

## THERE'S WORK TO BE DONE

Jesus said "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) and "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you with me to be where I am." (John 14:3). Peter said, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5) Often this great verse is overlooked but among other things it states that Christians need to be about the work of building or rebuilding. We are the spiritual stones who are being set together for God's purposes.

If there has ever been a time to be reminded of the truth that God is a builder, it's now. Sadly many churches lie in a state of ruin today. Since God adds people to His church we are speaking of people, not buildings. For all mankind and especially Christians, the church is the most important and valuable thing that God has ever built. The construction of it cost Him the loss of His Son. As it lies in neglect in some places and in shambles in others, too many people are content to just hang in there and do very little.

On an even more personal basis for many, the walls of their own lives lie in ruin—destroyed by greed, lust, alcohol or other drugs, bitterness, hatred, selfishness, pride—you name it. God is looking for people to rebuild their walls. He is calling for leaders who will call others to action. Nehemiah responded to that call, he did exactly what God wanted him to do.

About 1000 BC at the death of King David, his son Solomon took the throne and reigned for 40 years. At Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam was made king. But Rehoboam was not nearly as wise as his father. In fact, he was a very poor leader. During the reign of Rehoboam, the kingdom split, never to be united again. Ten of the twelve tribes formed what was called the Northern Kingdom henceforth to be called the nation of Israel. The Northern Kingdom was led by one lecherous, no-good, idol-worshipping king after another until, in 721 BC, the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians. They never again appeared on the scene of history as a nation or as a people. They were lost forever.

The Southern Kingdom composed of two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin, was known as the nation of Judah. Judah fared a little bit

better than Israel. Most of their kings also rebelled against God's will, and under the prophet Jeremiah, God said, "You are going to be taken captive, too." Sure enough in 606 BC, the mighty nation of Babylon came in and swept away thousands of captives and took them back home to Babylon. Twenty years after that, in 586 BC, the Babylonians came again and this time, they desolated Jerusalem. They laid waste to the temple and the wall. Later Persia defeated the Babylonians.

But when God predicted Judah's captivity in the book of Jeremiah, God also said, 70 years later, "I'm going to bring you back home. I'm not going to let you stay there in perpetuity." In 536 BC, exactly 70 years after the first exile, a man by the name of Zerubbabel led the first group of Jews back home, and they rebuilt the temple. You can read about this in the book of Ezra, chapters 1 through 6.

Eighty years after Zerubbabel led that first group back, in 458 BC a priest by the name of Ezra led another group of Jews home. He restores public worship and the reading of the law. However many thousands of Jews stayed in exile in Persia.

In 445 BC, our story begins in a town of Persia called Shushan. Shushan was the winter home of the Persian monarchs and Persia, and at this time, was the dominant power of the Middle Eastern world. Thousands and thousands of Jews are exiled in Persia. One of them is a man by the name of Nehemiah.

Many of the Jews had been back in their homeland for a long time by the time Nehemiah is ready to come back home. In fact, by the time we pick up with Nehemiah, the Jews have been back in Palestine for about 100 years. The question I would like to start with is: Wouldn't you think with the people, the Jews going back home, having a hundred years to resettle and to rebuild, don't you think you would have heard a glowing report about how excited they were about being back?

Such was not the case; "The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was at the citadel of Shushan, 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." (Nehemiah 1:1) "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." (Nehemiah 1:3) They have been there for a hundred years, but after all this time, the Jews who have returned are living an insecure, vulnerable, cowering existence there at home, but they are still living like exiles.

If you were Nehemiah, what would it matter to you? After all you were born in captivity, you've never even seen Jerusalem, you've only heard about it. It's just ancient history. You've been an outsider to this Persian Empire, but you have climbed the ladder of success. You are now the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes! Now cup-bearer may not sound all that impressive to you. You may be thinking of a dishwasher or a waiter at a table or a butler. No. A cupbearer was a far more prominent and important than that. The most entrusted of the king's associates, the cupbearer, tasted the king's food and sipped of the king's wine before the king would ever consume it. In other words, he was the royal guinea pig for any assassination attempt, and in that day and time, there were plenty. Ancient historians tell us that no one other than the king's wife had as much influence on all of the king's decisions than the cupbearer. So, here Nehemiah is, a captive who has grown up in this culture and in the second most important position in the kingdom. Don't you think Nehemiah would have heard the report of the deplorable conditions in Palestine and just say, "that's a shame! Got to get back to work. Got to go cash another check!" Here's what Nehemiah did. "When I heard those things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven." (Nehemiah 1:4)

This is not a moment of nostalgia. It is a man in deep, deep anguish. What's going on in this man's head? Why is he concerned about a city he's never seen? Moreover, what's the big deal about a wall? Why would that bring you down to your knees? If we are going to understand together the book of Nehemiah, if we are going to see revival among God's people, including our own personal revival, understanding verse 4 is the key.

1. The broken wall said something about the reputation of his God. Jerusalem was known throughout the ancient world as the "city of the Jews." It was the place of their temple. Therefore, it was the dwelling place of their God, Jehovah. Even the pagans knew that.

"In Judah, God is known. His name is great in Israel. His tent is in Salem

(Salem was the early name for Jerusalem.). His dwelling place is Zion." (Psalm 76:1-2) "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our hearts, for there our captors asked us for song, our tormenters demanded songs of joy. They said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion'. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4)

To a Jew a song about Zion and a song about the Lord was the same thing. Because Zion was where God lived. Nehemiah felt the burden because he knew the peoples of the world were saying, "Who is this God of the Jews? We heard a long time ago, He parted the Red Sea. We heard about how He conquered kingdom after kingdom. Tell me, where is His home? Where is the home of His people? When you pointed to a heap of ruins, it mocked His name." That is Nehemiah's burden. God is not honored by ruins and Nehemiah knew that.

2. The broken wall said something about the condition of his people, and I think that's what really bothered him. After all these years of being home, his people are still living like exiles. Rather than restore and flourish in their city, they are living like jackals. They settle for a survival mentality rather than a revival mentality.

Nehemiah isn't as interested in a construction project as he is a consecration project. He didn't just desire to go to Jerusalem to rebuild walls—he wanted to go home to rebuild a people. That's his burden! So, here is this godly man who has a burden on his heart for the reputation of his God and the condition of his people.

Why was Nehemiah chosen, why did he go? Why did a cupbearer travel over a thousand miles of desert with supplies and equipment and materials when he wasn't even a contractor?

1. He had a heart that cared. This guy had socially arrived! He was the right-hand man to the most powerful man on the face of the earth. He could have stayed on easy street and said, "Hey! It's not my problem! Jerusalem is not my home and if those people want to wallow in spiritual squalor, just let them!" It's awfully easy for those who are successful financially to insulate themselves from the real problems of the world. But instead Nehemiah took it into his heart and he made it his burden.

You never build up the broken until you feel the burden. Nehemiah did.

God was looking for a man to mourn over His city. Until you find people who will mourn over that which is in ruins, you'll have no revival. May I sadly suggest that universally the reason we have more sightseers than we have builders in the church is that too many of us have hearts that haven't mourned in a long, long time. We just plug along, doing our own business with our nose to the ground seeing what is in front of us. We don't really see a ruined world like our God does. Nehemiah saw a city in ruins and he dropped down to his knees.

When our hearts are broken over the things that break God's heart then we'll find a way to do what's right. You can talk all you want to about technique but it has no bearing. If your heart's broken over the things that breaks God's heart, you'll find a way to do what's right.

2. He had a life that was fair. Nehemiah would never have been the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes if he had not been a man of character. One of the great misconceptions in the world is that the foundation of leadership is charisma, not character. Charisma may shoot you to the top, but character will keep you there. It's true that God calls us wherever we may be but He calls us to be something better, and empowers us to be people of character. Without it, we cannot be used mightily by God. With it we will bless everybody we touch.

"Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." (Hebrews 13:7) I think that's a call to Christian character! You look at the leaders who spoke and who lived God's Word. You look at their way of life, and you imitate it. Nehemiah was called because he was a man who was honest and fair.

3. He was a man of prayer. "For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven." (Nehemiah 1:4) Do you want to know how many of "some days" were? "In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year." (Nehemiah 1:1) That was when he heard the report. "In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes" (Nehemiah 2:1) he goes before the king. In other words, we can tell what that is—that's four months. For four months, this man has been praying to God. One of the greatest need of most churches and Christians is to rebuild the walls of prayer. I'm afraid that most of us have gotten accustomed to living without those walls. Nehemiah grieved and prayed for four months because he believed in the power of prayer.

Are the walls of your prayer life in neglect? God uses the person who cares. He uses the person who is fair, He uses the person of prayer.

4. He had the will to dare. As we will see in our study, Nehemiah was going to leave his comfort zone and start a revival. That's the lesson of the incarnation, isn't it? That's the story of Jesus. If you are going to do a great work for God, you can't stay where it's easy.

Building will always be harder, more challenging, and more costly than sightseeing. But staying comfortable will never be an option for the one whose heart breaks at the things that break the heart of God.

Nehemiah couldn't stay where it was easy. He said, "Here am I, send me!" He had the job everybody wanted. The problem was a thousand miles away, across the desert, and a place he had never seen. He says, "I'll go, I'll go. I'm not a contractor, I'm a cupbearer, but somebody has to build the wall. I'll go."

We all have walls that need to be repaired. Don't we? For many of us it is a wall of prayer. Lesson #1324 July 27, 1997

## **THE POWER OF PLEADING**

Richard Elworth Day, in his book Filled With The Spirit, wrote, "It would be no surprise if a study of secret causes were undertaken. To find that in every golden era of human history, it proceeds from the devotion and righteous passion of a single individual. There are no bonafide mass movements. It just looks that way. At the center of the column, there will always be one person who knows God and who knows where he is going." He is exactly right! That is why God is always looking for leaders.

In Ezekiel 22:30, God said, "I look for a man who could stand there and build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of my people." then He said, "I could find none." But He is always looking.

The reason God is always looking for leaders is because nothing happens without leadership. Everything rises or falls based upon leadership. That

is true when you are talking about a nation, city, church or family. Everything rises or falls on leadership and it is really built from the inside and works its way out.

In the book of Nehemiah, the men had come back from Jerusalem and they gave the report, "Oh, Nehemiah, it's terrible. Back in Jerusalem, the wall is down and the people are living in squalor." Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. (Nehemiah 1:4)

### **When should you pray?**

Nehemiah was a man of prayer. I'm fascinated that in the 13 chapters of Nehemiah we find him praying nine different times. So, when should you pray? You pray before you do anything else, that's when you pray. Nehemiah's praying lasted over a span of four months. In other words, Nehemiah kneeled in the presence of God for four months before he ever took a single step of action. A leader does more than pray, but he doesn't do anything else until he prays.

Leaders make prayer a first priority; losers make prayer a last resort. That is needed counsel especially for those of us who are Type A personalities. You know what I'm talking about? Those people who are goal-oriented, achievement driven and busy people who want to get the job done. Nehemiah was the epitome of a Type A personality. You don't rise to be second in charge of a kingdom by just being a no-count lay-about. This man was an organizer, motivator, manager and get-it-done kind of guy. In 52 days, he rebuilt half the wall around the city of Jerusalem. Talk about a Type A! But, instead of just going out and doing something, the first thing that Nehemiah does is get alone with God.

A good little book came out a few years ago. The best thing about it was the title, Don't Just Stand There. Pray Something. That's exactly what Nehemiah did. He was God's kind of leader. He was a leader from the knees up. He was a leader who understood that leading begins with pleading. You pray before you do anything else.

### **Why do we pray?**

1. Pray to acknowledge your dependence on God. In fact the reason we don't pray more is because we don't think we need to. We think we can handle it on our own. What's your most common

reaction when you have a problem? I dare say for most of us, the common reaction is "what am I going to do about this?" When the reaction should be, "God, what do You want to do about this?"

All too often we tend to forget what Jesus said "Apart from me, you can do nothing." (John 15:3) That's pretty strong. Paul wrote "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your request to God." (Philippians 4:6) What do you pray about? Everything! Present your prayer with petition. My fruitfulness and my usefulness for the Lord begins when I recognize my absolute dependence upon Him. "In Him we live, and move, and have our being." The Bible says He holds the world together by the very word of His power. We take that for granted. Do you realize the molecules in your body cling together? Oh, you say it's the laws of physics and chemistry. Where do you think those laws came from? The reason your body doesn't just go off into space is because He is holding it all together by the very word of His power. I pray to remind me of that.

2. Pray to alleviate the burden. Nehemiah dropped to his knees because he had this bad report about what was happening in Zion. The Bible says he wept over the ruins. Rather than simply mourn and moan, he prayed. He took his problem to God. In Hebrew Nehemiah means "the Lord is my comfort." Paul said "In everything offer prayer, and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6) "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31) That's why godly people take their problems to the Lord because His peace follows prayer and God takes that burden off your back and lets you soar again. It alleviates the burden.
3. Pray to access God's power. This is the most important reason of all. Nothing releases God's power like the prayer of faith. God says, "Call to me and I will answer you." (Jeremiah 33:3) Oh, if we just had a better appreciation of the power that God has available for us.

