderator shared these all too obvious facts with the remaining members, he also shared a vision for planting a brand new church in the area. They could, if they wished, find new life and meaning in helping with this church plant. One of the older members, rather upset over the proceedings, spoke up and said, “I know what this church needs! We need an old-fashioned revival meeting! That will get some new people into the church. That’s what we need!” Another person suggested that the need was a physical renovation of the existing church facility. A number of them rejected the thought of a brand new church because they failed to identify the real needs of both their church and their changing community. This unhealthy church’s effective and fruitful ministry had long since died, and the church had been operating on spiritual “life-support” for some time. It was indeed time to pull the plug.

The good news comes in what happened in this very stressful situation. The congregation finally did vote to close the church and to allow the denomination to move ahead with the sale of the property, using the money as seed money for a brand new church in the area. The new church started to meet in a local school not far from the old church site.

Dozens of people started coming. The community responded positively to invitations. Unchurched people were brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, although most of the people of the old church drifted away, one of the couples became committed to this new church plant. Their testimony to this day is that they found “new life” and a new reason for Christian service and joy in this church. They would agree with the truth, what you think you need may not be what you really need.

What do most pastors and churches want in a distressed situation when they ask for help? They naturally want encouragement. That’s what these folks wanted from the moderator and myself. That was what they perceived as their need at that time. After all, the Bible gives us a number of commands and promptings to “encourage” one another (cf. Romans 12:8; Eph. 6:22; Col. 4:8; Heb. 10:25; 1 Thes. 5:11, 14). They wanted someone to tell them that, in spite of their problems and concerns, God is still in control, and He will preserve His church. What they thought they needed, however, was not at all what they really needed.

God is still in control. But He has promised to preserve His Church, with a capital “C,” not necessarily a particular local congregation!¹ In addition, the biblical dynamic of encouragement involves much more than mere comforting words or thoughts.² Biblical encouragement for troubled pastors and their situations may mean exhortation and rebuke! It may involve practical changes that will actually feel more uncomfortable than what they can ever imagine. It is always united with truthfulness and authenticity. Biblical encouragement never shrinks back from asking the hard questions and giving uncomfortable answers. Biblical encouragement seeks for God’s solutions to problems, not a panacea for those problems.

The second felt-need from such leaders and their churches is for revival. If their churches had a good, old-fashioned revival, they hope and believe their problems would go away. Indeed, Christian writers, televangelists and seminar speakers tell us the church is on the verge of a massive, nationwide revival, but such a renewal never seems to come. As a consultant who has dealt with thousands of church people, worked in three very different denominational affiliations,³ consulted with over

one hundred churches in church health related issues, trained numerous ministerial, church and parachurch groups, and mentored a number of church leaders, I can safely say the church needs more than revival from within.

Much of the church in America has health problems. In the northeast, where I live and minister, many churches are small, old and plagued with “quality of life” issues. Ministerial leadership seems unfocused at best and dysfunctional at worst. Yes, a number of churches and ministries have seen God move powerfully and wonderfully, but on a typical Sunday morning such movement is spotty and inconsistent. In addition, the non-church world has dismissed the institutional church as ineffective, inefficient and insufficient to address the needs of the day. While the church still lives, it does not thrive.

Many churches need reform and possibly even a “revolution” in the way they work and think and minister. These churches need to go back to the Great Physician for a “health checkup.” They need to study and implement God’s natural growth mechanisms⁴ in the life and health of their local scene. Much more than confession, repentance, and renewal of personal faith need to take place. Christian Schwarz in his church health thesis, *Paradigm Shift In The Church*, points out that expectation of revival can often actually miss the heart of what a church really needs in natural church development.⁵ Thus, churches that narrowly focus on individualistic revival, or what he calls “passionate spirituality,” may in fact miss real revival since their problems may stem from other valid growth factors, such as dysfunctional structures, a ministry that is not gift-oriented or a questionable evangelistic concept.⁶

What does it take for a church and its leaders to see what they really need? Several points come to my attention through my own interactions and experience.

The grace to see and own the need

This is both an “ego” issue as well as a “head-in-the-sand” problem. One particular church I have worked with over a number of years never really “got it.” They read my health analyses, discussed them at length in church

board meetings, and even had me come in to do seminars with them over their health problems. But somehow through all of this, they never really owned their health problem. After two senior pastors and many staff changes, church leaders still could not come to grips with their health issues and concerns. This is a prideful, ego condition that hampers that congregation from moving forward in kingdom work and grieves the Holy Spirit.

