



LESSONS FROM
N E H E M I A H

BY AARON ARMSTRONG

DISCOVERING THE BUILDING BLOCKS
OF GODLY CHARACTER

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
LESSON 1: HUMILITY	4
LESSON 2: PLANNING	8
LESSON 3: REPUTATION	12
LESSON 4: PERSEVERANCE	16
LESSON 5: PREACHING	20
LESSON 6: REPENTANCE	24
LESSON 7: OBEDIENCE	28
LESSON 8: ANGER	30

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH:
INTRODUCTION

Nehemiah is a book that has always interested me. The story of a Jewish servant, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, who asks the king to be released from his position so he can rebuild the walls of Jerusalem—and he wants the king to pay for it!

Truly, he has what one pastor calls “audacious faith.”

As I read through this great Old Testament book, I found I had pages and pages of notes covering the lessons I was learning. Those notes turned into the *Lessons from Nehemiah* series that was first published online in March, 2009 and now make up the content of this small book.

This wasn't an easy series to write. As it almost certainly should, writing *Lessons from Nehemiah* forced me to confront a great number of sins in my life, not the least of which being my attitude to authority and my stubbornness in leaving things in the care of our Sovereign Lord.

And as anyone who knows me will tell you, I continue to struggle in these areas. But I hope I've made progress.

Having said all that, *Lessons from Nehemiah* continues to be one of my favorite series of essays—and one I come back to periodically to remind myself of what God has taught me through His written Word.

I hope it's a benefit to you as well.

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 1: HUMILITY

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia, and a very trusted part of the king's court. His job was to make sure no one was poisoning the king's wine; this would often include swallowing some of the wine before serving it. Nehemiah regularly put his life on the line for the king.

He was also one of the Jewish exiles, sent into captivity because of Israel's apostasy.

When his brother Hanani arrived to bring him news of Jerusalem, his heart broke, and he wept and mourned for the destroyed city of his fathers. After much mourning, Nehemiah prayed for the mercy of the Lord to fall on him and the exiles, that they might rebuild the walls of the city and that the king would have mercy on him when he would ask to do this very thing.

Four months later, he approached the king. He had not been sad in the king's presence (since part of his job was to be uplifting and encouraging), but now he could not hide the condition of his heart. And he was afraid. Asking to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls could be seen as disloyalty to the king—the punishment for this: Death. And Nehemiah prayed to God, then made his request. Mercifully, God softened Artaxerxes' heart, and Nehemiah was permitted to return to

the city of his fathers to rebuild the walls.

From the first chapter and a half of Nehemiah, we learn about character; and more specifically, *humility*.

Nehemiah exemplified submission to authority. First Peter 2:18 says that we are to “be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.” He was a member of a captive people, who worked with godliness, and became one of the most trusted members of Artaxerxes’ court—by virtue of his background, Nehemiah should not have been in this position. Yet, providentially he was. Why? Because he was subject to his master with all respect.

We need to treat our employers in the same way, whether they’re godly or ungodly people. As Christians, if our boss is a great man or woman, we need to work hard and do the best job we can. If our boss is a jerk, a liar, hypocrite, whatever—we need to work hard and do the best job we can. Our aim should be that “those who revile your good behavior in Christ [would] be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:16b). This is part of what it means when Scripture says that we are to be above reproach.

In submitting to ungodly authority the same way we would godly authority, we show the grace of God to unbelievers. It is humility that allows us to submit to authority, even when we don’t think that authority deserves our submission.

Humility also allows us to submit to God’s authority. Humility makes repentance possible for the Christian. What is one of the most humble prayers in all of Scripture? “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 9:14 b). Nehemiah offers a prayer of heartfelt repentance, not just for himself, but for his people in Nehemiah 1:5-10:

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

N E H E M I A H 1 : 5 - 1 0

Humility does not allow us to stand on anything but the mercy of God. Our position, our actions are meaningless if our heart is not inclined to Jesus. Repentance—true, heartfelt repentance—is the key to putting pride, arguably the mother of all sins, to death.