Israel was having trouble with a nation of people called the

Aramians. The Aramians were trying to conquer them but at every turn, Israel was heading them off and the king of Aram said, "There's some spy out there who is telling every thing we plan." The people said, "No, King, there's no spy. There is a prophet in Israel named Elisha and he knows where we're going." The king of Aram said, "Then we'll get him." So at night he sent this huge army with chariots and horses. At daybreak they had surrounded the city where Elisha lived. A servant woke up and looked out and said, "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" Elisha said "Don't be afraid, those who are with us are more than those who are against us." (2 Kings 6:16) He prayed "Let their eyes be opened." (2 Kings 6:17) When the servant looked out the window again, he saw the Aramian army was surrounded by horses and chariots of fire and that God had blinded the Aramian soldiers.

My prayer is that God would open our eyes and let us see the horses and the chariots of fire. I access God's power through prayer. And Nehemiah did the same thing.

### **How do you pray?**

1. "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." (Nehemiah 1:5) Do you remember who Nehemiah worked for? He worked for a guy named Artaxerxes, the Persian king, who was the most powerful man on the face of the earth. The man who is Nehemiah's boss is the king of the world. But the first thing Nehemiah does is go to the King of the universe. He goes to the King of Kings and recognizes who the real ruler is. He starts his prayer with two things that we teach our children to pray. He says, "God is great, and God is good." See what he says: "Our God is the great and awesome God, the King of Heaven. God, you are good. You keep your covenant of love."

Praise is simply acknowledging God for who He is; a) He deserves our praise, and b) He is the King. When you focus on the greatness of God your problems shrink. Nehemiah experienced that, have you? He did not allow the difficult circumstances to diminish his need or desire to praise God. He said, "God, I know our situation is a mess, but you are bigger than the mess. God, I know that the problems in Jerusalem are great, but You are greater than the problems."

When things in my life are going well, when circumstances are lined up in a rosy fashion, I'm quick to praise God. God is great, God is good! But when I'm in despair, when I feel like I'm at the end of my rope because circumstances around me are as negative as they can be, it's harder for me to praise. Nehemiah says God, I praise you—I don't care what the circumstances are. It doesn't make any difference. You are bigger than my circumstances and the more I praise, the smaller those circumstances get.

2. Confess your sins. "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes be opened 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 towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses." (Nehemiah 1:6-7) Nehemiah was not born when Israel was taken into captivity but he could identify with the sins that caused their downfall and captivity. When you start extolling God for His wonderful righteousness and holiness, then your own smallness and sinfulness becomes more apparent.

The prayers of other great men of Scripture have a common thread, they identify personally with the sins of the people. One of the most righteous men who ever lived was Daniel, not one negative word written about Daniel. "We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled. We have turned away from your commands and laws." (Daniel 9:5)

Ezra came back as a priest to restore public worship. He was a great and godly man, but look what he prayed, "Oh my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you. My God, because our sins are higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached the heavens." (Ezra 9:6) We are so individualistically minded in America, that kind of thinking seldom crosses our minds.

When is the last time that you confessed the sins of this nation and identified yourself as part of the problem? When's the last time you've done that and said, "God, I'm sorry. I'm a big part of this." Oh, no, we like to pray for God to help those heathen, pagan people that are out there doing all those terrible things. When's the last time you confessed the sins for your church? When's the last time you

confessed your part of the sins for your family? Society teaches us that you are only responsible for you. That's just not true! You are your brothers' keeper. We are all in this together and there will never be revival where there is no sense of community responsibility.

Leaders accept the blame, but losers pass the buck. If you want to be a leader, you'd better be quick to accept the blame and be quick to share the credit. Losers, on the other hand, are always accusers and excusers. Do you ever see them? They always say it's their fault and they are the reason it's like it is. Let me tell you why I'm not involved in all this! Nehemiah stepped to the plate and said, "God, I've never been to Jerusalem, and I don't know any of the homefolk there, but I want to tell you I'm sorry. I'm part of the problem."

3. You claim God's promises. Nehemiah prays, "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.'" (Nehemiah 1:8-9) He's claiming the promises. He prayed to God saying "I've read your book. I've read in that you promised if we disobeyed you, you'd send us into exile. (Leviticus 26:33) You kept that promise. But God You also promised that if we return to You spiritually, You would gather us up and bring us to the place where Your name dwells. (Deuteronomy 30:4) I'm calling boldly on you now, God. Keep your promise."

That boldness may blow some of your minds. In fact, most of you would think it very presumptive to even use the word "remember" in the context of God. Now, God, You remember what You promised. If that is your thinking you need to read your Bible more because all the way through it you find people reminding God about what He promised. Abraham did it, Moses did it, and David did it. Every one of the prophets did it. They said, "God, I call to your remembrance your promises." Does God need to be reminded?" No! "Has God forgotten His promises?" No! Then why do we claim the promises of God in prayer? Because it helps us remember what those promises. Presumptive? No! Nothing pleases God more than when you remind Him of one of His promises, because you are stating to God that you

believe Him.

Do you realize there are over 7,400 promises from God in the Bible? Over 7,400! Now, some of those are in a context where they have a restricted audience for a restricted time. But most of them are universal in their scope and that is why they have been recorded for us.

4. **Boldly make your petition.** "They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Oh, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer, 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." (Nehemiah 1:10) Nehemiah has a heart that's breaking. He's mourning over Jerusalem. He's willing to go there. He's willing to rebuild the wall, but in order to go he's going to need the king's permission.

That's going to be easier said than done because King Artaxerxes is an unbeliever and Nehemiah is his right hand man. This is the man whose trust has grown over the years to the point that he tests the king's food and drinks of the king's wine. Now Nehemiah is going to say "Oh, King, can I take a little three year leave of absence? Also would you equip me with men and equipment so I can go 1,000 miles from here and rebuild a wall that you don't know anything about?" What are the odds he's going to say yes? Nehemiah knows that his cleverness and his articulation and his personality are not going to get it done. He also knows that God can do it, so he prayed "God give me success." (Nehemiah 1:11)

Have you ever prayed boldly, "God, give me success in what I'm asking you to do." If not, what do you pray for? We should not be afraid to pray for success when what we are trying to do is advance the Kingdom of God.

When Arnold Palmer was back in his prime as the world's greatest golfer, he was in Saudi Arabia and he was doing a little golf exhibition. The king of Saudi Arabia was so impressed that he told him before he leaves that he needed to give him a gift. Palmer said, "Oh, don't give me a gift. I was paid to come over here." The King said, "You don't understand our culture. For me not to give you a gift

would be a great insult upon me. So what gift would be appropriate?" Palmer didn't know what to say, so he said, "Just give me a golf club." He said, "Fine". The next morning, an emissary arrived at his hotel and hand him the deed to a 300-acre "golf club." The moral to that story is when you are in the presence of the king don't bother to ask for small things. Ask for great things.

Let's pray boldly. There is nothing wrong with asking and praying to God for success if what you are doing is ultimately for the glory of God. In fact, if we can't ask God to bless what we're doing, then we need to be doing something else. It's just that simple. Praise Him, confess your sins, claim the promises and boldly ask for success.  
Lesson #1325 August 3, 1997

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2. Pray to alleviate the burden. Nehemiah dropped to his knees because he had this bad report about what was happening in Zion. The Bible says he wept over the ruins. Rather than simply mourn and moan, he prayed. He took his problem to God. In Hebrew Nehemiah means "the Lord is my comfort." Paul said "In everything offer prayer, and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6) "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31) That's why godly people take their problems to the Lord because His peace follows prayer and God takes that burden off your back and lets you soar again. It alleviates the burden.
3. Pray to access God's power. This is the most important reason of all. Nothing releases God's power like the prayer of faith. God says, "Call to me and I will answer you." (Jeremiah 33:3) Oh, if we just had a better appreciation of the power that God has available for us.

Israel was having trouble with a nation of people called the Aramians. The Aramians were trying to conquer them but at every turn, Israel was heading them off and the king of Aram said, "There's some spy out there who is telling every thing we plan." The people said, "No, King, there's no spy. There is a prophet in Israel named Elisha and he knows where we're going." The king of Aram said, "Then we'll get him." So at night he sent this huge army with chariots and horses. At daybreak they had surrounded the city where Elisha lived. A servant woke up and looked out and said, "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" Elisha said "Don't be afraid, those who are with us are more than those who are against us." (2 Kings 6:16) He prayed "Let their eyes be opened." (2 Kings 6:17) When the servant

looked out the window again, he saw the Aramian army was surrounded by horses and chariots of fire and that God had blinded the Aramian soldiers.

My prayer is that God would open our eyes and let us see the horses and the chariots of fire. I access God's power through prayer. And Nehemiah did the same thing.

## **How do you pray?**

1. "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." (Nehemiah 1:5) Do you remember who Nehemiah worked for? He worked for a guy named Artaxerxes, the Persian king, who was the most powerful man on the face of the earth. The man who is Nehemiah's boss is the king of the world. But the first thing Nehemiah does is go to the King of the universe. He goes to the King of Kings and recognizes who the real ruler is. He starts his prayer with two things that we teach our children to pray. He says, "God is great, and God is good." See what he says: "Our God is the great and awesome God, the King of Heaven. God, you are good. You keep your covenant of love."

Praise is simply acknowledging God for who He is; a) He deserves our praise, and b) He is the King. When you focus on the greatness of God your problems shrink. Nehemiah experienced that, have you? He did not allow the difficult circumstances to diminish his need or desire to praise God. He said, "God, I know our situation is a mess, but you are bigger than the mess. God, I know that the problems in Jerusalem are great, but You are greater than the problems."

When things in my life are going well, when circumstances are lined up in a rosy fashion, I'm quick to praise God. God is great, God is good! But when I'm in despair, when I feel like I'm at the end of my rope because circumstances around me are as negative as they can be, it's harder for me to praise. Nehemiah says God, I praise you—I don't care what the circumstances are. It doesn't make any difference. You are bigger than my circumstances and the more I praise, the smaller those circumstances get.

2. Confess your sins. "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes be opened

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 towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses." (Nehemiah 1:6-7) Nehemiah was not born when Israel was taken into captivity but he could identify with the sins that caused their downfall and captivity. When you start extolling God for His wonderful righteousness and holiness, then your own smallness and sinfulness becomes more apparent.

The prayers of other great men of Scripture have a common thread, they identify personally with the sins of the people. One of the most righteous men who ever lived was Daniel, not one negative word written about Daniel. "We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled. We have turned away from your commands and laws." (Daniel 9:5)

Ezra came back as a priest to restore public worship. He was a great and godly man, but look what he prayed, "Oh my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you. My God, because our sins are higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached the heavens." (Ezra 9:6) We are so individualistically minded in America, that kind of thinking seldom crosses our minds.

When is the last time that you confessed the sins of this nation and identified yourself as part of the problem? When's the last time you've done that and said, "God, I'm sorry. I'm a big part of this." Oh, no, we like to pray for God to help those heathen, pagan people that are out there doing all those terrible things. When's the last time you confessed the sins for your church? When's the last time you confessed your part of the sins for your family? Society teaches us that you are only responsible for you. That's just not true! You are your brothers' keeper. We are all in this together and there will never be revival where there is no sense of community responsibility.

Leaders accept the blame, but losers pass the buck. If you want to be a leader, you'd better be quick to accept the blame and be quick to share the credit. Losers, on the other hand, are always accusers and excusers. Do you ever see them? They always say it's their fault and they are the reason it's like it is. Let me tell you why I'm not involved

in all this! Nehemiah stepped to the plate and said, "God, I've never been to Jerusalem, and I don't know any of the homefolk there, but I want to tell you I'm sorry. I'm part of the problem."

3. You claim God's promises. Nehemiah prays, "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.'" (Nehemiah 1:8-9) He's claiming the promises. He prayed to God saying "I've read your book. I've read in that you promised if we disobeyed you, you'd send us into exile. (Leviticus 26:33) You kept that promise. But God You also promised that if we return to You spiritually, You would gather us up and bring us to the place where Your name dwells. (Deuteronomy 30:4) I'm calling boldly on you now, God. Keep your promise."

That boldness may blow some of your minds. In fact, most of you would think it very presumptive to even use the word "remember" in the context of God. Now, God, You remember what You promised. If that is your thinking you need to read your Bible more because all the way through it you find people reminding God about what He promised. Abraham did it, Moses did it, and David did it. Every one of the prophets did it. They said, "God, I call to your remembrance your promises." Does God need to be reminded?" No! "Has God forgotten His promises?" No! Then why do we claim the promises of God in prayer? Because it helps us remember what those promises. Presumptive? No! Nothing pleases God more than when you remind Him of one of His promises, because you are stating to God that you believe Him.

Do you realize there are over 7,400 promises from God in the Bible? Over 7,400! Now, some of those are in a context where they have a restricted audience for a restricted time. But most of them are universal in their scope and that is why they have been recorded for us.

4. Boldly make your petition. "They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Oh, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer, 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." (Nehemiah 1:10) Nehemiah has a heart that's breaking. He's mourning over Jerusalem. He's willing to go there. He's willing to rebuild the wall, but in order to go he's going to need the king's permission.

That's going to be easier said than done because King Artaxerxes is an unbeliever and Nehemiah is his right hand man. This is the man whose trust has grown over the years to the point that he tests the king's food and drinks of the king's wine. Now Nehemiah is going to say "Oh, King, can I take a little three year leave of absence? Also would you equip me with men and equipment so I can go 1,000 miles from here and rebuild a wall that you don't know anything about?" What are the odds he's going to say yes? Nehemiah knows that his cleverness and his articulation and his personality are not going to get it done. He also knows that God can do it, so he prayed "God give me success." (Nehemiah 1:11)

Have you ever prayed boldly, "God, give me success in what I'm asking you to do." If not, what do you pray for? We should not be afraid to pray for success when what we are trying to do is advance the Kingdom of God.

