
The Read, Pray and Grow (RPG)
is a daily Bible reading material
published by
Tabernacle Books,
Singapore.

The PDA version is
freely downloadable from
www.truthbpc.com/rpg.html

**January to March
2026**

**“Principles for
Christian Service:
Based on the Book of
Nehemiah”**

by Rev Dr Nelson Ng’uono Were

About the Author



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THURSDAY, JANUARY 1

NEHEMIAH 1:1-4

MARK 10:42-45

*“And whosoever of you
will be the chiefest,
shall be servant of all.”*

A HEART FOR SERVICE (I)

The book of Nehemiah is set in the period of the Israelites' return to Israel from captivity in Babylon. The return of the people was not just a physical one to their ancestral land, but also a spiritual one, in their relationship with God. The story of Nehemiah is one of service to God and fellow men. It is the story of an “incidental leader” who did not actively seek to be a leader, but who became a leader through circumstances and the providence of God. Thus, the book presents to us “The Principles of Christian Service and Leadership.”

As I was in Shushan the palace (Neh 1:1). The book begins as it were an autobiography, with Nehemiah giving his account of the circumstances that thrust him into service for God and his fellowmen. In giving this account, Nehemiah gave us a glimpse into the heart of a servant. The picture we have is that of a diligent man with a caring heart. The circumstances that opened the door of service for Nehemiah were not extraordinary ones. They were ordinary, normal and common everyday circumstances.

I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped (Neh 1:2). Nehemiah was concerned about the returnees from exile and the state of Jerusalem, and he showed this by asking after them. In most languages, greetings are given in question form. “How are you doing?” “How is your family?” and so on. However, when we do ask, do we ask out of formality or out of real concern? Nehemiah's part and service in the building of the wall of Jerusalem, the reforming of the abuses that existed, and the spiritual revival that took place in conjunction with Ezra, were born out of the common questions he asked Hanani and the “*certain men of Judah*.” What, to many of us, would be fuel for gossip and tea-time stories, or would be forgotten as soon as we part ways with those telling us, was to Nehemiah the starting point of a journey of service and leadership that he himself did not know would unfold as is recorded for us in Scripture. A heart concerned for the things of God and the people of God will surely find opportunities to serve God and fellow men for the glory of God!

THOUGHT: (Read 1 Corinthians 15:58.)

PRAYER: Give me, Father, a servant's heart!

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2
NEHEMIAH 1:5-11
DANIEL 9:3-19

*“...yet made we not our prayer
before the LORD our God,
that we might turn from our iniquities,
and understand thy truth.”*

A HEART FOR SERVICE (II)

Christian service does not begin when the acts are performed. They begin with the heart of the one who will perform the acts. The acts of Christian service are born in the heart of the Christian who will serve. The glimpse of Nehemiah's heart given to us does not only reveal a diligent and caring heart, it was also a prayerful and conscious heart. F.B. Meyer in his book “The Secret of Guidance” said, “The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.”

And prayed before the God of heaven (Neh 1:4). Nehemiah's initial response to the news that burdened his heart greatly was to pray to God. His desire to set things right or to alleviate the misery of his people did not precede prayer. We err and stray when we, in our desire to help, hurry to act without first tarrying to pray! The foundation and basis for every Christian's act of service is communion with and obedience to God. Nehemiah's compassion and desire for Jerusalem reveals to us the concern and burden of his heart, but his decision to pray and seek God's grace and guidance reveals the alignment and allegiance of his heart.

Nehemiah's desire to help drove him to pray, and the content of his prayer reveals his knowledge of God's Word. It is clear that, as he prayed, he was conscious both of God's Word and his own person and nature. He had read both his “Bibles” and related them correctly to the issues burdening his heart. Spurgeon said, “He who lives without prayer, he who lives with little prayer, he who seldom reads the Word, and he who seldom looks up to heaven for a fresh influence from on high – he will be the man whose heart will become dry and barren. However, he who falls in secret on his God, who spends much time in holy retirement, who delights to meditate on the words of the Most High, and whose soul is given up to Christ – such a man must have an overflowing heart. As his heart is, such will his life be.”

THOUGHT: What do I do with my cares? Do I take them to God in prayer?

PRAYER: (Read Psalm 86:1-11.)

SATURDAY, JANUARY 3

NEHEMIAH 1:4-11

ISAIAH 6:1-8

“...Then said I, Here am I, send me.”

A HEART FOR SERVICE (III)

Nehemiah, as he prayed, was cognisant of God's Word, his nature and also his circumstances and the obstacles he faced in his desire to serve God. His prayer was scriptural and personal. He considered his condition in Shushan, acknowledging God's righteousness and their sinfulness, and presented his desire and the desires of others who sought to do something for the returnees and for Jerusalem, acknowledging the obstacles to the accomplishing of his desire.

O Lord, I beseech thee... grant him mercy in the sight of this man (Neh 1:11). We are not given the point at which Nehemiah's care and concern changed into a conviction to do something. But we are given an insight into the conviction that he could do something also came with a realisation of how difficult it would be for him to do it. The picture given in the book of Esther concerning the dangers of angering the king and appearing before him unannounced may give us some perspective of the risk Nehemiah faced. Christian service is for the committed heart, not for the convenient one. Those who seek to do something for Jesus at their convenience often end up doing nothing. In his prayer, Nehemiah is casting all his cares upon God, and placing “his future” in God's hand. This, on his part, was not an act of reckless abandon, but rather one of willing commitment. It is not an act of putting himself in harm's way, and his career in danger, but rather of putting himself in God's hand and being available to be used of God. The king might be great, but he was still a man. If God was pleased to use him, God would grant him mercy in the sight of the king, which as he prayed, he rightfully referred to as “*this man*.” We too live in tough times and have work and career duties and responsibilities. Like Nehemiah, challenges of our life obligations may affect our Christian service, but they ought not be used as excuses or reasons for us not to be active in Christian service. Rather they should be items for prayer, that the Lord may grant us mercy, so that, despite whatever commitments in life, we may still find opportunities to serve God and be useful and fruitful in church for Him.