Humility also allows us to understand that God is supreme. Psalm 135:6 tells us that “whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.” He is absolutely sovereign over all things in heaven and on earth. But we don’t always believe that. Instead, we try to create persuasive arguments or concoct schemes to take charge, as is we could.

Nehemiah could have done this, instead, what did he do?

He prayed to God. It was a short prayer, but it was a good one. It was good because Nehemiah wasn’t ordering God to do anything, he was submitting himself to God’s authority. Humility allows us to pray rightly. And humility allows us to trust that God will do what’s right.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION :

1. Are we submitting to the authorities over us or do we find ourselves rebelling?
2. Do we trust that God will do what’s right, or do we rebel and take matters into our own hands?
3. Are we pursuing humility or succumbing to pride?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 2: P L A N N I N G

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. . . . I went out by night . . . and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. . . . Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

NEHEMIAH 2:10-13, 15-16

Nehemiah spent three days in Jerusalem, before going out in the night to walk around the city and inspect the walls for himself. After he had completed his inspection, reveals his mission to rebuild the walls and bring dignity back to the city. The people are on board, and prepare for the work ahead. Three men, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite & Geshem the Arab, jeered and mocked the people of Jerusalem.

The people worked diligently, they and their families rebuilding sections near their homes and districts. When Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem heard that work was going forward they plotted to fight against Jerusalem.

When reading Nehemiah 2:9-4:23, two big ideas stand out:

Planning and perseverance in the face of opposition.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he told no one of his mission. Instead, he began to inspect the city and the walls. He began to make preparations—he began to plan.

As Christians, we need to make plans (and realistic plans at that). Over the last few years, I've noticed that this is something many Christians don't do well, as if our plans would somehow hinder God's sovereignty and ability to work in the world. At best, prayer is the extent of much of our planning:

"God, I want to do XYZ... and Lord God, I just pray that a door to XYZ would be opened."

"The secret of our success is prayer. That's the only reason for our success."

And while I don't want to diminish the importance of prayer in any way, we need to understand that diligent prayer does not make up for a lack of preparation. In everything we do, we must both pray and act. Notice, Nehemiah 4:9: "And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night."

The people both prayed and acted.

They prayed for protection, and made preparations against attack. They understood that if the hand of God is on them, as Nehemiah says it is (v 2:18), then nothing can stand against them. Indeed, a few verses later, in 4:19-20, we're told, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. *Our God will fight for us*"

(emphasis added). Read the passage in full.

Who is acting?

Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem.

Who is fighting?

God.

God works through our actions as He sees fit and our plans can in no way hinder Him. As the psalmist said in Psalm 135:6, “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does.”

Because of this, we need to persevere when opposition comes—not if, but always when. Nehemiah faced tremendous opposition from not only Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, but even from his own people! Family members from the surrounding villages came appealing to those who worked on the walls to flee so they wouldn’t die. Whenever we step out in faith, opposition will come, either subtly or overtly. Maybe it’s your parents who don’t understand why you talk about Jesus so much. Maybe it’s your church family that doesn’t understand why you don’t want to live in a big pre-fab home near the new building (these are a couple of things I’ve come up against recently). Maybe it’s your boss who knows your convictions but tries to have you violate them. Maybe you’re facing threats to your life.

One of the promises of the Christian life is hardship. Suffering. Opposition. And Jesus wants us to suffer well, as He suffered well. “[W]e do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” says Hebrews 4:15. We need to remind ourselves that opposition will come, and we must be ready. How did Nehemiah prepare? He reminded the people of

the goodness of God; he called them to persevere. “Do not be afraid [of those who oppose you],” he says in verse 4:14. “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome...”

When you face opposition, do you find yourself despairing? Are you hopeless and afraid?

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. *Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed*, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9, emphasis added). I don’t say that to invalidate the very real feelings that come along with challenges. But remember, God has commanded you to move forward in the face of opposition.