When Arnold Palmer was back in his prime as the world's greatest golfer, he was in Saudi Arabia and he was doing a little golf exhibition. The king of Saudi Arabia was so impressed that he told him before he leaves that he needed to give him a gift. Palmer said, "Oh, don't give me a gift. I was paid to come over here." The King said, "You don't understand our culture. For me not to give you a gift would be a great insult upon me. So what gift would be appropriate?" Palmer didn't know what to say, so he said, "Just give me a golf club." He said, "Fine". The next morning, an emissary arrived at his hotel and hand him the deed to a 300-acre "golf club." The moral to that story is when you are in the presence of the king don't bother to ask for small things. Ask for great things.

Let's pray boldly. There is nothing wrong with asking and praying to God for success if what you are doing is ultimately for the glory of God. In fact, if we can't ask God to bless what we're doing, then we

need to be doing something else. It's just that simple. Praise Him, confess your sins, claim the promises and boldly ask for success.  
Lesson #1325 August 3, 1997

## FROM IDEA TO ACTION

You may never have heard the story about Hans Bablinger, a fellow who wanted to fly. The problem was he lived in 16th century Germany, and nobody was flying. But Hans was a pretty creative fellow. He was one of the first that we know of in history to fashion artificial limbs and he was doing that when amputation was the first prescription rather than the last resort.

One day Hans fashioned two wings and he went up to the top of the Bavarian Alps. He decided he would try to coast down to the plain below. He made a good choice because in the Alps there were some strong updrafts and it worked. News got all over Bavaria that Hans Bablinger had flown, and the king came to see him. When the king and his entourage came, they tried to arrange a more convenient place to let Hans show his flight so they went up just to the cliff over the river. That was a bad choice because, instead of updrafts, there were downdrafts over the river. As he dove off, he fell like a rock—straight down into the river. The king was disappointed, the bishop was mortified. The next day in church, the bishop got up and pronounced that it was never God's intent for man to fly. So Hans threw away his wings. He died a few months later. But not long afterwards the church died. The irony of it is today it is the sight of a museum. Ninety percent of the people who go to see that museum get there by airplane.

The book of Nehemiah is the story of how God brought revival to His people through the heart of a godly and caring man. He had a vision and could see beyond what was to what was to be. Vision is an essential and a vital part of spiritual life for God's people. The Proverbs say that without vision the people perish. But sadly, some people not only have no vision, some even seek to kill what vision there is. (Proverbs 29:18)

Nehemiah's didn't just have a dream. He was able to get his people to embrace his dream. I believe that God is honored when His people have dreams about things to please Him. Nehemiah had received permission,

provision, and protection to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall. He arrives in Jerusalem. It's the first time he has ever been in that great city. He had prayed for four months. He'd been dreaming about this for years. What's the first thing he's going to do? Is he going to hit the ground running? Is he going to call a great meeting? Will he take out a hammer and saw and begin building right from the get-go? "I went to Jerusalem and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem." (Nehemiah 2:11-12) In three days, he doesn't do a thing. Now what's he doing during that three days? Do you suppose he's just getting some rest? Was he spending time "alone" with God?

**Principle 1. A person cannot sustain in public what he is not in private.**

As Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, God was still working on his heart. God was putting in his mind exactly what he needed to do now that he was there. Some Type A personality would read verse 11 and say "Nehemiah didn't do anything for the first few days." Instead this was the most important work of all. He was making sure that he was doing what God wanted him to do. He hasn't laid a single brick, but these first few days are as valuable as any because they were spent seeking a clear confirmation from God.

"I've not told anyone what God had put on my heart for me to do for Jerusalem." You see, as Nehemiah got there and continued his prayer time, God was giving him the wisdom to do exactly what needed to be done. I think he was obeying what we read in James 1:5; "If any of you lack wisdom, just ask for it. I'll give it to you."

Remember that Nehemiah was not just in Jerusalem to build a wall so much as he is there to build a people. He was a spiritual leader, but you cannot be a spiritual leader without first being a spiritual man or woman. This generation needs to learn that busyness is not always godliness. That it is in solitude that a person receives the right to lead in public because a person cannot sustain in public what he or she is not in private.

**Principle 2. Prepare well.**

"I went out to examine the wall." The word "examine" was a Hebrew

medical term that used to describe probing the wound. He wanted to see just how bad it was. He wanted to get a clear picture in his mind. He had heard it was bad. It was so bad that he couldn't ride his mount around the wall. I think it is at that point that the size of the project really sinks in. The whole wall is destroyed, the gates have been burned. Seeing the scope of the work to be done, Nehemiah knows it can't be done alone.

"There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night, I went through the valley gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem which had been broken down and its gates which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through. So I went up the valley by night examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work." (Nehemiah 2:13-16)

Reconfirmed by his time with God, Nehemiah surveys the situation. Keep in mind that everything that Nehemiah has learned about the wall at this point, he has learned through hearsay. So after three days he goes out in the middle of the night with a small band of men. He just wants to scout the wall without bringing undue attention to himself or his dream.

Remember Nehemiah is coming from Persia where he was the number two man in charge. He is arriving with an entourage from King Artaxerxes. Everybody knows he is coming. Opposition was beginning to swell when they just heard that Nehemiah was on his way, (At the close of this lesson we're going to see that that opposition crystallizes and it surfaces.) So Nehemiah is getting a plan together as quietly as possible to minimize the opposition because this wise man didn't want his plan stalled in the starting gate. Great leaders protect their plans from premature death. It is easier to kill a good idea than to promote a good idea.

### **Principle 3. The greatest ideas are not yours or mine. They are ours**

- Get involved with your people.

Once having a dream, it's critical to have a following. The wall could

never be built unless the people embrace his dream. So Nehemiah speaks to them. "Then I said to them, you see the trouble we are in?" These are the first words to the people who would be his followers, "Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire. Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace." (Nehemiah 2:17) He didn't walk in there and say, "You bunch of losers. Why hasn't this wall been rebuilt? You've been here for over 90 years. You've had every opportunity in the world. I've been sent by God to get it done and I'm going to stay on your case until it's rebuilt." That's not what he said. Instead, he identified with his people and with the need. He said "We, Us, and We." Those are the most important things that Nehemiah said. "We are in disgrace, come let us rebuild the wall, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

- Get the people motivated to attack the problem.

Nehemiah not only identifies with it. He motivates the people. He said, "Do you see the trouble we're in? Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire. Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace." (Nehemiah 2:17) Nehemiah does a masterful job here. The wall has been in ruin now for decades and decades. People have walked by it every day of their lives and after a while they got used to it. It's not so bad. It's not so ugly. It wasn't such a big deal anymore. In fact, the people really didn't even see the dilapidated wall. Nehemiah makes them see it again. He does it by using words and phrases to stress the needs. He said that this place lies in ruins, gates burned with fire, we are in disgrace.

Change never occurs until people are discontent with the current state of affairs. That's true in your business, school, church, family and life. As long as one is content to just go along with whatever, things will never change or improve. Nehemiah said, "I want you see how bad it is." As bad as the situation was in Jerusalem, the Jews had grown apathetically content with it. Nehemiah takes off their blinders and says, "Hey, get a good look at where we are and where we need to be."

Notice the motivation he uses. The whole world was laughing, "Those poor Jews, they say they worship the true God, they can't even rebuild the wall around their city. They say their God is all-powerful, He can't even protect their holy place." When Nehemiah said we are in disgrace, it's a commentary not only toward the people, but on their God. His

ultimate appeal in his little speech was appealing to the glory of God.

The greatest motivation in life is not external, it is not internal. It is eternal.

The lowest and most temporary form of motivation is external motivation, the lowest: If you will do this, I will give you this. We use that on our children, don't we? They are so immature—if you'll be good, I'll give you this. Nehemiah didn't use any external motivation.

Internal motivation is a little bit more noble. Nehemiah uses that "We are in disgrace. Doesn't that hurt your heart?" But what he is really calling on them to do is to remember their eternal motivation. He says, "The wall of Jerusalem is in disgrace." It was no longer us but Jerusalem, "the dwelling place of God". He said, "Let's rebuild the wall for the glory of God so that God's name is not held in disgrace."

The highest motivation for you to be involved in is to do work for God, remember whatever you do, you do it as unto the Lord. Anything you say or do, you do for the glory of God and as unto the Lord. If you can keep that paramount in your mind, you will do more than you ever thought you could have done otherwise. The greatest motivation is not internal or external, it's eternal.

- Get and give a personal story or testimony

Look at verse 18: "I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me, and what the king had said to me." (Nehemiah 2:18) "I heard the report about how bad things were. I prayed about it for four months. The more I prayed, the more God put it on my heart to be part of the answer. He called me to this project. He opened the door with the King, even supplying me with provision and protection."

#### **Principle 4: People follow people, not programs.**

By themselves, programs are cold and sterile, but put people with them and suddenly you've got purpose and passion. When Martin Luther King gave his tremendous speech that changed the course of America, he didn't stand up and say, "I have a program," or "I have an organization," or "I have an agenda." If he had, we would never have heard of him. Instead he said, "I have a dream," his own personal story, "that my chil-

dren to walk hand in hand with white children in the red clay hills of Georgia." When people heard this story, they listened and they followed.

If you need volunteers for a ministry in your church, the surest way to get no takers is to get up and just announce "we have a need for volunteers to help in this ministry." It sounds so cold and so clinical, but you put a person whose heart is in that ministry in front of folks, and let that person tell why they are involved and what they get out of it, and folks will line up to help. Because people follow people, not programs.

Nehemiah stood up and said, "Let me tell you my story." The people were ready to follow. In fact, verse 18 closes, they replied, "Let us start rebuilding, so they began this good work."

"But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Gesham, the Arab, heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. What is this you are doing, they asked? Are you rebelling against the king?" Why were Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham opposed to Nehemiah? What was the big deal about them rebuilding the wall? Sanballat and Tobiah are war lords. They've got their own little cities and states they rule over. They've got their own little economic empire. If Jerusalem becomes a major force, particularly a major economic force, it's going to hurt their business. In another lesson we will discuss the different times opposition rears its ugly head

If Satan doesn't try to hinder your dreams, your dreams are too small. If he doesn't try to hinder you, you are not dreaming nearly enough. Part of the unwritten job description of any godly leader is the inevitability of dealing with criticism.

- a) Nehemiah considered the track record of his detractors. "I answered them by saying the God of Heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." (Nehemiah 2:20) He asked the question: Did these men have a history of helping the people of God? Did these people have a history of wanting to support the things that God supports? When he considered the source, he became more resolved than ever to let no one stop the work except God Himself. One response to criticism of work you are doing for God is "You show us your track record. We don't have all the answers. We're doing the best we can. Are

you somebody who is doing what God wants done? If so, show us how to do it. Don't tell us!"

- b) He considered the track record of his God. He knew God wanted him to have success. He had heard stories about great men of God being ridiculed, about 1) Noah having spent over a hundred years building an ark and all along the way people stood out and just laughed; 2) Moses walking into Pharaoh's court and saying "let my people go" and the giggles that must have filled that court the first day; Samson whose eyes had been put out being made sport of in a sideshow while enslaved and chained saying "Put me to where my hands can touch the pillars;" and Goliath mocking the little boy who had come out with the stones. So when these fellows ridiculed Nehemiah, he said, "Our God will give us success. He's got a track record of doing what the world says can't be done." That's the perspective that kept him from giving up on his dream.

The single greatest problem of Christ's church today is not her problems but what she thinks about her problems. Too many churches think the problems are greater than their God. That is never the case.

### **Principle 5: Opportunity is always accompanied by opposition**

"But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost. Because a great door for effective work has been opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." Now look at that. Doesn't that sound like a contradiction? He says, "I have to stay here, why, because there's this great door opened." (1 Corinthians 16:8-9) How do you know? "There are all kinds of people who are opposing me." Most of us say, "People are opposing me. Shut the door. Let's go. Let's move out of here." Paul says he can't leave yet because God has opened a door. That is often the way it works. Whenever somebody really gets concerned about people, those who are not too concerned will get upset. Whenever somebody wants to do something, those who are doing nothing will want to throw stones. That is why we must not be quick to interpret problems and opposition to be an indication that we are outside God's Will. That has nothing to do with whether you are in or out of God's Will.

The ultimate example of those steps of putting ideas in action is found in

Jesus Christ Himself. There has been no greater work, no greater movement, and no greater project than that which we call Christianity. It all started when man was created. God said, "I've already got in mind how humankind will be redeemed." (Genesis 3) So God looked at the scope of the picture. He got involved with His people by sending His own Son to take on flesh. He has motivated us to see the problem of sin in our lives. He is compelling us each day to turn to Christ as the answer. He has put people there who have strong personal testimonies like Paul—really, any Christian whose life has been changed. Then the work of Christianity has been opposed more than any other force or any other movement in the history of the world. It really follows the same pattern—anything worthwhile when you get an idea into action, will follow the format we've looked at today.

Have you made the decision to commit your life to Christ? If you have not, you need to do it today. Lesson #1327 August 17, 1997

## **DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT**

When a good work for God is in progress, you can be sure that Satan is going to do absolutely everything he can to defeat it. Now what better way to defeat than by simply getting God's people to quit. Nehemiah has been praying about this. He has prepared the people. He has organized the people and great things are happening. "So we rebuilt the wall until all of it reached half its height: for the people worked with all their heart (had a mind to work –NKJV)." (Neh. 4:6).

