



## AN ORDINARY MAN

Nehemiah 1–2

God does not need great people to accomplish His work. He looks for those who are sensitive to His will and determined to obey Him; He seeks humble people of prayer. That is the kind of man Nehemiah was, and that is the kind of person we should each strive to be.

The book of Nehemiah is about broken things and broken people and how they are restored by a man who begins here in chapter 1 with a broken heart. His name is Nehemiah, and he's described in verse 1 as "the son of Hacaliah." And who is Hacaliah? Nobody unusual, that we know of.

Nehemiah is an ordinary man—the son of an ordinary man. No royal blood runs through his veins; he's not a priest or a Bible scholar like Ezra. But he is a determined man whom God is about to use in an extraordinary way.

Martin Luther, the reformer often said—and I like to say it often as well—that God created the world out of nothing, and when we realize we're nothing, He can create something out of us as well.

Now the book opens here by telling us that Nehemiah is serving the king in the Persian capital of Susa—that's the king's winter resort. Nehemiah's brother Hanani arrives with other men to deliver some shocking news here in verse 3:

*"The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."*



Eunuch offering the king his cup

Nehemiah knows about the return of Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years earlier and how they rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. He also knows about Ezra's recent return; but he is shocked here to learn that the walls of Jerusalem and its gates have been burned.

Some work had been done on rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, as mentioned back in Ezra 4:12, but King Artaxerxes had stopped it. Then, apparently, the enemies of the Jews had burned down those sections of the walls that had been under construction, and the gates had been set on fire. The city is now defenseless.



Notice Nehemiah's reaction to this news. Verse 4 tells us he "wept and mourned for days . . . fasting and praying before the God of heaven." He is shaken with grief here, but he takes his grief to the right place as he prays to the Lord.

And let me tell you, Nehemiah's prayer here in verses 5 to 11 gives us a great example of how to pray. I like to put it under the acronym **PATH**—P-A-T-H. This is the "path" we ought to take in prayer.

First, *P* stands for *Priority*. Nehemiah's priority is God's sovereignty. He prays in verse 5, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God." This is how he begins to pray—recognizing God is on His throne and we are at His feet. We are not telling God to do our will in heaven; we are asking Him to do His will on earth.

Second, the letter *A* stands for *Acknowledgment*. In verses 6 and 7 Nehemiah acknowledges Israel's sin and includes himself in this confession.

Third, the letter *T* stands for *Trust*. God had promised to bless the nation and restore them to their land when they returned to Him in repentance and obedience. Nehemiah is trusting that promise. In fact, he actually quotes God's promise back to God here in verse 9:

*"If you return to me and keep my commandments . . . though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts . . . I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen."*

Now the letter *H* stands for *Humility*. Priority, acknowledgment, trust, and now Nehemiah makes this humble request. And notice that his request comes at the end of his prayer, not the beginning—that's a good example for us today.

Nehemiah prays in verse 11 that God will give him success "in the sight of this man." "This man" is King Artaxerxes. And we are told here that Nehemiah is his cupbearer.

One of Nehemiah's roles is to taste the king's wine to make sure the king is not poisoned. He is one of the

most trusted men in the court of Artaxerxes. God has placed Nehemiah there for such a time as this.

Well, for four months Nehemiah waits and prays for God to create the perfect opportunity for him to speak to the king. Finally, in chapter 2, verse 2, the king notices Nehemiah's sad appearance and asks him, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?"

Immediately Nehemiah is afraid because any sign of displeasure or anxiety in front of the king could be a cause for suspicion. And this king is Artaxerxes, the very one who had stopped the reconstruction in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah is about to ask the king to reverse his decision.

Nehemiah probably gulps and takes a huge breath and then answers the king here in verse 3:

*"Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins and its gates are burned by fire."*

The king seems interested! He asks Nehemiah what he wants to do about it. But before he pours out his request to the king, verse 4 tells us that Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven."

I'm sure he did! This is a silent prayer—and it is a short one too! Maybe you have prayed the same way—suddenly you are in some difficulty, some encounter, and you quickly pray for help to the God of heaven. There is nothing wrong with that at all.

So, Nehemiah responds here in verse 5:

*"If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah . . . that I may rebuild it."*

Nehemiah then notes in verse 8: "The king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me." Nehemiah knows this is the work of God.

Soon Nehemiah quietly arrives in Jerusalem. There's no fanfare or big announcement. He is there three days before he takes a few men with him at night to survey the broken-down walls and gates of the city.



Then he finally speaks to the people in verse 17:

*“You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem.”*

Nehemiah encourages these discouraged people here with a personal testimony in verse 18:

*I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.”*

They're inspired. God is in this—“Let us rise up and build.”

Now with every opportunity, there is always opposition. In verse 19 we are introduced to three men who are going to oppose Nehemiah every step of the way:

*“Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite . . . and Geshem the Arab [when they] heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing?”*

Nehemiah simply responds here in verse 20:

*“The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”*

<sup>1</sup> Ezra 4:7-23

In other words, “We are God’s servants, this is God’s work, and it is going to get done by God’s power.”

Beloved, doing God’s will is not always easy, but it’s never impossible. You will face opposition, hardship, and ridicule. But just stay who you are—an ordinary person, in the hand of God, following the will of God—and just watch the extraordinary work of God get accomplished by the power of God in and through your *ordinary* life.

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You may have your own acronym but how might having a “P.A.T.H” to pray help you pray with confidence, conviction and more often? Be encouraged about praying with these verses: 1 Chronicles 16:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:15-16, 1 John 5:14-15

Nehemiah prayed and waited for God not knowing when He would answer.

