

Nehemiah: Fulfillment in Obedience

Messages and study aids by Timothy Darling

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Introduction: New Beginnings

Nehemiah is more than the story of a rebuilt wall; it is the story of a re-built nation. In it, advances are not just material, they are political, cultural and moral. The story's theme is fulfillment found in obedience to God.

For me, the story is a study in new beginnings. If I want to start over, seize a second chance, I have to do it in a way that is pleasing to God. I have to follow certain procedures and formulate certain priorities. If my second chance, my new beginning is going to gain me spiritual ground, I have to approach it in a way that has spiritual value, and that means obedience.

For many people, a second chance is all about leaving the first spoiled chance behind. If, however, we are to ask the question, "a second chance at what?" then we are left with a strong need to find a purpose to which our second chance should be directed. This goes far beyond leaving the rubble of the past behind. It delves into the hope and promise of building something new and significant.

These messages were preached at Norma Mennonite Church in 2003 and some in 2014. The observant person will notice that many of them make references to a new beginning. The 2003 messages were preached at the beginning of the year. Readers should note that the message from Nehemiah 9 includes an occasional Testimony. When this message was delivered, people from the congregation shared God's goodness with the rest of us. It is my prayer that all who read these messages find motivation and instruction for making new beginnings through obedience to God in their own lives.

Nehemiah: Renewal of a nation

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Pray to begin anew

Nehemiah 1

The Book of Nehemiah begins in Persia. Some of you may even remember Persia. Since it's height of power, it has passed through many hands including the Greeks during the time of Alexander the Great and the Muslims after the time of Mohammed. Iran became the official name of Persia in 1935, although, now it bears almost no resemblance to the Persia of Nehemiah's day.

During the time of Daniel, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, while the Jews were still under Babylonian control. It was the Persian, Cyrus II who began allowing the Jews to return to Judea. Many changes had taken place since the Jew's left home:

- The Jews had been away for 70 years. A whole generation had been born and passed away. These were the grandchildren of the original people taken away.
- The area in and around Jerusalem had been resettled by local Canaanite tribes so that the returning Jews had to contend with a settlement of foreigners before they could reestablish their homeland.
- Many Jews had settled in Babylonian and Persian territory and decided not to return
- The Hebrew language had fallen into disuse and most of the Jews now spoke Aramaic the language of their exile captors. Many of the younger people did not even know the language in which their own Scripture was written.

- The practice of the Mosaic Law had collapsed in the absence of the temple and a centralized priesthood
- The center of the dominating government had moved from the Euphrates Valley to the more eastern area of Medea where the Persians were from

When we come to the Book of Nehemiah, Ezra had traveled to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and also began many religious reforms. It is quite likely that Nehemiah's brother was in Susa carrying one of the letters quoted in Ezra. These two books were written about the same time and overlap in the time periods they cover.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I

confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah 1:1-11 (NIV)

It must have been discouraging to live in Ezra and Nehemiah's time. Both men led great reconstruction projects in Jerusalem. Both men dealt with the discouragement of the people who were doing the work.

Imagine being one of the people doing the clearing work after 9/11. Of course the World Trade Center buildings were a lot bigger than even the walls surrounding the ancient city of Jerusalem. But we must remember that Nehemiah and Ezra did not have bulldozers and cranes. They did all their work by hand.

There were places the rubble was impassable along the wall.

These people had left the oppression of living in exile only to find their home city occupied by local settlers and the ruins of their city totally unrepaired.

Imagine finding out that your long lost grand-father had a home in a city in East Germany. You have just inherited it. All your life you knew about the city and had read about it and only now you learn that the your grand-dad owned property there and it now belongs to you.

You return to the city only to find that it was completely demolished in the bombings during World War II. What is more, the house you inherited, though at one time it was a fine house made of stone is now laying in ruins. Imagine walking around the city trying to figure out what to do. There are no stores. No people who are willing to help. And a community of squatters is living on your land. They may even have a legal claim to it since they have been living there so long.

That is how Nehemiah's brother must have felt.

He traveled through lands of desert and enemies

To find his home

Only to reach the wreck of a city

His father had described as a sparkling jewel

He stumbled through the rubble

And foraged the ruins

Looking for a lost heritage

Finding only fallen stone

And stirring up the dust of dying memories

What robbery and loss

What sadistic deprivation

I've found my mothers house

But it no longer stands
Her lamp and chair are long looted
The foundations sit empty
The wind blows the sand across the open floor
To cover the footprints of my family
Wiping out the memory of their lives
Now they are gone
All they had is mine
But it too is taken
I have nothing left

We should remember that this is not abstract national pride on Nehemiah's and his brother's part. According to Nehemiah 2:3 his family had lived in Jerusalem for generations. This is like your parents talking about the fields that used to lay wide open where now there are housing developments cropping up like the corn that used to be planted there. Worse yet, this is like the abandoned and ramshackle strip-mall that now sits where your grandmother's farmhouse stood. Nehemiah was not mourning the loss of the capital of his ancestral people. He was mourning the loss of his homestead.

Loss is an important part of life. All of us experience it in a number of ways, many times.

- We lose family members
- We lose homes
- We lose jobs
- We lose our self respect
- We lose heart

We are deprived of something that means a great deal to us and the loss is irretrievable.

The only thing we can do in times like this is to salvage what we can and start on something new. That

something may resemble the old, but it cannot replace it. It may fill some of the same needs, but it cannot fill the void.

I remember feeling that when my grandfather died. I was half a world away and a week late for the funeral when I got the news. I spent the day thinking about the questions I could never ask him and the stories I could never hear.

I cannot have my grandfather back. But I can ask questions of others and listen to their stories. It will not replace the memories and experiences that I let slip through my fingers by ignoring my mother's dad, but it will save me from that same experience with others in the future. By asking those same questions of others, I have learned to know them in ways I never would have known them otherwise.

We are beginning a new year and many of you would like to begin it with the restoration of what has been good in your life. We are haunted by the aphorism, "you can never go back." We are convinced that what was once great in our lives can never be again.

Keep in mind that Nehemiah and his brother are not mourning for the loss of a golden age, they are mourning for the continued ruination of something that could be alive and active in their lifetimes.

Maybe it is true, you never can go back. Maybe our lives are like a plaster wall. You can always tell where it has been repaired. Nothing quite covers up the scar. Researchers can still tell the differences in Jerusalem's wall from the different times it has been repaired and rebuilt.

But what we can do, is fix the wall so the rain can't come in. We can make it serviceable. Maybe we can

even tear the cosmetic part of the wall completely down and start all over. But we are not called to put up with something that is less than good.

Some of you are alarmed by things that have taken root in your lives.

- Sin
- Trouble
- Sickness
- Habits
- Conflict
- Apathy

Whatever the thing that you place next to God and find it wanting, it can be repaired. God has placed all His resources at your disposal. James said, “you do not have, because you do not ask.”

Have you ever built a puzzle and came close to the end. You look at the small pile of pieces in your hand and none of them seem to fit. Immediately we look in the box to see if we left any pieces there. Then we search the floor to find what we may have dropped.

When we look at our lives like an incomplete puzzle and look at the pieces we have left and none of them fit, the place to start looking is exactly the same. We must find ourselves on our knees either literally or in spirit, humbled before God and looking for those things that can make our lives complete.

All repairs in our lives must begin with prayer. We cannot hope to accomplish anything aside from prayer. “Unless the LORD build the house, they labor in vain who build.” If you have been alarmed by something in your life and you would like to start anew Nehemiah gives us a pattern to follow:

Remember who God is

Jesus began His great sample prayer: “Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name.”

Nehemiah begins much the same way.

great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, *Nehemiah 1:5 (NIV)*

Whenever God spoke to the Jews, He usually prefaced His words with: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt.” He did this to remind them of what Nehemiah is letting God know – that he remembers. God is good to those who obey Him. He keeps His word.

We are not dealing with a god made of stone, wood, metal or even money. We are dealing with a living breathing Spirit of power who wants to help. We are dealing with the Creator of the Universe.

How do you reinforce a proper assessment of God in your mind?

Make a list of the things you are sure He has done for you. Word it simply and in short sentences.

- God healed my sister
- God kept my family through the difficult years of my father’s business starting up
- God led me through the steps to come to the place I am now
- God preserved me during a time of violence in the community where I lived

Write them on a card that you can keep in your Bible or in a book you are currently reading, or to mark your

place in the TV Guide. Keep them where you can see them often and remember.

Sing the songs you learn here. The praise and worship songs and the old hymns we sing in our services are not just a thing we do to fill time. They are a tool you can take home. They are the expressions of great truths about God phrased in memorable music and verse so that you can easily recall them and use them to remind yourself of who God is and of what He is capable. Sing them to yourself in the car and don't worry about what the other drivers think. That too is a form of prayer. It is praise to God.

Remember who you are

Verses 6 and 7 also represent a part of what Jesus told us to pray: "Forgive us our sins."

God keeps His promises. But most of His promises assume that you have been faithful to your covenant with Him. You have not been. And neither have I.

Let's face it we sin.

- We are self righteous
- We gossip
- We lust
- We try to hard to please men instead of God
- We are materialistic

As long as we are human we will have these urges. Some of them we picked up from our parents and they are a deeply ingrained part of our behavior that we can barely recognize as sin, but when we are honest we see them for what they are and we throw them on the ground before the throne and get forgiveness for our indulgence.

Do it. God will forgive. He holds forgiveness out freely. It is one of His great specialties. It is one thing He has paid dearly to be able to do. This is the whole reason Jesus came to die.

Our sins can be forgiven on an instant's notice. Just take it to him. You don't have to tell me or anybody else about your sin in order to be forgiven by God. The Bible says:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

1 Timothy 2:5 (NIV)

God may demand that you apologize to a person or pay restitution to someone whom you have injured, but nobody can give you freedom from sin except Him. It is appropriate to take these things to Him first, sometimes, to Him alone.

Remember what God has said

Nehemiah remembers two things that God said in His prayer:

- God warned the people that He would scatter them if they were unfaithful
- He promised them that He would gather them back if they returned to Him

God has made promises to you. Look up these verses to find some wonderful promises:

- 1 John 1.9
- Exodus 20.12
- Matthew 28.20
- Luke 6.38
- John 3.30
- John 10.10

- John 20.31
- Acts 1.8
- James 1.5

These are only a few of the great promises of God. I encourage you to look for others as you read, especially in the New Testament. The most often repeated promise that we are called upon to remember is the Eternal life God has promised those who follow Him. In your prayers to God for a new beginning, let Him know that you know how good He is, because He has promised good things.

Ask for what you need in keeping with what He said

Then simply ask.

It doesn't have to be a long complicated prayer. In fact, Martin Luther said, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer." God isn't impressed with long phrasing or thees and thous. He isn't impressed with liturgical sounding aphorisms. All he wants to hear is your heart. What is it you want. Jesus said the pharisees thought they would be heard because of their many words. Don't be fooled. Just state what you want.

David said if we delight ourselves in the LORD He will give us the desires of our hearts.

Jesus said: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."
John 15:7 (NIV)

These aren't bubble gum machine promises. They do not say we can have anything we want. They do say that if we align ourselves with God's will we can have that freely. They remind us to remember who we are and who God is and how we measure up. Then look at

what God has promised and ask for it. That we can have. No problem.

Do you want a new start?

- It begins on your knees
- It begins by seeking the face of God and seeing all things new.

So that I can rebuild it

Nehemiah 2:1-8

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? 8And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” And because the

gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. (NIV)

Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and burnt its gates, leveled the temple and carried her people away. For seventy years Israel remained in captivity. After the Persians conquered Babylon, Cyrus, the new king allowed many Israelites to return home to live and work at rebuilding the Temple. The returnees began on the Temple but soon left that work to build their own homes and farm their land.

The prophets of that day gave them a boost and work began again and the Temple was completed. In our passage today, about 90 years after Israel first returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, about 160 years after they first went to Babylon, Nehemiah receives word that in all that time no one has done any significant work on the walls or gates of the city.

To us that doesn't seem like any big deal. New York is a great city and it doesn't have any walls. None of today's great cities have walls. But in those days they were a great advantage.

Walls stood as a defense on several levels. Of course they were defense against full scale battles, but that wasn't their only function. Walls also stood against the citizens of a city and petty raiders. Cities were population centers and pockets of wealth. In Ezra and Nehemiah we read about several local groups coming to harass the people working on the temple, the walls and homes. As long as the citizens of Jerusalem were living as a rough collection of homes on a hill they were open to violence and oppression by these long time, established residents of the area. But if they had walls they could be easily protected against these local

problems. That is why these groups so actively opposed the construction projects of Jerusalem.

On the most practical level. The walls were protection against wild animals. This is something we don't really realize the need for either.

When I was in High School, St. Mary's College for Women in Raleigh shut down for a day. Somehow a bear had wandered onto the campus and everything had to be canceled until the bear could be brought under control and evacuated.

Bears, lions, leopards, hyenas, Jackals and wolves all were common in Palestine back then, though some of these animals no longer live in that area. City walls stood as barriers between thousands of people and severe tragedy on a daily basis.

Walls were more than a symbol of national power, although they were that, they were practical measures of self defense. Farms had fences or hedges, smaller versions of walls that kept out all but the most determined animals, but it took major barriers to protect against people.

This is a new beginning for Israel. They have sinned, have gone through their punishment and have come out a purified people. They were purified in that:

- ▶ Their sin had been dealt with
- ▶ Many "bad apples" had been culled from the bushel when they went into captivity
- ▶ Only those who wanted to return to Israel were going back.

Their major sin was idol worship

God told Israel way back in Moses' day that if they followed other gods, He would send them into exile. So when they followed false gods for hundreds of years he sent them into a land where they would have to deal with false gods constantly.

When they experienced the destruction of the Temple and separation from their homeland they realized exactly what they had given up and many determined to get it back.

Not everybody went to Babylon

A number of people were left behind. They proudly assumed that they were better than those carried away. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God assured them that He had removed the good figs from the basket and had left only the rotten ones. The people left behind were the problem. God was preserving those carried away. In the end, those left behind went away to Egypt and their identity as God's people was washed out.

Not everybody in Babylon came back

After the 70 years were up and waves of people began to return to Judah, many people did not want to return. Their lives in Babylon had been profitable and comfortable and they saw no reason to leave. In one case, Ezra had to do some special recruiting to get people to go back.

Now the returnees in Nehemiah's time who are standing around the ruined city of Jerusalem trying to figure out what to do first are redeemable, purified, and motivated. This is what Nehemiah has to work with

when he goes back to Jerusalem with the king's permission.

Notice the truths of the text:

- Nehemiah was broken hearted by the needs of his homeland
- Nehemiah bathed his venture in prayer
- Nehemiah was afraid of the implications of his need
- Nehemiah was honest in his assessment
- Nehemiah asked the king for exactly what he wanted
- Nehemiah asked for the resources to do the job properly

Chapter 1 of this book is taken up with Nehemiah hearing of the need and praying for about its resolution. The first half of chapter 2 is his approach to king Artaxerxes for permission to tackle the huge project that meeting Jerusalem's needs implied.

Nehemiah is going to do something about it. He has petitioned the king of Persia for permission to begin the task. He has seen a need and he wants to meet that need.

The prayer in chapter 1 is a model to be followed in its own right. It is full of humility, repentance, and deference to God's will. I will not go into chapter 1. It is a full blown message on prayer by itself. It is an exposition on Nehemiah's spiritual approach to the problem.

What I am looking at is Nehemiah's practical approach to the problem he met.

I used to have a pastor who said repeatedly. We should pray as if everything depended on God and

work like everything depended on us. I don't know if I agree with that philosophy, but it sure describes what is necessary sometimes. For one thing, everything does depend on God and all our work is in vain if we are not aligned with His plan. But that looks like what Nehemiah is doing here. He was acting in accord with God's plan, so the work he was doing was his part of the resolution God had designed.

Have you ever stood where Nehemiah stands? Have you ever seen something you love crumble and fall and have you ever been heart broken over the process?

I have felt that way about the Church. Not Norma Mennonite Church, but the church at large. Many of you have seen some of the recent TV specials. In these specials, people who have claimed to be Christians have stood in public and cast doubt on the Bible.

No wonder people don't want to be Christians. Why should I accept a book that those who know it best don't believe? Why should I embrace a faith that those who hold it don't trust?

- ▶ I find myself wanting to see the Church become a rallying army for the Kingdom of God.
- ▶ I find myself wanting to see the old spiritual strongholds rebuilt.
- ▶ I find myself wanting to see a strong belief in God's Word the rule rather than the exception.
- ▶ I find myself wanting to see more and more believers who have a passion for their faith and seeing it spread and strengthened in others

The church didn't get in the shape it is in over night. Let's look for a few minutes at the way the church has developed:

The first 500 years

of Christianity was marked by debate and purification of doctrine. Many false teachings arose (that we can still find echoes of in today's false teachings) and were debated until a consensus of the truth was reached. In those days the New Testament was compiled, the doctrine of the Trinity was clarified, the Church moved west and established churches in the most remote countryside villages.

This period also saw the establishment of Christianity as an official religion. Some have seen this as a positive turning point in our faith, but it is possible that it took away the threat that kept the Church more pure.

The 2nd 500 years

marked the continuation of the growth of the church and the gathering of power in Rome. Although the Church was growing the centralized administration of the church was gaining power and becoming corrupt. The central power of the church was increasingly political and often military.

The 3rd 500

years brings the disintegration of the central church in Rome. At one time there were as many as 3 popes and the Church was now at war with itself as well as with neighboring countries and empires. The church was firmly rooted in all parts of Europe, but as a political entity more than a spiritual one. Any real spiritual work was done purely on the local level and only at the close of this half century do we see the hierarchy of the

Church tiring of the internal debate and the office of Pope being reestablished.