Isn't that amazing? Fifty-two days into the project, it's halfway finished. Incredible progress! You can be sure the old devil won't leave them alone. He is going to try to get them to throw in the towel, or in their case, throw in the trowel. How did Nehemiah respond to get the people out of that discouragement?

**Catalyst for discouragement**—those things that the devil uses to bring it on.

1. Ridicule. "When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will

they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from these heaps of rubble, burned as they are?' Tobiah the Ammonite who was at his side said, 'What they are building, if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones.'" (Nehemiah 4:1-3) Did you notice that they were ridiculing a) the people themselves – "those feeble Jews," those people who have come from slavery; b) their religion – "will they offer sacrifices"? You may wonder what that has to do with sacrifices. He's saying, "Aw, they are sacrificing people—they are so religious. Maybe they think they can burn some calf or some lamb and the wall will be rebuilt;" and c) their work – "if a fox were to walk up on top of what they were building, it would crumble underneath."

What does ridicule do? It makes one doubt who they are and what they can do. Ridicule is always the substitute for reason. If people cannot reason you out of a position, then they will just fall back to something more primal. They will just make fun of you. They'll ridicule you. People who ridicule are always afraid. They are afraid you will succeed and they won't. It's Satan's tool.

2. Resistance. "But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's wall had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed. They were very angry." You see the ridicule didn't stop them. "They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it." (Nehemiah 4:7-8) Now the idea here is not an all-out war. What Sanballat, Tobiah, and all the enemies have in mind here is terrorism—guerilla warfare. It's like a couple of you may be working on the wall and on your way home one night, lo and behold, somebody comes out of the bushes and you don't see those workers anymore. So be on your guard because we are going to send snipers to pick you off one at a time. It is a psychological warfare. In a moment we are going to see what Nehemiah did to counteract that.
3. Rumor. "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'. Also our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them, and we 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." (Nehemiah 4:10-12) Oh, two characteristics about rumor jumped off those pages at me:

a) Rumors are spread by those who are closest to the enemy. "The Jews who lived near them said." Whenever you encounter one who spreads rumor to thwart or to dismantle a great work of God, you can be confident that they're not far from the enemy camp, spiritually as well as logistically.

b) Rumors are always exaggerated as they repeat it. "The Jews told us ten times over." They just get bigger and bigger and bigger and out of control.

So these are the things that Satan uses to start up discouragement, ridicule and resistance and rumor. Isn't it interesting that Satan's tactics haven't changed very much, have they? He really doesn't have any new weapons. It's the same old stuff he uses today. We'll see that the Jews became quite discouraged. Why? Why were they so susceptible to these old tricks of Satan?

### **Circumstances were right for discouragement.**

1. They were near exhaustion. "The strength of the laborers is giving out." (Nehemiah 4:10) They were haggard, they were worn out. Situations always seem more hopeless when you are dead tired. They were near the point of exhaustion and they were no where near completion.

Elijah the great prophet of God, in one of the great chapters of the Bible, does battle with Ahab and Jezebel and over 800 prophets are wiped out. Then Elijah comes down off Mt. Carmel and he tucks his cloak up into his belt and he outruns Ahab (who by the way was on a chariot). Eighteen miles to Jezreel. "Elijah goes out under a tree for no apparent reason and he says God, there's nobody but me, just take my life. I don't want to live." He's as depressed as all get-out. Do you want to know the great spiritual counsel that God gave Elijah on that occasion? He says, "Elijah, get up, get something to eat, and take a nap." Elijah did and when he got up God told him the second time "Elijah, get something else to eat. Go sleep some more." (1 Kings 19) Satan knows a tired worker is more easily discouraged and that's

where the Jews were.

"The people in 52 days built the wall to half its height." But you know what I think the key is there? Half its height! You know, those first bricks were easy. But now the new had worn off and this place was a mess. I don't know if you have noticed it or not, but I find that half way is a hard place in life. Some of you may be runners so you know the hardest time in a race is the half-way point. You've not gotten your second wind yet, you are as tired as can be and it can't help but cross your mind "I've got as far to go as I've already come." It's a terribly, terribly depressing moment. If you're not a runner, surely you've been on a family vacation and almost as soon as the car gets out of the driveway, the kids are asking, "Are we there yet?" They ask you all along the way, but the worse point is when you have driven for hours and it comes again, "Are we there yet?" "No, we're about half way." Oh, no—half way? Hey, Satan knows that half way is a psychologically difficult time and you want all the rubble taken away. It just doesn't work like that!

The Jews got discouraged because the circumstances were right. Satan saw it and sent those little catalyst units to ignite the real causes of discouragement, ridicule, resistance and rumor. They are the external forces. The real cause for discouragement is not external. It is internal. Satan will use external things to prime the pump, but our discouragement comes from inside. The Jews had two internal things that caused their discouragement.

2. Inappropriate fear. The Jews had allowed themselves to become bewildered and intimidated. They allowed the seeds of doubt to be sown and when the seeds of doubt are sown, a harvest of despair is inevitable. "What I feared has come upon me." (Job 3:25) From the beginning of time, God knew the problem that fear would pose for all humankind. That may be the reason He put 350 verses in the Bible that begin with the words "Fear not." If you are a child of God, the only thing you really have to fear is fear itself. It will destroy you. Those Jews had an inappropriate fear.
3. Inadequate faith. The real source of the problem was they were trying to build this wall without an awareness of spiritual realities. They got tired, worn out, and discouraged because they were trying to build a

great wall instead of trying to build a wall for a great God. There is a big difference. They made a big mistake. You see, this was not their wall. This was God's wall. When God owns something, even the gates of Hell can't prevail against it. If they had kept those two things in mind, they would have had nothing to fear. Our God is for us, and this is His wall. Their discouragement would have been at a very low level.

### **The cure for discouragement**

We've all been there and done that. Some of you are in the depths of discouragement right now. The crucial test of leadership is keeping momentum through the valleys. That's true when you are talking about the business you may run, the team you coach, the school you operate, the church over which you are an elder over or the family of which you are a parent of. The real test of leadership is how you keep the momentum going when everybody seems to be getting discouraged around you.

1. Adjusted their focus. The Israelites are scared, they are discouraged, they are ready to quit. In verse 14, he said, "After I look things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'Don't be afraid of them, remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.'" (Nehemiah 4:14) Good speech Nehemiah! Great first line. You see, Nehemiah knew that the real problem wasn't Tobiah. The real problem wasn't Sanballat or Geshem. The real problem wasn't the rubble, the spears or the sword. The real problem was that they forgot to remember the great and awesome Lord. That's why they became afraid. Nehemiah said, "Take your eyes off the rubble, take your eyes off the enemy and fix your eyes on God." The lesson for us is this: You can either have an awesome problem or you can have an awesome God but you cannot have both. Did you hear that? Now you can have an awesome problem and a small impotent God and, by the way, your problem will stay awesome. It won't get any smaller and it won't go away. Or you can have an awesome God and you will have problems, they will be nowhere nearly as large as those of the unbeliever. You can have an awesome God or you can have an awesome problem—but you can't have both. One of the most encouraging things that we can do is to do what Nehemiah said, "Remember how awesome your God is, remember how great He is, and remember He is for you and He fights for you."

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" "Will death, or famine or nakedness or peril of the sword?" (Romans 8:35) Paul names the worse things that could possibly happen to anybody. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors." More than conquerors "through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:37) You can have an awesome God or you can have an awesome problem. Nehemiah said remember you've got an awesome God. He adjusted their focus.

2. Advanced their fortifications. "Therefore I station some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families with their swords, spears and bows." .... "From that day on, half of my men did the work while the other half was equipped with spears, shields, bows, and armour. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other. And each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked." (Nehemiah 4:13, 16)

Now, someone may have the question: "Doesn't arming the people show a lack of faith? Nehemiah has already prayed, God, take care of us. Don't let anything happen to us. Why on earth would he arm all of his people? Didn't he trust God to take care of him?" There are a lot of people who think that way. Nehemiah was showing his faith by his works, his actions.

Jesus said "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." (Matthew 26:41) Did you hear that? Watch and pray! Paul wrote "Devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and prayerful." (Colossians 4:2) You see what is being said in those two verses? Pray—oh, absolutely. But as you pray, be on your watch for the enemy.

Peter put it this way: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) It is faith to pray to God for protection, then to put your armor on and be on guard against the devil.

In fact, to pray for protection and to leave yourself vulnerable to the enemy, that's not faith, that is foolish presumption. For example, if you pray saying, "Now, Lord, tonight I want to go a movie and, boy, it's filthy and violent, it's filled with sex and immorality and violence. I hear

it's got a great plot, so God just protect me from all that other stuff." Friends, that's not a prayer God will honor. How presumptive it is for you to say, "God, I want to go dance with the enemy but You take care of me, OK?" It's just as presumptive as the father who prays, "Now, Lord, you know I need to work these 80 hours for the next many, many, many weeks. I just got to do it to bring home more bacon. But, God, you take care of my family and make sure those kids turn out right." How presumptive! Do we expect God to answer that prayer? Or you may say, "God, I know you want me to marry a Christian. I know that it is important, but, you know, there's this person and I know they don't care about you. But, I'll tell you what. God, you can change their heart." If you go dance with the enemy, don't you expect God to protect you. What Nehemiah said here is absolutely right. He said we're going to pray to God, and we're going to post a guard. It's like the old saying in a revolution "Trust in God and keep the powder dry." It's exactly what God would expect us to do. He advanced their fortifications, and we need to be doing the same thing in our personal lives.

3. Advocated their future. "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your homes." (Nehemiah 4:14) Nehemiah said, "We're not just building a wall here, we're building a future." What a great statement to a discouraged people. He said for them to have a long term perspective. What we're doing here is bigger than the moment.

4. Accentuated their fellowship. "Then I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, the work is extensive and spread out and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us." (Nehemiah 4:19-20) "At that time, I also said to the people, 'Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day.'" (Nehemiah 4:22) You see, Nehemiah had the fellowship drawn in tighter. He said, "We're going to have a trumpeteer and whenever you hear that trumpet, everybody come together because we need to be together for safety." Then he said, "Those of you who have been living outside the wall, you come and live inside." He did that for their protection and to keep them from hearing all that awful propaganda the enemies are spreading. Nehemiah had all the people come together because he knew that fellowship is a great antidote

for discouragement.

Like those Jews 2,500 years ago, all of us have trouble with rubble. I'd like to tell you that all of our problems would go away. They won't. We can hang in there together and we can build a great wall for God. "Let's encourage each other as long as it's called today." ... "And let us not forsake the assembly." (Hebrews 10:24-23) Let us be together whenever we possibly can.

Ministry is messy. Isn't that profound? Deep, isn't it? Ministry is messy. Ministry is getting out there in the name of God where things have been destroyed and where things need to be built and lives need to be repaired and families need to be put back together. You can't have ministry without rubble. It's going to always be messy. And if Heaven had been afraid of getting messy, we'd sure be in a mess, wouldn't we? Because Jesus never would have come to this earth and packaged Himself in flesh. Ministry will always be costly, make us tired, and get us discouraged. We will always need to be motivated and pumped up to do more. You can't build something great for God without getting your hands dirty.

Faithfulness means finishing. Satan's aim is to make the Christian a quitter. He just wants you to quit. He wants you to come down off the wall. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Are you discouraged? Have the catalysts of Satan been working on you? Have the circumstances been right for discouragement in your life? Have you allowed those internal causes to take root? You've got an awesome God, far more awesome than whatever problem you might have. Put your trust and faith in Him today. Lesson #1329 August 31, 1997

## **THE INFLUENCE OF MONEY**

The book of Nehemiah is more than the story of a city in need of a wall. It is the story of a people in need of revival. It's a story worth our study because it tells us what we need to do in order to stay on fire or to get back on fire for God. As it does that, the book of Nehemiah warns us that if we are revived to do a great work for God, be ready! Satan is going to

do absolutely everything he can to thwart us. He will raise up external opposition, people like Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem and all of their allies. He will use ridicule, rumor and finally physical resistance in the form of terrorism to try to intimidate us from doing their work.

The best way Satan thwarts a great work of God is not from the outside but from the inside. Just get the followers to fight among themselves. Have you ever stopped to think about the number of diversities and differences that Satan has exploited to get God's people not to get along? For example, he has used racial differences, cultural differences, differences in educational levels, generational strife and just about everything you can think of to divide God's people. But one of the oldest tensions that has existed among God's people is the difference between the rich and the poor. In fact, I believe the love of money has stalled more walls for God than all the hatred and opposition of the enemy put together. The love of money has hampered God's work more than any external force that you can name. One of the amazing things about life is we don't particularly want God to tell us how to do it; it's with the realm of finances.

"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've had to borrow money to pay the king's taxes 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 vineyards belong to others." (Nehemiah 5:1-5)

This may be the first recorded labor strike. "We're not building the wall, we're stopping, and we've got a real problem."

### **Basic complaints:**

1. The land is over-populated. They say we now have sons and daughters and refugees are moving in now that the wall is going up, they want to be a part of Jerusalem, and it's just harder to get food because there are too many people.