Why is it important to trust God’s timing when we pray? Why is it hard to wait? What are several things God wants to do in us while we wait on Him? (Psalm 27:14, Isaiah 40:31, Lamentations 3:26)

How is Nehemiah practicing the truth of Galatians 6:2? When you do seek to bear someone’s burden, who are you representing in the process according to Galatians 6:2? Who in your life might you help bear their burden? Why do we tend to avoid “messy ministry”?

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## OPPORTUNITY AND OPPOSITION

Nehemiah 3-4

Success in serving the Lord requires careful planning. Part of that planning should be preparing to respond properly to the opposition that will inevitably come. Nehemiah offers us a great example of godly leadership and wisdom in dealing with opposition.

Nehemiah is now launching a major project to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Here in Nehemiah chapter 3, we are given a long list of people who join him in this great work. This list proves that Nehemiah is a careful and strategic administrator and planner; otherwise, it would have looked like a three-ring circus rather than a construction project.

Now we are not going to go through every name here, but I want to highlight some of the attitudes demonstrated by these faithful workers—and they are attitudes that ought to be present in the church today.

First, the people work *willingly*. Some of them are assigned to repair the walls; others work on different gates in the city; other people pick up the rubble and cart all the trash away. Every willing person is involved in some way.

I can remember one summer as a college student having a job loading a dump truck full of trash at a construction site, let me tell you, that was not a fun job. Well, that's the assignment here and every willing person was involved in some way.

In fact, verse 1 says, “Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep

Gate.” Even the high priest rolls up his sleeves and probably gets some splinters in his hands.

Many of these workers are unskilled—they didn't get a degree in engineering or an apprenticeship with a brick mason. They never built walls or gates before. Look at verses 8-9:

*Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths, repaired. Next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, repaired . . . Next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur,*



The important Persian port city of Ashdod Yam, now dominated by the remains of a Crusader fort





*ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired.*

What does a goldsmith, a perfume maker, and a politician have in common? They are all willing to learn how to do something they have never done before.

And let me tell you, beloved, anyone today who wants to serve the Lord will be willing to do whatever needs to be done—and maybe learn how to do something they have never done before. Nehemiah's people are simply willing to work.

My father was a missionary leader for sixty-five years. One day a young man came to interview for a key position at the headquarters, and my father was mopping the floor to clean up a spill. When this young man introduced himself and said he was there for an appointment with the executive director, my dad leaned on his mop and said, “Well, that would be me.” This young man was shocked. He said, “If I were in your position, I’d never do that; I’d get somebody else to mop it for me.” Well, that young man wasn’t hired after all.

The people worked willingly.

Secondly, they work *zealously*. Verse 20 mentions a man named Baruch. Some Bible versions translate the Hebrew here as saying he worked “zealously,” or “eagerly,” repairing a section of the wall. It’s one thing to do a job halfheartedly; it’s another thing to put your whole heart into it.

A man named Meremoth repaired two different sections of the wall, here in verse 4 and again in verse 21. The Tekoites (from the village of Tekoa) repaired two sections as well (verses 5, 27), even though their town leaders refused to help. Many young women also got involved in the work, as verse 12 reveals.

Now Nehemiah strategically assigns people to repair the wall near their own houses. That is a brilliant idea. Verse 10, for example, says, “Jediah . . . repaired opposite his house.” This strategy encouraged good work.

Thirdly, the workers can be characterized as working *harmoniously*. They work side by side restoring the walls.

Well, you can be sure that when God’s people are diligently, willingly working in unity and with great zeal, the devil is going to start working overtime. In chapter 3 you have people embracing the opportunity.

But now in chapter 4, the people are going to experience the opposition. Keep in mind, Jerusalem wasn’t just any old building project. It represented the very center of God’s plans for the nations and the worship of the true and living God. So, the restoration of the city would be a terrible blow to the unbelieving and idolatrous enemies living around them.

Once again, Sanballat and Tobiah lead the opposition. And they use a variety of methods to oppose this project.

Their first method is *verbal ridicule*. Verse 1 tells us that in anger Sanballat “jeered at the Jews.” He mocks them here in verse 2, saying, “What are these feeble Jews doing? . . . Will they revive the stones out of the . . . rubbish?” Tobiah chimes in here in verse 3, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”

In other words, this wall is so flimsy that a little fox could make it fall over. Well, that stung, I’m sure. No one likes to be ridiculed. But Nehemiah does not respond to their mocking; he doesn’t get a bullhorn and holler insults back at them.

Instead, Nehemiah prays. He takes it to the Lord. He wisely recognizes that these people don’t hate only him; they hate God. So, he prays here in verse 5 that God will be vindicated by His judgment of these enemies. Nehemiah is more concerned about God’s reputation than his own.

But in a way, Nehemiah does respond to his enemies, and here is how: verse 6 records, “So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height.” This is the best way to respond to your critics—just keep on praying and keep on working.

Now the second method of opposition here isn’t just verbal insults, but *physical threats*. Verse 8 says, “They



all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem.” We don’t know the details of their plot, but it is life-threatening. And when the Jewish builders become aware of it, instead of quitting, we are told here in verse 9, they “set a guard . . . day and night.”

The Jewish people have faced verbal ridicule and physical threats. Now, thirdly, the opposition comes in the form of *emotional discouragement*. The enemies of the Jews plant seeds of discouragement among the people, and those seeds take root. Listen to what the people begin to say here in verse 10:

*“The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”*

In other words, “We’re not going to make it!”

Discouragement is one of the devil’s most successful weapons against believers, to this day. It has a way of growing and spreading to others. And if it is not dealt with, it can stop some important work for the Lord.

