

Read Nehemiah 1

They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. Neh 1:10 When I was in college, I traveled around with a singing group that was in different churches every weekend. As a result, we spent a lot of time together and developed close friendships. Sometimes a member of the group might get to talking about themselves for a little too long and soon someone would give the comment, “It’s all about Andy”, or “It’s all about Alisa.” The comment was a reminder not to talk about yourself too much, and to change the subject if your subject was constantly you.

Nehemiah’s prayer for the desperate situation of Jerusalem has always moved me. Nehemiah lumped himself in with the sins of all the people as he pleaded for God’s forgiveness and grace. Here in verse 10, we see who this is really about. Nehemiah wasn’t just pleading for some random people. Nehemiah keeps emphasizing God in this sentence. God’s servants, God’s people, God’s redemption, God’s great power, God’s strong hand. In every instance, Nehemiah was emphasizing and recognizing God’s role from start to finish. He was asking for God to be God more than praying that the people would be strengthened for the task. **Do you completely recognize God’s power and working in your life? All your gifts and abilities have come from Him. When you take credit for something that God has done in you, and you give no glory to Him, you have failed the gospel. When people see you, they should in turn glorify the God who is working in you.**

Read Nehemiah 2

Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. Neh 2:4 The story is told of the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, as he met with other reformers for prayer. The men were going around a circle as they prayed out loud, and each in turn. One of the men in the circle prayed as if he would never stop. After about 15 minutes of listening, Luther looked up and said to the man, “Brother, God stopped listening five minutes ago.” Apparently the man was just talking more than praying, and it was clear that he wasn’t genuinely praying about anything. Contrary to popular belief, prayer is not made effective by its length but by its sincerity.

I’ve always appreciated this verse of Scripture. Nehemiah has a request in mind, but now the king has actually asked him what it is, Nehemiah wants to make sure that he doesn’t miss anything that needs to be said; and so he prays. It couldn’t have been a very long prayer, and not uttered out loud, but it was a sincere prayer that probably asked God for wisdom in the answer. And wisdom comes out. Nehemiah doesn’t just get permission for the trip, but asks for letters of protection and other aspects to help in the rebuilding process. **Have you ever wanted to pray for something, but didn’t because you couldn’t devote much time to the prayer? I have, and I’ve learned over time that it’s the sincerity of relying on God that validates our prayer to God. It doesn’t grant answering in the way we always want, but it does grant that God will hear it. If**

you're entire prayer life is only made up of these short and desperate prayers, that indicates you are not taking the time you need with God.

Read Nehemiah 3

Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters. Neh 3:5 I've always been interested in politics, and I wanted to run for President until I entered college. The two Presidential candidates in 2008 each worked for the same purpose...to make the other guy look out of touch. McCain called Obama a celebrity, but in our celebrity crazy society, I'm not sure that worked against him. Obama criticized McCain for not knowing how many houses he owned. Instead of playing it as McCain is too old to remember stuff, Obama painted him as out of touch with Americans who are just trying to keep the one home they have. Both men wanted to give voters they impression, "I'm just like you." They wanted voters to believe they would roll up their sleeves and work side by side to fix America's problems.

The Tekoites were Jews that were living outside the walls of Jerusalem in Tekoa. However, they were willing to come to Jerusalem for the benefit of the nation and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. As they came, their leaders refused to submit themselves to those in charge of the rebuilding. Those masters were not nobles, but just wise men who were likely installed in their positions by Nehemiah. These nobles refused to work, probably so they didn't lose any symbols of their power among their people. However, by working alongside of them, the people would have seen they were being ruled by someone who really cared about them. **To hold a title is an easy thing, but to glorify God with your title is harder. Are you a Sunday School teacher, deacon, minister, or other ministry leader? Are you happy to plan, but unwilling to help? Church cleanup days are for everyone. Youth lock-in volunteers don't have to be parents. How are you working alongside those in your church?**

Read Nehemiah 4

"At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." Neh 4:20 Holes in church ministry usually happen because people believe they are not fully equipped to do what is asked. A youth Sunday School teacher is needed, but the position goes unfilled because an available person doesn't know if they can connect with youth. More people are needed for church outreach, but available people don't respond because they don't think they can clearly explain the gospel to people (I worry if you say you're a Christian, and you also say you can't explain the gospel). My pastor in Arkansas used to make a statement for moments like that: "The most important ability we have is availability." If you have time to devote to a ministry need, ask God to give you the wisdom to find an area to plug into and the ability to work successfully in that ministry.