2. We're having to mortgage our homes to get grain. We don't own our property anymore, and because we need grain and we are going into debt to survive.
3. We are having to sell our children into slavery. We do not have food. Our property has been foreclosed because of debt. The only remaining option is to sell our children into slavery rather than let them starve along with us.

I don't believe that God intends for every one of His children to be rich in worldly goods. Neither does He want them to be in financial bondage.

### **Causes:**

1. Famine. I don't know if drought was the problem. I don't know the circumstances, but there was a famine. Isn't it interesting that Nehemiah had to build during tough times. Nehemiah had to build during a famine. Remember that the next time you have to do your ministry during difficult times. Don't whine about it, don't think God's not for it just because there are difficulties surrounding it.

2. Taxation. They are still under the rule of Artaxerxes and so they are still subject to the king's tax. (v. 4) Nehemiah does not say one word about trying to get the tax lifted, does he? Scripture makes it clear that God's people should meet their obligations to government. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's."

3. Exploitation. Now the wealthy Jews would have resented that word. They would have claimed that they were just being good businessmen. In fact, they would have claimed, "Why, we're just being benevolent! We are finding ways to finance our brothers." They claimed that they were being benevolent. The fact is they were charging an exorbitant annual interest rate and some of the poor among the Jews had to sell their sons and daughters into slavery. "We are only charging the standard business practice rate. There's nothing wrong with a fellow making a buck, is there? In fact, we find that age-old adage, "the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer." (Nehemiah 5:7) The rich are the ones responsible for it.

Nehemiah can't do anything about the famine—God will have to take care of that. Nehemiah's not going to do anything about the taxation, but he will do something about the exploitation. "When I heard their outcry

and these charges, I was very angry." (Nehemiah 5:6) Look at that! Why is he so angry? It really was common business practice among the people. You lend money, you charge interest rates. So, if they have to sell their kids into slavery, it's their problem, not mine.

### **Reasons for outrage:**

1. The wealthy Jews were violating God's law. God had said, "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender, charge him no interest." (Exodus 22:5) It was the law of God that an Israelite could not charge interest to money loaned to a fellow Israelite in need. That was the law. No ifs, ands and buts! It was repeated in Leviticus and again in Deuteronomy 23:19-20 "Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite. So that the Lord your God may bless you in the land you are entering to possess." Now, you may not understand the differentiation. But God said, "I am intentionally setting up a very peculiar economic system. For one thing, I'm telling you not to work on the seventh day. I want the whole world to notice that you can just take it easy. You rest, you relax, and you praise me. I want the world to notice that you don't even charge interest to your own brother. Then I bless you far more abundantly than all those other nations. They'll sit up and say, 'How on earth do you figure that?'" It must be the power of an awesome God. They would be so genuinely benevolent and yet they would have the greatest return among all peoples. That was the law!

Hundreds of years after that law had been written, the Jews were ignoring it. Nehemiah was angry because they were violating God's law,

2. God's people were also being violated. It was just simply abuse of the Golden Rule. Nehemiah realized it wouldn't do much good to build a wall to protect the people from the enemy if the enemy were on the inside. Nehemiah was angry because he knew God was angry. So what does he do?

He says, "I pondered them in my mind." (v. 7) He doesn't just immediately get mad and go blow off steam. He follows James' and Paul's admonition "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak,

and slow to wrath." (James 1:19) "Be angry and sin not." (Ephesians 4) Slow to wrath, slow to anger and not sin. He stops and considers the best thing to do. "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." (v. 7-8) You see what Nehemiah is stating about the problem? He said, "When we came back here to rebuild this wall one of the things we wanted to do is free our own brethren, and so we bought back those who were enslaved. Now because of the burden you are putting on your fellow-countrymen, they are having to sell their children again to these foreigners and now we are going to have to buy them back again." Notice the end of verse 8, they couldn't say anything because it was true. It's the truth! No excuse, no defense.

**Corrective action:**

1. Stop extracting usury. "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." (v. 9-10)

Nehemiah says, "You are deliberately disobeying the will of God." The issue here isn't interest rates, the issue here is your lack of interest in the word of God. "Shouldn't you walk in the fear of God?" One of the great temptations in any generation is allowing the rich and the powerful among God's people to live outside His will and just letting it ride because we are afraid. We tend to change that to "shouldn't you walk in the fear of the wealthy?"

That wasn't Nehemiah's mindset. Nehemiah remembered this one key fact we all need to remember. He remembered it was all God's money. He remembered that God's the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Nehemiah knew where the power was and he would not wink at the sin of those who deliberately disobeyed the Lord regardless of the size of their bank account.

Some people, when they see someone doing something wrong are tempted to coddle, counsel, nurture, or look the other way. They didn't want to run them off or make them mad. Our God is not pleased when we take our time dealing with wrong that way. "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Galatians 6:1) But many of us say, "Look, you know it's wrong, I know it's wrong, God knows it's wrong, so just stop it! Just quit!" When we make long-range plans to deal with wrong, we set ourselves up for moral failure.

You give any one long enough and they will find a way to rationalize that whatever they are doing is right. The sands of time will erode the fine edge of God's sword, and we will wallow in our sin. Nehemiah knew there wasn't time to set up a commission or a committee to come up with a solution. It was time to step up and grab the bull by the horns and just say, "STOP"! It's wrong!

2. Make it right. "Give back to them immediately their fields, their vineyards, olive groves and houses and also the usury you are charging them. The hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil." (Nehemiah 13:11) He says I want you to give back what you took that deliberately violated God's law. Repentance demands the righting of wrong whenever that is possible. Remember the story of Zacchaeus? He was a tax collector and undoubtedly took money he shouldn't have taken. He declared, I'm going to give back four times to those I have wronged and half of what is left over, I'm going to give to the poor and Jesus told him, "Today, salvation has come to this house."
3. Make a promise. "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." (Nehemiah 5:12-13) Once you stop and make it right, you need to make a vow to stop doing it. Nehemiah had these officials make a public statement of their intent to do what was right. It was valuable then and it is just as valuable today. It's not to say that we'll never fall a victim to temptation again, but it is saying it is my absolute intent that it will not happen again.
4. Make yourself a personal example. Nehemiah was appointed

governor over Judah. (v. 14) The prior governors had placed these heavy burdens on the people. (v. 15) Nehemiah did differently. He didn't even accept a salary. He said he would not take the money that was allotted to him for the king's table. "But despite that, I still fed daily a hundred and fifty Jews plus others that came from the surrounding territories." (Nehemiah 5:17-18) He said I just did that on my own. He did that not to brag, but simply to say I'm making myself an example of a charitable and generous non-exploiting person. He made himself an example.

### **Principles:**

1. It is easier to criticize than to confront. It's a challenge face to face to tell the sinner to quit sinning. We know people who are not living according to God. I'm not talking about people just falling victim to temptation. Some people say, "let him who is without sin cast the first stone." I'm not talking about all of us who struggle daily, fall, repent and we confess and by God's grace get back. I'm talking about people who are spitting in the face of God. They know it, we know it, and God knows it. Our silence allows their lives to be destroyed and allows God's name to be slandered. It is a lot easier to gossip about folks we think are doing wrong than to confront; but, we sin against them and God.

Back in 1894, the Baltimore Orioles were playing the Boston Red Sox in Boston. John McGraw played for the Baltimore Orioles. You may have heard of him. He went on to become a famous manager later, but he got in a fight with the third baseman from Boston. The fight escalated and the benches cleared and there was a big brawl. Then a fight broke out in the stands and the fans began to fight, it even spilled over into the field. Somehow, in the midst of that melee a fire got started and burned the stadium to the ground. In fact, before they could get it under control, it burned down 107 buildings in downtown Boston. It all started when two guys got into a fight and nobody said, "Stop It." That's how sin works. The Bible can't take place where sin is ignored.

2. It is easier to confess sin than correct it. It's easier to confess wrongs than it is to be driven to change it for the better. The word "repentance" means "turn." It means to turn 180 degrees. It means to change direction and as you change direction, you go back and make

it right. If you are guilty of gossip, stop gossiping. Turn and apologize to those you have offended. Retract what should not have been said. If you are guilty of fraud, stop, turn around and return that which you have defrauded to your victims. Don't misunderstand. I have a great appreciation for confessing sin. It's not an easy thing to confess and the first step in turning around, repenting, is confession. But it takes more.

It takes courage, conviction and accountability. That's why Nehemiah made those nobles and officials make a promise in front of all those people. You need people who love you that you trust enough to say this is the sin I am struggling with. I want to make it right by God's power and grace. Would you hold me accountable? I think that is at the heart of James 5:16 about confessing your sins one to another.

3. It's easier to stay with the program than to focus on people. A church work or program is almost a dirty word. Let me tell you something, programs are worthwhile. They are wonderful. Going back to Nehemiah, chapter 3, organization is essential to God's work. But programs are useful only as they benefit and bless people. Nehemiah believed in the value of this building program, didn't he? Remember at the very threat of death to some of the workers, what does Nehemiah say? "The program is not going to stop. We'll work with a spear in one hand and a shovel in the other. Let's keep going. Nobody's going to stop us from building this wall." Why? Because he knew that that was best for the people. If they were intimidated and paralyzed by their fear, that is the worse thing that could happen to them.

But construction on the wall stopped because of the grievances of the people. Nehemiah called a meeting because the one thing that could stall the rebuilding of the wall was hurting people. Does your heart hurt over the things that break God's heart? Do you grieve over that which grieves God? Are you hurting because of sin? The Lord invites you to come to Him, put your trust in Him and obey His Word.  
Lesson #1330 September 7, 1997

## OPERATION INTIMIDATION

Back in 1975, one of the scariest movies I ever saw came out called "Jaws", a great white killer shark. The newspapers recorded that beach tourism went way down during the popular run of the movie. The next year everybody went back to the beach, everybody was fine. But three years later, they came out with "Jaws II", the sequel. The advertisement for that movie said, "Just when you thought it was safe, terror returns to the beach."

It seems like in our lives sometimes, just when everything seems to be going well, disaster hits. Someone or something threatens you.

Jerusalem is the city where God chose to dwell. God's temple was there. God's people were there. Nehemiah had come from Babylon intent on rebuilding the wall because God had called him to do so. The wall around the city not only fortified the city and protected it from the enemy attacks, but it symbolically stood for something. It stood for strength and it stood for the honor of the people there—in fact, the honor of God. So for the wall of Jerusalem to lie in ruins was an insult to God's people and as far as they were concerned, that was an insult to God Himself.

Nehemiah wept and prayed that God would use him to go and rebuild the wall. God answered that prayer and Nehemiah rallied the people, he motivated them, he organized them and got to work about 450 B.C or so. Everybody was working well together and getting along good, enthusiastically doing the work of the Lord. Everything was going along great until Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem came and tried to undo Nehemiah's plan.

These guys ridiculed the workers, made fun of them, and dampened their spirits. In fact, they threatened to storm the city and attack them and kill them. They tried to scare them to death. So, Nehemiah prayed to the Lord for strength and he prepared the people for battle. He prepared them to defend themselves. When those enemies saw how strong an army God's people made, they backed off. They said that they'll not attack those people. So everybody got back to work and everybody was fine and all was well. Right?

The wall is almost finished. In fact, the only thing left to do is to hang the doors and the gates. But guess who comes back for the sequel? That's right! Those same three guys. Just when it appears to be safe, here come these enemies again ready to attack again and to try to undo God's plan. Our world today has enemies of God. God still has his enemies and always will until Christ comes back to judge the world. Everybody who's an enemy of God is an ally of Satan. That's right! They are an agent of Satan. Satan has influence in our world today. Don't mistake that fact. And he uses that influence against us.

"Put on the full armor of God". In other words, prepare to defend yourself. Why Paul? Take your stand against the devil's schemes, as "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our struggle is against the rulers and authorities and powers of the dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12) The pages of the New Testament are filled with the reality of spiritual warfare. God says to prepare yourself for that kind of battle.

But what are the motives of Satan? a) He wants to deny God the glory that is due his name. Our purpose on this earth, as Christians, is to bring glory to God. But the devil wants to stop that. One thing you know from studying the origin of Satan is that he is very egotistical, and he wants all of the glory to himself. So anything he can do to take glory away from God, he is going to do it even if he has to use you to do it. That's kind of a scary thought, isn't it? b) His motive is to frustrate God's will in the world. Anything that God wants done, Satan wants undone. c) To win converts. That's right! Satan wants to win converts. Satan is evangelistic, did you know that? He wants a bigger army all the time. He wants to enlist you.

The previous time Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem were in Jerusalem they attacked the people. This time they focused their attack on Nehemiah. This time it's personal, and they've got three more tricks up their sleeve. But God wants us to keep working for Him in spite of personal attacks.