So, Nehemiah takes it seriously; he calls the people together and gives them an inspired pep talk here in verse 14:

*“Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”*

He is saying, “God is bigger than our enemies. So, let’s trust Him, get better prepared, and keep building the walls.”

In verse 16, Nehemiah sees that the workers are armed with weapons in case they are attacked; and he establishes an alarm system in verse 18, so that the blowing of a trumpet will signal where an attack is coming from, and everyone can help. Finally, in verse 22, Nehemiah instructs all the people to stay inside Jerusalem each night, where guards are stationed around the clock.

The wall is half-way built; the enemies are ramping up their threats; and the Jewish people are refusing to quit. What happens next? Well, we will get to that when we continue our Wisdom Journey in Nehemiah.

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How prominent is the attitude of being “willing to do whatever needs to be done” in your church? How do you contribute to that attitude? Why is it important for leaders to realize that certain seasons of life limit our availability to physically serve? If you’re in such a season, how is prayer a substantial contribution to serving the spiritual church?

In what way does putting your whole heart into your ministry help accomplish the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20?

If you were asked by someone suffering from verbal ridicule, physical threats, or emotional discouragement, “what it is about God that I can trust to see me through my struggles,” how would you answer?

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## IMPOSSIBLE, DIFFICULT, DONE!

Nehemiah 5-6

Opposition is sure to come when we follow the Lord, and we must deal with it. But we must never allow such opposition to divert our focus from fulfilling God's plan for us. This is an important lesson Nehemiah teaches us in chapters 5 and 6 of his book.

If there's one thing the life of Nehemiah shows us, it is this: Following the Lord can create a lot of difficulty in your life. As we have said before, there is no such thing as opportunity without opposition.

Now we know that opposition originates with Satan, who hates the church and opposes the gospel. And he's always on the prowl to discourage anyone who seeks to honor the Lord.

So far in the first four chapters of Nehemiah, the enemies of the Jewish people have been trying to stop the reconstruction of the walls around Jerusalem. And so far, they have been unsuccessful.



The wealth of the Persians, illustrated by exquisite pieces of gold workmanship

But the devil hasn't run out of ideas. In fact, he is about change his strategy. And here in Nehemiah chapter 5, we find opposition to God's work now coming from *within* the Jewish community. This time it's not from the outside but from the inside. And you have probably witnessed it, beloved; internal strife can be more devastating than external attacks.

I've heard it said that Satan loves to cause division and fighting in a family or in a church, and then he refuses to take sides. He's happy to provide ammunition to both sides.

No, ridicule could not stop this building project; neither could physical threats. But internal selfishness and strife is about to bring this project to a halt.

The details of this internal strife are given to us here in verses 1-5:

*There arose a great outcry of the people . . . against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said . . . "Let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." There were also those who said,*



*“We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax . . . we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves . . . for other men have our fields and our vineyards.”*

Without land to farm, many people are going hungry. And due to a famine, those who own land have had to mortgage their property to buy food. Many have had to borrow money to pay their taxes. And the wealthy among them are exploiting the poor, loaning money to the needy and charging interest. As a result, they are putting young people into forced labor. This is tearing the nation apart.

*Beloved; internal strife can be more devastating than external attacks.*

They won’t need walls built around the city to protect them from outsiders, because at this point, the danger is inside the city. Nehemiah is quick to step in here. He writes in verse 7, “I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, ‘You are exacting interest, each from his brother.’”

Now there was nothing wrong with loaning money to fellow Jews who were in need, but charging them interest was forbidden by God (Exodus 22:25). They had been physical slaves in Egypt, and God didn’t want them to become financially enslaved to each other.

These leaders, verse 8 says, “were silent and could not find a word to say.” They just hang their heads in shame. And with that, Nehemiah leads them to make some key changes. In verse 12 they promise Nehemiah, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.”

By the way, Nehemiah is not telling these leaders to do something he hasn’t been willing to do. We are told here in verse 14 and following that although he was the governor, he didn’t take advantage of his political office. He didn’t demand the usual food allowances, and he didn’t burden the people with financial charges to support a lavish lifestyle.

Unfortunately—and not always, by the way—a position of power can be used for personal benefit. Nehemiah is not going to do that. What he *does* do is continue the work of rebuilding the wall.

Again, Satan just changes his strategy, and the opposition takes another form in chapter 6. Here comes Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshum all over again. They hear the wall has reached a point where only the doors need to be set in the gates, and they realize if they are going to stop the work, now is their last chance.

First, they move in with an act of *deception*. Nehemiah writes in his journal, “Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, ‘Come and let us meet together . . . in the plain of Ono’” (verse 2). That happened to be a vacation resort; so, they are tempting Nehemiah to take a break and come over for a little rest and relaxation. Now on the surface, this appears to be a polite invitation to talk things over and reach a compromise.

But Nehemiah adds here in verse 2, “They intended to do me harm.” He knows this is not a two-week vacation; they are going to try to kill him. So, he refuses. Verse 4 says that they repeat the invitation four times, and every time, Nehemiah says the same thing: no, no, no, no. That little word *no* kept him out of a lot of trouble, and beloved, we ought to use it more often today.

Deceiving Nehemiah doesn’t work; so, his enemies try to *discredit* him. They write an open letter ascribing evil motives to him. Sanballat publishes the letter,





so to speak, in the Jerusalem newspaper, where he writes:

*“It is reported among the nations . . . that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king.”* (verse 6)

This will start the rumor mill, won't it? Nehemiah doesn't care about Jerusalem! This could also get him into trouble with the Persian king.