As the wall of Jerusalem is going up, Sanballat and others from outside the nation of Israel didn't like what they were seeing. I wouldn't be surprised if these men helped burn the walls, essentially kicking Jerusalem while she was down. But, now the city was rising

up again and the threats didn't work. They were going to show force and physically stop the rebuilding process. In response, Israel worked with a hammer in one hand and a weapon in the other. I'm sure that some of these had never fought in a real battle, but they were ready to respond if they heard the trumpet. Nehemiah made it clear that if they would respond to the battle call, God would do the fighting for them. They just needed to be available. **Where do you need to be available? Is there a place of service that you already know you need to step in? Is there something more that you need to be doing in a current place of service? Ask God to help you be completely available to Him, and that His Holy Spirit would prepare you and excite you to fully serve God as He calls.**

Read Nehemiah 5

I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. Neh 5:7 I am sickened to see the continued glut of fast cash stores across our country. They advertise that you can walk in with a personal check, even if you don't have any money in your account, and they will give you money. This kind of advanced borrowing is just killing families across our country. They overspend and then when their real paycheck comes in, they owe it to the cash store plus 25% interest in some cases. I don't know how cash stores can justify what they do. They claim they are providing an important service to people. However, you don't see these stores in the nice areas of town. They are targeting the poor and enticing them to live above their actual lifestyle. As Americans, and simply as human beings, taking advantage of someone in this way is despicable. Even when I was desperate for a job, I refused to consider working for one of these places.

Nehemiah felt a similar disgust with how people were treating each other financially. You had some people who were in positions of power established by Babylon or were merchants and as a result had wealth despite the difficulties Israel was going through. These people were charging such outrageous interest that people were mortgaging all their possessions just to eat. Nehemiah comes before these wealthy lenders and tells them that they are doing wrong. Is he being judgmental? Is he Communist? No, but he is for Christians treating each other fairly and not taking advantage of one another. These lenders not only stop the practice, but they also give the people's stuff back to them. **Are you taking advantage of someone? Treat your brothers and sisters in Christ as your family. Don't use them or take advantage of them. If your church uses your expertise in an area, work as hard for them as you would any other client or boss. Show a Christian example in the way you work and care for others.**

Read Nehemiah 6

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. Neh 6:15 I took our teenagers on a mission trip to Evansville, Indiana a few years ago. The purpose of the week was to help those who were living in sub-standard housing and to improve the residents living conditions. My group was given a project to put siding on

a two-story house that was very large, but also in very bad condition. We had 4 adults and 8 teenagers and there was no way. The day before we were supposed to finish, several crew chiefs from other projects came over and had a “siding party”. Their projects had been smaller and were done already, so they came to help us complete our work. From day one I thought there was no way we were going to finish, but at the end I was pleased to see it had happened despite my doubts.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem was similar. As people finished their wall projects, they went to go help those who were still working. You’re not talking about a bunch of wall builders. These were just ordinary people, led by a few experienced hands, and they worked like crazy and finished the wall in less than two months. I’m sure that when they arrived, some were suddenly less excited having now seen the dilapidated wall that was waiting for them. I’m sure others griped as much as they worked. But, fifty-two days later, the wall was up and done. Why? Because people didn’t just take responsibility for their small project, but for the project as a whole. **Do you need to start investing in other projects of the church? Thank you if you have been working in Sunday School, VBS, or another area. But do you see a ministry that is short on help and long on needs? Do you have the time and ability to invest?**

Read Nehemiah 7

Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built. Neh 7:4 I was in a church one time that had a major space problem. We were growing, but we were moving a little slow on handling the problem. I was working with youth, and after moving to three different rooms to accommodate all the students, the church finally began talking about building a family ministry center with a basketball court and some new classrooms. It became clear after a while that people didn’t really understand why we were building this. I talked about having the building open at different times to provide a place for people in our poor community a place to go and have fun in a safe environment. Some vocal people didn’t see why we would open it up like that, because the building might begin to suffer damage with all these visitors. They thought the building would magically grow the youth group, which it wouldn’t, but they were content to see it would sit empty on 5 of the 7 days of the week.

Nehemiah and the people in Jerusalem had accomplished something great. The wall of the city was up in less than two months, and there stood a city that the people of Israel could call home. The only problem was, there weren’t many people living in it. Some had not come back from the exile, and many continued to live in their new areas outside of Jerusalem. The project was worth it, but they had to find ways to help people benefit from the project. Churches need to think in much the same manner. **There is hardly a church in the country that doesn’t have some kind of building plan in mind. But what is the purpose of your church expansion? Is it the hope that more space will equal more members? That’s not a guarantee. Is your church willing to use the space to really reach out to people? Some churches have invested in computers to make their fellowship halls into tutoring areas for low-income students. Some churches open up their gyms to give students a safe place to hang out and play after**

school. Churches that sit empty during the week are missing their chance to minister to the community and show unbelievers that we want more for their lives than for them to attend church. We want to plug them into the Kingdom of God and into the life of our church. Is there a community ministry that your church could/should be doing?