THOUGHT: Though life is tough and busy, service to God is still possible for the willing in heart.

PRAYER: Father, help me find time for service amidst life's busyness.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 4

NEHEMIAH 2:1-8

EZRA 4:7-24

*“Give ye now commandment to
cause these men to cease,...
until another commandment...”*

ETHICS FOR SERVICE (I)

Christian service must be guided and based on God's revelation given in Scripture and, therefore, is governed by biblical principles. The principles by which we live, and the view we espouse in life, are usually reflected in the decisions we make. Chance and circumstances sometimes force us to make certain decisions. If we believe in the Sovereignty of God over all things and circumstances, as well as His providential leading and guidance in all circumstances, then both our life and work ethic will be shaped by this belief.

Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence (Neh 2:1). Nehemiah's statement presents to us the kind of person that he was. He bore in his heart a great personal burden and had made what would be (under the circumstances he lived in) a grave and life-changing decision. As he awaited God's leading and opportunity to discharge his heart's desire to serve God and his fellow men, he still continued with his work in the king's court and performed his duties diligently. We note that the king he served was the one mentioned in Ezra 4:7, 8 and 11 and was the one who had ordered the work at Jerusalem to cease. The picture given to us in Chapter 2 occurred when Nehemiah was called to perform his duty before the king, which he dutifully did. It was then he gave us the general comment that before this time he had not been *“sad in his presence.”*

This is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid (Neh 2:2). The king discerned that Nehemiah was troubled and sought to know what it was that warranted Nehemiah bringing his sorrows to his attention. Nehemiah would have every reason to be afraid since the burden he had was one that a decree had been given against (Ezra 4:21). Would his request be seen as political and would Nehemiah risk being seen as treasonous? But Nehemiah carefully approached the king and presented his matter not as a political issue, but a social one, a matter of family honour.

THOUGHT: Trust in God does not exclude tact in life.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 56:1-4.)

MONDAY, JANUARY 5
NEHEMIAH 2:1-8
ECCLESIASTES 9:1-12

*“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,
do it with thy might.”*

ETHICS FOR SERVICE (II)

Trusting in God to lead, guide and direct our life is the foundation of Christian living, and this faith must be exercised in all of life's circumstances. This faith, however, does not result in a fatalistic kind of life which leaves us with no responsibility. As we approach each situation of life with faith, we also have to approach it with care, avoiding any unnecessary hurt, harm, animosity or conflict. This is seen in how Nehemiah responded to the situation in which he found himself while in the presence of the king. This is what we mean by trust in God and tact in life. But there is also the matter of our habits and character.

Now I had not been *beforetime* sad in his presence (Neh 2:1). The general statement Nehemiah gave was also a historical one, one that depicted his character and habits while on duty over an unspecified period, as given by the word “*beforetime*.” Modern distinctions between “secular” and “spiritual” work have given some Christians the notion that they can be faithful in doing spiritual duties, and excuse unfaithfulness in the secular ones. Faithfulness and diligence in work are habits that have no distinction between secular and spiritual employment. To the spiritual, all employments are spiritual and every work is done as “*unto the Lord*.”

For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven (Neh 2:4). The king's question to Nehemiah drew a spiritual initial response that reflected the character and habits of Nehemiah. In his response to pray in the midst of a very sensitive situation between him and his king, in a setting that many would term “secular,” it is clear that Nehemiah had cultivated the spiritual habit of prayer. The king's question also pointed to the relationship between them. He sought not only to know what burdened his faithful servant, but also sought to know what his desire and request were. One who would serve God ought to be one who is both spiritual and hardworking, diligent and prayerful in all his duties and responsibilities.

THOUGHT: Diligence in work and prayer marks a faithful servant.

PRAYER: Grant me, O Father, a diligent hand and a fervent heart.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6

NEHEMIAH 2:1-8

LUKE 14:25-33

*“For which of you,
intending to build a tower,
sitteth not down first,
and counteth the cost.”*

ETHICS FOR SERVICE (III)

Christian service begins with the heart, not the acts. Chapter 1 of Nehemiah gives us a glimpse into the heart of a servant. As we consider the ethics of a servant in Chapter 2, we get a glimpse also into the mind of Nehemiah. The picture we get is one of a sober mind aiding a burdened heart. As we go about seeking to serve God, we must ensure that we keep close to God, seek His will and know His Word. It is equally important to have a clear understanding of the requirements and the tasks related to the area of service we seek to pursue. Hence Christian service requires a sober and clear mind.

And I said unto the king (Neh 2:5). Nehemiah secured the attention of the king by approaching the matter and issue in his heart tactfully and wisely. He secured the favour of the king by a life of committed and faithful service. Also, having prayed both over the matter bearing on his heart, as well as the king's question posed to him, Nehemiah went on then to respond to the king in a manner that gives us a glimpse of a sober and clear mind. First, he did not lose himself in the moment. The king's question definitely brought hope and joy, but Nehemiah approached it with the same tact as he did the earlier question that brought great fear (Neh 2:2). With a sober mind, he made his request again, not mentioning the name of the *“city of my fathers' sepulchres.”*

For how long shall thy journey be? (Neh 2:6). The conversation between Nehemiah and the king continued with Nehemiah responding to the king's questions, revealing a well-thought plan of action. He had obviously considered what it would take to accomplish the task he desired. He was able to set a timetable for the work (Neh 2:6), make request for letters of authority (i.e. official permits both for travel and work) to the governors of the province beyond the river (Neh 2:7), and letters of provision for the work he was to do, securing for him materials he would need for the work (Neh 2:8). He even knew who was in charge of the king's forest.

THOUGHT: It is not spiritual to be careless, we must be well versed in God's Word.

PRAYER: Help me not to be slothful in business, but fervent in spirit.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7

NEHEMIAH 2:1-8

EZRA 8:15-20

“And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding.”