Nehemiah replies in verse 8: “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” What a great response. He is not writing a long letter back to them. There is no self-vindication. He just sends a note back that says, “You're making it all up.”

Now, third and finally, they try to get Nehemiah to *disobey the law*. Shemaiah, a man secretly hired by the enemy, supposedly “prophesies” that Nehemiah's enemies are going to attack him that night, and he should hide inside the temple, in the Holy Place, to save his life (verse 10).

Well, only priests were allowed in there. So, Nehemiah responds in verse 11, “I will not go in.” To “act in this way,” he says in verse 13, is to “sin.” Even if this prophecy were true and he was going to be attacked that night, Nehemiah would rather risk his life than lose his testimony by sinning against God.

And with that final failure on the part of these enemies, we read this wonderful statement here in verse 15: “So the wall was finished . . . in fifty-two days.” They hadn't been able to do this over several years, and now they do it in less than two months.

How? Well, the people had worked together in unity, a dedicated leader had refused to quit, and the grace of God enabled them—in the face of impossibility and difficulty—to finish rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China in the 1800s often said that the work of God has three stages: impossible, difficult, done! And that's exactly what has happened here.

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Why is it important to be familiar with Satan's tactics within the family of God? What role do God's word and prayer have on your response to those tactics? According to God's word, what other resources has the LORD given His people to stand against the enemy?

“Deception, discredit, and disobey” are more tactics of the enemy against you as a believer. How does 1 Peter 5:8 inform your thinking about Satan's attitude towards you? Read Matthew 4:1-11, what weapon does Jesus use against Satan that you also may use? What are you doing to make this last weapon readily available to you?

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## PHYSICAL RESTORATION AND SPIRITUAL REDEDICATION

Nehemiah 7–8

These chapters in Nehemiah remind us that the same energy and dedication we give to achieving ambitions in this world need to be applied to our spiritual lives. Reading, learning, and applying Scripture and worshiping and obeying God should be unwavering goals in our lives.

One of my seminary professors used to say that we have plenty of celebrities but not enough saints. And if we try to find people of integrity, we usually discover they are not in the spotlight; no journalist interviews them; no talk show introduces them. There is no annual award ceremony for people of integrity.

If there were, Nehemiah would have deserved the honor. He continues here in his journal we call the book of Nehemiah, recording his efforts to keep Jerusalem, not only safe, but also spiritually strong.

He realizes that finished walls around Jerusalem are not the only issue. The people of Judah need physical protection, but they also need spiritual revival. And Nehemiah is going to tackle both issues here in chapters 7 and 8.

The first issue Nehemiah deals with is the physical restoration of the Jewish people in chapter 7. We are told here in verse 1 that Nehemiah appoints “the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites.” The gatekeepers normally guarded the temple, but here they are assigned to stand guard at the city gates.

The gates of Jerusalem are only as good as the character of the guards. I have read that on several occasions, the Great Wall of China was breached by invading



Israelite citizens of Lachish bowing before Assyrian king Sennacherib

armies. They didn’t scale the walls; they bribed the gatekeepers and got in.

Nehemiah personally appoints these guards. Evidently, the singers and Levites, who serve at the temple, helped guard the gates as well.



Now Nehemiah gives administrative responsibility for Jerusalem to two men: his brother Hanani and another man named Hananiah. Hananiah is described in verse 2 as a man who was “faithful and God-fearing.” Nehemiah wasn’t looking for a celebrity; he needed a man of integrity.

That is an important lesson for the church to this day. We appoint men to leadership, not because of their bank account or some impressive resume, but because of their godly character (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).

Here in verse 3 Nehemiah instructs these two men, “Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot.” In other words, to guard against the threat of attack, these gates are to be opened only a couple hours each morning.

Verse 4 reveals one of the major challenges facing the people of Jerusalem; it says that while, “the city was wide and large . . . the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.”

Nehemiah writes in verse 5:

*God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first.*

As he is trying to figure out how to repopulate the city, the Lord gives Nehemiah the idea to register the people according to their genealogies—their family trees. This is going to set the stage for a draft later on in chapter 11, where people from Judah will be selected to come and live inside the city walls of Jerusalem.

This book Nehemiah found is described in verse 5 as “the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first.” This is a record of the first wave of people who returned from Persia under Zerubbabel. It established that they were of pure Jewish ancestry and could resettle in Jerusalem.

Now from verse 6 all the way to the end of chapter 7, Nehemiah gives us the names in that genealogy book. In fact, with the exception of verses 70-72, it repeats almost word for word what is written in the second chapter of the book of Ezra, which we covered previously.

So, Nehemiah is now ready to begin the process of repopulating the city of Jerusalem. But that must be put on hold so he can address the second critical issue.

Physical restoration is important, but so is the spiritual restoration of the people. So here in chapter 8, the emphasis shifts from rebuilding to revival. And Nehemiah steps aside now as Ezra steps forward.

You might remember that Ezra, the Bible scholar and priest, had arrived in Jerusalem some thirteen years before Nehemiah. So, he was still around, teaching the people while Nehemiah headed up the building project. Now, for the first time in the book of Nehemiah, Ezra steps up to the microphone.

Verse 1 tells us the people of Judah assemble in great numbers in the “square before the Water Gate.” A week earlier the walls had been finished. Now the Feast of Trumpets is going to be observed, marking the new year on Israel’s calendar.

As the people gather, they ask Ezra to read the “Book of the Law of Moses” to them. This is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.

They had built a little wooden platform for Ezra to stand on, and he reads the Scriptures before the people “from early morning until midday” according to verse 3—for six hours! And we are told here that the people are “attentive to the Book of the Law,” and verse 5 says they stood the entire time!