Read Nehemiah 8

Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Neh 8:9 When I share the gospel with a lost person, I never know what kind of response I'll get. I might be dealing with someone who has thought very little about God, or someone who grew up in a Christian home and never made his own decision. More than once though, I have seen people who knew they needed Jesus and His forgiveness, but they just didn't believe it was possible for their lives. I can't say it's very surprising that a lost person would feel this way, but I meet more and more Christians who feel the exact same thing. Somehow the church is not clearly teaching the doctrines of grace and mercy in Jesus. Grace and mercy are about avoiding what we deserve because we have placed our lives, faith and hope in Jesus Christ. Sin is no longer our detractor. Satan no longer accuses us with merit. We have been covered in the blood of Jesus, and that blood will never lose its power to cleanse you of your sin.

The people of Israel certainly know what I'm talking about. Many had been away from home for many years and heard no Scripture in that time. Now they have come back and some are hearing the Law for the very first time. It causes them to mourn and weep as they realize that they are no better than the Israel that strayed from God in the desert after being spared from Egypt. However, Nehemiah and Ezra tell the people that the only tears that should flow are tears of happiness. If you hear the words of Scripture and they bring you to understand that you're a sinner, that's a good thing! We need to remember, even as long-term Christians, that we are sinners. Our sin is no longer counted against us, but it can still bring difficulties and consequences to our life. **When you find yourself remembering who you were before Christ, or remembering a major sinful failing since you began walking with Christ, remember that Jesus loves you no more or less than He did when you said "yes" to Him. His forgiveness still remains. If we could out-sin the grace of God, then that would mean that we hold onto salvation by our own work, and not by the work of Christ. The Bible teaches we are saved by grace through faith. Have you thanked Jesus today that your sin is no longer on your account by His blood?**

Read Nehemiah 9

"So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, and laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, through Your servant Moses. Neh 9:14 It was a beautiful Sunday morning, and the pastor woke up and decided, "I'm not going to church today." So he called his associate pastor and claimed that he wasn't feeling well, and that

the associate would have to preach that morning. Straightaway, the pastor took off for the golf course and found there wasn't a soul around. An angel in Heaven was watching this scene play out and asked God, "Aren't you going to do anything about that man?" God didn't say a word. The pastor got on the first tee and hit the best shot of his life! The ball hit the green rolled, rolled, rolled right into the cup. It was a hole in one! The angel said, "Lord, how could you let him get a hole-in-one when he's skipping out on worship." The Lord looked at the angel and said, "Who's he going to tell?" This is an old joke, but one of my favorites and it helps to make my point this morning. Why do we have a Sabbath? Why is there a day set aside for us to worship the Lord as our primary purpose?

Here in Nehemiah we see the people move from repentance to remembrance. The people were previously weeping over their sin, and we found that once repentance comes, the tears can cease! God has forgiven the repentant believer. Now the priests are recounting the history of Israel to these people as a reminder to never allow the banishment from Jerusalem happen again. They remembered their history to remind them how to serve God in their future. So why do we have a Sabbath? Because God in His wisdom knew that selfish humanity would need the encouragement. Everyday should see God as our priority, however in our selfishness, we can often prioritize ourselves above the Lord. Even as a minister, I can tell you there are times I wake up on a Sunday and don't feel like doing the "church thing". That's when I remember that this is for the Lord. He didn't rest because He was tired on the seventh day. He set that day aside so that in my worst week, I would have that time to refocus myself on His goodness and mercy to me. **How is your attitude about Sunday? Do you go to church but fail to worship? Are you willing to miss church for just about any excuse? Remember that when we come together to worship, we are reminded of our personal history by the Holy Spirit. He reminds us what we were without Jesus, and we commit ourselves to never be that person again.**

Read Nehemiah 10

and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. Neh 10:30 "I'm not what you would call a handsome man." I felt that quote applied to me growing up. No matter how much interest I took in girls, they rarely took interest in me. My first date was to my senior prom. When I talked to her I asked her the all-important question, "Are you a Christian?" When she confirmed that she was and even went to church, I thought that meant that the relationship would have God's blessings. Later I learned that being "equally yoked" doesn't just refer to believers and unbelievers, but also finding a Christian who has the same devotion to the Lord that you have. That's what I have in my wife Nikki. I remember taking her to meet my parents and they loved her right away. I told my dad as I prepared to ask Nikki to marry me. He said that he and mom had been praying for my future wife long ago, and that they both felt confident that Nikki was a woman who loved God. That shocked me. I had no idea they were praying anything like that for me.