Another church I have briefly advised believe they are “God’s answer” to their community and its needs. A mid-sized congregation, they believe that their church talent is so gifted they do not need any help from anyone or any other church in the area. This attitude exists in spite of the fact that a megachurch meets only a few miles away with plenty of gifted individuals and ministry programs and activities that overshadow what their church offers. The issue here is not size of church, but rather attitude of ministry. The Apostle John wrote to churches in Revelation that had problems like these. The Holy Spirit-inspired admonition was for them to repent! Leaders and churches who refuse to see their health needs are summoned by the Lord of the Church to change their hearts, minds and direction of ministries so that God can lead them forward.

A desire for outside input

Coaching and/or mentoring⁷ are tools that organizational experts highly recommend in an ever-changing business world.⁸ Unfortunately, many pastors and church leaders have yet to understand or appreciate the value of church leadership coaching. Older pastors and leaders still cling to a false separation between the church culture and the “world,” citing out-of-context Scriptural passages in support of this separation. They believe only God Himself or the Bible itself can teach them anything helpful for leadership and/or ministry in the church. They mostly ignore the need for outside help until it’s too late to help.

More prevalent, however, is the modern pastor or church leader who knows or suspects that a major paradigm shift has occurred in the last number of years in church life and leadership. Centralized, hierarchical authority has shifted to decentralized networking between groups of

people in the church environment. Boards and committees have been replaced by task forces and action groups. “Team” language is now used instead of boss, chairman, supervisor or even delegator. Leaders are now facilitators, coaches, servants or visionaries. Telling, directing and controlling have been overshadowed by questioning, influencing and role-modeling.⁹ The people in the pew are living in a broadband information age with social networking through Facebook, Twitter and so on. IMs (instant messages) are replacing emails and certainly old fashioned “snail mail.” The pastor, like his managerial or CEO counterpart in business, needs coaches to help him or her not only keep up-to-date, but to communicate accurately and effectively with the congregation.

Coaching, unlike accountability partners, brings skill sets to the pastor or ministry leader that he or she needs to navigate the waters of change in his or her congregational context. The leader seeking to be relevant and effective wants and plans for coaches for his or her congregational leadership. One pastor that I have had the privilege to work with on numerous church health projects in his own congregation has had a number of coaches or mentors through the years. The growth of his church, the quality of his staff and the developing numbers of church plants through this congregation are testimonies to his belief and use of coaching. Coaches can help a church leader see the exact needs of his or her ministry and suggest steps to take for fruitful and forward movement. The courage to address the need(s) and institute real change

Pastors and lay leaders need a great deal of God-given courage and inspiration to address health needs and make necessary changes. God wants courageous leaders. He wants men and women who have the courage to act on what they see, the courage to say publicly what everyone else is whispering privately and the courage to initiate change. Vision without courage is little more than a dream. A vision that demands courage can change a church and make it healthy and vital.

What is courage? Courage is not hard-heartedness or domineering authoritativeness. It is not swaggering brashness or harsh boldness. Lovely and meek Esther was a courageous biblical queen in a foreign, pagan land who stood for God “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

The obedient cupbearer, Nehemiah, took a courageous step of faith to go back to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Courage comes from deeply held, God-given convictions and a self-disciplined character. Courage is the ability to say “no” when everyone else seems to be saying “yes” even when they know otherwise. Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness and ability to face our fears and launch out into the unknown, trusting in the perfect plan of a sovereign God.

If you really want a healthy church, you will most likely have to go through the painfully slow process of implementing change. Without courage you will choose to do little or nothing about your situation. You will either hope that it “goes away,” or that you go away! Or, you will content yourself in making “cosmetic” adjustments that never really get to the heart and root of the issues confronting your church situation. Courage is really a matter of your will and where your convictions really lie. Courageous leadership is a fundamental “must” for a healthy church.¹⁰

Proactive Leadership

Leaders must respond to difficulties rather than react to them. Most evangelical churches have pastors who lead prayerfully, thoughtfully and biblically. They preach and teach sound, Scripture-based and Spirit-led sermons. They want to lead carefully and cautiously because they know their own weaknesses. They also want to be open and aware to the Holy Spirit’s direction in specific needs and problems.

The proactive leader has all these qualities plus the willing obedience to carry out the Lord’s plans at the opportune time. The pastoral leader who waits for the “perfect” timing will often wait too long and miss God’s timing! Proactive leadership is not willing for the optimal time to pass. Even if not all of God’s people are ready to proceed (and when are they all ever ready?), the proactive pastor will move forward in implementing necessary changes and plans to create a healthy environment. This is not a blundering into something without counting the cost or knowing the facts. Proactive leadership means leading the church where it needs to go by doing what needs to be done to get there.