And sometimes you need to strap your sword to your side and keep working.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. When you pray, how often are your prayers accompanied by careful planning? Likewise, as you make plans, are you praying?
2. Do you often find yourself paralyzed when considering tasks that seem overwhelming? How should we respond?
3. When you face opposition, what is your first instinct? What can we learn from Nehemiah’s example in Nehemiah chapters 2-4?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 3: REPUTATION

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

NEHEMIAH 5:14-19

In Nehemiah chapter 5, Nehemiah learns that the returned exiles are being taken advantage of by their own people. The people mortgaged their fields, vineyards and homes to get food to eat. They borrowed money

against their fields and vineyards to pay their taxes. They were forced to sell their sons and daughters into slavery in order to service their debt, because “other men have [their] fields and vineyards” (v. 5). Nehemiah accused the officials of oppressing the people for their own gain and demanded an end to the exacting of interest (a practice explicitly forbidden in Deut 23:19-20). “Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them,” Nehemiah commanded (v. 11). He made them swear an oath under threat of judgement from God (v 13), and the people agreed.

Nehemiah then leads by example in modeling generosity. Rather than taking the food allowance that were his right as governor of Judea, he forsook his rights; he did not take his daily ration of forty shekels of silver, as the previous governors had. He and his servants did not lord their position over the people, but worked with them on the rebuilding of the wall, and accumulated for themselves no land. He even hosted large dinner parties at his home nightly for in excess of 150 people, with all food provided at his own expense.

What do we learn from this chapter? *We learn how we ought to treat others— we learn the importance of true generosity.*

I have a couple of practical examples:

My wife and I run a graphic design business and we deal with a variety of different types of clients on a regular basis. We have some really great clients—and have had some really lousy ones. A while back, we made a decision that, as a general rule, we would not work with Christian businesses or individuals. Why? Because they have historically been our

worst clients (outside of biological family). Many expect free work, deep discounts, or, even when they agree to a quote, have either grumbled about the price after the work was done or simply not paid at all(!).

We need to understand that when it's known that we are Christians, especially in business, we must be above reproach. That we means pay our bills promptly. Don't wait for day 29 of your net 30 term. We never go back on our word—we are to say what we mean, and mean what we say. And we are to never take advantage of our Christian brother or sister; we don't grumble about how much prices or demand a deal just because we go to the same church. As business owners, we are to never gouge our clients. We don't overestimate our work or have a higher mark-up than is reasonable (I'm looking at you, Christian bookstores); charge fairly and appropriately. Remember, too, that if a client genuinely has financial difficulties, give grace to that client. Do not be like the unforgiving servant of Matthew 18:21-35. Don't be a doormat, but do be graceful and forgive debts as necessary. Money is never worth the damage to a relationship that comes from being heartless.

Next example: You're at a restaurant on a Sunday after church. You've prayed over your meal, had a good conversation with your friends and/or spouse about the sermon you've just heard and you're about to pay. You're looking at your bill, and trying to decide how much to tip. The service wasn't all that great; the server brought you fried eggs instead of scrambled and your toast was a little darker than you'd prefer. Oh, and the coffee was terrible.

How much do you tip? Think carefully.

Do you have an answer? Tip generously!

How we tip says a lot about our character. Do we love money more than people? Do we appreciate the gift that God has given us that we were not merely undeserving of, but ill-deserving? Our servers are deserving of the same grace and generosity that Jesus has showered us with and a practical way to do that is to tip well, regardless of how great the service was, especially if it's known that you're a Christian.

While we should never strive to be people pleasers, we do need to remember that our reputation matters; how people see us is how they see Jesus.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. What do you believe is your reputation? Ask three trusted friends or colleagues to tell you what they see.
2. When you're at a restaurant, what's your demeanor? Are you friendly? Do you tip generously?
3. As you examine Nehemiah's conduct, what is the Holy Spirit asking you to change about your own?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 4:
P E R S E V E R A N C E

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

N E H E M I A H 6 : 1 5 - 1 9

In Nehemiah chapters 6 and 7, opposition continues, with a desperate attempt to discredit Nehemiah and assassinate him. Sanballat and Geshem sent four letters to Nehemiah, asking him to come for a meeting at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono. Nehemiah declined their invitation, preferring not to get murdered—besides, he had some important work to do, namely get the walls finished and the doors put up. A fifth letter was sent in a final attempt to scare him, spreading the rumor that the Jews were planning on rebelling against Artaxerxes.