### **God wants you to keep working in spite of distractions.**

Nehemiah 6:1 states that word got to Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem and the rest of the enemies that Nehemiah had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it except for the doors and the gates. They sent this message,

"Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono. They are scheming to harm me. So I sent messengers to them with this reply, 'I am carrying on a great project here, and I cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?'" (Nehemiah 6:2) Now at first thought, their invitation to meet with Nehemiah might not seem so suspicious. What's wrong with that? Sounds like they want to have a little peace talk, you know. But Nehemiah knew these guys. He knew how dangerous they could be. In fact, they didn't offer to come to Jerusalem. They wanted Nehemiah to leave Jerusalem and go some twenty miles away to a place or region where Nehemiah's enemies were known to be where they could either kidnap him or assassinate him. He knew how dangerous it would be. But a two day journey would take him off that wall, away from the work that God gave him to do. They tried to lure Nehemiah away four times. He resisted and stayed at his task. He was going to do what God wanted done not what God's enemies wanted done. He was able to do this by continuing to:

1. Stay focused. Nehemiah was focused. He knew his priorities. He knew the commitment that he had made to the Lord. He kept his eyes on his goal. You can be assured that our enemy, Satan, wants to distract us from doing God's will. Satan has put all kinds of allurements and distractions in our culture today. Many of them wicked. Like Nehemiah, we have to evaluate them in the light of God's calling. Sometimes staying focused on God and what He wants me to do means saying "no". It's hard for us to say no. We like to do things, go places and be involved. But sometimes we just have to say "no" and be more focused and do the job that God gave us to do. What is taking your time away from doing God's will, from the really important things in life?
2. Work in spite of defamation. When you defame someone you spread lies and rumors about them. "Then the fifth time Sanballat sent his aid to me with a message and in his hand was an unsealed letter which said, 'It is reported among the nations and Geshem says this is true, Nehemiah, that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt and therefore that's why you are building the wall. Moreover, according to the report, you are about to become their king, and you have sent prophets to make a proclamation about you being a king in Judah. This is going to get back to the king.'" (Nehemiah 6:5) In other words, Nehemiah, I'm going to tell the real king that you are trying to get his

job. Well, it was a lie, wasn't it? You notice that the letter was unsealed. It was open. This would be like a letter to the editor and everybody who carried it on its way would be able to read it and I'm sure Sanballat made sure his servants and lots of eyes got to see this letter. He wanted to spread this vicious and false rumor and if Nehemiah's people found out about this and they thought their leader was just an opportunistic, self-centered person, why they wouldn't support him anymore. This could be a harming thing.

Nehemiah sent this reply, "Nothing of what you are saying is true, and you're just making it up out of your own head. You're trying to frighten me." Then Nehemiah says, "I prayed to the Lord, now strengthen my hands." (Nehemiah 6:8) So true to Nehemiah's character, he simply dismissed the charges as false. He prayed to God like he always did and then he got back to work. He didn't waste time defending himself. Have you ever stopped working on something because someone was criticizing you and you had to take time to defend yourself? Well, Nehemiah said that I'm not going to fall for that. I'm not going to respond to rumors. I'm not going to respond to gossip and innuendos. The work of God is too important.

One of the toughest things that any leader has to do is to respond to false accusations about them, usually from a jealous source. You want to quit sometimes, but not Nehemiah. He just trusted in God and he trusted in the truth. He believed that the truth would prevail and that's important to remember when someone slanders you and spreads gossip about you. Truth will win out. Who was the most falsely accused man in the history of the world? My Lord, Jesus Christ. What did He say "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you falsely and say all kinds of evil against you because of me? Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophet who came before you." (Matthew 5:11) One of those prophets was Nehemiah and God will protect you against slander just like He protected Nehemiah.

3. Work in spite of danger. "One day I went to the house of Shemaiah, and he said, let's meet in the house of God, in fact inside the temple." He meant by that "in the Holy of Holies". "And let's close the doors because men are coming by night to kill you, Nehemiah." Nehemiah said, "Should a man like me run away? Should a man like me hide in

the temple? I will not go." (Nehemiah 6:10) Well, what are they doing? They're trying to scare him. They say, "Nehemiah, there's a hit man out there and he's got a contract on your life, and the best place for you to hide is inside the Holy of Holies. The bad guys won't follow you in there. First of all, only the priests were allowed into the Holy of Holies, but these enemies of Nehemiah wanted him to break that law and he would be guilty of the death penalty.

But even more than that, Nehemiah knew that he was being set up to look like a coward. The people would be able to say, "What kind of a leader do we have? He's running and hiding." Nehemiah said "I realize that God did not send them, but Tobiah and Sanballat have hired them to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name and discredit me." (v. 12) Oh, I like that. Should a man like me run and hide. He's not being egotistical there. He's saying, "Look, I'm a leader and God has chosen me. God has commissioned me. I'm responsible for all these people. I can't just run and hide in the face of danger." Nehemiah remembered who he was. He knew his own God-given character. Because of that, he could remain strong. The Bible says that our enemy, Satan, prowls around like a roaring lion just looking for someone to devour, looking for you and looking for me. You will be able to withstand the devil if you know who you are and if you remember that you are God's child. If you are a Christian, you wear the name of Christ. You have put Him on in baptism and you wear His name. Christ died for you. That is your identity. He also equips you.

## **God helps you withstand the Devil.**

1. He gives you a compelling purpose in life. You know the game Trivial Pursuit; it's kind of a fun thing. You sit around and answer questions about meaningless things. It does describe a lot of people's lives. They are just in a trivial pursuit. The Bible clearly says that the Christian life is not to be that way. "Great lives are produced by a commitment to a great cause." They said, "Nehemiah, stop what you are doing and come down off that wall and come meet with us." What did he say? "Look, I'm doing a great project. Why should I come down? I'm involved with something great." Do you have a great project in your life? Do you have a compelling purpose that motivates you every day? Again, great people are ordinary people who are committed to a great cause. That cause draws them out of themselves

and makes them better than they could be on their own. Jesus gives us our purpose. Several times, Jesus was asked what is the most important thing. “An expert in the law tested Him with the question, ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in all the law?’ Jesus said, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.’ That’s the first and greatest commandment. ‘And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commands.’” (Matthew 22) Jesus said. That is called the great commandment.

A few chapters later, Jesus is about to ascend to the Father, but He tells His disciples, "All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28) There is nothing better that you can devote your life to than the great commandment and the great commission. These things last forever! They are our compelling purposes— love God, love people, tell people the gospel, and disciple them. I challenge you not to be on the sidelines of the Christian life watching others. Take ownership of this purpose for your own life.

2. God gives you a clear perspective. Did you notice that every time Nehemiah's enemies tried to trap him, he sensed it? He could smell a trap a mile away. He had incredible perception, discernment and wisdom. Nehemiah had a spiritual radar that enabled him to withstand his enemies. Now, how do you get that? God gives it to you. But you do have to ask Him for it. James talked about how our faith is tested sometimes and how we're going to go through trials. "If any of you lack wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously without showing favoritism and it will be given to him." (James 1:5) Do you have that relationship? How is your spiritual sensitivity? Do you know God's word well enough to know a trap when it comes along?
3. God calls us to continual prayer. That's right: continual prayer. The Bible says, "Pray without ceasing." Nehemiah prayed at every turn. Anything that came up, Nehemiah's first response to that situation was to pray, to ask God for the strength. Jesus was the same way and He told His disciples to be the same way. In Luke 18:1, Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not

give up. So how is your prayer life?

4. God calls us to a courageous persistence. Nehemiah kept on hanging in there no matter what came. He said, "I'm not going to run away because God is with me. Satan is the one who tries to tempt people to run away when the going gets tough. He tempts people to run away from God. He tempts people to run away from their marriages when the going gets tough. He tempts people to run out of ministry, to run away from reality and into some addiction or some sin. The devil wants you to run, but God's will for Christians is persistence even in the face of defamation, danger, or distractions.

Paul said, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9) So the question is: how persistent are you in doing God's will? Do you just obey the Lord when it's convenient? Or have you so committed your life to Him that

### **REVIVE US AGAIN**

There was an ad in the "Business Farmer's News" in Scottsbluff, Nebraska under the "Sale and Trade" column. The ad said "Will trade one white wedding gown, size 16, never worn. Will trade for 38 caliber revolver." Now I don't know the story, but somehow I suspect things didn't work out quite like somebody had hoped.

The Bible is so honest about the way things are. Take the book of Nehemiah for example. Nehemiah had every opportunity to end his book on a high, positive, and happily ever after note. But life really isn't that way. God's people don't stay on the mountaintop.

Nehemiah served as governor a total of 12 years after getting the wall rebuilt and the people restored. As he had promised Artaxerxes, he then went back to Persia. Sometime later he returns to Jerusalem to check on things. Upon his arrival he is severely disappointed. Everything he had worked so hard to see accomplished was undone. (Nehemiah 13:6-7) Have you noticed how many times revival in any arena seems to fizzle? In politics you might have this great surge of conservatism, environmentalism or a great quest for campaign reform. It appears everybody gets worked up, but after awhile, it all begins to fizzle and it's back to business as usual.

Churches sometimes have a great revival and everybody is on fire for weeks, maybe for several months. But in a year or two most everything has returned to the condition as it was before. Even in our lives we have those moments. We make New Year's resolutions or vow that things are going to be different and for awhile we see that improvement. But all too often, we withdraw right back to where we were. It is the nature of revival to wear off.

"Before this, Eliashib, the priest, had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests. But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem. For in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had returned to the king. Some time later, I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the court of the house of our God." (Nehemiah 13:4-7)

Reasons why revivals fizzle.

1. People cultivate wrong companions. Notice Eliashib. He was a worldly and ambitious high priest who laid low as long as Nehemiah was around. Apparently, he was not a big fan of Nehemiah and especially of Nehemiah's foreign policy. You remember Nehemiah's two chief enemies all the way through were Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Amonite. When Nehemiah goes back to Artaxerxes, Eliashib establishes or re-establishes a relationship with Tobiah. Verse 4 states "He was closely associated with Tobiah." Verse 5 states "He even prepared him a room." In of all places, right there in the temple. You see, in those days, the house of God was joined by chambers, large rooms, that often held grain and utensils and vessels of worship. Eliashib, the High Priest, said, "Well, let's just clear out a room here in the temple and make a place for my good friend Tobiah." Now, can you imagine that? A man who was the bitterest foe of Nehemiah. A man who, on one occasion, even plotted to kill Nehemiah is now sleeping in the temple. Not because he has repented, but because evil is lurking back in as Nehemiah has left.

Nehemiah said upon learning about that situation "I was greatly

displeased and threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God with the grain offerings and incense." (v.8) Nehemiah immediately knew the influence that this was bringing upon all of Jerusalem. He could see that this was a root cause for the slippage in their revival. We've got to learn how to get mad at the right things, at the root causes. I am amazed how Christians will fuss over things that are so trivial and absolutely ignore the moral and the spiritual cancers that destroy our lives and our children's lives. Nehemiah saw the root cause and he attacked it. He wasn't going to live with wrong in a place that was built for right. So he takes all the furniture, throws it out into the street and says, "I purified the room." (v.9) The Hebrew word there means "he had it fumigated." He didn't want the stench of Tobiah around. So he had it all removed. That sounds strong but keep reading and see all of the evil that spawned from a man like Tobiah rising to a place of influence.

2. The people quit contributing. "I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them. And all the Levites and singers responsible for the services had gone back into their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, 'Why is the house of God neglected?'" (v. 9-10) A sign that revival is fizzling is when people find something else to do with their money rather than keep their pledges and commitments to give to God. This is always a sign that revival is on the back-slide.

"In those days, I saw men in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys together with wine, grapes and figs and all other kinds of loads and they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore, I warned them about selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this wicked thing you are doing, desecrating the Sabbath day. Didn't your forefathers do the same things so that our God brought all of this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.'" (Nehemiah 13:15-18)

Now, someone may say, "Maybe the people quit giving because of poor leadership. Eliashib was the high priest and he had brought Tobiah into the temple. Maybe, they just say we're not going to give as long as that kind of evil relationship is going on." But, regardless of the reason, the Levites and temple servants had to leave the temple and go back to their farms. They had to find a way to survive. Regardless of the reason the temple was being neglected because the people were not giving.

God only knows how much work is not being done in mission fields and in communities all across the world because of what's not being given to the Lord's work by people who should be—Christians. One of the comments I've heard through the years and it's the age-old alibi, "I don't always agree with what the elders decide and I don't always agree with what the preacher preaches so I withhold my contribution." Nehemiah declared that their tithe was obligatory whether the leaders were fit to be leaders or not. Incidentally, they were not. Nehemiah said you've got an obligation before God to support the temple regardless of what you think.

I think one of the great misunderstandings among God's people is that giving is a function of financing the church. That the reason God incorporated giving was just that little practical necessity that if we don't give, the church would have to shut down. That is ridiculous! Giving is not about financing the church. God can finance the church. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. God can do whatever He wants to whether you gave a dime or not. Giving is about blessing the people's lives. The reason is it's an index of your priority. God knows it's a cleansing of your heart. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In some ways, the Bible is the most spiritual document you own. But another of your books is also a spiritual book. It's your checkbook. Wherever you are putting your treasure, that is where your heart is also.

3. They were compromising the consecrated. They were secularizing the Sabbaths. It had just become another day. There is nothing wrong with doing business, and there's nothing wrong with making a dollar, making a profit. The problem is taking something God calls "holy" and treating it as if it were trivial, as if there was nothing special

about it at all. Under the Law of Moses, God said, "I want the Sabbath kept sacred." The people treated it as just another day.

God wants certain things consecrated in our lives and He becomes upset when we trivialize them. For example: Marriage. If there is anything holy and sacred to God it is marriage. He calls it a covenant and He uses that word very sparingly. Jesus was asked, "what reason can somebody put their mate away?" He replied "What are you talking about? Haven't you read from the beginning God made them one flesh? How do you divide one flesh?" But people put away their mates by the scores of thousands everyday, some for trivial reasons while others do so because a mate treated the marriage as something trivial.