I don’t know how many people would listen to a six-hour sermon, standing up, and I am pretty sure I wouldn’t want to preach a sermon that long. So, this is a remarkable time of revival, frankly. It reminds me of those all-night prayer meetings we read about in church history, which had such an impact on God’s people and God’s work.

Well, Ezra is assisted by a number of Levites, verse 8 says, who “read from the book . . . and . . . gave



the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” The Levites follow the reading of the Scripture with an exposition of it, explaining its meaning.

The clear reading and preaching and teaching of Scripture make a great impact on these people, who are more than ready to follow after God.

Verse 12 tells us:

*All the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

We might say the preaching service ends with dinner-on-the-grounds as the people celebrate the goodness of God.

The next day the people come back again – and this proves it wasn’t some quick emotional response earlier. Verse 13 tells us:

*The heads of fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.*

What they find in their study is they need to observe the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths. This means living inside booths made of branches – little lean-tos – for seven days; this reminded them of God’s faithfulness to their forefathers who traveled through the wilderness. So, they observe the feast, and on each of these seven days, they listen as the Word of God is read.

*Maybe what you need today, my friend, is a revival—a rededication to God’s Word.*

Maybe what you need today, my friend, is a revival—a rededication to God’s Word. Well, let me encourage you to follow the example here.

The Jewish people experienced a revival as they listened to the Word of God. They were convicted by the preaching and teaching of God’s Word; they began to obey what God’s Word said, even though for them it meant the discomfort of living in a little booth for seven days. But they obeyed and ended up experiencing great joy as they rededicated their lives to the Lord.

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Begin a list of verses that teaches the value of God’s word to fuel your own revival. Here’s a few to get started: Psalm 119:9,11,105,114,130, Proverbs 2:6, Isaiah 40:8, Luke 11:28, John 1:1,14, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12, James 1:22.

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## CONFESSION AND COMMITMENT

Nehemiah 9–10

Faithful service to the Lord is not based on negative feelings of regret or brief experiences of joy. Consistent, enduring, long-term faithfulness comes from genuine and ongoing confession of sin and renewed commitment to obeying God's Word.

Years ago, I got a call from a family who lived near our home. Their little boy and my youngest daughter, Charity, who was six years old at the time, often played outdoors together. Well, he was having a party in his elementary class, and part of the festivities was a show-and-tell. His mom called to tell us that she had asked him what he wanted to bring for show-and-tell, and after he thought for a moment, he said, "Charity." He wanted to bring my daughter for show-and-tell. I didn't know what to think about it, but we finally agreed. It was actually quite a nice compliment, and our daughter thought it was great—especially the ice-cream and cake afterward.

The people of Israel are about to become God's show-and-tell concerning true confession and commitment. If you want to know how to confess and commit your life to God, watch them because they are going to show you how.

Nehemiah chapter 9 picks up just a couple days after the Feast of Booths. It tells us:

*The people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites . . . stood and confessed*

*their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.* (verses 1-2)

Now that the joyful celebration is over, they show up here in humble *confession* of their sin. They are not playing charades either. They are genuinely confessing their sin, which is evident in their fasting, wearing sackcloth, and putting the dirt or ashes on their heads since these were all signs of mourning and contrition.

Verse 3 says:

*They stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a*



Temple Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls



*quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.*

Imagine, for several hours they are confessing their sin. The content of the people's confession is detailed at great length in this chapter, and it's voiced by the Levites mentioned in verse 5. This is a national confession, as well as a personal one.

It's been said—correctly—that whenever genuine revival sweeps over a people, the first evidence is a profound awareness of sin and a deep sorrow over it. Ask people today if they are sinners, and most will be offended by the thought. There is very little conscious awareness of sin in our world today.

I want to point out several key elements in this prayer of confession. First, the Levites open the prayer in verses 5–6 by exalting God as the only true and living God, saying, “Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. You are the LORD, you alone.” God has no rival. He alone is God.

Second, they praise God as the Creator in verse 6:

*“You have made heaven . . . with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them.”*

Third, they go on in verses 9–11 to thank God for delivering His people from Egyptian bondage. But, fourth, the prayer also admits to failing God. Verse 16 acknowledges that their forefathers in the desert “did not obey [His] commandments” but rebelled by building that golden calf as an idol (verse 18).

But then we have the fifth element in this great show-and-tell of true confession. They praise God for His faithful mercy. Verse 19 reads, “You in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.”

Verses 30–31 kind of sum up Israel's history to this point in these words to the Lord:

*“Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear . . . Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”*

Then in verse 32 the prayer comes full circle, returning to their current situation in Jerusalem.

Because of their sin, they admit that they have brought upon themselves the Lord's judgment. And so, we read here in verse 36, “Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers.” Even though they are back in the land, they are still the servants of the Persians.

This is full and genuine confession of sin. Their sin is seen in light of God's mercy and grace and faithfulness. There are no excuses, no downplaying of their sin—they get it; they now understand the corruption and defilement of their sin. And that is going to lead to changed behavior.

I read some time ago of a rather interesting solution to a problem in a middle school in Oregon. A number of girls were beginning to use lipstick, and they would put it on in the girls' bathroom. After they put it on, they would press their lips to the mirrors, leaving dozens of little lip prints. It was taking a long time every day cleaning the mirrors off. So, the principal and the custodian came up with a clever plan. The principal called all the girls to the bathroom, and explained how all the lip prints were slowing down the daily cleaning. She could tell the girls were unmoved and uninterested. Then, on cue, she asked the custodian to show the girls how he had been cleaning the mirrors. He took out a long-handled brush, went over and dipped it into one of the toilets, and then walked over and scrubbed



the mirror. Well, the lip prints disappeared—that behavior stopped immediately.