ETHICS FOR SERVICE (IV)

The opportunity and success of every venture of service for God and men do not rest solely on the desire of the heart, tact, character and habits of the man, and the soberness and clarity of the mind. Though all these are things we can look for, consider and cultivate in preparation for profitable and successful service, yet their presence alone does not guarantee success. Nehemiah, in his account of how he found himself with the opportunity to serve and position to lead, made this very clear by the last sentence in Nehemiah 2:8

According to the good hand of my God upon me (Neh 2:8). Here we find the cornerstone of every successful venture for the Lord. Christian service and leadership are primarily matters of the workings of the providential hand of God. Therefore, the mind of the servant and the ethics he uses in his pursuits must include the acknowledging of God. So, what is it that characterises a mind that is both conscious of, and trusting in, the providential hand of God in the pursuits and workings of life? First, a reliance on God as seen in a prayerful disposition. One who trusts in God with all his heart, will make known to God, with prayer and supplications with thanksgiving, all matters both great and small, seeking guidance and God’s will concerning them. Second, a relationship with God as seen in acknowledgement. It is not enough to seek and lean on God’s revealed wisdom as we undertake and address issues in our lives, but it is equally important to be conscious of God’s providence and acknowledge Him in all our ways. Nehemiah acknowledged and attributed the king’s favour, not to his tact, carefulness, wisdom, planning or focus, but rather to the hand of God upon him. This is a reflection of his relationship with God. He knew God would guide, and trusted Him to guide, and when he received favour, he acknowledged and attributed all of it to God. He said, *“the good hand of MY God upon me.”* The emphasis added on the personal pronoun *“my”* shows a clear understanding of a close and personal relationship with God.

THOUGHT: What do I attribute my successes to? Who takes the credit?

PRAYER: Father, keep me near the cross, and make Thyself known through all circumstances in my life.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8

NEHEMIAH 2:9-20

PSALM 37:23-34

*“The steps of a good man are
ordered by the LORD.”*

APPROACH TO SERVICE (I)

Christian service requires the preparation of the heart, and clarity and stability of the mind. In addition, there is also the need for wisdom and carefulness in the approach one makes to service. One's preparations and plans can be hampered and undermined by the approach one takes when it comes to the actual service. This is because in serving, there may be circumstances, situations and foes that are unforeseen. In Nehemiah's case, his heart and prayers opened doors for service. His planning, preparation and tact granted him favour and provisions from the king. But upon reaching Jerusalem, other things came to light that were not known to him before his arrival in Jerusalem.

It grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel (Neh 2:10). The arrival of Nehemiah was not well received by two officials. The presence of someone from the royal court of the king with letters from the king, and an armed escort who could and would stand up to them, brought them great grief. How their jealousy and grief would translate into action was, at the time of Nehemiah's arrival, unknown to him. All Nehemiah had at that time was the knowledge he had gathered from the information from the brethren he had spoken to while at Shushan, the burden God had placed in his heart, and the opportunity God had accorded him through the king to discharge the burden.

So, I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days (Neh 2:11). This gives us an introduction to Nehemiah's approach to service. He did not rush into the work, though it was a great work. He took time before starting the work. He took time to make a personal assessment of the place. He did this the night he went out to view the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 2:12-16). After that, he enlisted and encouraged support and participation from others who shared the same burden (Neh 2:17-18).

THOUGHT: I am responsible not only for the work done, but also for the way I pursue the work.

PRAYER: Grant me grace to glorify Thee by my character as I serve Thee.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9
NEHEMIAH 2:9-20
HEBREWS 10:19-25

“...let us build up the wall of Jerusalem.”

APPROACH TO SERVICE (II)

The approach of Nehemiah delayed the opposition he would receive long enough for him to both carry out his personal assessment of the city and the work ahead of him, and to communicate with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. During this period, he made it clear that his intentions were not known to anyone, not even to those he would rally to join hands in the work. After he had finished his survey (and probably had first-hand information from it), he called the people together. The meeting with the people rallied them to the work at hand. To do this, Nehemiah made two appeals.

Then I said to them, Ye see the distress that we are in (Neh 2:17). The first appeal of the meeting was to the circumstance and situation on the ground. He had heard of the affliction, reproach and broken walls (Neh 1:4), and had also seen them for himself during the night survey. Thus, when he called the people to the meeting, he pointed out the danger and embarrassment that the absence of the wall presented. In this, he identified with them in the distress. He did not say “you are in,” but rather “*we are in*” (Neh 2:17). He called them to action and rallied them to unite and put in their concerted effort. He had the burden, and he had come to work. He did not intend to work alone. He wanted them to work together with him. Their situation had been a source of pain to him. Therefore, their safety and security would be a source of joy to him too.

Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me (Neh 2:18). The second appeal of the meeting was to the providence that had brought him to Jerusalem. The people had the experience of rising up to work only to be hampered and stalled. Nehemiah encouraged them by sharing that God clearly had a hand in leading him to Jerusalem. Their resolve was strengthened and their hope renewed, as they heard what the king had said to Nehemiah. It shed new light on things as they had been, and the change that would result. The people responded in consensus, “*...Let us rise up and build...*” (Neh 2:18).

THOUGHT: Unity of faith and purpose creates opportunities for service.

PRAYER: Help me provoke others to love and good works for Thy glory, Father.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10

NEHEMIAH 2:9-20

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

*“...but ye have no portion, nor right,
nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”*

APPROACH TO SERVICE (III)

Nehemiah's delay served not only to allow him to rally and enlist help for the great work ahead, it also served another important function. It exposed compromisers who would hamper and hinder the work. Many a time, those who have no desire to serve and those who seek to hinder God's work would hypocritically present themselves as friends, not foes. One who is zealous but inexperienced might easily be led astray by them, especially in the pastoral ministry. The discretion of Nehemiah upon arrival in Jerusalem kept the news from reaching the ears of Sanballat. Though Sanballat was greatly grieved that *“there was come a man to seek the welfare”* (Neh 2:10) of Jerusalem, the actual intentions and plans of Nehemiah were delayed in reaching him.