Unfortunately, on the local level, the damage was done. Corruption beginning at the powerful top had trickled its way down and the church at the local level became corrupt.

During the last 500 years

priests like Martin Luther and Menno Simons tired of the hypocrisy of the spiritual leadership and began the process of cleansing we know as the Reformation. We are products of that movement. Although the Catholic Church was reunited, many local churches found common ground and doctrine that was inconsistent with the party line and broke away.

The last 200 years

has developed this movement to its natural conclusion. If anybody can determine right doctrine then anybody can start a church.

For the last 200 years in the face of Scientific theory and discovery the church has struggled to maintain its integrity. Some have retreated into extreme conservatism; some have married the popular philosophies and have become intellectually indistinguishable from their atheist counterparts.

The rest of the Protestant Church has fought to find a balance - recognition of the truth as revealed in nature while embracing the revealed truth of scripture. In our case we have to say that we do not yet have the capacity to understand nature correctly and so we rely on Scripture for the truth and maintain that Scientific explanations still have to catch up.

The result has been the split of the protestant movement into more and more denominations. This is not a bad thing - it just is. The unfortunate part of this development is that so many times, minor issues divide instead of major issues uniting the Church. But we must recognize the need for different people to worship differently and the peace that is maintained in allowing for differences of opinion in this way.

The Mennonite Church

is trying to deal with this fragmentation. In the first years of the century, a great movement moved all the Mennonite churches of the United States into a single organization. This would have some advantages as long as that organization holds to the purity of Scripture, but many of us, including myself, our Bishop and our Moderator, have serious doubts. The new organization seems to be paving the way to allow itself to be incredibly liberal. The Lancaster Conference of which we are a part is deep in lively discussion about whether we should join this organization. The over all feeling, as I see it, is that we will not.

Centralization is not the answer to our problems. It would make us richer and able to do more from our organizational offices. But we must remember that

In the Church, there is no strength in numbers of wealth. There is only strength in Christ.

There is a more realistic way to see the wounds of the faithful Church healed. That is through our public identity. Who are we? Are we Christians, are we Mennonites? Is there a difference? Why do we choose one label over another?

Dawn and I went to the last Leadership Conference where the Key Note Speaker spoke about his home church. He sees the Church as growing and alive. He did not attribute that characteristic to any special programs or strategies. He attributed it to the identity of the congregation. He described them as Christian first and Mennonite Second.

I was recently at a district meeting where the Moderator addressed the New Jersey pastors. He said something like this:

I'm a follower of Christ first, and only after that am I a Mennonite, and that is negotiable. If Mennonites begin doing something that is inconsistent with being a follower of Christ, I will be something else, but I will remain a follower of Christ.

That is what we as a church and as individuals must determine. We will be followers of Christ. Mennonites are traditionally peace making and baptized as believers and that distinguishes us from other followers of Christ who have different teachings. That's ok. The day may come when the majority of Mennonites don't care about those things. The day may also come when other things are more important to Mennonites than being followers of Christ - but we as individuals must determine that we will be followers of Christ and we will never be anything ahead of that.

Jesus Christ and His word are the hallmarks of spiritual well being. The only way to the Father is through Him. The most powerful thing we own is the Word of God that teaches us this central truth. If we give up that, we have relinquished our weapon to the powers of Darkness.

When I was in the Navy I was assigned a weapon during security alerts. During a security alert we were to find intruders, identify security breaches and then close them up. Everybody was suspect. Every single person on the ship had to be suspected as a spy until the security alert was called off.

During a security alert you were to surrender your weapon to nobody. Nobody!

If the captain of the Ship walked up and asked you for your weapon, you were not to give it to him. You obeyed his commands other than that, but if it turned out that he was the security breach you had to be able to apprehend him.

One time, on security alert, I was in the missile house with the Command Duty Officer. He gave the order to call off the security alert, and before the order could be followed, he turned to me and said, "let me see your weapon."

I almost handed it to him. I pulled back just in time. The only person to whom I was allowed to give my weapon was the gunnery officer and that was after the order was issued to the entire ship to call off the security alert. The Command Duty Officer just glared at me. He was testing me. I passed, but only barely.

God has given us a weapon, the Sword of the Spirit that is the Word of God. This is the only weapon we physically have against the powers of Satan. When we compromise the truth of this book, we are relinquishing our weapon to the enemy. We must never do that. This Book teaches us how to be followers of Christ

- ▶ Not Protestants
- ▶ Not Mennonites
- ▶ Not good citizens

- ▶ Not good republicans

Followers of Christ. If we remain faithful to that we will be able to see our way clear to obedience. If we are good Christians, we will be good Mennonites. If that correlation breaks down, so be it, but we must remain good Christians first.

I am issuing a challenge this morning. I would like to see our congregation make a three fold commitment:

- ▶ To stand for His Word no matter what
- ▶ To follow Him no matter what others do or say
- ▶ To work to see His kingdom enlarged and strengthened

That is going to mean different things to different people.

- ▶ It may mean getting to know God's word better
- ▶ It may mean a firmer commitment to the work of His church
- ▶ It may mean a change of lifestyle or habits

I would like to invite anyone who is willing to take this challenge to come forward this morning for a prayer of commitment.

It is my prayer that this church will be a pocket of faith that will launch us into this year and the next stage of the Church's history as a force to be reckoned with. Like Nehemiah rebuilding the walls, I would like to see us rebuilding the church starting with our own congregation. I would like to see commitment that stands the forces of culture. I would like to see us moving forward purposefully and deliberately - praying for strength in every way from our God. Would you be willing to take this challenge of commitment this morning?

- ▶ To stand for His Word no matter what
- ▶ To follow Him no matter what others do or say
- ▶ To work to see His kingdom enlarged and strengthened

Giving God everything you have and everything you can get

Nehemiah 2:1-8

In chapter 1 of Nehemiah, we see Nehemiah on a new beginning. He starts where all new endeavors should start ... with prayer

- He recognizes God for who He is
- He recognizes himself and his people for who they are
- He remembers what God said
- He states in simple and clear terms what it is he wants from God

What Nehemiah wanted from God was no easy thing. He wanted to talk to the king, and he wanted the king's favor when he approached him. He was going to need Divine intervention or this whole thing would never get off the ground.

The next thing we see Nehemiah doing after his prayer is taking everything he has and putting it at God's disposal for the endeavor to which he has been called.

His time

Nehemiah waited 4 months before he broached this subject with the king.

For that reason the presence of the queen at this audience is important. The queens were very influential in ancient times. Particularly the mothers of the heirs to the throne. It has been suggested that this woman was the king's chief wife so she was probably the most influential woman in the kingdom. Perhaps the king's mother had more influence.

What the presence of the queen tells us is that the king was in a good mood. We can tell this because of Esther 5-7. Even the queen had a hard time getting in to see the king. He had to want someone to be there in order for them to approach him.

Nehemiah and Esther went through similar events.

- They both had an important request to make to the king
- They both were very close to the king
- They both were afraid to make the request initially
- They both needed the king's indulgence to even mention what their request was

You know, there is a consistency in the way the Persian monarchy worked. People who claim the Bible is full of contradictions need to take note of the immeasurable historical value in the Bible. This picture of court life in Persia that has such a wonderful confirmation may not have been possible outside the Biblical records. They present the historical facts with a warmth and a humanity you cannot get from official ancient records where kings simply made grocery lists of their exploits.

We may be surprised initially that Nehemiah waited so long to say what he had to say, but in light of the rigamarole that Esther went through to state her case, we can see why he may have waited. After all, she was the queen, he was only a servant.

Nehemiah was the king's cup bearer. That meant more than standing beside the king holding his cup till he wanted a drink. There may have been more than one cup bearer, and Nehemiah may not have even been the most important one. He would definitely have been a trusted part of the throne room staff. According to Dr.

Edwin Yamauchi (Expositors Commentary), Nehemiah's job as cup-bearer gives us some important insight into his character and responsibilities:

- He would have been well-trained in court etiquette (cf. Dan 1:4-5).
- He was probably a handsome individual (cf. Dan 1:4, 13, 15; Jos. Antiq. XVI, 230 [viii.1]).
- He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Qamma 92b) states: "The wine belongs to the master but credit for it is due to his cupbearer."
- He would have to be a convivial companion, willing to lend an ear at all times.
- He would have great influence as one with the closest access to the king, able to determine who was able see his master.
- Above all Nehemiah had to be one who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king. After all, Xerxes was killed in his own bedchamber by a member of the court staff.

One other qualification that occurs to me is courage, because of the great danger of the position. Nehemiah had to taste the wine just in case someone was trying to poison the king.

All of these things combine to tell us that Nehemiah might have had the personality of a sympathetic bartender with the looks of a model and the bearing of a statesman and the bravery of an explorer. But just by looking at this chapter we can tell that he was around the king often enough to be recognized for his attitude and well liked.

There are other things that served him equally well when it came to the important task that God had laid on his heart.

A love for his home

This may be the most important of the assets that Nehemiah brought to this venture. It is certainly the most foundational. All that had to happen for Nehemiah to get started on this life changing path was for his brother to come and tell him about the situation at home.

The reason this is most foundational is it determined not only that Nehemiah was going to approach this project with great energy and passion, but with a deep care. It was something very close to his heart. The first chapter quotes for us the eloquent prayer that Nehemiah brought before God, but it also lets us know that he fasted “for some days.”

Many times we look desperately for God’s will. We search in every corner for what He has for our lives. Do you know that God is most likely to call you into something that is very important to you already? Do you realize that He may have a ministry for you involving something you love deeply?

Remember the quote from David: “Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

The gifts of the Spirit are God’s way of taking your built-in personality and shaping it to His purposes. He takes those things that you already have a heart for and pushes you toward them for the glory of His kingdom.

Some people think they could never be missionaries because they are such home-bodies. They may be right. Possibly not, but if God has given you a heart for hearth and home, then He probably has something He wants you to do right there.

That's what he did to Nehemiah. He took a love that he already had for his homestead and tapped it for His purposes. Nehemiah could have looked at the risks and decided that he would rather not get involved, but God had pushed him in a direction he was already inclined to go. Now, though, he is going for God's purposes instead of his own.

- If you love your family
- If you love your community
- If you love your school
- If you love your work

It would be a great sin to not see that interest and personality trait as the gift and calling of God on your life. God does not want you to simply exist in that world, he wants you to change it for Him.

His attitude

Here is what we know about Nehemiah's attitude around the king: "I had not been sad in his presence before."

Service with a smile was his credo. Remember that Nehemiah was possibly a confidante of the king. He was around when the king got drunk, which if the first chapter of Esther is any indication, did not always result in the most rational behavior. But in Nehemiah's position: "The customer is always right," had life and death implications. It could not have been easy for Nehemiah to say that he had never been sad in the

presence of the king, but it must have been true, because the king noticed and became concerned.

In our society it is considered our right to wear our feelings on our shoulders. It is considered “honest” to say exactly how you feel at all times.

I want to suggest to you that this is not the best course of action. Some of you may think that I am advocating dishonesty, but I am not. Here is what I am saying.

Nehemiah’s job required him to be there for the king if the king wanted him to bring something to him or take down a note or let somebody in.

Nehemiah’s problems were not the king’s.

The king did not have him there to attract attention to his own problems but to solve the king’s.

- Remember that your attitude comes through in body language
- The purpose of language is to communicate
- If a person communicates about himself all the time and does not take an interest in others, we say that person is self absorbed or selfish
- What does our face communicate?
- Something we are saying about ourselves?
- Or something we want to say to others?

People often say they don’t care what their boss thinks of them, their attitude should not matter as long as the work gets done.

First, it does matter. We are not our own, we are bought with a price. We do not represent ourselves but our Master.

Second, that is a backward approach to work. We are there to do the work and to contribute to the overall goals of the organization. If our attitude

- causes others discomfort
- negatively affects customers
- Does not focus our attention on the task at hand
- Is not generally encouraging to those around us

We are not solving the boss's problems but creating a new one. I am not saying that we all have to be bouncing off the wall happy all the time. What I am saying is that unless you are self employed, your problems are not your boss's. If you are self employed, your problems are not your customers'.

If something is bothering you so much that it attracts the attention of your boss, it should be the exception rather than the rule. It should inspire concern rather than frustration.

The fact that Nehemiah had personal concerns that showed up at work made the king take notice.

If our personal concerns are always present with us at work, it will not take long for them to fade into the background of sand in the gears of the machine. The boss will take your moodiness or constant crisis or negativity into account

- and when we want it to elicit a response of
- What is wrong?
- It will instead elicit a response of
- What else is new?

What difference does all this make?

In the special forces they say: "sleep is a weapon."

In the kingdom of God you could say, “a positive attitude is a tool.”

Why should your boss, or coworkers, or customers want to hear a thing about your faith if it was not strong enough to help you focus on serving their needs long enough to get your work done and make their lives easier? Isn't serving others part of what our faith is about?

For Nehemiah, his attitude formed the foundation for a pleasant relationship with the king that made the king willing to help him instead of telling him to focus on the job at hand.

His job training

Mind you, cup-bearer may have been an important job, but the cupbearer was still just a servant. This was not a job you could just resign from. Money, effort and trust went into establishing the cup bearers. So Nehemiah's training gave him skills he never would have had on his own.

What has your job trained you for? Your trustees regularly use their hard won professional skills to enhance and maintain the property where we worship. Others in this congregation have done the same thing in different ways. They have used the professions that God prepared them for to His glory and the furtherance of His kingdom.

What skills do you have?

I remember one guy who went to Liberty who asked himself that question. If you know college students at all they are notorious for having no skills at all. He felt that way. He wanted to express his appreciation to Dr. Falwell for the opportunity to train and learn.

This guy had worked at a car lot washing cars. So he lined up a day when he went to Dr. Falwell, got his keys and took his truck to a car wash. He did the deluxe job too,

- degreasing the engine
- Washing underneath
- Vacuuming the trunk
- Washing the windows
- Armor All

The whole 9 yards. His point in telling the story is, there is something you can do. It may seem small to you, but any effort expended in the work of the LORD gains returns in its application. It may forward a business, or it may build an eternal kingdom.

I know of a church that requires that you make yourself available for specific ministry before you can become a member. I like that actually. Some folks, of course, say there is nothing they can do. In one case there was a mechanic who thought he had nothing to offer. The person helping him out said:

“hey, we have single working mothers who need car maintenance. You can help them.”

The mechanic did car maintenance for free for people who were struggling to make ends meet. There is always something you can do.

Here is a way to figure out what you can do:

Think about your resume’

We often fill out job applications or resume’s to our greatest advantage. We should never lie on these documents, but we should think about every skill we have acquired in order to give a good picture of our capabilities.

When you look at the job skills you have listed on your resume or your job application ask yourself this question,

How can this skill be used for ministry purposes?

- Is there a way the church could benefit from this skill?
- Is there an individual in the church who could better do their ministry with my help along these lines?
- Is there an unsaved person whom I could serve by using this skill and so express the love of Christ?

We may not be a Nehemiah. We may not have job skills that equip us to rebuild a city. But whatever job skills we have can translate into the work of God's kingdom here on earth.

Federal grants and recommendations

Of course we are not called to run the ministry of God on federal grants. However, that is the equivalent of what Nehemiah did. He obtained the resources of a country for a country sized problem. According to J. Oswald Sanders in *Spiritual Leadership*, the chapter entitled "Nehemiah the Leader," in this he showed amazing foresight. He was thinking about the details as well as the big picture.

It is important for us to think ahead and gain the help of others when we need it. We are not personally up to every task. Sometimes we need resources that we do not have. God knows that, and He expects you to use the resources you have at your disposal, not just the ones you have in your possession.

Occasionally we will be in a meeting of the council and a question will arise as to the delay of the payment of

one of our Missions goals. Perhaps we had intended to support Cumberland Christian School for a certain amount, but it has not yet been paid. If the question is raised and Everett is there to answer it, inevitably the answer will be something like this:

“A matching grant was being made available to the school that would double every contribution at a particular time. I waited till that was in effect.”

In this way, Everett makes the church’s resources for other ministries stretch further than we can accomplish on our own. He is using all the resources at his command to do the work God has called him to do.

Your business contacts may constitute a resource, keep your ear to the ground for opportunities to use the job God has given you for His glory. Notice that Nehemiah is not exploiting his position. He waited for God’s timing and the king’s willingness to help. We should be just as careful.

We have, on occasion held events in the fire hall. We were able to do this because some of our members have access to the fire hall and they used that access for the work of God. This is the kind of thing I’m talking about.

That kind of resourcing extends our reach beyond our personal means and into the means that others have made available to us.

His own involvement

At last we see that Nehemiah was not standing up for a cause or drawing attention to a movement. We see that he did not have a lot of his own money, he may not have had any, in fact, he may have been as much

a slave as any Israelite in Egypt. What he did do, is ask to be sent. He invested his own efforts.

- He was wise to his timing
- He took years of cultivating a good attitude
- He took the skills God provided for him
- He took the contacts and outside resources that were available to Him

And he used them to build a wall for Jerusalem that still stands today. That wall was the calling of God on his life and He saw it as service to God.

What God is calling you to do may seem somewhat mundane. It may not be spectacular. It may be something that is very close to home. God doesn't want you just to give to the cause. He wants you to invest yourself.

- When the church has events
- When individuals have needs
- When a project is underway
- When your neighbors or coworkers could use a hand

Remember, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it to the glory of God."

Everything you have and everything you can get comes from and belongs to God.

Give it back to him.

Lessons in Work

Nehemiah 3

Nehemiah 3 is one of those chapters that we come to and sometimes want to skip over. There are so many names and so many geographical details it seems dry as dust to us.

But you should realize, this is a historian's gold mine. This chapter teaches us more about the layout of ancient Jerusalem than any other place in the Bible. It is because of this chapter that Archeology in Jerusalem can be accurate and some important historical places can even be identified.