Other examples could be given but the point is that which is consecrated or dedicated to God, is not to be compromised. In this case, the Sabbath Day abuse, Nehemiah made physical changes to see that it was consecrated and stayed that way. "When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own at the gate so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath Day. Once or twice, the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem but I warned them and said, 'Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.'" (v. 19) Nehemiah said that some of those merchants decided to spend Friday night right outside the wall and tempt the people to slip out and shop. Nehemiah said, "I see you camping out there, I just want to let you know that if you do that again, I'm going to come out there and I'm going to lay hands on you." ... "From that time they no longer came on the Sabbath." (v. 21) I bet they didn't! People, God doesn't want us to fight about much, but He said I want you to fight over that which is consecrated before you let it become trivial, before it loses its sacredness.

4. They committed to wrong covenants. "Moreover in those days, I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, or the language of one of the other peoples and did not know how to speak the language of Judah." (v. 26) Back in chapter 10, on the heels of

their great revival where they read the word of God and the people confessed their sins, the people made a vow and had it written out in a document and they all signed it. They pledged three things in that written out vow. They said we pledge a) to be faithful to our tithes and offerings, b) to keep the Sabbath Day holy, and c) not going to marry pagan people any more." Notice in Chapter 13 they had broken all three. Now they have little children running all through the streets who can't even speak the language of the Hebrew scripture because their mommas are worshipping idols.

Christian be careful who you marry. Therefore be careful about whom you date. If your life is dedicated to God then you marry somebody who is on an entirely different wavelength, you are asking for trouble. The reason is so simple. You have conflicting covenants. You have a covenant with God that says, "My life and you are going to be one." But then if you enter into a covenant with someone else and say that we're going to be one flesh, we're headed in opposite way. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that will end in great pain and destruction. Nehemiah saw the fruit of conflicting covenants and he reacted violently. You thought he treated the merchants badly, look at verse 25. He said, "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair." Aren't you glad our elders don't do that? "I made them take an oath in God's name and said, 'you are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons nor for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon, king of Israel, sinned? Among the many nations, there was no king like him. He was loved by his God and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?'"

## Applications

1. Revival is always in need of renewal. This sin stained world has what I call a downward pull. For example, if you have a beautiful house and leave it totally vacant it will begin to slowly fall apart. If this world were on an even keel, then nothing would happen, but this world has a downward pull. That house will fall apart. Same thing will happen to a garden that's left un-kept. So, why have revival if it

tends to wear off? The reason is if you do not have revival you don't stay the same, you go down, down, down and down. But understand that revival is not a one time shot. We live in a world that is sin-stained and revival is going to always be in need.

2. Look for cracks in the wall. Nehemiah was finding cracks not in the physical wall, but in the spiritual wall of Jerusalem. The lesson is that by letting something in that didn't belong, destruction was the result. Remember this whole thing started when Eliashib let Tobiah come and live in the temple. Are there any rooms in your heart where Tobiah has set up residence? Do you have a chamber in your life where you are storing things that don't belong? The Bible teaches us that you give the devil a foothold, just a little place to put a foot, and he'll turn it into a stronghold. That's the way he works. Look for cracks in your wall.
3. Be willing to make repairs quickly. Nehemiah didn't form some committee, task force or a five months study. If it meant kick them out, fumigate the room, pull out their hair, or whatever, he did it! Don't misunderstand, I don't recommend beating people, or pulling out their hair. One of the greatest problems in the church today is not being willing to confront sin and allow the cracks to get bigger and bigger. Confronting sin either in your life or in someone's life that you love is not easy but neglecting it is far worse.

I heard a story about a little boy who was injured and severely hurt his legs. It could be a permanent disability or with therapy, he could totally improve and get back in shape. So his father was working with him and working with him through hours of therapy and the improvement was so slow. The little boy holding on the rails making those legs work, slumped and he looked at his dad and said, "Aw, Dad, don't you just love me like I am?" With tears, the father said, "Yes, Son, I sure do and I love you too much to let you stay that way." Would to God that we would love each other enough that when sin has crept into our lives we would not let each other stay that way, but to do what's hard for their betterment.

Nehemiah closes with a warning that Judah hadn't gone into captivity originally because of inadequate defenses. She went into captivity because of inadequate obedience. Her problem when Babylon first came down and took her over was not that she didn't have a big

enough wall. But she didn't have a big enough commitment to God. That's the message of Nehemiah. That's the essence of revival.

Don't misunderstand what we've studied. Our God doesn't want our isolation. He doesn't want us withdrawn from this world. You can't be salt and light if you are not out there amongst folks. But He wants our consecration so that when we move among the world, we change the world. Let's learn the lesson that they kept forgetting.

If you have never come to Christ and obeyed the gospel, I've got great news for you. That's not a re-do or a renovation. That's a whole new construction project. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come!" Galatians 2:20 says, "You don't even live anymore as you have died to sin. Christ lives in you." The good news is you are a brand new life, a new heart, and the power of God's spirit will live in you. That is a freshness and a wholeness that has no comparison. Lesson #1335 October 12, 1997

### **CONFESSION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL**

A young man at the candy store told the proprietor, "I want three boxes of candy. I want a \$5.00 box, a \$10.00 box, and a \$20.00 box." The candy store owner said, "What on earth do you want three boxes of candy?" He said, "I've got a date with a young lady this weekend. If she just shakes my hand and says I had a nice time, I'm going to give her a \$5.00 box of candy. If she gives me a big bear hug, I'm going to give her the \$10.00 one. But if she plants a big kiss on me, I'm going to give her a \$20.00 box of candy." Well, come that Friday, he went over to her house, was invited in and asked if he couldn't stay for supper. The father asked the boy "Would you lead us in prayer for the meal?" That young man led the most eloquent, longest and most beautiful prayer you've ever heard. After it was over, his date whispered over to him, "I didn't know you were so spiritual." He whispered back, "and I didn't know your daddy owned the candy store." The moral of the story is sometime prayers sound a lot more sincere than they are.

I wonder how many insincere prayers God has heard through the centuries. Particularly as they relate to personal sinfulness. Prayers that oft times are well worded and eloquent but are not very authentic, not very

heartfelt. Personally, I believe that God has heard many more token prayers than He has broken prayers. Do you know what I mean when I say "a broken prayer"? It's the prayer of one who has been cut to the quick that he or she has offended an all holy, all loving, all faithful God. For example: The prayer David offered after his sin with Bathsheba. After he had been confronted by the prophet Nathan and the truth looked him square in the face. David prayed "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin for I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when you judge." ... "Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:4, 7-10) This prayer flows from a broken heart and only the broken heart is big enough for God to dwell in.

In this lesson we can see the necessity of brokenness because only when we are broke will we face the truth about ourselves. We are sure David felt twinges of guilt for months after his sin with Bathsheba. But there is a difference between feeling guilty and being broken. There have been times in life when we've done things that were wrong and we felt a little bad about it, but that's not being broken over your sins. Only when David was confronted by the stark truth presented by the prophet Nathan, only then did David strip away the Band-Aids of twinges of guilt and come face to face with the moral cancer that was eating away at his soul. Only when he was broken did he face the truth about himself.

The same thing happened to Peter. When he boasted that he would never betray Jesus. Jesus said that all of them would betray Him. Peter said, "Well, maybe all of them, Lord, but not me. No, I'll be faithful to you to death. Lord." Jesus said, "Oh, Peter! Before this very night's over, you'll deny me three times before the cock crows." Sure enough by that campfire it happened the denials came - once, twice and then thrice. The Bible says, "Then Jesus walked by and looked at Peter. When he did Peter knew the truth about himself." The unfaithfulness that filled his heart and it broke the apostle. The Bible said he went out and he wept bitterly. A broken man doesn't make excuses or play the blame-game.

He just pleads for mercy.

“On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God.” (Nehemiah 9:1-3)

1. Revival is linked to the word of God.

It is that word that acts as the two-edged sword, cutting to the heart, and being cut to the heart. It was time for Israel to face the facts and confess her sins. The result is the longest recorded prayer in the entire Bible. It is a prayer that is spoken by the broken. In this confession and prayer, Israel confesses her sins. She traces her past from Abraham all the way to the present situation. There are two key points stressed over and over again, first, the faithfulness of God, and second, the faithlessness of God's people.

The people pray and recount the covenant that God with them through Abraham, and said, "Oh God, you've been good to us, even when we went down to Egypt in bondage. We prayed for deliverance and you sent a deliverer, Moses. After the plagues, You parted the Red Sea, and we walked across on dry ground. Then you gave our people food and water and you protected us from the enemies. God, you were good to us." How did those people respond to that goodness? "But they and their 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 and ordered to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate; slow to anger and astounding in love. Therefore, you did not desert them."

The cycle is repeated over and over again in verses 19 through 25. The people pray about how good God was after that. After taking them through the desert, not even allowing their shoes and clothing to wear out. Then when they entered Canaan you gave them kingdom after kingdom. You gave them wells to drink from that they didn't dig. You

gave them vineyards to eat from that they didn't plant. You gave them houses to live in that they did not build. God, you were awesomely good!

But then how did the people respond again? "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. 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." (vs. 26-28a) "And in your compassion, you delivered them time after time." (v. 28b)

You see what is happening here? Did you ever try to hug a baby that didn't want to be hugged? Did you ever pick up an infant and have that infant stiffen that back and throw that back in such a way. They didn't want that affection? That is exactly what happened with Israel. No matter how much God tried to show His love and His care, Israel balked and they rebelled. Don't misunderstand. This prayer is not a group of Jews gathering in the 5th century B. C. just offering a laundry list of gripes about their ancestors. No, these broken people were saying, "We are the product of a rebellious and arrogant ancestry and we bear the family resemblance.

Instead of talking about the great-great grandparents, the words we, our, and us come into play. "In all that has happened to us, you have been just, you have acted faithfully while we did wrong." (v. 33) "We are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress." (v. 36)

If you don't remember anything remember this, your prayer must not be a token prayer but a prayer from a broken and contrite heart and mind. No excuses or alibis just confession and a cry for mercy. It is true the book of Nehemiah is not just about the rebuilding of a wall, oh that's how it started. It is about rebuilding people. Nehemiah, while in Persia heard

word of the dilapidated condition of the wall around Jerusalem. He wanted to go there and rebuild it, but what he really wanted to rebuild was a people.

The wall had been rebuilt. The people don't pray "Oh, God, our problem was that we had poor defenses." Instead they prayed "God, our problem was we had poor obedience. God, we understand that we are where we are because we've been who we've been."

These were children of God of the Old Covenant. What is the application of all this to children of God of the New Covenant? Until a person stops making excuses, stops playing the blame-game, and pointing the finger for all of his circumstances and reaches the point of brokenness and says, "I have sinned before God and that's why my life is in a mess" there can be no healing. Just can't!

This prayer is Israel's story. What's your story? Can you be as honest about your story as the Israelites were about theirs? There are a lot of stories. Is your story one of spurning God's gracious offer of salvation for years? Sitting in your own arrogant way, thinking I'll do what I want, when I want, and if I want. Yet God still gives you chance, after chance, after chance. Is that your story? Is your story one of coming back to God in tears? You really were touched when you came back to Him, but as months, weeks, days, and maybe just a few hours later, you wandered away again. As you look back over your life, has your cycle been more repeated than the Israelites? Yet, God was always there the next time you came back. How many of you have lived for years as a chameleon Christian?

Are you going through the motions, praying the token prayers, putting on that big smile but knowing that week after week you're not even obeying the first commandment? Yet He has never, ever failed you.

You know we've all got a story, everyone of us. Let me tell you nobody's story is what it ought to be. The question is why on earth has God put up with us? The reality is, as with the Israelites, even though we've failed Him many, many times, He has never failed us.

You know what sin is? The Hebrew word for sin means "to miss the mark". I think most of us miss the mark in terms of our concept about sin. Most of us think that sin is breaking a rule. We don't feel too bad

about that because everybody breaks rules. Rules are made to be broken. Right? No wonder we don't feel guilty about sin. Sin is not primarily breaking a rule. Sin is primarily breaking the heart of the only one who has never turned His back on us, and has never done anything but good for us. When David realized that his heart ached. When Peter saw that he hadn't broken a rule, but a broken heart, that's when he went out and cried. Have you even once ever been genuinely broken before the Lord? Until you are, you don't really know the Lord. Some of you may have many times. Some of you may not have for many years, but if and when that day comes, confess your sins before God and plead for mercy and forgiveness.

## 2. Assume personal responsibility for your sin.

Come to the Lord pleading and begging "Lord, I am where I am because I've been where I've been. It's my responsibility." I heard a story about an older lady. She had been just kind of a clerical worker all her life and she had saved her money little by little and built a nest egg. Finally, she had got to retirement and lo and behold, a slick salesman came to her door and conned her into investing all of her money in some fly-by-night scheme. He left town, she lost everything she had. Upset about it, she called her accountant, a fellow that she had trusted for years, giving her financial advice she'd always received. He listened to her, and he said, "Why on earth didn't you call me before you made that decision?" She said, "I didn't call you because I was afraid you'd tell me not to do it." You know what? That's us and God. We haven't wandered from God because of ignorance. We know His will. We know His word. We don't want to come to Him because we know that if we do He won't let us have our own way. He wants us to go His way and we don't want to hear that. Let's just admit "God, it's my fault." "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) Square up to it. Don't blame your mother or your father, your boss or someone at church. It's your sin, period! Admit it.