When Sanballat the Horonite... heard it, they laughed us to scorn (Neh 2:19). Nehemiah rallied the people to work. At the same time, to Sanballat and Tobiah's names was added *“Geshem the Arabian”* (Neh 2:19) whose name did not appear in verse 10. They, who had been greatly grieved, now *“laughed us to scorn, and despised us”* (Neh 2:19). When they heard of Nehemiah's plans, they mocked Nehemiah and sought to weaken his people before the work started. Thank God that Nehemiah had the opportunity to encourage the people before Sanballat and his group started discouraging them. How many times has a good work stalled and failed because the people were discouraged even before the work started?

We his servants will arise and build (Neh 2:20). The resolve of Nehemiah was a discriminating one. God's work is not for everyone. It is exclusive. there are those who have *“no portion, nor right”* (Neh 2:20) in it, and they must not be involved in the work! What prospers God's work, and what prospers God's servants is not numbers or political support. It is God who both prospers and accomplishes His work and His servants in their service for Him. God's servants must take a stand in service, and Nehemiah did so, making it plain and clear that the enemies had no part in their work for God.

THOUGHT: Stand up, Stand up for Jesus, Stand in His strength alone!

PRAYER: Give me courage to overcome fear and remain steadfast, Father.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 11

NEHEMIAH 2:9-20

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

"...we his servants will arise and build..."

APPROACH TO SERVICE (IV)

Though Nehemiah's work was a physical one, in that he was to build a physical wall around the city of Jerusalem, it was also a spiritual task. In all the stages of preparation until then, when the work was about to start, he acknowledged the good providential hand of God. This made it clear that his approach to God's work had been a spiritual one.

Approach to service is greatly influenced by one's view of self and of the work. A good work viewed wrongly will be approached wrongly, and ultimately even be corrupted.

The God of heaven, he will prosper us (Neh 2:20). In the previous section, we saw an approach to work that was separatist and exclusive. Collaboration with compromise never prospers God's work. Nehemiah's resolve that the rebuilding of Jerusalem was none of the scorners' business and that they should have no part in that work, was drawn from the view he had both of himself and of those who should do the work, as well as the nature of the work they were about to undertake. They were about to undertake God's work and were to do it for God's glory. Therefore, only those who were God's servants were to be included in the work, hence Nehemiah's rallying call: *"we his servants will arise and build."*

But even as God's servants rose up to the task and to the work of God, they did so not in their own strength or wisdom, but with faith and assurance. Their confidence that God's work would never lack God's hand of help and their faith that the *"God of heaven, he will prosper us"* (Neh 2:20) promoted commitment to the work of God at hand. The men who rose up to join in the work were all volunteers. They gave of their time and efforts, but not for personal or financial gain. Theirs was not a self-serving work, it was service to God and God's people. They, therefore, approached the work with faith in God and commitment to God in the process of the work. This is the essence of religious work. The building of the wall was to be done religiously, relying on God, ascribing it to God, and involving only those who shared the same faith.

THOUGHT: Approach service with trust and commitment to God.

PRAYER: Grant me the grace to serve Thee faithfully, O Father.

MONDAY, JANUARY 12

NEHEMIAH 2:17-3:5

HEBREWS 6:9-12

“...we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence...”

CALLED TO SERVE (I)

The building of the wall to its completion was a testimony to the commitment of both Nehemiah and the children of Israel to their God and to His work. It echoed Nehemiah 2:20, attesting to the fact that God did prosper His people in the work, and that God's servants did indeed rise up and build. The completion of the work was also a testimony to the necessity of the steps Nehemiah took and his approach to the work of the Lord. Necessary traits for successful leading and administering of God's work can be observed through it.

But ye have no...memorial in Jerusalem (Neh 2:20). The first lesson we may draw from the list of names which gives us a sort of roll call of servants in the work of the Lord is that of a memorial. The names may be strange to us, and we may have difficulty even pronouncing them correctly, but they are necessary to remind us that *“God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name”* (Heb 6:10). The presence of this record in Scripture testifies that God does not forget. We have the names of individuals and groups. We have knowledge of their professions before the work of the wall. There was recognition too of where, what, and how much of the work they did. Their labour indeed was not forgotten and therefore, their labour was, as the apostle said, *“not in vain in the Lord”* (1 Cor 15:58).

But their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord (Neh 3:5). This memorial included the mention of a peculiar group that responded to Nehemiah's rallying call, but *“put not their necks to the work of their Lord”* (Neh 3:5). As God remembers the good and faithful servants and their work, He also mentions the wicked and slothful servants, and their reluctance. No reasons were given as to why they did not fully commit to the work. What was made clear though was their unwillingness. They willingly allowed their subjects to work, but they did not offer themselves to the work. Yet, all should be willing to do God's work.

THOUGHT: Success requires preparation and action.

PRAYER: Grant, O Father, that I may be available and willing to serve Thee.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 13
NEHEMIAH 3:1-5
1 CORINTHIANS 3:9-15

“For we are labourers together with God.”

CALLED TO SERVE (II)

The call to serve brought success when it was met by a commitment to work. The people who rose to serve did so with commitment and this was seen in those who seized the opportunity to serve even if the area of service was not their area of expertise.

Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded (Neh 3:1a). Nehemiah 3:1 illustrates both the inspiration of Nehemiah’s appeal to the children of Israel, as well as their commitment and faith in their response to the appeal to work for God. The call was to consider the need (the present state of Jerusalem and the reproach it brought) and to rise up in faith to do something about it. They were to trust that God’s servants would rise up and work, and that God would prosper the work. Eliashib and the priests presented to us the spirit with which service is to be done. They rose up to a work that was not part of their calling. They were set apart for the work of the Temple, the sacrifices and the offerings. Yet, when the work at hand was one of building the Jerusalem walls, they willingly did the part assigned to them.