Historical Jerusalem is not very big. This wall was only about 2 miles in total length. What it enclosed can be measured in acres rather than miles. But the history of the city is so old that identifying things is a real challenge.

But it gets better. Many of the names in Nehemiah cross over and you can read about them in Ezra too. That gives us glimpses into the personalities and values of the people who pioneered the resettling of Israel.

They were a hardy bunch. Those who returned to rebuild the wall were heavily involved in a work of God that found it's expression in another person: Nehemiah.

So who are these people and what can we learn from them about working for God?

Leaders have to set the example

Verse 1 tells us Eliashib the High Priest helped. Some people would have considered him too important to do labor like this. Not only this, he worked on the northern face of the wall. This is an area that was especially subject to attack. All of Jerusalem's attackers started at the North wall.

He teaches us that nobody is too important to do their part in the work God has called them to. Not only that, if a person can be considered a leader, he has to be out front taking the brunt of the risk. He cannot hide and rest on his laurels.

This is a lesson the Nobles of Tekoa should have learned. Verses 5 and 27 tell a sorry story. Some (probably of royal blood) thought they were too good to work. The Nobles of Tekoa shifted their work on to others that they held in less regard. These two verses tell us that the common people of Tekoa wound up doing two sections. Their leaders would not help. We can learn two lessons from this:

- The lesson of the High Priest is reinforced. Nobody is too good to help
- The common people of Tekoa teach us that the work is too important for us to allow it to go undone, just because some people won't pull their load

Many of you may be familiar with David and Karen Mains of Mainstay Ministries. These folks are internationally recognized authors and Bible teachers. David Mains teaches pastors how to teach. I'm not talking about seminary students who don't know anything to begin with, I'm talking about experienced pastors who have been in their pulpits for years. His organization conducts seminars that provide materials

for them to use in their churches and they are used by hundreds, maybe thousands. You may have heard of them. They are called the Fifty Day Spiritual Adventures. We will be doing one here in the future.

Mr. and Mrs. Mains make it a point to help out in the kitchen at their church. They don't want anyone to get the idea that they feel they are above a little physical work. They know they are not and they do their best to do their part.

Where we work may not be important as the fact that we are working

- Some were not from the place they were working
- Some built sections next to their homes

At times we judge what we should do based on our own vested interest. That may or may not be appropriate. You will remember at the beginning of chapter 2 the Bible indicates that God nudged Nehemiah in a direction he was already inclined to go. This was because Nehemiah already had a great love for Jerusalem and God was simply assigning him to care for a place he loved.

This should not be confused with caring for something in which we have a vested interest.

Dawn and I have been examining our retirement packages. In examining them we discovered that in a very small and round about way, we have invested in Rite Aid.

Now I have no particular attachment to Rite Aid and I don't shop there very often. Some people might say that I should. I have a vested interest in the success of the company.

Compare that to a nice pair of grandparents who have just had a Rite Aid open up in their neighborhood. Imagine that this pair has a son who just got out of prison and he was looking for work and having a terrible time finding it. It began looking like he may go back to a life of crime. Suddenly he gets a call from this Rite Aid and they are willing to hire him.

That couple will love Rite Aid. They will buy from Rite Aid even if they move to Upper Sandusky. That particular Rite Aid may not have hired their son, but they love the place. They will not profit at all by keeping Rite Aid in Upper Sandusky open and neither will their son, but they will shop there anyway, because they love it.

There is a difference. Some times we are compelled to do an action because we stand to lose if we do not. Sometimes we are compelled to do an action because we are convinced it is for the better good and we are moved by that particular facet of the better good.

Nehemiah was moved by his love for Jerusalem

- Jedaiah in Verse 10
- Azariah, Benjamin and Hasshub in verse 23
- The priests in verse 28
- Meshullam in verse 30

All worked near their own homes. There is nothing wrong with this. If their homes were part of the work, it may have made sense for them to do that part. We should never neglect our own back yard when it is a vital part of the ministry. Our vested interest does not necessarily conflict with our duty.

On the other hand, verses

- 2
- 5
- 7
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 19
- 22
- and 27

all record people working who were from other places. This is important. The work of Jerusalem was not just important to the people who lived there, it was important for the entire nation.

Thurgood Marshall was the first black Supreme Court Justice. As a justice, he was particularly concerned with civil rights issues. I recently heard an interview with him that was conducted shortly after he retired. The interviewer asked him: “do you believe black people are better off because you were a justice of the Supreme Court?”

He answered: “White people too are better off because I was a justice of the Supreme Court.”

What confidence. I don't know much about Marshall. I'm sure Dawn could tell me many things about him and some of you probably could too. I suspect I would have disagreed with him about a number of things. However, I would like to point out the selflessness in his approach. He was not just concerned with his own ethnic group. He was concerned about the well being of all the people.

- When you contribute to missions
- When you support a World Vision or Compassion child
- When you give to a relief effort
- When you bring things for the health kit drive or contribute soap and blankets

You are building the wall for somebody else and so strengthening the body Christ. You are contributing to the infrastructure of the Kingdom of God.

We can never become so selfish or narrow minded or limited in our approach as to think if we take care of our own little corner and nothing else we are doing all we should. We had better work on our own little corner. It is quite important that we do so. That's one of the reasons we have been placed there, but we had also better work on the bigger picture. Some of us may specialize in the work at home, others of us should specialize in the work elsewhere. But we as a congregation must contribute to both.

Some worked under threat of persecution

Some rebuilt in spite of their national loyalties. Verse 7 records the contributions of “Melatiah of Gibeon and Jadon of Meronoth.” These towns, according to the Bible were under the governance of the governor of Trans-Euphrates. You will have heard of Trans-Euphrates in Nehemiah 2:7, Nehemiah makes special provision to get letters of transit from the King so he will not be harmed or hampered by this same governor.

Melatiah and Jadon are working for the enemy. If the governor of Trans-Euphrates had to throw in with anybody it would have been Sanballat and Tobiah, the people opposing Nehemiah. It is not in his interests to see the wall of a neighboring city restored. The only thing that keeps him from opposing the work is that the King has given him personal instructions to leave it alone. And he's supplied Nehemiah with an army to back it up.

This was an act of boldness for Melatiah and Jadon. Some of you have close associates or even family who

would rather you would give up the whole nonsense of God's work and get back into groove with everybody else. It is a hardship on you to continue in the LORD's work.

On a bigger scale, EMM has sent relief to Afghanistan. In a very real way, when you give to missions through your offerings, you are investing spiritually in an area your government is attacking. I don't think that is inconsistent with our national policy, but we must recognize that there will be times that working for God will go against the grain of relatives or even authorities. We must be willing to do it anyway.

Different people do different amounts of work

If we measure the wall and do the best math we can based on Nehemiah 3 we find that each team repaired an average of 250 feet. That is a section of wall that is a bit longer than our parking lot from the road to the swing set.

That's an average. Probably nobody did exactly that much of the wall. Almost everybody surely did more or less than 250 feet.

As we've already noticed, some rebuilt small sections right in front of their house. Even if it was a big house, it probably wasn't much wall to build.

Some rebuilt extra long sections. Some like the common people of Tekoa in verses 5 and 27 rebuilt two sections. Binnui in verse 25 built at least two sections, but we don't have any record of the first section he built. Apparently, Nehemiah did not record every inch of the project. Hanun and the residents of Zanoah (13) rebuilt over 1500 feet of wall, plus a gate.

Some had the help of the whole town behind them. All the priests from outside Jerusalem rebuilt a particular section. Some had a lot of help, some did not. Verse 12 tells us that Shallum worked on the wall with his daughters. Who knows maybe they were as good at slinging stones as the next strapping young man. Or maybe they were petit girls who just wanted to do their part. It doesn't matter.

The constitution of the USSR when it still existed said this:

- From each according to his ability
- To each according to his work

For the communists, that was an ideal that never lived, but in God's economy it doesn't matter how much headway you make in your efforts so much as the efforts are being made. That sounds like some people can try to get by without doing much, until we remember who is doing the measuring. God knows how much we can do, and He expects no more and no less.

Not all facets of the work will seem important to us

- Shallun rebuilt important places like the entrance to the spring and the area around the palace
- Ezer in verse 19 rebuilt the area near the armory

However

- In many verses we just hear that somebody "repaired the next section."
- Malkijah in verse 14 rebuilt the Dung Gate where the garbage went out

How many of us struggle with this area. We want to work and do all kinds of things as long as the work seems important to our friends or gets popular attention. But when it is work that is lower profile we don't want to get so excited. Why is that? We want others to think we are important. It is part of our mechanism for feeling accepted.

Paul tells us that some of us will be gifted in ways that are prominent or conspicuous. Others of us will be gifted in ways that are less so. It is all important.

Case in point:

Malkijah rebuilt a useful gate

I can't tell you the name of a single Tekoan noble – they didn't do anything

The Bible records the names of all kinds of people that we cannot even remember. Some of them did useful, but unappealing things. Their names are in the book. Otherwise history has forgotten them.

On the other hand there are kings whose names have been preserved, but their names didn't make it into the book. Do any of you know who Nabonidus is? Right.

He didn't make the book. The point is, now you know who Malkijah is, but you don't know who Nabonidus is. That's because Malkijah made the book. That tells me something.

Sometimes people who do humble but important things are more significant to God than kings.

It may be discouraging to have a job in the kingdom of God that seems like it doesn't get any attention. Maybe you don't want attention. Maybe you feel like you are

the only person who appreciates the importance of what you do.

- It isn't true
- God knows and in His book, you are doing important stuff
- Don't give up

There are many other lessons we can learn

In verses 20 and 21 we learn to support those who are working elsewhere. Baruch and Meremoth repaired the section near Eliashib the High Priest's house, while he was working on the North side.

Many times we are told people worked on gates. This means they concentrated on places the enemy was most likely to attack. Our spiritual work should concentrate on our areas of weakness. It is the sin we are most likely to commit that we must battle the most fiercely. We must reinforce the gate through which the enemy can come.

By comparing with the book of Ezra, we learn that Meremoth's background was somewhat in question. That eliminated him from some types of work, but he was trusted by the High Priest, Ezra and Nehemiah and did his part anyway. Our past does not stand against us in the eyes of God. And it should not stand against us in the eyes of human leaders either. Most of all we should not allow it to stand against us in our own eyes. We have work to do anyway and we should do it.

We should not shrink from the task even if we feel ill prepared for it

In this passage we learn about a lot of people working

- Men and girls

- Priests and servants
- Goldsmiths and perfumers
- Merchants and outcasts
- Guards and rulers

People did the work even though it was not their area of expertise:

Viggo Olsen, who helped rebuild ten thousand houses in war-ravaged Bangladesh in 1972, derived unexpected inspiration from reading a chapter ordinarily considered one of the least interesting in the Bible: "I was struck.. that no expert builders were listed in the 'Holy Land brigade.' There were priests, priests' helpers, goldsmiths, perfume makers, and women, but no expert builders or carpenters were named" (with J. Lockerbie, *Daktar* [Chicago: Moody, 1973], p. 324) (The Expositor's Bible Commentary)

You may feel ill prepared for your work for the LORD, but in this case the boss is more important than the training. He will make it work.

Verse 20 says Baruch worked zealously

- There is a certain amount of work that we may or may not be able to do
- We may have work that seems important to others or we may not
- We may have to do twice our load because others don't do their share

But Baruch did work for somebody else so they could work in another place and he did it with joy. We too should work with enthusiasm. The work of God is too important and too exciting to do in a ho - hum way. It is

too earth shattering to do haphazardly. It is too crucial to make others think it is boring

(because if we think it's boring we are:

- A. not doing it right or
- B. not doing it for the right reason)

So this morning's message is a message of encouragement

- Work
- Work hard
- Work well
- Work in the knowledge of the importance of your task
- And work with enthusiasm
- The kingdom of God is here
- Night is coming

What is to be done at all – has to be done now.

Don't let down your guard

Nehemiah 2:19-20; 4:1-23

It has been said that Nehemiah is about building and battling. I also like to think of it as a book of new beginnings. The Jews were getting a second chance. After over a century of domination and exile under foreign powers they were at last returning home to build a meaningful life for themselves.

- Nehemiah began it right with prayer
- He moved every resource at his disposal in the effort
- He planned and acted wisely in his leadership
- Many people of varying talents contributed to the work

Finally in chapter 4 and in a couple of verses of chapter 2 we see that Nehemiah and his workers resisted opposition. Building and battling.

New beginnings are never easy. The very fact that you need a new beginning implies both that something is broken and that work needs to be done.

For the Jews, the superstructure of their nation was in ruins. Their families were displaced. They had a spiritual past to live down and correct.

The work that needed to be done was a building from the ground up. After the stone infrastructure was in place, they had to reclaim land that had lain dormant for decades and plow a living out of it. All this after a long march home from Persia.

All of us have felt the need for a new beginning from time to time. Whether it has meant

- a change in job
- a change in location
- a change in approach to a problem
- a change in churches (it happens, but not here)
- a change in schools
- College students know that the answer to all their problems is a change of major

Sometimes we need to run on a different track to gain perspective and a new lease on life. Even churches come to this point. Churches get the place where they desperately need a change or risk dying completely. At that stage they need new

- ways of looking at things
- methods
- projects
- perspectives on their community
- evaluation of priorities

But one other thing is certain. Any time anyone or anything tries to change there will be opposition. People get attached to ideas and procedures and forget that when those things were formulated they were meant to solve problems. When the problem changes, the idea needs to change too.

- But we get used to people the way they are
- We get used to sitting in a particular place
- We get used to parking in a specific spot
- We get used to doing this before we do that
- And before you know it, those things become more important to us than the original reason we did it.
- We become afraid of not recognizing a person we are used to
- Or not knowing how to react when something different happens

And we get scared that we will look foolish, or will become unimportant or that we will feel ill equipped to do something that we have already done for years and it just isn't comfortable.

There is nothing wrong with those feelings, but they do need to be confronted for what they are:

Fear and frustration

It is deathly important in our lives to realize that fear and frustration should never be the motivations for our actions. We need to do what is right no matter how afraid or frustrated we become.

The change for the Jews takes a couple of forms

- Some of them have just moved home
- Some of them have been here for awhile and have not yet established themselves well

But most of all they have to begin thinking about the land as something they have to win again and not something that will be dropped in their laps. That is a major change in thinking. The attacks they experienced were based on this difference in the situation.

Nehemiah tells of two types of attack

The first is external

- Ridicule (2.19-20; 4.1-3)
- Conspiracy (4.7-8; 11)
- Physical attack (8)

You know about these kinds of attacks. The Bible says that the enemies of Nehemiah

- made light of the work they were doing,

- they made light of the people who were doing the work

When they discovered that they could not discourage them by ridicule they began trying physically to stop them from their efforts. They made plans to attack and kill them. Of course we know the extremes of this effort still exist today.

On November 21, 2002, just two months ago, Bonnie Weatherall, a 31 year old missionary was found shot outside the clinic she had just unlocked for the morning.

In December 2002, 3 Missionaries (2 doctors and a clerk) were shot and killed and a 4th (a pharmacist) was wounded in Yemen at a Southern Baptist clinic.

These people were not hard core evangelists and church planters. They were medical missionaries who were obviously and primarily in their places to physically benefit the very people who took their lives.

You face things too. Usually they will not take this kind of shape. Mostly we face the kind of opposition that Sanballat and Tobiah started with. But don't be surprised if being a Christian

- affects your relationship with unsaved family
- affects your prospects of advancement at work
- Shades your teachers' opinions of you at school
- Makes you a target for abuse on the playground

I have heard of it affecting whether or not a person got a speeding ticket instead of a warning. The point is, sometimes it can affect more than just your pride. It can affect your financial and social well being.

We should not be surprised. Over 400 years before Christ, Nehemiah and his followers went to do the work

God empowered them to do and they met opposition from other people. You will too.

The second attack is internal – coming from within the workers themselves

These are harder to recognize. Let's see the form they took for Nehemiah's team:

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Nehemiah 4:10 (NIV)

This is discouragement. Discouragement means, very literally, to take a person's heart away. This happens when the job is so big and the obstacles are so strong that we become overwhelmed and we lose heart.

For Nehemiah's people this was the magnitude and the difficulty of the job. The stones were so broken down that according to chapter 2 there were places you could not even get past the wall without going outside the city. The limestone had heated from the burning of the gates so much that they had crumbled and shattered. These people had begun the work and soon somebody came by and pointed out the size of the job they were trying to do and they became discouraged.

I don't know about you, but that happens to me sometimes. Do you realize that within 7 ½ miles of this building there live 20,000 people. This is not a guess, this is a demographic fact based on the last census. Sometimes I wonder how a group so comparatively few in number and with our limited resource can affect that large a community.

Another type of internal roadblock faced by the returning Jews is found in verses 11-12

Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.” Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

Nehemiah 4:11-12 (NIV)

This is fear. It is not the job that is getting to them, it is the sense of their own inadequacy against attacks that have not happened. In their case they were basically refugees and many of them were only servants. They had no homes, no wealth, no personal knowledge of the lay of the land and they did not know the real capability of their enemy. They were left wondering, can we handle this?

Now I don't know about you, but sometimes I think about that too.

- I am not trained in counseling
- I am not trained in evangelism to Jews
- I am not trained in social work
- I am not trained in a lot of things

I am basically a Bible teacher who has been around a very small block a couple of times trying to pass on what I have learned. In the face of what I don't know, that doesn't seem like much.

But Nehemiah teaches us what to do when we are overwhelmed and afraid because of the size of the job and our own inadequacy. He teaches us how to respond.