Beloved, we tend to downplay our sin; we manage it, instead of confessing it. We sugarcoat our selfishness; we rationalize our disobedience; we justify our pride; we excuse our disobedience. Frankly, we need to take a good look, so to speak, at what we are kissing up to. We are cozying up to nothing less than defilement and sin. Genuine confession is a heartfelt admission that we need the Lord to clean us up every single day.

Now if confession is real, it leads to *commitment*. Their prayer here concludes in verse 38 with just that:

*“Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.”*

They are saying, “We’re going to change our behavior!” And they even put their promise into writing.

Now in chapter 10 the first twenty-seven verses simply list the names of the leaders who sign this covenant, beginning with Nehemiah. Verses 28-29 add that many others, including even little children are able to join in committing themselves, as it says here, to “observe and do all the commandments of the LORD.”

Now that doesn’t mean they are going to be perfect from then on—no one is—but they are passionate now in their walk with God. And they promise to focus on three commitments.

First, they promise not to intermarry with the idolatrous people in the land (verse 30). Second, they commit to observing the Sabbath (verse 31). And third, they promise to support the temple with their tithes, contributions, and offerings (verses 32-39). In fact, the chapter concludes with their solemn promise in verse 39: “We will not neglect the house of our God.”

*This is nothing less  
than a loving  
response to a loving,  
faithful, merciful,  
and gracious Lord.*

Wow, what a passage this is. These two chapters give us nothing less than a show-and-tell of true confession and true commitment. And it is nothing less than a loving response to a loving, faithful, merciful, and gracious Lord.

Review the stages of confession above with your typical way of confession in mind. How are they similar? How are they different? How would God have you feel about yourself and Himself when you’ve done a thorough confession?

You may not sign a document, but what commitments would you make to God today in light of these truths and His grace towards you? Psalm 103:8-14; Romans 5:1, 9; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 18; Ephesians 2:1

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## THE RESULTS OF REVIVAL

Nehemiah 11–12

We often think of Nehemiah as the great builder. But his physical work and plans for Jerusalem and his people were simply the outworkings of far more important spiritual concerns. Nehemiah is a wonderful example of what a godly person should be—focused on God and others.

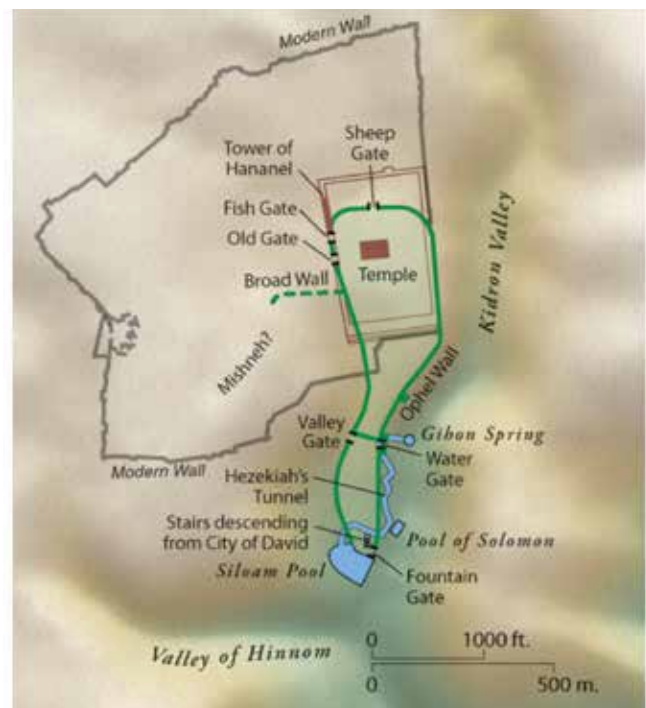
What is important to people is usually pretty evident. It's what they talk about and spend their money on and devote their time to. It's no different with writers, including the biblical authors. We should keep this in mind as we look at Nehemiah chapters 11–12, for they point to things that were very important to the man Nehemiah. We are going to watch a man—and the people he leads—make some wonderful decisions that reveal changed hearts and lives.

Chapter 11 centers on Nehemiah's effort to repopulate Jerusalem. You may recall that back in chapter 7 Nehemiah began the process of enrolling people by genealogy. Based on a list of people who had returned to Judah much earlier with Zerubbabel, he assembled a list of people who were confirmed to be fully Jewish. Using this list, people are now selected to move into the sparsely populated city of Jerusalem.

The first two verses of chapter 11 describe what takes place:

*Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jeru-*

*salem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.*



Jerusalem at the Time of Nehemiah





Now understand that until the wall was completed, people were hesitant to live in the city. Remember, they are surrounded by enemies who have already threatened their lives and earlier had succeeded in tearing down Jerusalem's walls (Nehemiah 1:3).

So, Nehemiah devises this lottery, so to speak, to choose one-tenth of Judah's population to move into Jerusalem. We also discover a number of people mentioned here in verse 2 who step forward to volunteer to establish households in the city. They effectively step forward and say, "We will leave the countryside. We will uproot our families. We will leave our homes and relatives. We will move to the city of Jerusalem and see to it that the holy city thrives."

You have to love and appreciate these volunteers. Frankly, there isn't a ministry or a church on the planet right now that would be able to accomplish its mission without faithful volunteers.