They sanctified it, and set up the doors of it... they sanctified it... unto the tower of Hananeel (Neh 3:1b). In rising up to build, the priests joined in the faith and declaration made in Nehemiah 2:20. They declared their faith in the God of heaven who would prosper them and their work, showing that they were God’s servants. They also carried out God’s calling for them and sanctified the work they were doing. Though the work at hand was physical in nature, it was spiritual in both approach and intent. It was undertaken for religious reasons. Jerusalem was a city in which God had chosen to put His name, it was the city of God.

THOUGHT: Participation is necessary for Christian service.

PRAYER: Father, help me to trust in Thy help and do my best in Thy service.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14

NEHEMIAH 3:1-15

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27

*“Now ye are the body of Christ,
and members in particular.”*

CALLED TO SERVE (III)

The building of the wall as recorded in Nehemiah 3 was also a testimony to fruitfulness of concerted effort, and the advantage of organised and focused service. The picture given of the work as outlined in the list of names is one that highlights proper planning and inspirational leadership, pointing to the value of leadership, administration and organisation. It also highlights to us the fruitfulness of committed, united and determined service.

And next unto him... (Neh 3:2). The three-word phrase *“and next unto”* occurs in verses 2 (twice), 4 (thrice), 5, 7, 9, 10 (twice), 12 and 17. The phrase highlights for us both an aspect of the leadership, administration and organisation of the work as well as the unity and cooperation of the workers. Concerning the leadership and administration of the work, this phrase highlights both the delegation and the supervision of the work. The work was a great undertaking, and it needed all the help that could be gotten. Nehemiah not only inspired and rallied the people to work, but when the people resolved and rose to work, all who availed themselves for the work were assigned specific work.

Nehemiah 3 is also a record of the progress of the work in its individual and assigned parts. There was identification and recognition of those who were working. The nature of the work they were doing and the section in which they were assigned to work were pointed out. The extent and progress of their effort and labours were highlighted. All these pointed to the responsibility of oversight and supervision which must follow that of delegation. This would ensure success of the work undertaken.

The duty of a leader does not end with assigning duties to others. It continues with following up. Nehemiah not only knew the duties assigned, and the people who had joined the work, he also followed the progress of the work and the individual workers in their assignments. Biblical leadership not only assigns, rallies and involves others in God's work, but also monitors the progress and recognises the effort put in.

THOUGHT: Responsible leadership promotes organised service.

PRAYER: (Pray for your pastors and leaders in church.)

THURSDAY, JANUARY 15

NEHEMIAH 3:1-15

EPHESIANS 4:1-16

CALLED TO SERVE (IV)

The building of the wall and the roll-call of the builders are a testimony to the unity and cooperation of God's servants, and the fruit and profit that such a united endeavour brings. It shows the importance of, and need for, unity and cooperation for success in God's service. Each volunteer was assigned duty, and was responsible for the part assigned to him. Every member of the body of Christ has a part to play for the body of Christ to accomplish its work. As such, every believer has a definite "ministry" or area of service he can render for the benefit, growth and comfort of the whole body of Christ. The diversity of the workers is unmistakable, along with the difference in scope and effort of work. Yet all the individual efforts, when put together, would accomplish a work that cannot be achieved by the efforts of one individual.

And next unto him... (Neh 3:2). The same three-word phrase considered in the previous devotion also describes the cooperation and unity in the work. As the roll call takes us around the wall of Jerusalem, it presents both diversity and unity. Different sections were worked upon by different people, from priests (Neh 3:1) to Gibeonites who were doomed to menial work by Joshua (Neh 3:7 cf. Josh 9:27), to goldsmiths and chemists (Neh 3:8), to rulers and nobles (Neh 3:9, 12, 14). Different sections required different kinds of workings, such as "wall" (Neh 3:8, 13, 15, 19, 20, 24, 25 and 27), and "tower" (Neh 3:1, 11, 25, 26 and 27). Yet, still others worked on the "gate" (Neh 3:1, 3, 6, 13, 14, 15, 26, 28, 29, 31 and 32). Some built up (Neh 3:1-3), while others set up (Neh 3:1, 3, 6, 13, 14 and 15). Others "repaired" (a word that occurs in almost every verse from Nehemiah 3:5 to 3:32). And some did multiple tasks like the priests. There were those who put in more effort than others and covered greater grounds like the inhabitants of Zanoah (Neh 3:13) and Baruch who "earnestly repaired" (Neh 3:20), and even those who worked "over against his house" like Jedaiah (Neh 3:10). Yet all around the wall, work progressed. And as the wall rose up, it rose up as one wall, one work.

THOUGHT: Everyone who does his part contributes to the whole.

PRAYER: Father, help me be mindful of every task, and be diligent in every task, so that I may honour my God and Saviour.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16

NEHEMIAH 3:16-32

ROMANS 12:1-13

*“Not slothful in business;
fervent in spirit; serving the Lord.”*

CALLED TO SERVE (V)

Often times, the church and its work are hindered because too much work is left to too few people to undertake. We have work that we wrongfully label as “not ours” and leave it to “our full-time ministers and church workers.” Yet, they are tasks that are to be undertaken by the whole body of Christ. The church would accomplish much more if all its members were committed to doing what is right, and to do it to the best of our abilities, and for God’s glory according to His revealed will. The picture presented in Nehemiah 3 is one of diversity of gifts and helps available to God’s cause that the condition of Jerusalem brought out of the people.

After him repaired... (Neh 3:16). Another phrase that recurs in this roll-call of builders is the phrase “*after him*” which is found in Nehemiah 3:16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30 and 31, emphasising the sequential progression of the work with different individuals and groups of individuals collaborating on the same work project. Person after person was identified, and every one of them helped in the building of the wall. Yet Nehemiah came alone, as was testified in Nehemiah 2:10: “*there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.*” How is it that the names that are now mentioned one after another had lived until now “*in great affliction and reproach*” (Neh 1:3)? And why did it have to take the coming of Nehemiah for them to “*see the distress that we are in*” (Neh 2:17)? Yet when they had recognised the one common purpose, and had been assured of the providential hand of God which was “*good upon me*” (Neh 2:18), they were able to work harmoniously side by side, in the spelled-out order and together, and were willing to work under the leadership and supervision of Nehemiah. May God grant us the grace to learn this important lesson. It is often easier for every man to look, and mind his own business, but this often adversely affects God’s work and Christian service. It is possible for the body of Christ to work together, with each one doing what he can and even picking up from where another has left off, and doing all for the growth of the body of Christ, even for the glory of God.