If you shy away from being a proactive, courageous leader then you

may not be ready to cultivate a healthy church. Bill Hybels in his book, *Courageous Leadership*, tells of a funeral he attended in a church he had once visited thirty years ago. There was still one Sunday morning service with still only 175 people in a community that had grown by more than 10,000 in those thirty years. He says,

“I think I would feel better about situations like this if I knew that church leaders had drafted bold plans, had done their best to implement them, and had prayed fervently for God’s blessing, but then for some reason had failed miserably to reach their goals. At least there would have been honest effort. But rarely is that the case. Most often there is a faithful core of sincere believers who would love to help their church have greater impact, if they just knew what to do. But they don’t. So they sit in their comfortable pews, frustrated as they watch a long line of pastors pass through the revolving doors, each devoted to God and willing to study and preach, but none, apparently, challenged or trained (or perhaps gifted) to exercise leadership.”¹¹

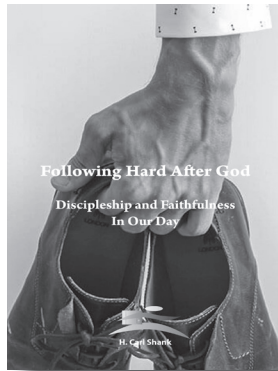
So, do you really want a healthy church? If so, it will require outside and objective evaluation, an understanding of what church health is and is not, a commitment to serious follow-through, and a courageous and proactive response to necessary changes.

Notes

1. The often quoted text in Matthew 16:18—“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (hell) will not overcome it”—does not refer to a particular, localized congregation but the “community” of the Lord Jesus Christ, the messianic community or the eschatological people of God. The term for “church” is an Aramaic word spoken by Jesus meaning “community” involving “all real Christians conceived of as an ideal congregation or assembly.” (cf. Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, Word Books, 1995, pp. 469ff and the older Baptist commentary by John Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Judson Press, 1886, pp. 358f.)
2. The term for “encouragement” is used 107 times in the New Testament. This is a multi-faceted word, pregnant with meaning. It could mean to “admonish, exhort, give incentive to” (Rom. 12:8; 1 Thes. 3:18), “to beg or entreat” (Matt. 8:5; 2 Cor. 12:18), “to console or comfort” (2 Cor. 1:4; 1 Thes. 4:18) or “to instruct or teach” (Tit. 1:9; 1 Tim. 6:2; 2 Thes. 2:17).

3. Reformed Baptist, Orthodox Presbyterian and Brethren in Christ. While seemingly contradictory in terms of theology, church history and ecclesiastical development, the truth for me has been that ministry in such diverse affiliations has enriched, deepened and given me a breadth of appreciation for all churches who claim to love, honor and serve Jesus Christ.
4. Christian A. Schwarz, "Church Development or Revival," *Paradigm Shift In The Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking*, Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999, pp. 259ff.
5. Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift*, p. 360. He says earlier in this study that "if just one of the quality characteristics is missing or poorly developed—for example 'functional structures'—it will not help us if we increase our strengths in other areas, such as 'passionate spirituality,' as the growth is not hindered by a defect in the area of spirituality, but by nonfunctional structures." (p. 251)
6. *Ibid.*
7. In *Coaching and Mentoring: Theory and Practice*, the authors maintain through historical research that the two terms are almost interchangeable in today's marketplace and usage. Robert Garvey, Paul Stokes, and David Megginson, "The Meaning of Coaching and Mentoring," Chapter 1, *Coaching and Mentoring: Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, 2009.
8. The paradigm shifts in business and the corporate world are outlined in Thomas G. Crane, *The Heart of Coaching: Using Transformational Coaching to Create A High Performance Coaching Culture*, FTA Press, 1998-2005, p. 16.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Get the Injoy Life Club tape, "The Courage to Lead," by Andy Stanley for a stimulating and informative message on courageous leadership. Order Tape Volume 18, Number 8 from Injoy Ministries, www.Injoy.com.
11. Bill Hybels, "Getting-It-Done Leadership," in *Courageous Leadership*, Zondervan, 2002, p. 67.

**Other Titles
by the Author**

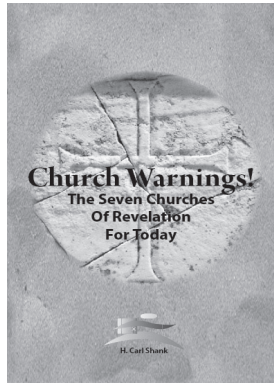


***Following Hard After God: Discipleship and Faithfulness In Our Day*, 2018.**

Faithfulness is hard to find in anyone or anything today. It is an “older” term, a word that seems risk-averse and not very creative. People claim that it blunts thrilling, excitement filled living and that top success in business or ministry cannot be found with it. We admire faithfulness at a distance, just so it is not the first thing that describes us and our faith journey. Faithfulness is at a premium today.