But Nehemiah persevered.

He then is given a false prophecy, saying that assassins are coming to kill Nehemiah, so he should go hide out in the temple, where he'd be safe. But Nehemiah recognized it as false, and refuses to act cowardly. If he's going to die, he's going to die like a man.

And Nehemiah persevered.

After 52 days, the wall was completed—an amazing feat, accomplished only by a miracle of God! And there was more conspiring against Nehemiah. Because the hand of God was obviously upon the people of Judah, what was to stop them from becoming a mighty nation once more? The nobles of Judah conspired with Tobiah the Ammonite, because many of them were bound to him by marriage, and Tobiah sent letters to Nehemiah to make him afraid.

Still, Nehemiah persevered.

These chapters remind us again of the need for perseverance in the face of great opposition.

As Christians, we will face much opposition and much persecution in this life, because we follow the example of Jesus. Jesus faced enormous opposition from the Pharisees and the Jews. The gospels tell us that on multiple occasions, the people tried to stone Jesus (John 8:59, 10:31-33), throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:29), and ultimately arrest and murder him (Matthew 26:4, Mark 14:1). If Jesus, our great God and Savior, was opposed and persecuted, can we have any doubt that this is true?

And what must we do in the face of opposition? We *must* persevere. Jesus says that, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take

up his cross daily and follow me” (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23). Indeed, Jesus said that whoever does not take his cross and follow is not worthy of him (Matthew 10:38).

Peter, in his first epistle puts it this way: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). In other words, our calling is to suffer for the cause of Christ, so that we might follow in his footsteps. It is through opposition, trial, persecution that we are transformed into the image and likeness of Christ.

The question then becomes, how will we view opposition? Will we see it as hardship? A burden?

Or can we embrace it as a wondrous gift from God the Father—that through it, we would be made more like Jesus?

Nehemiah embraced opposition as a gift; he persevered. And God did what only He could do through Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem who stood with him. The walls were restored, and the people were brought out from their shame.

This is what God does for us and in us when we persevere in the face of opposition. This is why He tells us, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev 3:19).

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. How do you view opposition?
2. When you face trials or hardship, are you inclined to view it as an opportunity to be made more like Christ?
3. Is there a trial you're going through right now that requires your perseverance?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 5: P R E A C H I N G

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly. . . . And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. . . . And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. . . . They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

N E H E M I A H 8 : 1 - 5 , 8

Nehemiah chapter eight opens on the first day of the seventh month with Ezra the Priest preaching a sermon—and it’s a good one, lasting from early morning to midday. He preaches through the Law of Moses, and the people begin to feel the weight of their sin and mourn. Ezra admonishes them not to grieve, itself a positive response to the reality of sin, but to rejoice “for this day [the Day of Atonement] is holy to the Lord.” The people rejoiced and celebrated, because they understood the words proclaimed to them.

The next day, the leaders of the people came together to study the Law, where they found that they were commanded to celebrate the Feast of Booths, remembering their time as sojourners in the wilderness. And they obeyed, and there was much rejoicing. Ezra read from the Book of the Law in the presence of the people each day of the celebration, which lasted seven days.

Here's the big idea that we learn from this passage of Scripture: A passion for Jesus and Scripture is created and fueled by the right preaching of the Bible. If the Bible is not preached in our churches, people will not be brought to repentance.

That sounds very harsh, but take a look at Ezra's actions in this chapter.