Responses

Prayer (4-5, 9)

We have already seen that Nehemiah was a man of prayer. When he first wanted to approach the king, he gave himself to prayer and fasting. All the while he was talking with the king, he was praying. In this case, once again he resorts first to prayer. He simply interrupts the telling of his story to burst out in prayer:

Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

Nehemiah 4:4-5 (NIV)

We hear a prayer like this and we think it is a little harsh. Don't forgive them? That isn't what Jesus taught. Of course, Nehemiah had not met Jesus, He wouldn't come along for another half a Millennium. He simply saw some people trying to thwart the work of God and He wanted to lay it at the feet of God to deal with. He couldn't resist recommending how he himself would deal with it.

It cannot be emphasized enough though. Prayer is the first place to go. We will be attacked for our faith

- both as a large group and personally
- both from others and from within our own spirits
- temptation will come from the world
- from Satan
- from our own desires

I have been reading E.M. Bounds' Power of Prayer. He talks about some of the people who have done what

we might see as the greatest deeds in history for the LORD. He says this:

No man can do a great and enduring work for God who is not a man of prayer ... (*Power Through Prayer* by E.M. Bounds, chapter 8)

Spend time in prayer – make a regular time for yourself if you know you need a system. Otherwise, make it your habit to pray often and at all times.

- Pray while you are driving (don't close your eyes)
- Pray while you are laying awake
- Pray while you are showering
- Pray while you are cooking

There are many times in our day that are down times for our minds, use them up in conversation with God.

Encouraged each other with a reminder of who God is (14)

Nehemiah used these words in verse 14, “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.”

Does the work look big, “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.”

Does your own ability look unusually small, “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.”

Guess what? The person next to you is feeling the same way sometimes. Encourage each other. Remind each other of the Lord, who is great and awesome. Look for the hand of God in your life and don't be ashamed to tell the story.

- Is someone finally coming around to belief in Jesus?
- Did you get a job?
- Did you have a prayer answered?

- Is something that was bad in your life getting better?
- Were you healed of your sickness?
- Did ends meet last week when you thought they wouldn't?

Tell somebody and remind them that the Lord, is great and awesome.”

Encouragement is the opposite of discouragement. But notice the biggest difference

- Whereas discouragement comes from within
- Encouragement usually comes from without

The children may remember what Encouragement means from Drama Days this past summer. Anybody?

It means to make someone's heart bigger.

If they have lost heart, talk to them, make their heart bigger with a reminder of how big God is.

Nehemiah and his people Continued to work

Verse 6 makes that clear, they worked with all their heart. How did they do that? Verse 13 says they identified the weak spots in their work

There were certain areas of their work that left them more vulnerable than others. There were low spots in the wall and gaps. These were the places that the enemy was most likely to attack. And it was at these places they posted a guard.

We all have weak points in our work.

Paul talks about this when he is discussing the Gifts of the Spirit. He says that nobody has all the gifts. You are going to have strengths and you will have

weaknesses. That is why there are other people around in the body of Christ. We are taking up each other's slack.

Young People, do you find that at times you feel kind of alone as a Christian at school? When you are alone and attacked as a Christian, do you find it easy to deny your faith or kind of slink away from the situation and go somewhere you can be embarrassed alone. You may even find yourself giving in to temptation or pressure from unsaved friends.

If you find it difficult to be a Christian at school it may help you to find some Christian friends who understand you and can encourage you. It gives you numbers to walk in and a place to draw support from when you are opposed by others at school who don't know God. Involve yourself in things like "Meet me at the flag pole" or other activities that involve Christians.

Adults, the same goes for you. We do our best to offer programs and opportunities for fellowship here. But that is not enough. Especially if you work among non-Christians. You need regular friends you can get together with.

I know I have been encouraging you to have non-Christian friends and to reach out to them. I don't back down on that. But that just increases your need to have Christian friends with whom you can get together to do things and from whom you can draw support.

Friends and fellowship are not the same thing. Fellowship is the larger body getting together for mutual support. Friendship is closer, more intimate. It's somebody you can admit things to that you would not admit in a group of 20. And rightfully so.

The point is that finding and forging friendships within the body of Christ is a major way of doing things like

- blowing off steam
- fighting temptation
- finding encouragement
- refocusing your perspective

My friend Steve Kreider does these things for me. I've told him things I will never tell you. And rightfully so. He is very close to me and that did not happen overnight. We have worked at building mutual trust and respect. We have gotten together even when it was not convenient and we have made it a point to not let our friendship slide. We have refused to allow new circumstances like distance and the arrival of a baby that created a fundamental shift in our situations to make our friendship less important.

For some of you, the person you should be getting that close to is right here in this room. Maybe they are a friend at work. These people stand guard over the weak spots in our lives and keep us from getting attacked while we are focused on the work.

This passage teaches a number of other things too

They kept an eye open for trouble (verse 9). Don't be blind-sided because you refused to admit that trouble was going to come your way.

Verse 19 tells us that they acknowledged that they couldn't do everything. Don't let yourself be defeated in your faith because you think you have to do it all. You can't and you will not. Regardless of how much of a Superman you think you are.

They equipped everyone to do some fighting (17-18). You cannot rely on others for everything. You must be willing to stand your own spiritual ground sometimes. Prepare yourself to know the Sword of the Spirit. That is part of what Scripture Memory is all about.

They made plans for the tough times (20). You will face some situations more difficult than others. Challenges will flood on you all at once. You should have a plan to keep yourself from being overwhelmed. Plan some down time and work in some time for spiritual refreshment. Know how you will do this, perhaps by listening to Scripture in the car instead of your normal habits.

Finally, the leaders set the pace (14, 16, 19, 23). This is a challenge especially to the leaders of this congregation. We cannot expect others to do things that we do not model. In Nehemiah's situation the Nobles and the officers were some of the first to help when the attack came. They both stood guard for the people being attacked and they encouraged the people. Of course, they also helped with the work.

You have a responsibility as a leader to watch over these people and offer them the help they need in their spiritual battles. Figure out whom you are helping that way and make sure you do it consistently and deliberately.

Attacks will come. There is no way to avoid them. But we can be ready for them and we can get the help we need.

- We must be people of prayer
- We must be realists who know our weaknesses
- We must be willing to get the help of close Christian friends

- And we must be willing to stand in order to get the work done.

Refusing to undermine God's work

Nehemiah 5:1-19

We have a tendency to think that the work of God is something that we do in good times. We look at the amount of time we can invest in God's work when we have time to spare. We look at the money we can put into His work, when we think we can afford it. Let's face it, God's work can be discouraging, because it takes time and effort and money. When things are already tight or hectic, we think it is the most natural thing in the world for us to set God's work aside for a time to take care of more immediate concerns.

One of the interesting things about this passage, in my opinion is found in verse 3. The fact is given almost passing mention. Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall during a famine. These people did the work of God in spite of the difficulties and even personal deprivation of their daily lives during a famine. Nothing should stand in the way of doing what God wants you to do.

Now the people rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem got discouraged. In fact, this was a recurring problem for Nehemiah. You will remember in chapter 4 some people became discouraged because of the amount of work that had to be done and some were discouraged because of the difficulty of the work. In chapter 5 we find one more thing that was discouraging the people, the fact that they had to eat.

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.”

“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!”

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people. (Nehemiah 5:1-19 NIV)

There is an important fact about the problems they were experiencing here. There was no grain to be grown, but there was some for sale. Apparently the famine was kind of localized. The problems were only indirectly caused by the hunger of the people. There were ways of solving that problem. The difficulties were caused by illegal activity.

Since there was no income to be had in community service, the money to buy grain had to come from somewhere. The people began getting loans using their property as collateral. In some cases they had no property and they used their own freedom and that of their children for collateral. They borrowed money they could not repay, and sold their daughters into slavery out of desperation.

Now let me clarify, there was no law against borrowing or lending money. There was no law against using collateral. There was not even a law against slavery or paying a debt by selling yourself as a slave.

The law of Moses spells out specific guidelines for lending money:

- You were allowed to charge a foreigner interest
- You were not allowed to charge any interest at all to fellow Jews
- You were not allowed to charge a poor man interest of any amount on any loan whether of food or money
- You were not to make a profit on the food you sold to a poor man
- A person was allowed to take a poor man's cloak for collateral, but you had to give it back at night so the man could keep warm
- You were not allowed to own or sell a Jewish slave (although he could serve you for a time to repay a

debt, this is not the same kind of permanent condition slavery is)

When it comes to lending money, the Bible drew a distinction between usury and excessive interest in several places. People who charged excessive interest were counted sinners in the Old Testament world. Not charging excessive interest was a mark of a righteous man. Usury or interest itself was not wrong. Charging it to another Jew was.

The Bible uses the word “usury” and we like to think of that word as meaning excessive interest. We are tempted to think that they were charging exorbitant rates for lending money, but the Scriptures themselves tell us what the rate was. Verse 11 says they were charging 1%, probably per month, or 12% annual interest. If you can get a 12% credit card these days, you aren’t doing as well as you can, but you could do a lot worse. Depending on the amount we are borrowing and how long we intend to take in repaying the loan, we don’t think of 12% as being unreasonably high.

But remember:

- You were not allowed to charge another Jew interest at all
- You were especially forbidden to charge a poor man (Jew or Gentile) interest
- You were specifically forbidden to charge a poor man interest whether you were lending him money or food
- These people were clearly in violation of the law.

Now I want to cut them a little break. It is very possible that they did not know they were breaking the law. Remember these people have been exiled for generations. By the time they came back to Israel they

could not even read the law. It had to be translated so they could understand it.

Beyond that, I am impressed with how quickly they turned around when they were told they were wrong. Let's face it, Nehemiah was not a man to pull punches. If he saw something wrong he said it, and if a person did not listen, he said that too. In this case there is nothing said about these folks arguing their case or pleading ignorance or anything of the sort. Verse 8 says they couldn't find anything to say. Nehemiah told them in verses 11 and 12 to give back the interest and the repossessed collateral, and they just said, "ok" and did it.

Repentance should always be so easy.

A story is told about a boy who had trouble pronouncing the letter "R."

His teacher gave him the assignment to practice this sentence:

"Robert gave Richard a rap in the rib for roasting the rabbit so rare."

A few days later the boy was asked by his teacher to repeat what she had said to him. The boy said this:

"Bob gave Dick a poke in the side for not cooking the bunny enough."

He got around the assignment by avoiding the "R" words.

Many times in the church today, we like to avoid the "R" word: repentance:

- We stress that salvation is the free gift of God (and it is)

- We talk about how we must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit (and we must)
- We emphasize our inability to do any good on our own (and we can't)

And we conveniently ignore the fact that God requires repentance. Repentance is a change of mind. It is the realization that we have been behaving one way and deciding to behave a different way. We may lack the power. We may even lack the will, but we do not lack the knowledge of what we should do and we do not lack the desire to see God's will done in our lives, so we decide to do it differently.

That is repentance.

And salvation is unavailable to those who will not repent. That seems harsh, but it is true. It is not enough to be sorry for your sins, you must repent of them, turn your back on them:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)

- Restitution
- Apologies
- Paying Penalties

These are the world's view of sorrow over doing something wrong. It is almost shocking to us, because these are what we think of as virtues, but the Bible says this is the way of death. These things are important, but they are not enough. They do not involve a change, simply an evening of the ledger. We must repent. We must decide in our inmost being that the wrong we have done is offensive to God and we must choose a path that will not offend, the path He has given us to walk.

It isn't just non-Christians who need to repent. We believers must repent from time to time too. As Christians, this approach takes a soft heart. We must be willing to hear that we have been doing wrong and admit that we should do something different. We all get defensive. We think we are righteous people. We forget that our righteousness comes from God or it is so much filth.

My messages are intended to do a couple of things, but among the things they are intended to do, is help you find the things that need to be fixed in your life. Do you realize that the sin you harbor and cultivate in your life affects all of us. It undermines the work of God.

These nobles were charging interest to people they should have been treating differently. In our language today we would say – That's between the borrower and the lender. That's nobody else's business. These guys probably felt that way. Hey, they were only trying to make a living right? It was their grain to begin with.

But the sin of one person and the way it affected others had the ultimate consequence of undermining the work of God. It beat morale into the ground. It slowed the work by distracting the workers. It ate up time with conflict resolution.

The things you do to undermine the kingdom affects others

Are you fair in your business dealings?

We have a high percentage of self employed people here. This is an important question for you. Are you fair in your business dealings. Do you charge fair prices for the work you do? Do you cut corners? Do you fully disclose your own mistakes and accept the cost for

them? Do you do a full days work for the pay you receive?

Are you careful in your talk about others?

This is a small church and a small church is like a small town. Everybody knows everything about everybody. In some ways that is good and it gives us a close knit group that is like family at times.

But it also means we have to be careful. Do you know what it means to mind your own business? Do you respect the reputations and the dignity of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you allow your desire to communicate information about others to color your judgement about whether that information should be shared? Do you recognize the limits placed on you by friendship to be loyal when they have problems that you are privileged to know about?

Those are just a couple of examples

When you are about to do something, anything that seems important, ask yourself this, "Does my behavior in this matter reinforce or undermine the work of the Kingdom?" If I'm having trouble deciding the answer to that question ask this one, "if I am undermining, what is the cost to the Kingdom?"

Let me be transparent for a moment. I am increasingly aware that I have to be doubly careful with my eyes and where I look. A second glance at a suggestive poster or a pretty girl costs more than I am willing to pay. What we do affects the work we can do in the Kingdom within our families and communities and in this congregation. It ultimately affects the work of others too. We can build the kingdom or undermine it.

The second example Nehemiah gives of this fact is a negative example

Nehemiah had a tacit and legal right to a great deal of privilege. He was the appointed governor of the city. It would have been normal for Nehemiah to tax the people. In fact he says that other governors had done so.

Not only was there the governor's tax to contend with, there was also the officials and their "squeeze."

I have read a distinction between a bribe and "squeeze."

A bribe is money wrongfully paid to a person to get them to do something they should not do.

Squeeze is money paid to a person to get them to do something they should do anyway.

This distinction is important because the Bible speaks against bribing people. It is a tool used to influence a person into being dishonest and it is at the discretion of the person paying the bribe. This second problem of "squeeze" is often out of the control of the person paying. If they want to go on with their business and not be harassed, perhaps to great limitation of their freedom or worse, they will pay. In these cases, the Bible holds the official and not the person doing the paying at fault.

Squeeze is an important part of society in many parts of the world. It is one way that Christianity has affected Western society at its very core. We see officials charging "tips" to perform their prescribed duties as wrong, to the point of being illegal.

Nehemiah would have none of this. He held tight control over his officials and did not allow them to extort the people. What is more he did not tax the people.

I'm not sure how this worked. The money for his provision had to come from somewhere and he apparently had money, even though he started out as a servant. Chapter 2 tells us that the king gave him generous allowances to conduct his business. It seems very likely that the Royal grant extended to outfitting and provisioning Nehemiah and his entourage. At least we know that it paid for Nehemiah's residence. This residence according to verse 16 did not include land to farm.

Instead Nehemiah used his personal resources to lend to people who needed to buy food and to feed his officials and those who came from outlying areas to do the work. He used his personal allowance to feed many people. It is estimated that the meat listed in verse 18 would make 600 to 800 meals. The 150 number included only his officials, but notice that he fed people from the outlying areas too.

Nehemiah took a different approach from that of the local Nobles. Instead of being an opportunist, he used his position to aid the people who needed help and to do the work of the LORD. In that way, Nehemiah is like Paul.

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. 1 Thessalonians 2:8-9 (NIV)

Paul had every right to expect the people he served to take care of him. But when he was in the heat of trying to win people to Christ, he even went so far as to work another job while he ministered in order not to be a burden to anyone.

Paul and Nehemiah teach us a valuable lesson. It is this:

When God has provided for you abundantly, it is better to share that abundance than to stand on your rights. We can use the resources God gives us to build them and enrich ourselves and so undermine the work of God, or we can use those resources to help others and build the kingdom.

Our attitude toward people is to be guided by compassion and generosity and what we can do for them and for God rather than being preoccupied with what we have coming.

- Nehemiah could have taxed the people fairly and not been at fault
- Paul could have accepted support from the Thessalonian church and not been at fault

But both of them chose to take a higher road:

While others were extorting and dishonestly using the people to undermine the work of God

They were investing all their resources and their own lives into seeing it go forward

Be like Paul, Be like Nehemiah

- I'm not just talking about money
- I'm talking about your abilities
- Your time
- Your relationships

Refuse to undermine the work of the Kingdom

But go the next step give out of your abundance to see it move forward.

The Subtle Attacks

Nehemiah 6:1-19

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it — though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates — Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written:

“It is reported among the nations — and Geshem says it is true — that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.”

I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.”

But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.”

But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

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

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. 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.

Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan

had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me. (NIV)

This passage is broken up very naturally into four sections. Each section tells another of Sanballat's schemes to kill Nehemiah and stop the work on the wall. He uses three tactics then he gives in. These are Sanballat's tactics:

- Compromise
- Misrepresentation
- Fear

In the first section, Sanballat is saying: You are clearly a power to be reckoned with. Why don't we make an alliance? Of course the alliance he wanted to make was one sided. He wanted to harm Nehemiah and bring the work to a halt for his own gain.

In the second section he is saying: "If you won't do what I want, I will spread rumors about you and make it so that no one will trust you." If Sanballat could discredit Nehemiah before the king or local officials, he would have won his victory another way.

In the third section Sanballat is trying to play on Nehemiah's fear. This is subtle because he wants him to use his faith as a vehicle for cowardice. You are being attacked, hide in the Temple.

These are some of the same tricks the Devil uses against God's people today:

Compromise "Come, let us meet together"

This often takes the form of political correctness

Our culture is continuing to embrace a doctrine of diversity.