We arrive here at a long list of names and places in the remainder of chapter 11; in fact, this list is going to extend all the way to chapter 12 and verse 26. Included in this list in verses 3-36 are those who came to live in Jerusalem, as well as the names of other villages in Judah that were inhabited. Then we are given the names of the priests and Levites who already had returned with Zerubbabel, here in chapter 12, verses 1 through 11. And finally, in verses 12 through 26, we are given the descendants of these priests and Levites who lived and served up to the time of Nehemiah.

This listing is Nehemiah's way of honoring these men, who were eager to perform the service to which God had called them. <sup>1</sup> You could call this the hall of fame, or better yet, the hall of faith.

Keep in mind, the reestablishment of Jerusalem as a secure city where the people can worship at the temple of the Lord is not just a matter of personal or national pride. In repopulating the city, we see the importance Nehemiah places on *honoring God's plan*. This city is their central place of worship; it is where the temple is located. I find it very interesting that for the first time in the Bible—here in chapter 11—Jerusalem is called the "holy city" (verse 1).

Now as we come to Nehemiah 12:27, we find something else that is very important to Nehemiah: *honoring God's work*. Here's verse 27:

*And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.*

They have had a revival in the land, as we have already seen, and now there is this ceremony of dedication. Nehemiah writes in verse 31, "Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks." One of these choirs is led by Ezra, the priest. More than likely he starts from the southwest corner of the city wall in one direction, while the other choir, with Nehemiah, circles the city in the other direction.

And they meet at the temple, where verse 42 says, "The singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader." Evidently, Jezrahiah is the choir director for this incredible ceremony. The next verse tells us, "And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy."

This dedication ceremony is marked by joy and thanksgiving to God. This was the work of God, and Nehemiah sees to it that the people honor the Lord for it.

Finally, the last few verses of Nehemiah 12 are devoted to what we might call some routine, housekeeping chores. It doesn't sound all that exciting, but this was important as well. Verse 44 says:

*On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered.*



The storerooms mentioned here were built within the temple precinct to store all the contributions of grain and fruit and animals. Basically, this was the paycheck for the priests, the Levites, the singers, and the gatekeepers (see 1 Chronicles 25–26).

And the people gladly gave to support the worship system in Jerusalem. Verse 47 tells us:

*All Israel . . . gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.*

Now we are not living back here in the Old Testament, bringing animals and bushels of wheat for the priests to eat. But the principle remains: what we do with our finances profoundly reveals the condition of our hearts. I have heard it said that the most sensitive nerve in a man's body is the one that runs from his heart to his back pocket, where he keeps his wallet.

Genuine revival—like we see here in the days of Nehemiah—is a surrender of your heart, a surrender of your life, a surrender of your will, and a surrender of your wallet to God.

But don't overlook this fact: these people here in Jerusalem were not depressed; they were excited and joyful in their contributions. They were enjoying life once again.

Just imagine what we read here in verse 43: "The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away."

They have never been happier! Listen beloved, we make a living by what we get; but we make life worth living by what we give.

Maybe you're thinking, I need a revival like this one—one that impacts my heart and my finances and my perspective. So where do I start today?

<sup>1</sup> Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge* (Victor Books, 1979), 101.

*We make a living  
by what we get;  
but we make life  
worth living by  
what we give.*

Well, I love the story of an old English evangelist by the name of Gypsy Smith. Reportedly, he once told a man that in order for revival to begin, he needed to go someplace alone and take a piece of chalk with him. Then he should kneel down, draw a circle around him, and pray for God to send revival to everything inside that circle.

Frankly, every one of us ought to do that, every single day.

What importance do you place on God's plan for you as His follower (Matthew 28:18-20)? What actions and attitudes might those close to you see and hear that would have them agree you indeed place high importance on God's plan for you?

What truths can you glean from the joy and thankfulness of these faithful believers? In what ways, and how often, do you celebrate God's work in your life? For young believers, and the church as a whole, what fruit is born of regular remembrance and celebration of God's work?

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## PULLING WEEDS ... RESISTING TEMPTATION

Nehemiah 13

Following Christ is not easy. We need His grace as we fight constant battles with temptations, and often the same temptations day after day. This reality is amply illustrated in the concluding chapter of Nehemiah, which finds Nehemiah dealing with familiar sins among his people.

Anyone who has done any gardening knows the battle against weeds is unending. You spend hours removing the weeds from your garden; then before you know it, they're back, and you have to start all over again.

There is a spiritual analogy to this, beloved; godly living isn't necessarily gaining victory over problems and temptations and then moving on to new challenges; sometimes it's battling the same ones over and over again.

As we arrive now at the last chapter of Nehemiah, I think Nehemiah must have felt that he was pulling weeds all over again. The Jewish people had confessed their sins and even committed themselves to a written covenant before the Lord. But those sins resurface again here in chapter 13, and Nehemiah has to start all over again.

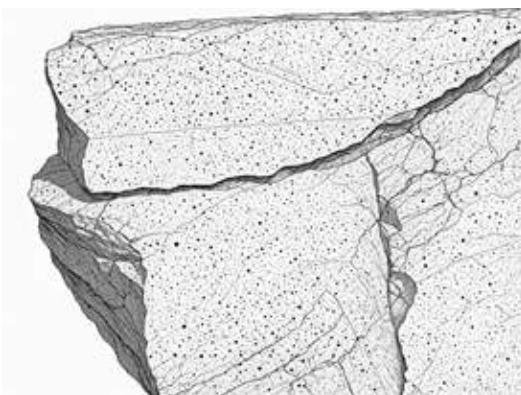
Now if you put the chronological pieces together—in Nehemiah 5:15 and here in 13:6—you'll discover that Nehemiah served twelve years as governor of Judah and then returned to Persia to serve King Artaxerxes there. Then, after some time in Persia, he again asked the king for permission to return to Judah.