As Israel signed their covenant before God, one of the things they committed to was to keep their sons and daughters from marrying unbelievers. Does this mean that God

desires for arranged marriages? Absolutely not, but He does expect parents to parent their children right up the moment they leave the house. I've heard of parents who said that they knew their son or daughter was marrying someone that was going to cause them problems later in life, and they were right. I try to think of why a child would ignore that counsel? Most likely, the parent approached the situation as "putting their foot down" and telling their child that they did not approve of the marriage. **If you have a child how can you steer them to the right mate for their life? Pray for them as my parents prayed for me. Eleven years later I have a beautiful, faithful, and loving wife that I would never trade in for anyone, and I have the prayers of my parents to thank for helping to lead us together. Teach them to stop looking for the right mate, but to be the right mate. We attract what we advertise for. Our children don't have to live like monks to attract a godly spouse, but they should live like they love Jesus. And if you're child begins to show interest or start a relationship with someone you feel they shouldn't, then lovingly ask the child how the relationship is going and remind them of the standards that God has for a loving and lasting marriage.**

Read Nehemiah 11

And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. Neh 11:2 When I was in sixth grade, Desert Storm was the war of my generation. It didn't really prepare us for what war would really be like, because our military went in and dominated the Iraqi military in quick fashion. Our school was close to a local military base, so we were taken by bus to a main street leading into the base as the soldiers came home. There were hundreds, if not thousands of people lining that road as troop transports, tanks, and other military vehicles rolled in. People were waving flags and signs and cheering their appreciation to these soldiers who had fought for us. I'm sure there were times the fight was tough, but those men certainly seemed to swell with pride as they received such a warm welcome home.

When people take on a tough assignment, it can be eased when others acknowledge it. Now that Jerusalem was rebuilt, they had to get people to live in it. Many that had come to work on the wall had lived in other cities outside of Jerusalem. This rebuilt city was not suddenly a safe place because of the wall. Those outside still wanted to see that wall come back down and to continue their attacks that had destroyed it in the first place. It sounds like many people were willing to live in the city, so they had to cast lots to narrow down the volunteers. Those volunteers were blessed by the people for their willingness to continue the work of rebuilding the city beyond the wall. **Who do you need to bless for their volunteer spirit? Do you give to the work of missionaries in your denomination? Do you thank the people who work gladly in the nursery of your church? What about the custodians who clean up with little thought of recognition? Find someone in your church family who is a volunteer, and bless them with some form of encouragement today.**

Read Nehemiah 12

So all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron. Neh 12:47 I was listening to the radio one day and it was a show about how to handle money and debt. A pastor's wife called in, and was asking some questions about whether they should sell their car. The host asked if they were doing it to try to get out of debt. She said that they just couldn't pay any of their bills. The church gave them a house to live in, and then paid her husband \$100 a week. He wasn't permitted to work any other job, and that was the situation they were in. The husband wouldn't call in because he felt like he needed to trust God more in the situation. The host said, "This is not an indictment on God's provision, but on the church's." He said that the pastor should go directly to the financial people of the church and demand a raise, or he should leave so he could care for his family. No other ministries of the church should be funded until the pastor has been provided for.

Here as the story of Nehemiah wraps up, we again see an important aspect of Jewish life. The people were giving, and as they did so, the priests and ministers of the temple were being provided for. As offerings were given, the Levites took care of the initial receiving of that offering. Then they were responsible for providing portions to the priests in taking care of them. The priests didn't have to come to the Levites looking for what they were to receive. The priests always received exactly what the Lord had commanded be set apart for them, and they were never short-changed in the service of the Lord. **How are you acting towards your ministers? Are you working to provide for their needs? Are they made to feel like employees of the church? Instead of asking how little you can get away with, instead attempt to see how much you can bless them.**

Read Nehemiah 13

Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. Neh 13:20 Gary Richmond is a former zookeeper. He had worked a lot with raccoons and he knew that at 24 months old, they undergo a glandular change, after which they often attack their owners. Gary was telling a friend who owned a pet raccoon about this process, in order to warn her. She said, "It will be different for me. Bandit wouldn't hurt me. He just wouldn't." Three months later, Julie underwent plastic surgery for facial lacerations suffered at the hand of her beloved Bandit. Bandit was released into the wild, and despite hoping for different results, Julie received the predictable results that come with owning an adult raccoon.

As Nehemiah had been gone taking care of responsibilities to the king, there had been some moral failures in the city he rebuilt. The Sabbath wasn't being properly observed. It probably had more to do with the forcefulness of these outside merchants than the desire of the Jews to break the Sabbath. After Nehemiah returns, those merchants were put out

before the Sabbath, and the door to the city was closed. However, those merchants remained outside, just in case an opportunity afforded itself to get back in. You'll notice that Nehemiah didn't allow the merchants to remove themselves. He knew the result would be predictable and that the people would allow the Sabbath to be profaned once more. Once those merchants realized they were being put out for the Sabbath, they gave up. **When you stand up to sin in your life, do so forcefully! Don't just say, "I better stop that", but take steps to stop. Stop going there. Stop watching that. Stop clicking that. Stop being alone there. Remember that like the merchants, sin is often just outside the gates. Be diligent against it in your life.**