This finds its roots in the civil rights movement which found its motivation in the Church. Godly people stood up for what was right and shined the light of the Gospel on the injustices of slavery. Many people are totally unaware of how much of the civil rights movement that began giving racial minorities the rights they were entitled to under the constitution was led by God fearing people with a conscience.

This movement also provided the impetus to bring women the vote and equal pay for equal work. The Americans with Disabilities act rode on the coat tails of the civil rights movement, so that employers were required to work with people when they had limitations that were beyond their control.

However, Satan is the master counterfeiter. This ethic of pluralism has now been extended to other things too.

- Sexual perversion has been given the nice word fetish or alternative lifestyle
- College students who cheat are spoken of in terms of their right to plagiarize
- People smile and speak of all religions as being the same and leading to the same thing
- Abortion on demand is clouded by the overcast term “reproductive choices”

These things that involve choices to follow baser instincts and selfishness are placed along side issues that have legitimacy both by the standards of the founding fathers of our nation and the standard held up in Scripture and given equal footing.

This is a trick of Satan. This trick even finds its way into the church.

- We as Christians are called to live in our cultures bringing the light of God to others
- We are not called to condone all the behavior of our culture
- We are called to love people
- We are not called to approve of everything they do

Now some people are thinking that sounds judgmental, and didn't Jesus tell us not to be judgmental?

Let me assure you it is not judgmental in the sense of being condemning. It is a recognition that everyone including ourselves is a part of a fallen humanity that needs Jesus to be redeemed. As long as people think they are OK, they don't need Jesus to come and make them better. The fact is, we are all spiritually sick. We all need the Great Physician. Jesus said it this way:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Matthew 9:12-13 (NIV)

Jesus was not saying this to really righteous people. He was saying it to the self-righteous Pharisees. He was basically saying,

If you think your ok, we have nothing to talk about, but if you know you are messed up and need spiritual healing, I'm your doctor. You had better realize this though, I'm not interested in your religiousness. A really spiritually well person will be merciful.

In our politically correct culture of pluralism, people have all the appearances of righteousness, but they

are unwilling to help people's spiritual sickness at its root.

- A person who is sick and pale will not get better by getting a tan.
- You can't cure a cancer with iodine.
- A good dentist does not fix our teeth by ignoring the x-rays. His repairs may be painful but they go deep and they fix the problem.
- Tolerance is not the same as forgiveness
- Sexual perversion is wrong
- Cheating is stealing and unjust
- Homosexuality is sin
- Abortion is murder

These are scriptural truths that should not lead us to condemn those who have been involved with them, just as Jesus has not condemned us for our sin. They should lead us to compassionately advocate the truth and lovingly help people find the cure for their spiritual illness.

I have heard a person tell a woman who has had an abortion she is a killer. This is not a loving action.

Telling her that you know that she has experienced pain because of this decision and spending time with her to help her through her time of difficulty, then when God presents the time sharing the Gospel in a gentle way that shows her the value of following Jesus is the most loving thing you can do.

After all, God forgave your lies, bitterness, hatred and who knows what else while you were still His enemy; before you were ever surrendered to Him or on a path to spiritual healing.

But spiritual healing for you began when you personally and deeply abandoned those sins for the righteousness of Christ.

Misrepresentation

Satan might try to sneak up on you by making it appear to you that the way of Christ is not such a good idea

He does this to people in the world all the time.

I recently heard a quote by a young lady who was interviewed on the street. She was asked what she thinks of Christians.

She said, “they are criminals, because people in Africa are dying of AIDS and they won’t let them have condoms.”

Of course we would say that she is quite mistaken in her analysis of our position. It isn’t that simple. The fact is we would love to see the AIDS epidemic in Africa stopped. But we would maintain that providing “protection” is not the answer.

- Compassionate outreach to AIDS orphans is necessary
- A pervasive education on what causes AIDS is necessary
- A treatment for those who already have it is necessary
- A widespread moral change is necessary

In short, a comprehensive campaign of spreading the truth with love is what is necessary for Africa to overcome the AIDS epidemic that is destroying the continent. 12 shiploads of thin latex barriers between people who neither understand the consequences of

their actions nor know the God who can change their lives is a temporary and surface treatment at best.

This isn't the only issue which Satan would like to foul people up on:

A young lady told me once that she wouldn't mind being a Christian, but she wouldn't want to be a "Born Again Christian." She was totally unaware that there is only one kind of Christian and that is the kind that is "Born Again." She had missed out on the requirement that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, a person must be "Born Again."

She didn't know that being Born Again is simply one name we put on a transition that takes a person from living for themselves to living for God. It takes them from knowing about Jesus and His sacrifice to believing in that sacrifice's effectiveness in forgiving their personal sins and trusting Christ to do that in order to transform them from a servant of sin to a servant of God.

But this misrepresentation plagues the church too

There are widespread beliefs that

- Going to church and doing good works makes you a Christian
- the goal of missions is to corrupt the natural development of cultures or to do economic aid and nothing else
- sharing your faith is all about confrontation and uncomfortable conversations with strangers who don't want to talk about it

These are things the Devil would like you to believe, but they are not true. The issues are at once both simpler and more complex than that. If Satan can get

us to believe false things about God and His people, he may be able to keep you from doing things you should do, just like Sanballat was trying to keep people from involving themselves in the work on the wall, by spreading rumors and falsehoods.

One of the tricks of the enemy is the illusion that we are beyond sin or a certain type of sin

There are churches that teach that you can finally overcome sin. That you can live without ever sinning again. I don't think this is right. In fact, I think it is deceptive.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we must continue to be careful:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)

the writer of Hebrews calls us to remember that we all have our weaknesses. He tells us to be on our guard against our greatest vulnerabilities.

This is not rocket science.

We all know that an alcoholic must avoid even one drink and frequenting bars or she may fall into old self-destructive patterns.

Unfortunately we are less willing to admit this tendency on a broader scale as it applies to us. We must be aware of our limitations. What sin throws us down and stomps us?

I, for example, know I cannot get involved in certain types of debate without losing my temper. I don't always succeed at avoiding these situations, but they are a weakness of mine

For somebody who enjoys academic exchange and knows the need to engage in constructive controversy, this is a problem. I just have to know when I will take it too personally. My dad tells me that I have problems with hostility. He may be right. "Be angry and do not sin," is an important verse in my life.

This is an easy one to blind side us. Satan can easily come in a side door on this one because often we don't want to admit our weaknesses. I have weaknesses that I find even harder to control than my anger. For those, my wife is a great help.

What is it for you?

- Bitterness?
- Self-righteousness?
- Selfishness?
- Substance abuse?
- Sexual issues?
- Laziness?
- Pride?

Everybody's got something. The first step to avoiding a problem is admitting it is there. It isn't easy. Nobody wants to be singled out, and we are plagued with the feeling that we are the only one admitting we have a problem and so we are left out in the open for ridicule or criticism.

That cannot matter. If we are to be right with God, we must view the world's view of us as unimportant.

Cowardice

Satan might try to convince us to give into fear by

- either hiding within the walls of the church and surrounding ourselves with no one but Christians
- or denying that we are Christians and living in such a way as to avoid controversy or friction

These are two mistakes that Christians make out of fear. The longer we are Christians the more we find that we have in common with other Christians and we forget how much we have in common with other people. We begin thinking that we must surround ourselves with only the good things of God and never see the world for the fallen and dangerous place that it is. The extremes of this position lead people to the cloister or the hermitage.

But they are not the only people guilty of this extreme type of segregation. We all do it on one level or another. God never called us to separate ourselves from the world so much that we cannot share His love with those who have not heard the Good News.

Correcting this tendency in ourselves may be as simple as making the acquaintance of our next door neighbor. It might involve going to lunch with someone we work with or with a customer. It just means making friends with people you don't go to church with, or people who are not obviously people who attend church. That's what Jesus did.

Of course the other danger is that the cowardice Satan inspires leads us to deny we know Jesus when we are

around others who don't know Him. That can happen in a couple of ways

- either we deliberately and clearly disavow any relationship with God
- or we act and speak as though we have no relationship with Him and imply that we are no different than anyone else

There is a very simple way to avoid this difficulty. Be up front and honest with people when you are first becoming acquainted. In some simple and non-aggressive way let them know

- you regularly attend church
- you read the Bible
- you value spiritual things
- you listen to Christian music
- Perhaps you could quickly pray silently over your food when you eat around others.

You don't have to come on like Jerry Falwell to reveal that Jesus is important to you. The foundation of any good friendship is mutual vulnerability. The person may laugh or reject you, it could happen. Jesus told us to expect that. Or they may open doors for you to share more.

The sooner you reveal that fact about yourself in some simple and non-threatening way, the less likely you are to find yourself with a moral dilemma over participating in some sin or denying your faith.

The Armor of God

Paul's reminder of the Armor of God in Ephesians 6 is all important here. Review it. It is that set of spiritual skills and preparations that help us withstand Satan.

Paul recommends something that Nehemiah models over and over in this book.

Pray

Nehemiah knew the strength to withstand these subtle attacks was not coming from within. They could only come from God.

How to feel good about what you give to God's work

Nehemiah 7:66-72

The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 245 men and women singers. There were 736 horses, 245 mules, 69,435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.

Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 drachmas of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work 20,000 drachmas of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 drachmas of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests.

Nehemiah 7:66-72 (NIV)

There are some important similarities between Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. The similarities carry into the beginnings of the following chapters. These commonalities have led some to believe that they represent the same situation. This is not the case.

Obviously the situations are similar

- Both take place during Jerusalem's repopulation
- Both take place during a great building project
- Both take place while the Jews are becoming reoriented to their homeland
- Both represent the reintroduction of the Hebrew law to the people

The people and clans listed in the chapters are drawn from the same groups, because even though these two

chapters are not representative of the exact same time, they did happen close together. For that reason you will find mostly similarities, but some slight differences in the names and the counts of the individuals and clans mentioned.

It makes sense that Nehemiah would have a higher count of people than Ezra, because Nehemiah's counts came some years after Ezra's. It makes sense that Ezra and Nehemiah would come up with different amounts of money in their counts, because they were counting contributions to two different projects. Ezra was rebuilding the Temple; Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall. Some commentaries will try to make more out of these commonalities, but really they are just similar and worded similarly and happened within a couple of decades of each other.

Nehemiah says that God put it in his heart to begin these examinations. Partially they took place in context of finding out who lived in Jerusalem, but it looks like it was also an accounting for the money that was donated to the project. Nehemiah knew

- how much money he (the governor) donated
- how much money the clan chiefs donated
- and how much money was donated by the rest of the people

The figures are divided into three categories

- gold
- other articles like bowls and clothing
- silver

Apparently Nehemiah himself donated all the bowls, most of the garments and a great sum of gold, but no silver. The clan chiefs and the rest of the people donated gold and silver to the project. The people

donated some garments. The figures are given to us in verses 70-72

Gold

- Governor 1000 drachmas
- Chiefs 20,000 drachmas
- People 20,000 drachmas

Silver

- Chiefs 2,200 Minas
- People 2,000 Minas

We must admit up front that these figures are pretty meaningless to us as they are. Some of you have other translations or may look at the footnotes in your Bibles and come up with something that closer resembles understandable figures. I will see if I can further complicate matters with some figures of my own.

Let me start by assuring you that these measurements are not exact. Most Biblical measures are explained in terms of a range of equivalents. There is no reliable chart that can give you an exact one to one ratio exchange rate for minas and drachmas to dollars and cents. I have come up with the best figures I, in my limited capacity as a mathematician can do:

Gold

- Governor \$79,800
- Chiefs \$1,575,000
- People \$1,575,000

Silver

- Chiefs \$141,678
- People \$138,900

These figures are based on the approximate weight of the money that was donated and the current price of gold and silver on the precious metals exchange.

The total that was donated would bring about \$3.5 million in today's gold and silver market.

There are other ways of figuring these values, but they are even more involved and less reliable than this method.

Suffice it to say that this is a lot of money. My guess is that it was even harder to come by in those days than it would be today ... until you begin breaking it down:

Consider this

Nehemiah's head count earlier in the chapter comes up with a little over 31,000 people and almost 100 clans. When you take these numbers and the allowance given to the governor into account the amounts of money begin to make better sense.

- The governor donated \$79,800 in gold
- The clan chiefs each averaged giving \$17,882
- The average Joe each gave \$55.50

I may have underestimated the number of clan chiefs and that would mean that the second amount would go down, but you get the idea.

- The average person did not have an unthinkable huge donation to make to the LORD's work
- The more politically powerful and by tradition richer people gave significantly more to the work
- The person with the most power, a royal grant, and presumably more personal wealth, gave more than anybody else.

This is God's plan. This is His pattern for the way we are called to give to His work.

- People with a little money give a little
- People with more money give more
- People with a lot of money give a lot

And that is all that is expected from anyone.

Here is the kicker — That's just the way we see it. It isn't the way God sees it. If we follow this pattern, here is the way God sees it:

- People with a lot of money give a lot
- People with a little less money give a lot too
- People with only a little money give just as much as anybody else

The beauty of this analysis, is it doesn't affect at all how much money comes out of your account.

Let me clarify. The Gospels tell a story:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Mark 12:41-44 (NIV)

Jesus did not measure the amount people were giving by the number of zeros after the 1. He measured it by

the attitude and the level of devotion of the person giving.

- For the rich, it was a portion of their wealth
- For the widow, it was a deep sacrifice
- For the rich, they had nothing to lose
- For the widow, she had all she wanted in God

In the world's economy, she didn't give much. In God's economy she gave more than anyone else in the room, because she gave in faith that the God to whom she gave would take care of her.

And that gives rise to the fundamental difference between the way God measures generosity and people measure generosity.

- People measure generosity by the buying power of the money given
- God measure's generosity by the faith of the person giving

In God's economy Nehemiah, the governor gave no more than the average Joe who is giving his 50 bucks in great faith. It is entirely possible that Nehemiah gave sacrificially and with a heart of great faith, and so even his large amount is also great in God's eyes. But it is no greater than the 50 bucks of the faithful average guy.

- Because they both gave proportionally to the level that God had blessed them.
- That is what God expects of your giving
- He wants you to give proportionally to the level that He has given to you.

In church we talk a great deal about a tithe, that is 10%. This is one way the Bible talks about proportional giving. We give 10% of our wealth to God as a way of

making sure that we are doing our share based on what God has given to us. The proportion here is the point.

I know there are some of you who wish you could give more, but you actually do give what you can

That's all that is expected of you. Be free!

I am willing to guess (not being personally aware of anybody's giving habits – me and Everett are not in cahoots) that there are some of you who could and should do more based on what God has given to you

I challenge you to do more.

Your generosity is not measured in the amount you give, but in the spirit with which you give. What is the spirit behind your giving? There may be several ways to answer that question:

- This is all I can do this week
- This is all I have left this week after I have spent the rest
- This is all I am willing to do, because this is all the preacher is worth
- I don't agree with the way we do our budget, so I'm not going to contribute
- I give 10%, no more, no less (even a tithe can express a lack of faith and generosity)
- I wish I could give more, but I'm self employed and business is slow

Here is the bottom line

God doesn't want your money – He wants your heart. He is God, it all belongs to Him anyway, He can take it back when ever He wants to. Some of us have known those times.

But God is wise. He says:

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:20-21 (NIV)

This is not a way of saying that you should give lots of money to God so that your heart will be with God, although He is acknowledging that relationship. What it is saying is

- What do you value?
- Is it your money
- Or is it the kingdom
- If I gave you a treasure chest what would you fill it with?

A scene of a movie called “Throw Mama from the Train” has a neat scene. Danny DeVito is showing Billy Crystal his coin collection. He has made a big issue of this coin collection so, Crystal is all set up to see some very rare and valuable coins.

Instead what DeVito shows him is a quarter that his dad gave him when he was a kid at a particular amusement park, or a dime he got from his dad for doing a particular task.

Crystal is annoyed because he has had the rug pulled out from under him. He doesn't see the value in the coins.

DeVito though has a different measure of value on the money than the face value. He has invested it with all kinds of value based on his relationship with the person who gave it to him.

That is the value God wants you to place on your money. Not how much is it worth at the bank. But how much is the person who gave it to you worth to you?

- What is in your treasure chest?
- Is it money and a carefully kept ledger?
- Or is it your relationship with the one who loved you enough to give you that money?

We like to think that we earn our living, but in fact we do not. That is not to say that we do not bear a level of responsibility in bringing in a paycheck. The curse defines the responsibility on our part. But the fact is that without God's intervention, we would never see that money.

This presents a difficulty, because there are an awful lot of rich people out there who do not value a relationship with God. But the very bottom line says they are not rich. They have neglected the most valuable thing they can own. All they have is lots of zeros after a 1. They don't have the relationship that is of true value.

Ask yourself a couple of questions:

- How much do I put in the offering plate and give to other ministries on average?
- Does that represent a proportional amount of the work that goes on in this congregation?

Using 10% as a biblical guide, should I be giving more?

I challenge you to figure out what percentage of your income you are actually giving.

- Go up in the coming year by 1%
- If you are now giving 5% of your income to the work of the ministry – give 6%.

- If you are giving 12% – give 13%
- That is only \$1 more out of every \$100 that you make

I am encouraging you this morning to give at all times like you are giving to God

Keep in mind that He only expects you to give proportionally according to what He has provided you with, you don't have to do it all yourself

Attempt to express to Him in your giving what He is worth to you by giving what you actually can do in proportion to what He has given you and the work He has placed you in.

- Is it a token gift?
- Is it enough to say you support the work?
- Or is it actually as much as you can and should do given your comparative ability in this congregation?

The choice is yours. You are called to give according to the way God has given to you. You can give a lot, or you can give a little. The amount you give has nothing to do with it. The spirit with which you give is everything.