THOUGHT: Responsibility shared and effort coordinated enable fruitful service for God’s glory.

PRAYER: Father, grant me humility to serve Thee where I can.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 17

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

2 KINGS 18:17-37

“...hath he not sent me to the men which sit on the wall...?”

SERVICE AMIDST OPPOSITION (I)

God's work will never lack supply and provision from God. And those who seek to serve Him will never lack the grace to enable them to fulfil His will. On the other hand, in God's service, God's servants will always face opposition and hardship. Spiritual work comes with spiritual battles. Nehemiah spoke of the burden God placed in his heart, and how God prospered

- (i) his desires, granting him permission before the king,
- (ii) his plans, granting him his requests for provisions and letters from the king,
- (iii) his journey, bringing him safely to Jerusalem, and
- (iv) his effort, enabling him to rally the people to rise up and work.

When Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth (Neh 4:1). The news of the work's progress was not good news to all who heard it just as the news that *“there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel”* (Neh 2:10) was not welcome news to all. Then, in addition to the great work in progress, there was added great battles to be fought and obstacles to be overcome.

And mocked the Jews (Neh 4:1). As the enemies of God gathered, their intent was one: the work must not continue. And they were prepared to do all they could to ensure that. Their first onslaught was against the resolve of God's people to do His work. They set out to discourage them by their mocking. They pretended to speak among themselves, but did so within earshot of God's people so as to weaken their resolve. They questioned the physical ability of the Jews in the work they were undertaking for their God. Today, our enemies use the same tactic. They question and undermine the Christian's faith in and service to his God. Dear Christian, do not be ashamed of your Christian faith nor stray from your walk with Christ because of their discouraging or demeaning words. Do not be ashamed of your Christian work even in the face of ridicule and scorn. Many before you have endured such (Heb 11:36). Even Christ Himself suffered such (John 9:28; Mark 15:31).

THOUGHT: Read Matthew 10:24, 32-33.

PRAYER: *“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”*

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 18

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

2 CORINTHIANS 12:8-10

"...when I am weak, then am I strong."

SERVICE AMIDST OPPOSITION (II)

The opposition of Sanballat against the work did not abate. As the work progressed, the opposition also progressed. From the account of Nehemiah 4 (both in the accounts of the nature and form of opposition, as well as in the account of the progress of the work and the response of Nehemiah and the builders), we may draw many valuable lessons to help us learn how to keep serving and remain steadfast in the faith and in the work of the Lord despite the varied oppositions and obstacles we may face in our Christian life, walk and service.

What do these feeble Jews? (Neh 4:2). The first question was about the physical strength of the Jews. The question was aimed at planting doubt in the hearts of the workers, doubt that was natural and would have troubled the returnees in Jerusalem as recorded in the post-exilic writings. Zechariah, when speaking of the building of the Temple, posed the question "*who hath despised the day of small things?*" (Zech 4:10). At the laying of the foundation of the Temple, there was both joy and mourning with many of those "*that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice*" (Ezra 3:12). And also, Haggai, when sent to speak to, and to encourage, Zerubbabel and Joshua and the remnants for the work, posed the question: "*is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?*" (Hag 2:3). Indeed, it is natural for us to despise small things, and to make comparisons and judgments, and to cease from serving because of them. Often times, when doubts or fears arise, we find ourselves sitting still, wondering and trying to resolve and answer the doubts we have in our minds. Many a time, we end up dishonouring God by relying on our own strength and not trusting His grace and wisdom. We ought to always remember that it is "*not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit*" (Zech 4:6) that God's work gets done. In the presence of doubt, we must "*be strong*" and "*work,*" trusting in the promise of God who says "*I am with you*" (Hag 2:4).

THOUGHT: Faith, courage and prudence are necessary elements of Christian service.

PRAYER: Father, keep me steadfast in service and fervent in spirit.

MONDAY, JANUARY 19

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

EZRA 4

*“...if this city be builded again,
and the walls thereof set up...”*

SERVICE AMIDST OPPOSITION (III)

Sanballat and his friends were against the work and its progress. They gathered to ensure the work stopped. The workers had been rallied and inspired to service by Nehemiah through his speech in Nehemiah 2. Sanballat and his friends, on the other hand, set out to discourage them and to shake their faith and resolve. As the people had been encouraged to work by words of faith, the enemies sought, by the use of words and questions of doubt, to discourage them. The progress of the work relied not only on the physical strength of the workers, but on their spiritual faith and resolve; and this was the target of the enemies in their speech.

Will they fortify themselves? (Neh 4:2). The second question was about the political intent of the Jews. This was a question with historical precedence. The threat of political rebellion was the tool used to get the king to stop the building of the Temple in Ezra 4. Here, Sanballat sought to use it to discourage the Jews from rebuilding and repairing the walls. They had trumped up false charges against the Jews to the king, and they again brought the same false charges. Is not the work they were doing a flagrant rebellion against the king's decree and was there not a law in the king's annals against this very endeavour? This question being asked in the presence of *“his brethren and the army of Samaria”* (Neh 4:2) would, apart from fuelling doubt among the builders, instil fear in them. The people had been motivated to work not by political intent, but because they had seen the conditions in which they lived *“how Jerusalem lieth waste”* (Neh 2:17) and had heard the testimony of God's providence in their favour (Neh 2:18). They had also received news of the king's goodwill (Neh 2:18). They rose to work as the servants of God trusting in God's help (Neh 2:20). It was not a political endeavour or a planned revolt. This was God's doing and work. Neither the threats and false charges nor the slow progress and their inexperience in construction work could deter them because God would help them! People may misjudge and misunderstand us, but as long as God receives and accepts us, we must serve.