## 3. Appreciate the goodness and faithfulness of God.

The Jews prayed; "All that has happened to us, you have been just. You have acted faithfully while we did wrong." (Nehemiah 9:33) If you can't pray that prayer, you're not broken. If you can't say, "God, none of this is your fault. You've acted faithfully, we've done wrong." The Israelites

said the same thing that David said in Psalm 51, "God, you are right, I'm wrong. You're the faithful one; I'm the one who broke the promise."

#### 4. Ask forgiveness through the blood of Christ.

The problem in our culture is that we think we don't need forgiveness anymore, and if we do, we only need it from ourselves. We sin against God and yet, we assume that we decide how to fix that. That would be like: Let's say you and I got into a heated conversation that turned into an argument. Lo and behold, you got very upset, jumped up and punched me in the nose. I'm stunned that you did this, but in a couple of minutes, you come back and say, "I don't know what came over me. I want you to know that I've forgiven myself and I'm all right now." An observer runs up and says, "I saw that whole thing, and I've forgiven you, too." Now what's the problem with that? I'm the offended one. There's some part I play in all that. But in our modern culture men break God's Word, they break His heart and then seek secular therapy and counseling which says I'm OK, you're OK so let's all just forget about it. Then they wonder why they still feel guilty and empty. The answer is simple: they've never gone to God, the one they offended.

Once a Christian is broken, how does he get forgiveness? "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9) "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:1-2) Admit your sin guilt to God. "I have sinned. Now God I am confessing to you, please, please cleanse me in the blood of Jesus."

Abraham Lincoln was out in the country one day, and a passerby came in his buggy. Lincoln stopped the man and said, "Sir, could you please take my overcoat into town?" The fellow said, "Well, that would be no problem. But how do you intend to get it back?" Lincoln said, "That won't be any problem. I plan to stay in it." If we are going to get to Heaven, we must clothe ourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3:27) If we are going to get to Heaven, we must stay in the robes of Christ.

A Pharisee and tax collector, both Jews children of God, were praying in

the temple. Our Lord said that Pharisee gave a laundry list of why he was such a good guy saying "Lord, aren't you glad I'm on your side?" But that publican, a tax collector smote his breast and said, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!" Jesus said, "It was the latter who left there justified because he was a broken man." (Luke 18) He was broken! In his brokenness, he claimed the power of Jesus Christ for forgiveness. The Pharisee was far from broken, he was righteous in his own eyes; i.e., self-righteous.

### 5. Accept God's promise.

This is hard to do because Satan, the old accuser, after we're broken and after we've accepted Christ's forgiveness, is whispering in our ear; "Aw, surely you don't think God will ever really forgive and forget do you?" What you've got to do is confront those subjective feelings with a clear objective truth of God's word. Look at some of His promises.

The "amnesia promise." "For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34) It's amazing to me that an omniscient God can choose to forget. This is the "amnesia promise".

The "detergent promise." "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are as red as crimson, they will be like wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

The "distance promise." "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12)

The "depths of the sea promise." "You will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins under foot, and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:19)

I don't understand all those promises. I don't understand how God can forgive us in the magnitude that He does. But I've learned this, I'm smart enough in life that I use a lot of things I don't understand. I still don't understand how an airplane gets off the ground, but I still use one. I don't understand, how a microwave makes food hot, but I use one everyday. I don't understand how God can forgive me but I use it every single day.  
Lesson #1333 September 28, 1997

## REVIVE US AGAIN

There was an ad in the "Business Farmer's News" in Scottsbluff, Nebraska under the "Sale and Trade" column. The ad said "Will trade one white wedding gown, size 16, never worn. Will trade for 38 caliber revolver." Now I don't know the story, but somehow I suspect things didn't work out quite like somebody had hoped.

The Bible is so honest about the way things are. Take the book of Nehemiah for example. Nehemiah had every opportunity to end his book on a high, positive, and happily ever after note. But life really isn't that way. God's people don't stay on the mountaintop.

Nehemiah served as governor a total of 12 years after getting the wall rebuilt and the people restored. As he had promised Artaxerxes, he then went back to Persia. Sometime later he returns to Jerusalem to check on things. Upon his arrival he is severely disappointed. Everything he had worked so hard to see accomplished was undone. (Nehemiah 13:6-7) Have you noticed how many times revival in any arena seems to fizzle? In politics you might have this great surge of conservatism, environmentalism or a great quest for campaign reform. It appears everybody gets worked up, but after awhile, it all begins to fizzle and it's back to business as usual.

Churches sometimes have a great revival and everybody is on fire for weeks, maybe for several months. But in a year or two most everything has returned to the condition as it was before. Even in our lives we have those moments. We make New Year's resolutions or vow that things are going to be different and for awhile we see that improvement. But all too often, we withdraw right back to where we were. It is the nature of revival to wear off.

"Before this, Eliashib, the priest, had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests. But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem. For in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had returned to the king. Some time later, I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about

the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the court of the house of our God." (Nehemiah 13:4-7)

Reasons why revivals fizzle.

1. People cultivate wrong companions. Notice Eliashib. He was a worldly and ambitious high priest who laid low as long as Nehemiah was around. Apparently, he was not a big fan of Nehemiah and especially of Nehemiah's foreign policy. You remember Nehemiah's two chief enemies all the way through were Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Amonite. When Nehemiah goes back to Artaxerxes, Eliashib establishes or re-establishes a relationship with Tobiah. Verse 4 states "He was closely associated with Tobiah." Verse 5 states "He even prepared him a room." In of all places, right there in the temple. You see, in those days, the house of God was joined by chambers, large rooms, that often held grain and utensils and vessels of worship. Eliashib, the High Priest, said, "Well, let's just clear out a room here in the temple and make a place for my good friend Tobiah." Now, can you imagine that? A man who was the bitterest foe of Nehemiah. A man who, on one occasion, even plotted to kill Nehemiah is now sleeping in the temple. Not because he has repented, but because evil is lurking back in as Nehemiah has left.

Nehemiah said upon learning about that situation "I was greatly displeased and threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God with the grain offerings and incense." (v.8) Nehemiah immediately knew the influence that this was bringing upon all of Jerusalem. He could see that this was a root cause for the slippage in their revival. We've got to learn how to get mad at the right things, at the root causes. I am amazed how Christians will fuss over things that are so trivial and absolutely ignore the moral and the spiritual cancers that destroy our lives and our children's lives. Nehemiah saw the root cause and he attacked it. He wasn't going to live with wrong in a place that was built for right. So he takes all the furniture, throws it out into the street and says, "I purified the room." (v.9) The Hebrew word there means "he had it fumigated." He didn't want the stench of Tobiah around. So he had it all removed. That sounds strong but keep reading and see all of the evil that spawned from a man like Tobiah rising to a place of influence.

2. The people quit contributing. "I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them. And all the Levites and singers responsible for the services had gone back into their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, 'Why is the house of God neglected?'" (v. 9-10) A sign that revival is fizzling is when people find something else to do with their money rather than keep their pledges and commitments to give to God. This is always a sign that revival is on the back-slide.

"In those days, I saw men in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys together with wine, grapes and figs and all other kinds of loads and they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore, I warned them about selling food on that day. Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this wicked thing you are doing, desecrating the Sabbath day. Didn't your forefathers do the same things so that our God brought all of this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.'" (Nehemiah 13:15-18)

Now, someone may say, "Maybe the people quit giving because of poor leadership. Eliashib was the high priest and he had brought Tobiah into the temple. Maybe, they just say we're not going to give as long as that kind of evil relationship is going on." But, regardless of the reason, the Levites and temple servants had to leave the temple and go back to their farms. They had to find a way to survive. Regardless of the reason the temple was being neglected because the people were not giving.

God only knows how much work is not being done in mission fields and in communities all across the world because of what's not being given to the Lord's work by people who should be—Christians. One of the comments I've heard through the years and it's the age-old alibi, "I don't always agree with what the elders decide and I don't always agree with what the preacher preaches so I withhold my contribution." Nehemiah declared that their tithe was obligatory whether the leaders were fit to be leaders or not. Incidentally, they

were not. Nehemiah said you've got an obligation before God to support the temple regardless of what you think.

I think one of the great misunderstandings among God's people is that giving is a function of financing the church. That the reason God incorporated giving was just that little practical necessity that if we don't give, the church would have to shut down. That is ridiculous! Giving is not about financing the church. God can finance the church. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. God can do whatever He wants to whether you gave a dime or not. Giving is about blessing the people's lives. The reason is it's an index of your priority. God knows it's a cleansing of your heart. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In some ways, the Bible is the most spiritual document you own. But another of your books is also a spiritual book. It's your checkbook. Wherever you are putting your treasure, that is where your heart is also.

3. They were compromising the consecrated. They were secularizing the Sabbaths. It had just become another day. There is nothing wrong with doing business, and there's nothing wrong with making a dollar, making a profit. The problem is taking something God calls "holy" and treating it as if it were trivial, as if there was nothing special about it at all. Under the Law of Moses, God said, "I want the Sabbath kept sacred." The people treated it as just another day.

God wants certain things consecrated in our lives and He becomes upset when we trivialize them. For example: Marriage. If there is anything holy and sacred to God it is marriage. He calls it a covenant and He uses that word very sparingly. Jesus was asked, "what reason can somebody put their mate away?" He replied "What are you talking about? Haven't you read from the beginning God made them one flesh? How do you divide one flesh?" But people put away their mates by the scores of thousands everyday, some for trivial reasons while others do so because a mate treated the marriage as something trivial.

Other examples could be given but the point is that which is consecrated or dedicated to God, is not to be compromised. In this case, the Sabbath Day abuse, Nehemiah made physical changes to

see that it was consecrated and stayed that way. "When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own at the gate so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath Day. Once or twice, the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem but I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." (v. 19) Nehemiah said that some of those merchants decided to spend Friday night right outside the wall and tempt the people to slip out and shop. Nehemiah said, "I see you camping out there, I just want to let you know that if you do that again, I'm going to come out there and I'm going to lay hands on you." ... "From that time they no longer came on the Sabbath." (v. 21) I bet they didn't! People, God doesn't want us to fight about much, but He said I want you to fight over that which is consecrated before you let it become trivial, before it loses its sacredness.

4. They committed to wrong covenants. "Moreover in those days, I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, or the language of one of the other peoples and did not know how to speak the language of Judah." (v. 26) Back in chapter 10, on the heels of their great revival where they read the word of God and the people confessed their sins, the people made a vow and had it written out in a document and they all signed it. They pledged three things in that written out vow. They said we pledge a) to be faithful to our tithes and offerings, b) to keep the Sabbath Day holy, and c) not going to marry pagan people any more." Notice in Chapter 13 they had broken all three. Now they have little children running all through the streets who can't even speak the language of the Hebrew scripture because their mommas are worshipping idols.

Christian be careful who you marry. Therefore be careful about whom you date. If your life is dedicated to God then you marry somebody who is on an entirely different wavelength, you are asking for trouble. The reason is so simple. You have conflicting covenants. You have a covenant with God that says, "My life and you are going to be one." But then if you enter into a covenant with someone else and say that we're going to be one flesh, we're headed in opposite

way. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that will end in great pain and destruction. Nehemiah saw the fruit of conflicting covenants and he reacted violently. You thought he treated the merchants badly, look at verse 25. He said, "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair." Aren't you glad our elders don't do that? "I made them take an oath in God's name and said, 'you are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons nor for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon, king of Israel, sinned? Among the many nations, there was no king like him. He was loved by his God and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?'"

## Applications

1. Revival is always in need of renewal. This sin stained world has what I call a downward pull. For example, if you have a beautiful house and leave it totally vacant it will begin to slowly fall apart. If this world were on an even keel, then nothing would happen, but this world has a downward pull. That house will fall apart. Same thing will happen to a garden that's left un-kept. So, why have revival if it tends to wear off? The reason is if you do not have revival you don't stay the same, you go down, down, down and down. But understand that revival is not a one time shot. We live in a world that is sin-stained and revival is going to always be in need.
2. Look for cracks in the wall. Nehemiah was finding cracks not in the physical wall, but in the spiritual wall of Jerusalem. The lesson is that by letting something in that didn't belong, destruction was the result. Remember this whole thing started when Eliashib let Tobiah come and live in the temple. Are there any rooms in your heart where Tobiah has set up residence? Do you have a chamber in your life where you are storing things that don't belong? The Bible teaches us that you give the devil a foothold, just a little place to put a foot, and he'll turn it into a stronghold. That's the way he works. Look for cracks in your wall.
3. Be willing to make repairs quickly. Nehemiah didn't form some committee, task force or a five months study. If it meant kick them

4. The word of God completes. It completes our life. We get so concerned with the tangible and material that we neglect the spiritual. In reality we are spiritual beings wrapped temporarily in a material tent of flesh. You are made in the image of God. That means you cannot be fulfilled without the word of God. You need soul food. No way around it. "For you have been born not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and enduring word of God." (1 Peter 1:23) You exist because of the word of God. God spoke all things into existence, and you have a saving relationship with Jesus today because of the word of God. The word of God didn't just create you, it will re-create you. The only way that you will feel whole is with a genuine relationship with that Word.

Revival is necessary. It always is. We don't need it once a decade, or once a year, we need continually. The key to revival is the word—the very breath of God that we need to hunger for, honor, and handle correctly so that it will humble us and make our lives a celebration to Him.

I don't know what your individual need is today but turn, repent and build or repent, return and rebuild your relationship to God. Lesson #1332  
September 21, 1997