Study the Bible

Nehemiah 8:1-8

I was teaching the New Testament the other day, inserting lots of background information. I had given out a list of helpful Bible Study books. When the lesson was over, one guy in the back asked if any of the books in my list gave the background information I had been presenting. I tried to answer his question, but after some thought later on I realized what he was asking. The answer should have been "no." The information I give as a teacher has been gleaned from a thousand sources over the course of decades of cumulative study. I'm sure there are books out there that could give pieces of the information, but it will take that student as long to learn it as it took me.

Study is an important discipline. It is our way of making the Bible a deep and foundational part of our thinking and behavior. Where reading washes us, and meditation soaks us, study is like osmosis. It systematically replaces the things in our hearts with other things ... the things of God. Here is a study session:

all the people assembled with one accord in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand.

And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah--instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. (Nehemiah 8:1-8 TNIV)

The people have been in Babylon and they have come back home to rebuild. They have finished the wall, and now they are trying to re-establish their own culture and livelihood. As an integral part of their Jewish life, they are reintroduced to the Law.

Once again we are walking among refugees. These folks have come back from two generations of exile, and though they were not slaves as they were in Egypt, their own heritage has somewhat slipped. They can read, but not so readily the classic form of their own language. At this point in history, Aramaic picked up in Babylon, rather than standard Hebrew became the language of the people. But the Torah was written in Hebrew.

Many people would have been able to read it, but that doesn't mean they would have had access to it or even that they would have understood it as a first language. So they have a reading. The Rabbi and leader Ezra stands with others for hours to read.

The Law is not read only to the men, but to the women and older children as well. Everyone who could understand. Ezra stood up high where the people could see him, and they listened attentively ... standing ... for hours. This is a feat in itself. It is difficult enough for us to listen attentively for a half hour. It's not something we do in our culture. We are far too accustomed to the freedom of being able to access things for ourselves at any time to be subject to listening to a single person for hours on end. These days, we would just buy the DVD and go home and watch it in installments.

We cannot be certain who all these men flanking Ezra are. For some of them, this is the only time they are mentioned in the Bible. For others, their names are common, so it's hard to tell which one is being singled out. Zechariah was a prophet, at least a couple of them were Levites, but the rest may have simply been prominent clan leaders.

However, the second list of men are all Levites. It was part of the levitical mandate to teach the law. These men took turns. Ezra did not read all by himself for hours on end, they traded off as the morning wore on.

There is an important prelude to the reading and the teaching of the law though, and that is worship. The people all bowed and worshiped God before the law was approached. This is a wonderful precedent for the order of most church services. Music, prayers, giving, all acts of worship precede the Scriptures. This

prepares the heart. It brings God into our awareness so that when we hear what He has to say, we've already been interacting with Him.

Verse 8 is of primary importance for our purposes. This was not a straight reading. It was an annotated reading. It was read, explained, and expounded upon. This might have been a 6 hour tag-team Scripture lesson. Likely the only book of the Law they used was Deuteronomy, which encapsulates the law for people living in the land.

Reading is straightforward enough. The Scriptures were written in Hebrew and the Levites read it as it was written. Aramaic is related to Hebrew as a language, but they are not the same. The people now with Aramaic as their first language would need many of the ideas explained to them. Terms would need to be defined, nuances drawn out. So besides straight reading they found these areas of difficulty and clarified things for the people.

Then besides reading and explaining, they also imparted insights. This is interpretation. This is expounding on the scriptures. It is the rough equivalent of a teaching or preaching session where the people walk away not just with a knowledge of what it says ... which they can gain by reading, or a knowledge of what it means ... which they gain by explanation ... but a knowledge of why it is important and what it requires of them personally and as a nation.

These are the goals of teaching and preaching. Just as Ezra and his Levite brothers brought God's word to the people, we as preachers and teachers try to bring it to you in such a way as to show you just how much the Bible is a living, relevant book.

You can do much of it yourself

It's called study. Look at the three ideas:

- Reading
- Explaining
- Interpreting

This process describes study as well as teaching. After all, what is study except teaching yourself? Some people can be a little too confident with this process. I had one friend who was intelligent, no doubt about it, but he was a little too confident in his intelligence. He was learning Esperanto. You may not know what that is ... that's ok. I told him he should stop learning an artificial language and learn a real one instead. So he decided on Mandarin Chinese. He worked at it for awhile, and I finally told him I thought he was only going to make it so far without a teacher. He disagreed ... for awhile. He made some headway, then he gave up.

I believe we need teachers to learn the Bible. I need teachers and so do you. However, there is a lot we can do on our own.

Read

Reading is a straightforward exercise, and I will say, that to get God's people to read the Bible is an accomplishment in itself. I can say that with confidence, because I find myself in the position of needing to read it more. Time passes, and before I know it, I've gone days without even opening a Bible. If it's a problem for the pastor, I can pretty well guess it's a problem for others too.

Reading the Bible is the first step in study. If you are studying a portion of the Bible, here is a recommended reading pattern:

- Pick a passage
- Read the whole book the passage is a part of
- Read the section of the book the passage is in
- Read the passage again, multiple times until it is very familiar

Reading is a sprint, meditation is a long run, study is a marathon. You can't expect to get it all done in a single sitting ... not unless you have long sitting times, and many do not. In truth, you can never get done studying a passage of Scripture. There's just too much to learn.

As with meditation, You will need a notebook. Each time you read as part of your study, you will want to write down important facts that occur to you. All this reading saturates your mind with the truths implicit in the scripture you are studying. It sets the passage in its context and keeps you from missing the point as easily.

Explain

Now, this might sound a little odd. You are studying because you need the scripture explained to you. How can you explain it to yourself. Let me ... um ... explain.

This stage of study is your way of making sure you are understanding the passage on the most basic level. No matter which translation of the Bible you use, there are going to be things that can be translated differently ... words, phrases, even sentence orders. Again, as with meditation, it may be helpful to have a dictionary close by. Don't over do it, but it can be useful.

More useful is a second and even a third translation of the Bible. You probably have at least two in your house already. It is fairly easy to get a third cheaply or even free if you are online. When you are done reading and re-reading your passage to get the flow and the context, read it slowly and with an eye for detail. Switch back and forth between translations, making sure before you move on that you have an idea why or how it could be translated various ways. Look for the relationships between the differing words ... find their commonalities, don't focus on the differences.

Here, allow me to state a very serious philosophy of mine: You don't need a Greek or Hebrew lexicon unless you are prepared to study that language.

Some people think that these tools help you to get closer to the original. They do, if you understand the tools themselves. Otherwise, you're just looking at another dictionary with multiple options that are probably more confusing than helpful.

Religion has a sad tendency toward linguistic snobbery:

The Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek

The OT was translated into Greek, and that's what was used by the Apostles, after all, Greek was the world's language.

After a few centuries, the Bible was translated into Latin

Over the next few centuries, a rift developed between those who continued to read the Bible in Greek and those who read the newer Latin translations. Finally the Church split completely between Orthodox and Catholic and language was part of the problem.

Now Latin became the dominant way the Bible was read, until the reformation approached.

Some people started translating the Bible into their own languages, and those who read the Bible in Latin saw them as heretics and criminals. Never mind the fact that most people could no longer read Latin.

It took the upheaval of the Reformation, including battles and deaths, to make the German and English translations of the Bible acceptable in some circles. See the pattern? The Church split again, and language was part of the issue.

We can see it happening again. Those early English translations were refined and became the standard. In the last 50 years many newer English translations have surfaced. Sure enough, there are protestant churches that have designated themselves as following a particular older translation. There isn't any bloodshed over it, but the church continues to fight over which English translation is appropriate.

Here's the truth. They're all good. Use one that sounds natural to you. Use a newer translation and get a couple others so you can compare.

There is no virtue in clinging to a Bible translation that is a burden to understand. God lives in you and He speaks your language. Here's one of the beautiful things. Ezra was reading in Hebrew and explaining in Aramaic ... two very different forms of the same language. That's the most complicated most of us need it to be.

Interpret

Ezra continued by expounding on the Scriptures. This is the hardest part to do by yourself. Some of it can be

done by using the meditation techniques you learned last week. Part of it can be done by using the study sheet you've been given.

You will notice much information can be sifted from the Bible without ever turning the page. Whether a passage is a story or an encouragement or a prayer makes a big difference. Stories give us positive and negative examples; advisory passages tell us how to behave and why; prayers tell us how to cope with our feelings as they relate to God. Some passages just tell us information we need to know.

By looking carefully at the details of a passage we can discover what the writer thought. We can tell not just the facts, but the moral fabric of the facts.

Notice the last step of the study process is to apply the Scriptures, looking for ways to change our thinking and our behavior. The Bible is not a book of theological information or even good moral stories. It is a book intended to transform us, to change us into the image of Jesus, to reclaim the image of God that was created in each of us.

If you don't find things from time to time that challenge the way you live, you aren't going deeply enough or you aren't being honest with yourself.

You should gain as much as you can from the passage itself, without going to outside sources. Eventually you'll want to go to those sources, but then it is to confirm or correct your own conclusions and to expand your understanding. If you go too quickly to commentaries, media preachers, articles or websites, you are allowing somebody else to do your thinking for you. Sometimes we don't even know who that person is or what they believe.

But God lives in you and you know you better than you know the author of any commentary ... even if it's a good one. Trust yourself and trust the God who lives in you. If you are stumped, come to me or another mature believer you know and trust. There is more transformation to be found in a relationship and a conversation than there is usually to be found in a book.

And remember to bathe your study in worship and prayer. The main relationship that will have an effect on what you learn, is your relationship with the author who created both you and the Bible.

Obey with Joy

Nehemiah 8:1-12 (NIV)

“I didn’t know” is one of my favorite excuses. I used it all the time as a child. Maybe some of you did too.

- ◆ “Why did you do that?”
- ◆ “I don’t know.”

I had a clear idea of what the burden of knowledge was. I knew that you are responsible for what you know. What I did not know at the time was that ignorance is not an excuse when the means to learn is at hand. Another thing I did not know was that knowledge is not only a burden it is a privilege. There were many people who would like to know many things but can not.

The people of Israel were privileged with a knowledge that the rest of the world did not have. They knew exactly who God was and what He demanded. Not just through the deduction of looking at nature or through the hidden meanings in the backwaters of their histories, but Israel knew because God had told them, explicitly and personally. This passage is the record of the people of Israel learning all over again. When we approach this part of Nehemiah we are seeing the burden of knowledge being eased back down upon their shoulders.

all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which

was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.”

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 (NIV)

If knowledge is a burden, then this Information Age must be an overwhelming load. The Israelites returning from Babylon and Persia certainly felt it.

The wall is done. The people are preparing to begin their lives again as a nation. It isn't the way it was, but it is more independence than any of them have ever known. We have seen a number of things that marked this new beginning on the LORD's work:

- ◆ Chapter 1 shows us it was bathed in prayer by its leader
- ◆ Chapter 2 shows us it was given all the resources that could be mustered
- ◆ Chapter 3 shows us it was bolstered by the work of its people, no matter their ability
- ◆ Chapter 4 shows us it was guarded against the enemy
- ◆ Chapter 5 shows us all attempts to undermine it have been put down
- ◆ Chapter 6 shows us the people have refused to compromise with the enemy

- ◆ Chapter 7 shows us everyone has financially given what they could to the work

These are lessons for our new beginnings. They are elements of a consecration to the LORD. This new beginning is off to a good start. The LORD's work is being treated with care and respect.

But up till now all the beginning notes that have been played have been only a prelude. The nation could not have its dignity until its wall was in place. They now have both a defended capital and their center of worship, the Temple. Their enemies have been soundly defeated by this accomplishment. The Bible says that the accomplishment itself was a testimony to them of God's power.

We are invited to the dedication of wall and the rededication of the nation

- ◆ It is symbolic that we join the Jews in the autumn
- ◆ Even the season suggests a time of transition
- ◆ The early harvest is in
- ◆ The plowing for the late crop has only begun
- ◆ The early rains are upon them
- ◆ They have completed a great task and now they must get down to the hard work of living

It is a strange irony that those things we see as difficult are usually short lived. By far the hardest things we do require our every day attention. They are the things that we must exercise discipline, loyalty, determination, self denial, and faithfulness to accomplish.

Surely the wall was a difficult project, but it was only a project after all. Anyone with an eye could see how far the end was and anticipate success and completion. It is the long haul that gets to us. It is the daily living that is hard.

So the Jews are standing in a time of transition. It is important that we notice who is there. We often associate the social structure of the ancient Jews as being almost entirely male oriented. But the Bible makes it clear that everyone who can understand is there, both men and women and presumably older children. This reminds us of God speaking from the mountain when all the people were called to assemble and listen. This is a reenactment. It is the same situation. God, in person, gave his people the law in Moses' day, and He is giving it to them again now through the reading of the event.

Ezra a priest and Rabbi is standing on a dais before them and beginning to read the book of the law to them. Many men of position and power are standing with him.

At the same time some other men are standing among the people. They are teaching. If you notice the footnote in your NIV Bible where it says "making it clear" in verse 8, you will find that it means translating it.

Remember that the Jews had been in Babylon and Persia for over a century and now most of them spoke Aramaic instead of Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures. The educated priests could read it and translate it to them, but they did not understand it directly.

- ◆ They read it to them
- ◆ Clarified the nuances of language
- ◆ and interpreted it for them

That's what I attempt to do. I am by no means the scholar that these men were, but it is my calling to bring the Scripture to you and make sure that you

understand it clearly so that you can live out what it says.

Apparently this great lesson that lasted about 6 hours had an unexpected effect. Nehemiah and the priests who were there found themselves having to comfort the people. The Bible says they were weeping with grief.

It may be difficult for us to understand why the reading of the law had this effect unless we continue to read the book of Nehemiah. In the next few chapters we find that the people were guilty of all kinds of abuses.

- ◆ The Law was making that very fact clear
- ◆ It was shining a light on their sin

In fact, I am convinced that some of them had no idea that their lifestyles were wrong. They had been living under a pagan roof for so long the house rules had changed. Remember, these people had forgotten that they were not supposed to charge each other interest. Later in the book we find out that is not all they forgot.

So for the first time in their lives many of these people are hearing about their national heritage. They are finding out what it means to be the chosen people of God. And it is a fearful thing. They are learning what His law is about and it disturbs them because they are coming up short.

Not only that, the Law that is being read to them spells out some fearful punishments doled out to those who do wrong. Many of the people in this gathering would have been guilty of sins worthy of the death penalty, if only they had known. They are finding out that there is more to being one of the chosen people than leaving Persia and coming to an ancient home land to start a

new life. They are finding out that the life they are beginning implies a covenant.

Many people today have a similar problem. They hear about what the Bible has to say and they interpret it with a knee jerk reaction:

- ◆ It's full of rules
- ◆ It's full of "Thou shalt not's"
- ◆ It has an unreachably high standard of morality

And their first response is to avoid it.

Even believers do this. We find ourselves immersed in sin after a long period of sliding away from God and rather than admit the sin and come back to Him, we try to hide it and justify it to ourselves so that we do not have to face the consequences that are implied.

When people are deeply enough touched by the essential wrongness of their lives it often moves them to grief and sometimes to tears in their repentance. That is what was going on here.

But Nehemiah and Ezra and the others are determined not to let it remain at that point. They highlight something the people had not considered. I'll show you.

The "X" of numbers

(this exercise involved a game I can no longer find.)

You have in your hand a paper full of numbers. I want you to look at it and for one minute ... Don't start yet. No head starts. I want you to circle the numbers ... in order. Start at 1, 2, 3 and move toward 100. Any questions? Go!

Allow 1 minute

Ok! How many of you reached 10?

20?

30?

etc.

Not easy, I know.

Now let's do this again. The ushers are handing out another sheet that is almost identical. You can see that there is a pattern to what you were doing. If you follow the numbers you circled you will find that

1 is in A

2 is in B

3 is in C

4 is in D

5 is in A

etc.

You understand the pattern? Ok, now using this new sheet, start all over again with 1, 2, 3, and move toward 100.

Allow 1 minute

Did you do better this time?

How many of you reached 20?

30?

40?

etc.

What made the difference?

You had information you did not have the first time. You had a key. You knew the pattern. You had the code cracked for you.

That's what God did for the Jews and that is what Nehemiah and Ezra are telling the people.

- ◆ The code has been cracked
- ◆ You have the key
- ◆ You know the rules
- ◆ You have a leg up in the battle for eternal significance
- ◆ And you are the only nation who does!

Moses articulated it to the original hearers of the Law like this:

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Deuteronomy 4:7-8 (NIV)

The Law, with all of its rules and restrictions gave the Jews a distinct spiritual advantage over the other nations. The Psalmist recognized this centuries later:

He has revealed his word to Jacob,
his laws and decrees to Israel.
He has done this for no other nation;
they do not know his laws.
Praise the LORD. Psalm 147:19-20 (NIV)

Praise the LORD!

It is His great mercy that has told you what is right and what is wrong

A child often sees the rules laid down by his parents as restrictive and unkind.

- ◆ After all ... the other kids play in the street
- ◆ After all ... my friends' parents don't pry into their personal lives
- ◆ Why don't you let me have my freedom and privacy?
- ◆ Why should I listen to you?

Because it is an advantage.

Young people. Your parents, for that matter, I tell you things you should and should not do for your own good and protection. I know, sometimes you don't want to be protected. You would rather find out for yourself what the consequences of your actions are.

- ◆ But you are not all that is at stake
- ◆ You represent an investment

Your parents have invested blood, sweat, tears, sleepless nights, hope, love, and grief for one great goal.

Do you want to know what that goal is? It is this.

They want you to reach their age and look back at your life free from the regrets they have.

They want you to be able to avoid berating yourself for being so stupid as to do some things that in retrospect were not wise.

It is a gift of a future freedom.

God has given us that same gift. He wants us to see His word as a leg up. He wants us to see it as a free dose of wisdom that will save us from eternal grief.