What does Ezra do? He preaches the Bible. He preaches the complete Word of God. For how long? From early morning to mid-day—at least six hours. What was the result? His hearers were convicted of their sin—they felt the full weight of their depravity in light of a holy and righteous God. *And there was repentance!*

What happened the next day, after Ezra had preached for six hours or more? The men came to Ezra and said, “We need to learn our Bibles.” Ezra's preaching not only brought conviction of sin, but a desire for God's Word and to grow in holiness.

What do we preach in our churches today? We preach lifestyle topics: “Seven Steps to a Better You”; “Debt is Dumb”; “Imagine a Great Marriage”, and so forth. Now, lifestyle topics are important, and should be addressed within a sermon. But lifestyle topics are not the gospel. And it's an offense to proclaim principles without clearly connecting them to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Truly, we as Christians have nothing worth talking about except the cross of Jesus Christ—His sinless life lived by the power of the Holy Spirit; His death in our place, for our sins; His resurrection, defeating our enemies of Satan, sin, death, and the wrath of God; and His ascension to the right hand of the Father, where he rules and reigns over all creation as our glorious & exalted King.

Those who have been called to preach are called to proclaim the gospel, not serve as motivational speakers. Repentance only comes when we are convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word of God. It only comes when the gospel is proclaimed.

The Apostle Paul says it this way:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?
And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”
But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

R O M A N S 10 : 14 - 17 (E M P H A S I S A D D E D)

So what do we do? We repent.

Just as Ezra’s preaching brought repentance to his hearers, we must also repent of our failing to proclaim the gospel. If we are to see people come to repentance and faith in Jesus, we must always proclaim the gospel in every area of our lives. We must passionately study and search the Scriptures to

know what the Word of God says.

And we must be ready at all times and all places to speak the word of Christ, so that some may come to repentance.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. What is it about preaching that inspires or frustrates you?
2. What is the best sermon you've ever heard? Why?
3. How can you encourage your pastor in his preaching?
4. In some ways, all believers are called to preach, as we are commanded to share the gospel with all the nations. What opportunities to share the gospel are right in front of you?
5. Author Jerry Bridges has written that we need to "preach the gospel to ourselves" on a regular basis. Why do you think this is important?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 6:
R E P E N T A N C E

Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

NEHEMIAH 9:32-37

In Nehemiah chapters 9-10, the people of Judea come together and confess their sins. They read from the Book of the Law; they name all of their sins publicly; they proclaim the history of creation and salvation—

that God created the heavens and the earth and made everything good. God chose Abram & brought him out of Ur, to make for Himself a people. They tell of the Exodus, where God redeemed the Israelites from the hands of Pharaoh, and made them to be a witness to all the nations of the earth. But they rebelled. They chased after the gods of the surrounding nations which were no gods at all, and rejected great gifts God had given them. And God chastened them; He sent them into exile for their disobedience. Because they had disobeyed His covenant and paid no attention to His Law, God made them slaves.

Now the people come before the Lord to confess their sins and to renew the covenant which they have broken.

In these chapters, we see the people of Judea repent of their sins.

What we learn from this passage is the need for repentance.

Martin Luther said that all of the Christian life is one of repentance; not that we are to be continually hopeless, but we should continually be pressing into the grace and mercy of God. Indeed, the first words proclaimed by Jesus were “*repent* and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15, emphasis added).

But what are we to repent of? And why do we need to repent?

We must repent of our sin, because it is sin that separates us from God.

Every day, in thought, word and deed, we sin. Indeed, it is our very nature to sin. We are slaves to sin (see Romans 5:12-6:14). I do the things we should not do; I do not do the things I should do. I lie, wish malice on others, act selfishly. I elevate my wants to a place of ultimate desire in my life.

And because of my sin I cannot stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God on my own merit. I don't measure up. I miss the mark (which is the meaning of the word "sin"). I'm not perfect—and God's standard is nothing less than perfection. None of us are perfect.

Except Jesus.

When God mercifully brings to life the heart of one He chooses to save, we are able to turn from sin and to Jesus. And in that moment of repentance, my unrighteousness is covered by Jesus' perfect righteousness. My sin is removed because of Jesus' perfect & sinless life.