THOUGHT: (Meditate on the lyrics of *“Standing on the Promises.”*)

PRAYER: O, Father, grant me steadfast faith and enable me to trust in Thy grace amidst the trials and difficulties of life.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 20

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-10

“...*thou shalt
set it before the LORD thy God, and
worship before the LORD thy God.*”

SERVICE AMIDST OPPOSITION (IV)

Sanballat and his friends censured the Jews and their work from multiple fronts. All the criticisms they laid before the workers were false and unfair. Their intent in all this was singular: that the work should cease. They intended to stop the work by diverting the focus and attention of the workers. Generally, men do not take criticism well. We have an inherent need to answer back and defend our intentions and actions when they are challenged, even if the persons raising the questions do not understand or accept our response. In this, we ought to be careful. We cannot convince nor please every man, but we must not have doubts as to our own intents and motives as we respond to God's call and carry out His will in our lives.

Will they sacrifice? (Neh 4:2). The third question was a spiritual one. Life in all its aspects is spiritual. In their resolve to work, the workers had claimed: “*The God of heaven, he will prosper us*” (Neh 2:20). The evidence of God's help would be in the completion of the work, and the response of gratitude and thanks would be in the worship and sacrifice, and the dedication of the completed work to God. Hence the question: “...*will they sacrifice?...*” (Neh 4:2).

It is common for people to deter others by undermining their faith and trust in God. But those who know their God also know that they do not need to defend God. Those who trust in God and depend on Him for grace and help, know that the best way to show this is not by well-framed apologies, but rather, by a life of consistent commitment and obedience to the revealed will of God and active service to Him. Like the three friends of Daniel, the response to the question “*who is that God that shall deliver you?*” is best answered by a firm resolve of allegiance to God, to His worship and service. This firm allegiance was what the builders had shown at the start of their endeavour when Nehemiah had asserted: “*The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build...*” (Neh 2:20). Their task in the face of criticism was not to answer back, but rather to “...*shew the same diligence... unto the end*” (Heb 6:11).

THOUGHT: (Read Daniel 3:16-18.)

PRAYER: (Use Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah 37:14-20.)

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 21

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

LUKE 14:25-33

“...which of you,
intending to build a tower,
...counteth the cost...”

SERVICE AMIDST OPPOSITION (V)

Christian work and service are demanding. Anyone who enters into service without careful consideration of what it requires of him is making a big mistake. Christ clearly set forth to all who desire to follow Him that they have to “*count the cost*” (Luke 14:28) and have to “*bear his cross*” (Luke 14:27). Sanballat and his friends knew the burden and difficulties the work entailed, and sought to add their opposition to the rigours and burden of the task at hand. To them, the work was too great, and the Jews weak. How would the Jews manage the work, the debris, and the opposition from Sanballat and his friends?

Will they make an end... will they revive the stones out of the heaps? (Neh 4:2). The final two questions were questions aimed at their ability to complete the work. The work at hand was daunting, as it came with many challenges. Some of the challenges were assessed by Nehemiah during his night visit. Apart from the building and repair works, there was much debris and rubbish to be cleared as was alluded to in Nehemiah 2:13-14, and mentioned later in Nehemiah 4:2, 10. Were the builders conscious of the work ahead of them, and were they up to the task? Would they give up before the work was completed? Or would their strength wane as the work progressed? Had they considered what they had set out to do? As they set out to build, would they reuse the old heaps of the stones in the new wall? Or, as Sanballat said, “*revive the stones out of the rubbish which are burned*”? Many Christians have committed themselves to areas of service without counting the cost. And when the cost seems too high, they leave the work incomplete. Christian service demands careful consideration. A task begun for God must be completed for His glory. How much more ridicule and mocking would the Jews have to endure if they failed to complete the wall that they had set out to build? What shame would they have brought to God’s name after claiming that God would help them if they had failed? If they had to endure mocking in the course of their service, they would have faced even greater mocking had they failed to do what they set out to do for their God.

THOUGHT: Sit down to contemplate before rising to serve.

PRAYER: Father, grant us wisdom to approach Thy work with care and zeal.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 22

NEHEMIAH 4:1-6

PSALM 69:1-14

*“My prayer is unto thee, O LORD,
in an acceptable time.”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (I)

The certainty of challenges and opposition to the work of God is not reason for any to fear Christian service. It is reason for all to approach service with care and prayer. We have considered the enemies of God’s work and their initial attacks, and we do know that God’s work progressed despite the attacks and opposition. How did God’s servants handle and overcome the attacks? How did they manage to accomplish such a great and difficult work in the face of severe adversity and opposition? Nehemiah recorded his and the people’s response and resolve to the work in light of the opposition and attacks.

Hear, O our God; for we are despised (Neh 4:4). God’s people were called to be men of prayer, and God’s house the house of prayer. We are to pray for everything, and in every situation. Nehemiah called upon God in prayer. He prayed on the following basis:

- (i) Relationship with God (“*our God*”)
- (ii) Confidence in God (“*Hear*” is a cry made because God hears.)
- (iii) Situations and circumstances (“*we are despised*”)

He also prayed with a desire for justice and help in light of the troubles that had beset them in their service for God. As we give of ourselves to serve God, we can pray to the God we serve and ask both for the help needed for service, as well as guidance and protection needed in service.

For they have provoked thee to anger before the builders (Neh 4:5). Christian service and prayer go hand in hand. But prayer has to be in accordance with God’s will. Hence, there is a need for self-examination by the one praying. Nehemiah’s confidence, as he sought for justice, was not misplaced as it was the confidence of one who knew that he was neither murmuring against God nor trusting in his own righteousness as he brought his petitions to God. His mind was not focused on personal vengeance, but rather on the holiness and the cause of God. The opposition was not against the builders as this was not their own agenda. The opposition was against the LORD who had guided, led and given opportunity to the builders to serve Him through this great undertaking.