- ◆ The Law of God is not a burden to be borne

- ◆ It is an advantage to be enjoyed

The Bible says the people saw the immediate good in this lesson. They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with great gusto and joy.

Having sin defined for you is not an occasion for grief and regret. Repentance yes. Brief sorrow perhaps.

- ◆ But God calls us to trade that sorrow for celebration.
- ◆ He wants us to turn in our regrets for rejoicing

He wants us to rejoice in the advantage He has given us.

For example: “Do not steal”

- ◆ This is not simply a restriction on what you may and may not have
- ◆ It is not simply an order to respect the property of others
- ◆ It is a freeing piece of information

Without the commandment we would not know that God is offended by theft. We would think cheating was ok. We would perhaps constantly offend God and damn ourselves in the process.

But you have the commandment “Do not steal”

You know that God is offended at a dishonest success and pleased by failure earned honestly. It is an occasion for joy.

- ◆ You know what is required of you and you can please God instead of angering Him
- ◆ You can be joyful in knowing that you have and have tried to have no more than God has given you

- ◆ You can rejoice in the gifts of God knowing that regardless of what you want, you have the very best you can have
- ◆ You know that even in your failure you can please him if you are honestly doing your best

When we take communion we could see it as an eternal reminder of our culpability in Jesus' death. Certainly it is a reminder of His body, broken for us and His blood poured out for us. We are reminded that without our sin, these things would not have been necessary.

But that is not all He intended it to be. It is a joyful celebration of the gift of Salvation He has given us. It is the participation with all other believers in the new life that is ours by an inheritance of faith. It is the life of Jesus transferred to us, handed to us as a free gift.

Remembering God's Goodness

Nehemiah 9

In Malachi 3:13-18, the Prophet says that the righteous got together and wrote a record of the good things they had done in the presence of the LORD. This is called by Malachi, "a scroll of Remembrance."

I believe this was the way Nehemiah was written. We don't know for sure. What we do know is that it was written about the same time as Malachi and it does indeed record many good things and long lists of righteous people with a sharp distinction drawn between their works and the works of those who were living outside the Law of God. It is my opinion that Nehemiah and Ezra could very well represent this Scroll of Remembrance that the prophet talks about.

Our passage today is part of what suggests this to me. Nehemiah 9 and 10 should actually be taken together. In chapter 9 the people along with the Levites look back at the good things God has done for them and the sad way they have repaid His goodness. In Nehemiah 10 we see what they decided to do in response to this information and they make a public, sealed agreement in that regard.

Today we are not looking at that agreement. Today we are looking at the preliminary. The look back at what God has done.

Remember that Chapter 8 tells how the Law of the LORD was read to the people and their response of grief and weeping. The leaders told them not to grieve, but to celebrate the great revelation they had been given.

They celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles. This was a great feast meant to commemorate the 40 year wandering in the wilderness during the time of Moses. Then they lived in tents, and God commanded them that in the Promised land, every autumn they must build booths out of branches and live in them for a week. This was their way of remembering that God had preserved them as a nation during a time of great hardship.

The Bible says that it was the greatest celebration of that feast since the days of Joshua. That means there had not been such a celebration in nearly 1000 years. Whoa! Basically, it was the party of the Millennium.

But that was not enough for these people. They did as they were told and did it with great spirit. But now they want to come back to the issue that was burning on their hearts. They want to see their own lifestyles in the context of the great movement of God among their people.

With that in mind, the Levites led in worship. For half a day, they read the Law and worshiped in prayer. The leaders then led a ritual that had been repeated at many key times in Israel's history: the recounting of the works of God. Accounts of this kind of story telling can be found in:

- Joshua 24 – Joshua is dying and is ensuring that the people remember the LORD
- 1 Samuel 12 – Samuel tells the story as they begin the monarchy
- Psalms 78, 105, 106, 136 were written so there would be a record of these events for use in the Temple
- Stephen does it in Acts 7 at the birth of the Church

At this time, when the returned exiles are reestablishing the nation, it is appropriate that they recall the works of God. It begins in verse 5 with creation itself.

“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

We, of course, believe in faith that the Earth and all the good things in it, including the lives that we lead are gifts from God rather than the random chances of chaos as is taught in secular scientific circles.

When the readers continue they go on to the specific history of Israel. They talk about Abram and the great call that took them away from the land of Ur to the Promised Land.

“You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

In this passage we see two great goodnesses of God:

- God changed Abram’s name
- God made a covenant with Abraham and gave him land where he could begin a nation

We might not think changing someone's name is so great but if we pay attention to the meaning of that change we see how important it really was.

- Abram means: "the father is exalted"
- Abraham means: "the father of a multitude"

As we know, Abram had no children. His name, the father is exalted, must have been an embarrassment to him. I have often thought it was important for parents to predict the uses of a child's name by a Junior High student, before they sign a birth certificate.

So it is a great act of prophecy and faith that Abram receives from God a name that means "father of a multitude." It reflected the things that God was yet to do.

Of course whole Old Testament is the account of the covenant and how it played out between God and His people.

Testimony: *(in these sections members told part of their own stories)*

The next section speaks of the Exodus. The single most spectacular and defining moment for Israel in the OT.

"You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with

a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.

“You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

The themes of this section are the strong hand by which God saved them from the most powerful empire in the known world, and the supernatural way God sustained them as they escaped.

- He gave them guidance in the cloud and the pillar of fire
- He gave them food that should not have been found in the desert
- He gave them a Law they would not have been able to come up with on their own

God is powerful and He does powerful things to keep His promises and save His people. It pays for us to remember that.

Testimony

The people are next called to the event they have just commemorated, the 40 years in the wilderness.

“But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became

stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.

"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

Here they are called to remember the failure of their ancestors and the faithfulness of God in spite of that failure. This is a great truth that we must always remember. God does not abandon those who abandon Him. When we see things about God's plan we do not like and turn away from Him, He is gentle with us and brings us back. It is interesting that we see all kinds of negative things brought into the life of the nation of Israel, but God still gives them the cloud and He still gives them the manna. How many times do we turn our backs on God and arrogantly think that His continued provision justifies our sin. In fact, it doesn't matter what we do, God is forgiving and loving and wants us to return to Him.

Testimony

The times of the Judges are the most tumultuous times Israel ever faced. They were nomads trying to learn how to settle down.

“You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.

“But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.

“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” is the rallying cry of the time of the Judges. The more you read the book you find out how appropriate that line is to that period. But the most important thing about the period is not the people’s sin, but God’s goodness. Nehemiah talks mostly about how God kept his promises and forgave when the people called out to Him. This period brought the people from being a homeless bunch of traveling vagabonds, to being a nation ready to face all the nations around them and even bask in a golden age of their own.

Testimony

The history of Israel is a see saw ride of moral ups and downs. The next section of the story bears that out.

“But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.

This king did what was right. That king did what was wrong. This king was bad, that king was worse, the other king was the worse they ever had. Some of the most depressing passages for the people of Israel must have been those that told about a king that had to strip out the treasures of the Temple or the Royal palace to pay the tribute that was demanded by one foreign king or another. But this writer notes that God delivered them, “time after time.”

I am reminded of an old political cartoon. The president is standing in a trash can. A person is talking to him and says, “I told you to stand on your record, not in it.”

If we look too long at our own records we may become very discouraged. When we get ready to move ahead in our spiritual lives, it is much better to look at God's record of faithfulness and all the good things He has done.

Testimony

The last part of this story is one that leads the people up to the place they are standing. It talks about their exile and return.

“You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

Nehemiah 9:5-31 (NIV)

It seems appropriate that this passage ends with a statement of the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28. God told them way back in the days of Moses, 1000 years ago that they would be handed over to a foreign power if they failed to obey the law. This writer once again though acknowledges the great place they find themselves at the end of it all. In the hands of a gracious and merciful God.

That is where you are. In the hands of a gracious and merciful God.

When we are trying for a new start, it is important to remember the good things of the past. It is important to recall the goodness God has shown you:

- It helps you be thankful
- It gives you perspective on your own obedience and disobedience
- It gives you faith for the hard times to come
- It reminds you of where to look for things that are beyond your power
- It refreshes your sense of identity as God's child.

Today you have heard a number of stories about the past of this body of believers. They are part of your history. They are foreshadows of your future. Remember God's goodness and be thankful.

Some should go

Nehemiah 11:1-2

Jesus said to go and make disciples of all nations. This was God's plan from the beginning.

- He told Abram that through him He would bless the world
- He told Israel that they would be a light to the nations
- The prophets reiterated that call
- He told the church in Matt 28 to spread everywhere

This is not an option, it is a command to the church. That is not to say that everyone in the church should start packing their bags, but it is a call to find those who are gifted and to equip and send them. It is also a call to seriously ask ourselves, "Am I one who should go?"

Certainly, some should go.

There are individuals in this room who should seriously be asking that question.

Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 11:1-2 (NIV)

Further down the page it says this:

The rest of the Israelites, with the priests and Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, each on his ancestral property. Nehemiah 11:20 (NIV)

Let us try to understand the nature of this call. It is not a call to stay, but a call to go. The second half of the book of Joshua is all about the division of the land after Moses died when the people of God arrived in the promised land. This was a very important process. Land in the nation of Israel at that time was not like land here. It was not a commodity to be bought and sold as the owner wished.

Land was a hereditary right and a gift from God. It was directly traceable to the first member of your tribe and clan who had owned the land on which you lived. You could buy land from another person but every 50 years at the Year of Jubilee it was supposed to be returned to its ancestral holding. The Jubilee law that governed the buying and selling of land is found in Leviticus 25:10-16

Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. ... “If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other. You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops.

In this way it was clear. If we had just had the year of Jubilee and you wanted to buy my property, I was free to charge you based on the dozens of years of crops that I would not get from the land. However, if the year of Jubilee was approaching, I could only charge you

based on the few crops that would be harvested until that time. In that way, when I returned to the land to reclaim it at the year of Jubilee, you would not have been cheated.

Now the Years of Jubilee were not faithfully observed. We are talking about what should have been and in some cases, what actually existed. Even though the Jubilees were not kept faithfully, there were many laws and customs governing the holding of property that were meticulously observed. So we can see that land was much more than an asset to these people, it was part of their family identity. It was something like living on the old family homestead, but remember that there was 1000 years of history behind these property holdings. In this country, at the most, there can only be about 400 years unless you are a Native American. Even then, the laws governing family property are not even close to the same, so there is no real parallel that I know of.

To own a piece of land was to hold the heritage of the family. It was to be entrusted to pass on the heritage of the family to the next generation. It was a sacred trust extended not just to you, but to all the people who would ever live on that land.

Some time ago there was a commercial. A woman and her husband are being given a baby shower. She opens a gift and it is her grandmother's only doll. A lady says, "It's been in the family for generations." The guy looks at it and sees somebody come in with the doughnuts. He walks over to the box and tosses the doll on the table to get a doughnut for himself. What he doesn't see until it is too late is that he tossed the doll right on top of a tea light and the thing catches on fire.

While the ladies are down on the sofa having a conversation about what a great father he will make, he is up at the table behind them trying to beat out the fire that is ravaging the head of the doll.

Maybe you had to be there.

Anyway, it is like that. Here is a priceless antique. What is more it has great sentimental value, and he is given charge of it. It is in his hands to care for and, presumably, to pass down to the child who will soon be born.

Now this guy drops the ball ... so to speak

But it is that kind of seriousness several times over with which land changes hands. It isn't just money. It is much more. We look at Nehemiah 11:4-18 and we see lists of hard to pronounce names that mean nothing to us and we wonder why they were included in the Bible. In most cases, their names are repeated nowhere else in the Bible at all. The people of Nehemiah's day saw those names and they knew the people. The list of forebears was the ancestral claim to the land they were entitled to. With each name that is included in the list the strength of the title of the land is reinforced. They are ready to get out and begin farming this land and making it prosperous.

At the same time we have this new city, the capital of the nation. The Temple has been rebuilt by Ezra and his retinue. The walls have been rebuilt under the leadership of Nehemiah. They have the superstructure for a workable, defensible city. They have everything they need to reinstate the national heritage and spiritual center. But they haven't completed the place yet, they have a long row to hoe. In fact, they are so far from having an actual working city that they don't even

have residents, craftsmen, merchants, service people, soldiers. You see, most of the residents were killed in the original siege or were carried away into exile and none of their relatives ever came back.

What they do have are enemies. They have people who tried to kill them while they were working. They have people who tried to kill their leader. They have people who tried to covertly undermine the priesthood and the very foundation of their worship.

If they don't populate this city, all the hard work they have gone through to bring it up to a defensible state will go for nothing. They will have priests to man the Temple and Levites to serve them, but if that is all they have, the city those few people will be left defenseless and vulnerable. They may as well have saved their energy.

So they did what any self respecting group of people do when they have a decision to make and there doesn't seem to be any fair way to choose. They flipped a coin.

So to speak.

Casting lots was a means of choosing impartially, but it is also thought of as a way to treat something too lightly at times. Some things are too important to cast lots about. When God wanted to demonstrate the depths to which His people had descended into sin, He accuses them of casting lots as a means of gambling and winning the possession of young boys for prostitution.

By the same token, it was endorsed, indeed commanded by God as a means of dividing property at times or deciding between people in a legal struggle. In 1 Chron 24:5 we see lots being cast by David to set

leaders in the ministry of the Temple. In the NT we see lots being cast for Jesus' clothing, gambling for personal gain. On the other hand we see lots being cast to determine who should join the company of the Apostles in Acts 1:26.

It is only on the rarest occasions, when everything else is equal and there is no other way to make a choice that lots are used to place people in leadership in the service of God. That is my piece about a good justification for abandoning the practice as it is used in some Mennonite churches. In every other case where leaders were placed, there was either the clear call of God on their lives or it was with the mentoring and placing of that person by competent leadership.

Nuff said.

In this case they cast lots to determine who should stay in Jerusalem. The reason they used lots this time was not so that nobody could unfairly be given the privilege to stay, it was so that nobody would unfairly be forced to stay. It was not something people were falling over themselves to do. Whoever stayed was giving up his family heritage and starting all over again from scratch. He couldn't even farm properly. Eventually, his family holdings would go to a collateral line of the family. That's why the Bible does not say they "congratulated" the people who were chosen to stay, but they "commended" them. These people were seen as sacrificing. Maybe this is why Mennonite used lots to determine who would be the ministers. Just kidding.

Actually it is more solemn than that. Here are about 3000 families whose relatives are going home to live together on the homestead. They are going to have the benefits and blessings of being around those they love in the company of people they know. Their

communities will have some transitions to go through, but they will do ok, because, besides living among family at their homes, their neighbors are extended family. Not only that, there may be some vestiges of their ancestor's lives in those places that can still be recognized and integrated into their lives today. The life of the family has been interrupted, but it has not been snuffed out.

On the other hand, here is a group of people who will get none of that. They will have to rebuild homes from the rubble in a place where they have no family ties that they do not bring with them. They will not have any close relatives living near by and the land they are getting in the city is no where near as large as the farm back home. They should be commended, they are giving up a lot.

There is a group of people that we see much the same way. They are called missionaries.

We don't choose them by lot, we look for the call of God on their lives. But the situation is similar. One of the most common objections to going on to the mission field is: "I would have to leave my family and everyone I know."

Some others sound like this:

- This is my home
- The culture would be weird and unfamiliar
- I'd have to leave my comfort
- I have no connection with those people at all
- I would have to work the ministry from the ground up

The calling on Nehemiah's contemporaries is not an easy place to work, but consider this. The place these people are being called to live is Jerusalem, "the holy

city." This is the place of Israel as God's people once again. But according to a prophet who was there when all this was being done, it will not always be that way:

“Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the LORD. “Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you. The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem. Be still before the LORD, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.” Zechariah 2:10-13 (NIV)

I would not be at all surprised if this event in Nehemiah 11 was the setting for the prophecy given in Zechariah 2. The prophet speaks of measuring the city and about the people coming back from Babylon. He is speaking in this short passage specifically about the people who are going to live in Jerusalem, not now, but in the last days. In that way, He is saying:

You who are chosen to live in Jerusalem now be glad. You are part of something that will one day be much bigger. It will include people from all nations and the LORD Himself will come to live among you in this place.

It is the same for those who go to the mission field today. They are part of that same plan of God. Those who will become a part of His people will come from many nations. Those who go now to call people to God will be inviting them to participate in this very event. Those whom God has called to go to the nations draw a line connecting these 3000 families who came to live in Jerusalem during the time of Nehemiah to those who

will live along side the Palace of the LORD at the last days. They are part of the plan.

And God calls some to go to do this great work.

In the days of Nehemiah, he called some to leave their homes to live in Jerusalem

It is part of the pattern He has made for Himself

- He called Noah out from his people
- He called Abram out from his people
- He called Moses out from his people
- He called the 12 apostles out from their people
- He called Paul and Barnabas out from their people
- Some 45 years ago, he began calling some of you out from your people
- 3 years ago, almost to the day, he called Dawn and I out from our people
- Just last year, he called the Brubakers out from their people

And I would not be at all surprised if in the next few years He calls some of you.

Some should go.

All cannot go. Some should stay. In Nehemiah's day 90% of the people breathed a sigh of relief and went home to live with their families. 10% were called upon to live the bold adventure. To leave all that was familiar and all they could possess to live in a strange place and build into the plan of God from the ruins.

That is the world. Ruins. God created the world to be His own in mankind's care. Man sold it to Satan in the Garden of Eden. Ever since then the people of the world have been going their own way and making a mess of things starting with their own lives and working their way out.