Now comes the big question: Do we still sin after God has saved us through the finished work of Jesus on the cross? Yes. Our new desires are constantly at war with our old ones. And sometimes we fail. We do the things we do not want to do, while we don't do the things we do want to do. And this is why the Christian life is to one of continual repentance. Repentance keeps our hearts aware of our sinful thoughts and actions. It causes us to rely on God's grace and mercy; Jesus' righteousness rather than our own.

Repentance breeds humility.

And through repentance, we are slowly made more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus.

So how should we respond today? After considering the questions at the end of this chapter, let's take an opportunity to confess our sins both to Jesus and to the people we've sinned against where necessary. Let us pursue humility and grow into the likeness of Christ.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. In what ways have I looked at God's mercies with contempt?
2. Do I have any habitual patterns of sin in my life?
3. Is there someone that I've sinned against from whom I need to ask forgiveness?
4. Do I have anyone to whom I can confess and will hold me accountable?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 7: O B E D I E N C E

These are the chiefs of the province who lived in Jerusalem; but in the towns of Judah everyone lived on his property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, and the descendants of Solomon's servants. And in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah and of the sons of Benjamin. Of the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uzziah, son of Zechariah, son of Amariah, son of Shephatiah, son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, son of Col-hozeh, son of Hazaiah, son of Adaiah, son of Joiarib, son of Zechariah, son of the Shilonite. All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 valiant men.

N E H E M I A H 11 : 3 - 6

Nehemiah chapters 11-12 presents a list naming the people who would live in Jerusalem, those who would remain in the surrounding villages, & the dedication of the wall; this passage serves as a conclusion to the story of the repopulating of Jerusalem.

The dedication ceremony described is the culmination of everything that's taken place over the course of the book; the wall is complete, the people have repented and turned to God, their Savior. There is much celebration and rejoicing. But as I was reading, I was left with a question...

Why are the lists of names important? Why would the Holy Spirit inspire

them to be written, not just here, but throughout Scripture?

Now, we could potentially over-spiritualize it and say that these lists are representative of the Book of Life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15, 21:27), in which the names of all God's people, past, present & future, are found.

And maybe that's the reason... but maybe there's another, practical reason for the existence of lists like we find in Nehemiah 11 & 12.

They serve to show us the fruit of obedience.

Did the people of Jerusalem realize that their names would be a part of the Bible? Almost certainly not. They were simply being obedient to the will of God.

I wonder how much thought we really give to obedience? While our names aren't going to be a part of inspired Scripture, I think we need to really come to grips with how much obedience to Jesus matters. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 5:13-16:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

We are to be salt and light, transforming the world around us because

of what Christ has done in us, for us and through us. We are to let our light shine before others—we are to obediently seek to do the will of God in every area of our lives—so that those who see might give glory to our Father in heaven.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. If you had to honestly assess your life, would you say you're being obedient to the will of God? Why or why not?
2. Would you say that your life is reflective of the command to be salt and light in the world? How so?

LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 8:

ANGER

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

NEHEMIAH 13:4-9

Nehemiah's final reforms are found in the final chapter of this great book. Nehemiah had returned to King Artaxerxes 12 years after having left to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. After some time, possibly years, he asked to return to Jerusalem. Upon his return, he was welcomed by a most troubling situation: The people had once again intermarried

with the surrounding nations, and many of their children could not even speak the Hebrew language—their entire religious culture was being lost. To compound the situation further, Tobiah, Nehemiah's old foe, had been given the chamber where “they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.” (v. 5). Tobiah was living in the court of the temple! He saw that the people of Judah were working on the Sabbath, treading winepresses. The Levites were neglected and had fled to their own fields to take care of themselves, and the house of God was forsaken.

What was Nehemiah's response?

He got angry. He got really, really *angry*.

He had Tobiah and all his furniture thrown out of the chamber, and had it cleansed & returned to its proper use.

He confronted the officials and demanded that they not forsake the house of God—he brought everyone together, appointed reliable treasurers over the storehouses, and the people gave their offerings.