And as soon as Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he finds some of those weeds have grown back. In fact, he has to deal with four recurring sins that have, once again, gained a stronghold among the people. These are the same sins he had dealt with years earlier back in chapter 10.

The first situation involves the sin of *compromise*. Apparently, even before Nehemiah arrived, the Lord providentially began to address this sin.

We learn here in verse 1 that Scripture was being read publicly one day, and the text read happened to be one that condemned intermarriage with the unbelieving nations around them. But while Nehemiah was away, some of these idolaters had been accepted into the nation of Israel, and Jewish people had intermarried with them. But verse 3 says, "As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent." So again, God was already at work in their hearts.

This separation was not complete, though. The problem of compromise had reached right into the priesthood.



Stone marking the place where the trumpet was blown at the Jerusalem temple



When Nehemiah arrives, he finds that his old enemy, Tobiah the Ammonite, has, shockingly, been given an apartment inside the temple! Through marriage he is related to a priest named Eliashib, and Eliashib was in charge of the chambers where offerings were stored. Eliashib had cleaned some of them out and moved his relative in. Tobiah was an enemy of the people of Jerusalem; he was the man who opposed the rebuilding of the city and even threatened Nehemiah's life. Now he is living inside the temple. You can't make this up!

Well, Nehemiah wastes no time. He tells us here in verse 8:

*I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers.*

Nehemiah doesn't hold any committee meetings, take a vote, or begin dialoging with Tobiah. He simply removes the sinner—and the sin—from the place of worship. Nehemiah personally throws out all this guy's furniture, his clothes, his idols, and, no doubt, his razor and toothbrush too!

By the way, today your body as well as mine is called the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19); so, how do we deal with sin that moves into God's temple? Do we manage it, excuse it, negotiate with it, or kick it out immediately? Well, Nehemiah had the right idea.

Now the second sin Nehemiah must confront is *selfishness*. He writes in verse 10:

*I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field.*

The people have stopped bringing their tithes of food and provisions to the temple, so the Levites, who lived off those offerings, have gone back to farming. Because of the people's selfishness, the worship system and schedule there in Jerusalem have been disrupted.

Once again, Nehemiah doesn't waste any time here in verses 11 and 12:

*I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.*

Nehemiah also discovers upon his return to Jerusalem that the weeds of *materialism* have grown back inside the city gates. The people of God are doing business on the Sabbath, violating God's law. We read here in verse 15:

*In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.*

Again, Nehemiah rebukes the leaders for allowing this. He says in verse 17, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?" He then has the gates of Jerusalem closed every Sabbath day and even chases away those people who try to set up their little vegetable stands outside the walls on the Sabbath (verse 20).

The final sin Nehemiah must deal with is just plain *disobedience*, specifically here in relation to marriage. He says in verse 23, "In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab."

Now there are three problems with marrying these unbelieving women. First, it will introduce pagan idolatry back into Israel. Nehemiah recalls here in verse 26 that "foreign women made even [Solomon] to sin."

Second, verse 24 tells us that many of the children from these mixed marriages could not speak "the lan-





guage of Judah.” They did not know Hebrew, and that meant they could not read God’s Word and easily could lose their spiritual heritage.

And third, entering mixed marriages broke their own promise to God back in chapter 10. There they had promised to separate from the peoples of the land and not intermarry with these idolators.

In verse 25 Nehemiah severely rebukes those guilty of this sin, which includes even the high priest’s son. Verse 28 tells us Nehemiah literally chases off this disobedient, compromising priest!

So, here’s the example of Nehemiah in chapter 13. Instead of giving up because he has to start pulling weeds all over again, what does he do?

He tackles compromise immediately.

He handles selfishness honestly.

He attacks materialism directly.

He deals with disobedience unapologetically.

We ought to do the same. The Christian life is hard work. Temptation is not easy to overcome. In fact, temptation doesn’t diminish with age; it grows more deceptive and dangerous. The lure of compromise, selfishness, materialism, and disobedience can wear a lot of disguises today.

But let me tell you, beloved, trusting the Lord, relying on the Holy Spirit, and obeying the truth of God’s Word leads to victories. And when we do fall prey to temptation, let’s follow Nehemiah’s example and deal with it immediately, honestly, directly, recognizing that every time we confess our sins, the Bible says, God is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Now as we conclude our Wisdom Journey through the memoirs of Nehemiah—an ordinary man who followed God wholeheartedly—I can tell you that the world, the church, and the family today all need more people like him. We need ordinary believers who are willing to live for the approval of God, re-

building and restoring their broken-down world, one person, one disciple, at a time. Begin with yourself and you entrust yourself to the LORD.

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How do you deal with sin that moves into God’s temple? (that is, you, 1 Corinthians 6:19) Do you manage it, excuse it, negotiate with it, or kick it out immediately? Why is your answer so critical to your peace in life and ministry in your world?

What forms does selfishness typically take in your life? What role does isolation from other believers play in giving selfishness ground to take root and grow? Why are your answers so critical to your peace in life and your ministry in your sphere of influence?

What spiritual habits and attitudes in your life reveal that you have a God-honoring balance of obeying God’s word and pursuing an income? Why is your answer so critical to your peace in life and ministry in your world?

Reflect on the life of Nehemiah and the actions of God’s people. What impressed you most and in what ways can you relate to each? What convictions (both negative and positive) have grown out of this study? How might you use this study to encourage a fellow believer? An unbeliever?

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