I am calling on you today. If we live up to the proportions of the days of Nehemiah we should expect about 10% of every generation to be called out to do God's work elsewhere. That is not a hard and fast figure, but it is realistic. Keep in mind that is only 10% of God's true people. I have no idea what that number is here at Norma, but It is safe to say that in a church that maintains an attendance of 40 for several decades should be able to call out 4 from every generation to do God's work.

You may protest, I am not a theologian. Not all missionaries are Bible trained. In EMM there are:

- Nurses
- Doctors
- Pilots
- Mechanics
- Well diggers
- Relief workers
- Teachers
- Church Planters
- Administrators
- Accountants

Just to name a few

Only two days ago the road was opened for 8 teams of Church planters, school administrators, teachers, and disciplers to go to Chile. Who knows what other skills will be needed.

It may be dangerous. in 2003, because they were Americans, three of EMM's missionaries were attacked by Muslims angry about the war. Nobody has been killed, but they may be. Carlton Stambaugh, EMM's Chairman of the Board said, "Some people think there is no adventure in the ministry. But these are times

when the adventure gets thicker than we really want it to.”

God may be calling some of you, even in the face of this danger. Some of you don't know it yet. Some of you aren't ready to know it yet, but when God speaks, you will know. Some of you may have already felt that call on your life to prepare for a ministry that is not here at home.

Some of you cannot stay, some of you should go.

- Is it a sacrifice?
- Yes
- Is it too much to ask?
- If it was just people asking for their own benefit, yes
- Should you be willing to do it anyway?
- Absolutely, because it isn't just people ... It's God

It is the great work of living among people who don't know the love of Jesus for the express purpose of communicating that love. You may communicate it in one of a million ways, but you should do it. Pray about it. Ask, “Is it I LORD?”

Some should go.

God wants the first of everything

Nehemiah 12:27-47

He doesn't want what's left over. He wants priority.

He wants you to acknowledge that He is the most important thing in your life, more important even than you. He says,

I have provided for you because I love you. But I don't want you to forget where your life comes from. I want you to give a portion of it back to me. Not just any portion ... the first portion. I want the first, because I want you to have faith that I will continue to provide.

No, I don't know a chapter and verse on that statement. It is woven into the fabric of the Scripture. It's what we scream and run away and call "THEOLOGY." And even though it is not a direct quote, it is true none the less.

A great part of it is expressed in Nehemiah 12:

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate. Hoshaiah and half the leaders of Judah followed them, along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his associates—Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani—with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God. Ezra the scribe led the procession. At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests—Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah with their trumpets—and also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam and Ezer. The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given

them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.

Nehemiah 12:27-47 (NIV)

The wall is done! Welcome to the celebration! I think Nehemiah's method of celebration is especially creative. He called all the professional worship leaders together. He had to, because they served in cycles so some were always at home, while others were serving at the temple. Nehemiah got them all into town.

Then he chose the best among them and divided them in half. Ezra took half and Nehemiah took the other half and they started up on the top of the West side of wall. The two halves walked along the top of the wall in opposite directions. All along the way they played

music. This brings us to verse 43 which is the climax of Nehemiah.

And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away (Neh 12:43 NIV).

The word "Joy" in different forms is repeated four times in this verse.

- They had worked
- They had obeyed
- They had trusted God
- They had sacrificed
- They had held up under the stress of opposition
- They had done work for which they were ill equipped

And now they were seeing and reaping the benefits: The joy of knowing that everything God has promised has come about

- Because He has been faithful
- and They have been obedient

They lined up with their instruments and their singers and marched around the top of the wall, starting at the West side and meeting on the East side at the temple. They just kept moving down one of the stairways along the wall and stepped right into their places in the Temple. The celebration moved seamlessly from a recognition of the work that had been completed to worshiping the LORD.

This is not a great leap. For weeks they had dedicated their lives to the service of the LORD in rebuilding the wall.

- It was a time for celebration
- the completion of a hard task and a time for worship
- the fulfillment of a great promise.
- The wall is built
- Jerusalem is restored ... The nation is restored

Sure the people still have a lot of work to do. The nation is not yet a viable, political entity aside from the forbearance of Persia. But they know it is begun. The first leg of the race is run and the down payment is made.

The whole book of Nehemiah has been about new beginnings and the whole book of Nehemiah marks a beginning, even though here, near the end of the book we seem to be looking at the completion of the wall, it is still just a beginning. The next chapter makes that clear, as you will realize if you were here when we discussed Chapter 13. Even as we complete this step, we are only preparing for more steps.

This is something God is very aware of. All of life is full of new beginnings and first steps. Life is renewed at every turn as we can tell by looking out the window.

God is showing us here how His will works. As we said at the start of the message, God wants the first of everything. Every time we make a new beginning

- Every spring
- Every morning
- Every conversation

He wants to be there and He wants to be acknowledged. He has specified a way this is to take place. It is called "Firstfruits."

This concept is peppered all through the law and it is illustrated here. What is firstfruits? Let's start right

where we are and see what we can understand where we stand.

A concept keeps rising to the surface all throughout this narration. Here are some words that indicate it:

- dedication
- purified
- assigned
- prescribed
- offered sacrifices
- appointed
- contributions
- first fruits
- tithes
- portions required by law
- services of purification
- set aside

All these things mean “Specially designated.” In theological terms they mean consecrated which takes the designation one step further and means that it is specially designated for God.

This is a principle set forth in the Law. Through Moses, God designated every first thing as something that was supposed to be specially designated for him:

- The first crop
- The first food you make
- The first oil you press
- The first born of every animal
- The first wine you make
- Every woman’s first born child

That’s right. Everything that could be designated as first, belonged to God. It seems a little unreasonable and you may be thinking, I don’t remember any first

born children being given to God, except Samuel, but that was a different situation.

Because God made a special provision for the children. That provision was two-fold:

He allowed the children to be redeemed with another kind of offering. Speaking to the priesthood he said:

“Everything in Israel that is devoted to the LORD is yours. The first offspring of every womb, both man and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. Numbers 18:14-16 (NIV)

In this way the LORD received His firstfruits and the child went home to live with his parents. This was meant to draw a sharp distinction between them and the surrounding nations some of whom sacrificed their first born to their gods. The LORD did not want human sacrifice.

The second thing he took instead of the children was the entire tribe of Levi:

The LORD also said to Moses, “I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.” Numbers 3:11-13 (NIV)

One of the most important things in this passage that was set aside for God was the very people leading in worship. Their whole tribe stood as the firstfruits of the nation, designated from the very inception of the clan to be used in God's service.

The concept of first fruits covers everything in the law of Moses. It serves to show how important the idea of setting things apart for God is. It penetrates every part of the ancient Israelite's life: His work, his home, his food, his family. Nothing is exempt.

Of course many of you are thinking it is a good thing that we do not observe the details of the Jewish law. But it is important for you and me to realize that this idea of consecrating or setting things aside for God is not dead. It is very much alive.

Occasionally you will hear us talk about tithing and giving. It is a common practice of those who tithe to write that check first as a symbol. It is the firstfruits of God's bounty to them, and so they return His portion first, not because they have a law to follow, but because it is in keeping with the idea of consecration and firstfruits. It is a symbolic act of faith. I give God His portion first and I trust Him to make sure I don't starve.

I challenge you to do that. Make your giving to God so inviolable that you will do it no matter what. If it looks like ends may not meet this week, write that check anyhow. Write it first and let it stand as a witness to your faith in the One who gave it to you in the first place.

You may have noticed that when we do health kits, MCC kind of insists on new items. Your relief giving of these items to MCC is a service to God. It is in keeping

with firstfruits giving to buy a new item and give it rather than giving what you have already partially worn out. In effect it is saying:

I will continue to use what I have, even though I could reasonably buy new things for myself. The person I am giving this to may appreciate having something instead of nothing, but since I am doing it in service to God, I will not give second best. I will do the very best that I can.

But consecration does not end there. It should permeate every part of our lives. Paul expands on the idea of consecration. He teaches us how it is to be translated into our lives today. He reminds us that nothing we do is isolated. It is always in the context of our service to God.

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

God still expects the consecration of your food and belongings. Do you realize that the tithe of the children of Israel was given to the priests and the Priests used that money and food for their own livelihood? That was the way God designed it. We don't have priests in the Old Testament sense any more, but it is important for us to take notice of something:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV)

Everything a priest from the line of Aaron received for his livelihood was a thing consecrated to the work of

the LORD. Every time he ate or spent money, it was an act of Holy trust, that his entire life had been given up to God.

You are now that priest. If you are a member of the household of faith, you are a priest whose very existence suggests service to God. Everything you have is a provision of God on your life as a consecrated priest in His service. Are you a Christian? Then you are a priest. Spiritually speaking, there is no access to God that you do not have.

Priests used to stand between the Israelites and God to bring their sins under His redemption. Jesus has done that for all of us now. We no longer need a priest to stand between us and God. We are permitted to stand before Him ourselves.

But do you realize what that means concerning your livelihood, your food and your belongings. They are things consecrated to the service of God. In the Old Testament that was epitomized in the sacrifices offered by the priests. Here is Paul again:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Romans 12:1 (NIV)

We no longer bring sacrifices to God because the sacrifice is made in Christ. As a token of our dedication to Him we are then expected to bring our very lives ... not slain upon an altar, that is already done, but lived in His service.

- How do we do that?
- We offer everything we have to Him
- We offer everything we are to Him
- We offer everything we do to Him

- We bring everything in our lives under His control

There is nothing mystical about this. It is, practically speaking, making sure that we familiarize ourselves with what He wants and complying with it. He will not physically turn our heads in the direction He wants us to go. At least usually He won't. He has already told us a lot. We are required to pay attention to what He has said and comply with it.

Let's take a practical exercise. Ask yourself this question:

What do I have the most trouble bringing under submission to God's will?

- Itemize it
- Pick one thing
- Do you have that in your head?

Ok, now here is what to do next. Commit yourself to taking the next month to discover what God's word has to say about that subject as nearly as you can make it out to be. Figure out what it looks like God requires of you along those lines.

I will be glad to help if you don't know how to go about this, you and I will sit down and figure out what you need to study. I'll help you with some methods that will work.

After you have done that you will have a clear idea of God's will on at least one subject, but it will be a subject that is important to you and your efforts to Give God the first of everything.

You will be taking the number one problem in your life and giving it to Him

In turn you will find yourself living a life that is more in keeping with His requirements on your life.

This morning we will have an invitation. The nature of the invitation is this. If you have an area of your life that you are convinced is not consecrated to God and you want to bring it under His control, I invite you to come forward this morning and we will pray together as an act of submission of that area of your life to Him.

Housecleaning

Nehemiah 13

The original writers of the Bible did not divide their writings into chapter and verse any more than you do. The chapter and verse system that we use was developed by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 13th century. Sometimes it is difficult to see why he divided it the way he did. Nehemiah 12 describes the dedication of the wall. At the end of the dedication some details were set up and begun, including the stewardship of the storerooms and the appointment of gate keepers and singers. The first 3 verses of chapter 13 are best read as belonging with the end of chapter 12. The reading of the Law goes with the consecration of the Levites.

After that there is some confusion in timing. Nehemiah left for 12 years, but it is unclear when he went and how that relates to some of the activities in chapter 13. The clearest way I can put it is that by the end of 13.3 Nehemiah was still there and the dedication of the new wall is complete. The Levites and their tools have been consecrated, the Law has been read and the people have expelled the foreigners from their company. But by the beginning of Nehemiah 13.4 he is gone and has not seen the abuses that are taking place.

But some abuses are clearly taking place in his absence, including abuses that relate directly to the consecration that takes place in the passage immediately preceding. Nehemiah comes back to do some housecleaning and refinement.

Nehemiah's housecleaning follows a pattern:

- He cites the abuse
- He asks a challenging question
- He restores righteousness
- He prays a Prayer of Defense

The pattern is repeated three times:

4-11 Abuses at the Temple

Abuse according to 1 Chronicles 28.11-13

Abuse according to Numbers 18:21 & 24

11 The question

12-13 Restoration of the Temple

14 Prayer of defense

15-22 Breaking the Sabbath

Abuse according to Exodus 31.14-17

Abuse according to Leviticus 26.27 & 33-35

17-18 The question

19-22 Restoration of the Sabbath

22b Prayer of defense

23-28 Intermarrying with Pagans

Abuse according to Deuteronomy 23.2

Abuse according to 1 Kings 11.4-8

26-27 The question

25, 28 & 30 Restoration of purity

29 Prayer of defense

31 Final act of righteousness and prayer of defense

What do we learn here?

A personal inventory should be taken on occasion

Nehemiah's return gave him the status of an outsider looking in. He has been gone 12 years. He has the fresh perspective of a person who has not lived with gradual shifts.

Allow your reading of the Scriptures to be more than a discipline. Let it be a challenge. As you read look intentionally for things you are doing wrong. God is an outsider looking in. Abuses gradually creep in where the best of intentions are exercised and in the most apparently devout people.

Look at Nehemiah's challenges

The challenges of Nehemiah imply broad questions we can use on ourselves:

- Why do I behave the way or do or neglect the things I neglect?
- What are the potential consequences of my actions?
- Should I have learned a lesson from someone else's mistakes?

The reasons I have for sinning are usually in total neglect for the reasons God has as classifying them as sin. I wander off because it feels good or it is convenient and I ignore the bigger issues of idolatry and apathy. By the same token Nehemiah wanted them to remember the lessons gleaned from their forefathers who went into exile and from Solomon. Are we smarter because others have made mistakes? We should be.

Make reforms quickly

Nehemiah's restorations were quick and decisive. That is the way we must be whenever possible. Our decisions should not be to begin doing something at another time, but to do something now to change our behavior. On occasion it may involve other people and the change must take root in a system rather than only in your own heart. That's ok. Change your heart now and plan to do the rest at the first available opportunity.

Our personal reforms should be peppered with prayer

Repentance finds substance in actions of change

Righteousness finds substance in words of communion with God

Afterword: The Joy of obedience

The book of Nehemiah is about obedience and the fulfillment it provides. Nehemiah is moved by a great desire to see the walls of the city restored. He begs the king of Persia for that privilege and as he progresses with the project it takes on new and increasingly complex implications.

To the surrounding peoples who have settled over the last century while Israel has been away in Babylon, this new wall becomes a political threat. Tobiah, Sanballat and others ridicule, oppose, threaten and intrigue their way into the spirits of the people. They try for Nehemiah and fail.

To the aristocracy of the Jews, it is an opportunity to make money off the refugees. They must feed their families while they work on the wall, there has been a famine, and the people are willing to borrow money to continue the labor. These aristocrats simultaneously refuse to work themselves and lend at interest, taking the opportunity to make a profit on the situation.

To the people, structure is being given to their lives. As they work on the wall, their own customs, laws and festivals are being resurrected. Milestones, both architectural and spiritual are celebrated:

The half-way point of the wall

The completion of the wall before the gates

The hanging of the gates

The dedication of the wall itself

In the mean time, the Feast of Tabernacles is announced and described, despite the people's deep sorrow over their own negligence of the law, they

celebrate more vigorously than has been done for nearly a millennium. Probably more significantly, after the celebration, they come together in a spontaneous humiliation before the LORD, reclaiming the sorrow that had to be suspended for the feast.

The reinstatement of the infrastructure of the city suggested the renewal of its official habitation and its centrality in the spiritual life of the nation. Beyond the great civil works project, a census was taken, contributions were received and accounted for, living arrangements were shifted to populate the city, and, most importantly, the covenant that defined the Jews as a people was renewed.

Only after all these accomplishments are fulfilled can the great dedication of the wall take place. It's full scope is demonstrated and appreciated and the celebration gathers momentum. It peaks at this point:

And on that day they offered great sacrifices,
rejoicing because God had given them great joy.
The women and children also rejoiced. The sound
of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

Nehemiah 12:43 (NIV)

In this verse the book of Nehemiah finds its ultimate climax. Both the emotional release of fulfillment and the spiritual catalyst for that abundance are recognized. The sacrifices of God are symbolic of the obedience that has been practiced in the accomplishment of all the goals recorded in the book:

The people have restored the wall

They have repopulated the city, giving the wall meaning

They have renewed the covenant, giving their unity substance

They have renounced the corruption that took them away from their God in the first place

They have confounded their enemies

In every sense, they have sacrificed, not just with the bulls and rams of the day. They have sacrificed of their own substance, their personal work, their spirits, their trust, in some cases their very homes.

The result is a joy so great that it is reiterated four times in a single verse. This joy was not a small passing thing that happened in close quarters, it was a joy shouted from the roof-tops, literally heard in every corner of the region.

This is in sharp contrast to the picture of obedience that is painted for us in our society. Obedience is, by that definition, restrictive, limiting, oppressive, confining. To demand obedience is decried as censorship, repression, bondage, imposition. And perhaps they have a point.

Some of Nehemiah's contemporaries were not willingly obedient. This is illustrated by the people who would not help work, those who charged their brothers interest on the food they ate, those who continued to aid the enemy and to marry outside the Covenant. But the picture painted by Nehemiah is one of general cooperation and acceptance of duty. As a body, the people worked, the people repented, the people celebrated, the people worshiped, the people vowed to adhere to the renewed covenant. Hence when the larger work was accomplished they felt a sense of personal accomplishment. It was their goal as well as a

national goal. It was their work that was completed and not just a project.

How readily do we enter into obedience on that level?

Are the projects of God's people your projects?

Do you work to develop an interest in and a contribution to the ministries of this local body?

Do you attach significance to your lack of fulfillment with perhaps your unwillingness to take a part in a work?

I feel least fulfilled in my work when I am accomplishing the least. I am accomplishing the least when I am laxest in my efforts. A prime cause of unhappiness is inactivity.

There are no returns when nothing is invested

Activity in your own interests are less likely to produce happiness than advertisements indicate. It's like paying your own salary. Trying to draw happiness from your own inner well is no good when there is nothing on the outside filling the well.