He shut down all commerce on the Sabbath day, commanding that the doors of the gates be closed until after it had passed. He saw merchants and sellers camped outside Jerusalem, waiting for the doors to open, but he told them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” And in case you were wondering, “laying hands” is a euphemism for “beat down.” And they left.

He confronted the men who had intermarried with the surrounding nations and he shamed them—He cursed them, pulled their hair and beat some

of them! He even chased off the son of Elishiab the high priest, who had married into Sanballat's family.

And after all this, Nehemiah prays, "Remember me, O my God, for good" (v. 31).

Nehemiah, in this final chapter, shows us the importance of righteous anger.

Did you know that it is not a sin to get angry? It's true.

There is a certain kind of anger that is good and holy and righteous. When we see injustice, we should get angry. When we see a loved one sinned against, we should get angry. When we see the Word of God maligned, we should get angry. In fact, if you don't get angry about the injustices and evil that exists in the world, I'd suggest that you might need to seek professional help.

While anger itself is not a sin. Some actions that result from anger are.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:26, "Be angry and do not sin." He went on to say that we must not give the devil a foothold through our anger. What did he mean by that? He was admonishing us to not become bitter in our anger. We need to deal with anger in a way that is holy and righteous. We need to deal with anger the way Jesus did.

Jesus got angry—perfectly angry. In His anger, He did not sin.

A key example appears in Matthew 21:12-13:

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-

changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

John 2:15 tells us that Jesus drove the money-changers and the sellers out with a whip. This was not a case of Jesus sitting everyone down for a tea to talk about their feelings: Jesus was ticked. He was consumed with zeal for the Lord’s house, as it says in Psalm 69:9.

Why was Jesus angry? Because people were selling their wares in the temple—and disrupting the worship of God.

Nehemiah also was consumed with zeal for the Lord’s house when he cleansed the temple of Tobiah; he disrupted the worship of God. Nehemiah was consumed with zeal when he saw the Sabbath—Nehemiah was angry when he saw his people once again whoring themselves, breaking their covenant vows and chasing after created things rather than their Creator.

In our day, what demands righteous anger? And, how do we respond in a way that does not lead to sin?

We should be angry with injustice—that men, women and children are being crushed under the weight of poverty and oppression. That Children are sold into slavery and abused by Westerners for their own debauched pleasures. That, statistically, one in three women in North America has been sexually abused or assaulted. That every day, thousands of children die in the name of “freedom of choice.”

These are things we must be angry about.

But we must also be angry about the abuse of Scripture in our churches.

The dethroning of Jesus Christ, our great God and Savior, in the name of tolerance and multi-perspectivism. The damnable false gospels that present themselves as Christianity—prosperity theology, therapeutic moralistic deism, “God hates homosexuals, but not the dude sleeping with his girlfriend...” There’s so much of it. Just take a look at the religious podcasts on iTunes and you’ll see how pervasive it is.

It’s sickening.

So how should we respond?

With love.

We seek justice for those who are oppressed and broken. Organizations like International Justice Mission and Compassion are rescuing people from slavery and the crushing weight of poverty overseas. They are freeing young girls from hopeless lives as prostitutes. They are giving hope to people who would otherwise have none.

At home, our churches need to become a place of recovery through the cross of Christ, for those who have been abused and assaulted. We need to be a place where it’s okay to be broken; to be weak.

We need to uphold biblical, orthodox Christianity—that Christ died, in our place for our sins, according to the Scriptures. That He rose again, according to the Scriptures. And that everything is under His dominion. That without Jesus, we are absolutely hopeless and lost and evil. We proclaim this more and louder and clearer. Because if we do not tell people the truth—both about humanity and about Jesus—we do not love them! The absolute most loving thing we can do for anyone is to call them to repentance.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. What is the difference between righteous and unrighteous anger?
2. Is it possible for us to experience righteous anger?
3. What should insight righteous anger in us?
4. How should we respond to righteous anger?

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