I am going to contend in this book that faith in Jesus is simply and profoundly faithfulness to Jesus. Faithfulness is what God wants in a follower of Christ. What I am at the end of my faith journey is what God looks at, not my moments of greatness or excitement or visionary declarations. God’s measuring stick is faithfulness.

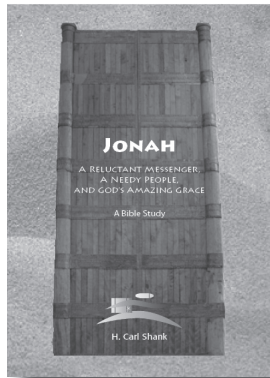
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A Bible study with Teacher Notes and discussion guide on the seven churches cited in Revelation 2–3. Christ’s messages to the seven churches of Revelation are as relevant today as they were then. Ephesus-like churches who have “forsaken their first love,” and churches like Pergamum and Thyatira which tolerate false teachers and teaching, as well as churches like Sardis and Laodicea who are lackadaisical about the faith are in danger. Churches like Smyrna and Philadelphia who have endured much persecution are told to hold on and overcome. To all seven, Jesus says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

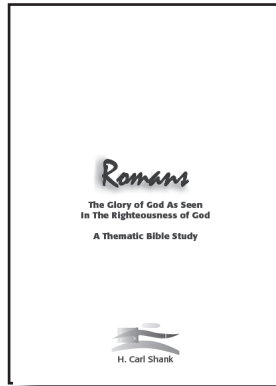
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A Bible study and discussion guide on the Old Testament story of Jonah. Grace transforms everything it touches. It does not discriminate, based on race, tradition, church experience, selectability, preference, timing or worth. There is no sin so great that grace cannot conquer and transform. There is no life so lost that grace cannot find and reclaim it. There is no one so wicked or unworthy that grace cannot totally change and renovate. This study of Jonah shows God's amazing, mighty and magnificent grace.

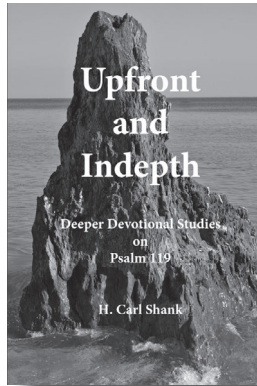
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Romans: The Glory of God As Seen in the Righteousness of God, A Thematic Bible Study, 2017.

A Bible study book on Romans with Leader's Notes. The study is arranged according to the themes of Paul's Letter to the Romans. "Righteousness From A Sovereign God," "Universal Guilt," "Gospel Benefits," "Sanctification: God's Picture of Righteousness In Our Lives," "Sovereignty: God's Sovereignty Leads to Grateful Praise and Gospel Love," "Understanding God's Sovereign Purposes," "God Is Not Through With Israel," "Living Sacrifices," "The Politically Correct Christian," and "Liberty Not License."

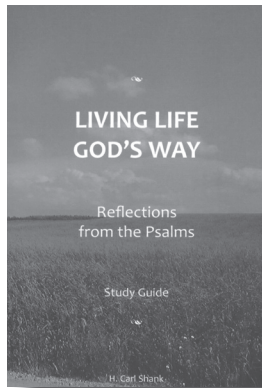
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Upfront and Indepth: Deeper Devotional Studies on Psalm 119, 2010.

This little exposition of Psalm 119 unlocks some of the deeper truths of the longest Psalm recorded in the Bible. Not for the tame, or for a quick read, this devotional study will challenge you to personally go places you have never visited within your own walk with God.

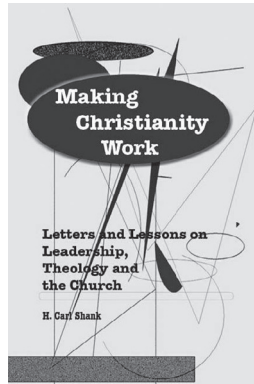
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Living Life God's Way: Reflections from the Psalms,
2016.

This is a study guide for selected Psalms from the Bible. It's fill-in-the blanks format is perfect for a small group study, or even a personal study of the Psalms. It references 67 of the most read Psalms and includes a special study of Psalm 1. A selection of "Psalms for Christmas" is included in the study.

Available from lulu.com and amazon.com and other booksellers. A *Leader's Guide* is also available.



Making Christianity Work: Letters and Lessons on Leadership, Theology and the Church, 2012.

Insights shared by the author from letters, emails and various mentoring situations involving a number of lay and professional ministry leaders over an almost forty year span. Sections include "Feelings About God and Life," "Knowing God Better," "Faith and Culture," "On Church Health and Growth," "On Church Difficulties," "On Preaching and Teaching," and "On Theology."

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