THOUGHT: (Meditate on the lyrics of “Something for Thee.”)

PRAYER: “Give me a faithful heart – likeness to Thee,” O Lord.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 23
NEHEMIAH 4:1-6
1 CHRONICLES 28:1-10

*“...serve him with a perfect heart and
with a willing mind.”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (II)

Prayer does not equal inaction. Relying on God and seeking Him and His grace in the face of our helplessness does not equal inability. In the face of opposition in the service of God, the hands of the servants of God are not slackened. Nehemiah prayed, and the work continued. True and believing prayer does not hinder or reduce the zeal and diligence of the person praying. Neither does it promote negligence of duty, even in the face of trials and opposition.

So built we the wall (Neh 4:6). Christian service entails both devotion and action. Devotion to seek God’s will and guidance, as well as devotion to do God’s work and accomplish what is set out for God’s glory. This is the testimony recorded for us in Nehemiah 4:6. When Nehemiah was burdened with the state of Jerusalem, he prayed (Neh 1:4). Before he made his request to the king, he prayed (Neh 2:4). Then when faced with opposition while doing the work, he prayed (Neh 4:4). He and the builders were determined and focused in their prayers and in their work, which were reflected in the obvious and visible progress of the work: *“...all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof...”* (Neh 4:6).

The people had a mind to work (Neh 4:6). Christian service has to be intentional and deliberate. The mind to serve God includes:
(1) the knowledge of God and the acknowledgement of God, trusting His Word and providential leading as we approach the work set before us, and
(2) the willing yielding to God through commitment to do the work we have confirmed to be God’s work and will for us even when faced with intimidation from outside, and discouragement and fears from within.

The challenges, obstacles, and hurdles in the course of the work drive us to God in prayer. These also remind us to trust in His wisdom, power and provision, and commit ourselves to His care. In the face of mockery and adversity, Nehemiah and the builders simply prayed and pressed on with the work.

THOUGHT: God’s servants must trust in God in all circumstances.

PRAYER: Father, help me always to trust Thee and do my best.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 24
NEHEMIAH 4:7-11
2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-33

*“...I will glory of the things
which concern mine infirmities.”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (III)

The certainty of challenges and opposition to God’s work includes the understanding of their repeated and recurring nature. Overcoming a particular challenge does not mean the end of challenges and opposition to God’s work. Challenges and opposition will not cease in the work and service of God. The work progressed despite the enemy’s onslaught. The visible progress of the work did not weaken the opposition. On the contrary, as the workers had a mind to work and made progress, the sole intent of Sanballat and his friends was to stop the work.

Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites (Neh 4:7). The opposition against the work included an increase in the opponents. This is clear as one traces the addition of the names of the opponents to the work. In Nehemiah 2:10, Sanballat and Tobiah were mentioned alone. In Nehemiah 2:19, Geshem was introduced. In Nehemiah 4:1-2, the army of Samaria was introduced. And here in Nehemiah 4:7, the Arabians, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites were added to the number of those who were “*very wroth*” (Neh 4:7) with the progress the builders were making.

And conspired all of them together (Neh 4:8). The unity and resolve of the enemies against God’s work were unmistakable. Their intention and focus were singular and clear: the work must stop. Their conspiracy was focused on and targeted to hindering the work. If this was the nature of the enemy, this required an equally clear, focused and singular response from the servants of God. The enemies conspired against the work; the servants of God persevered in the work. They had derided and mocked God’s work saying, “*Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down*” (Neh 4:3). Reinforcement and alliances would be called, revealing that work done with God’s blessing and help, even if it seems weak and despised, would be fruitful to the glory of God.

THOUGHT: Opposition should not hinder progress in God’s work.

PRAYER: Father, may I be diligent in Thy work at all times.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 25

NEHEMIAH 4:7-11

LUKE 21:34-38

"Watch ye therefore, and pray always."

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (IV)

The work that had been mocked and derided then drew a different form of opposition with the threat of war. This means that the work, though it was mocked, was actually done well. The measure of a work done is sometimes seen in the response it draws. The mockings of the enemy were aimed at discouraging, but were not a true reflection of the quality and progress of the work. The threat and the increased opposition served to confirm the fruitfulness of the work. The response of the workers at this point was one of increased zeal and effort.

Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God (Neh 4:9). The increase in opposition to God's work did not lead to a waning dedication to the service and work of God. The enemy increased in number, but the workers remained prayerful and resolute. The resolve, unity or increase of the enemy and opposition to the work of God should not adversely affect the servants' resolve and duty to their God. Work that begins with prayer is sustained and continued with prayer. Every answered prayer increases faith and prompts subsequent prayerful responses in the course of the work. They had prayed as they faced challenges, and then as the challenges increased, they continued to pray. Prayer must be the Christian's unchanging resolve and response to life and service.

And set a watch against them day and night (Neh 4:9). The increased threats led them to pray, but also increased their watchfulness. They understood the value of their work and progress through the response of the enemy. To protect the progress made thus far, they knew their need to increase vigilance. They were already engaged in a great work, but the threat to the work added to them the duty and responsibility of ensuring the gains made in the work were maintained.

THOUGHT: Progress made in service needs to be preserved against the enemy's attempts to destroy it.

PRAYER: Father, grant me strength to watch and pray continually as I serve Thee.

MONDAY, JANUARY 26
NEHEMIAH 4:7-11
2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-16

“For which cause we faint not...”

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (V)

The work did not get easier as it progressed. Duties and responsibilities seemed to increase with the progress of the work. The wall was now joined together (Neh 4:6), yet there was much more to be done. The enemy was still threatening to attack from without, and devising ways and making inroads to attack from within. In addition to the work of building and repairs, they not only had the additional duty of keeping watch against the threat of attack from the enemy, they also had the rubbish and debris to deal with.

The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed (Neh 4:10). The work and service of the Lord is work that is demanding, and as such cannot be fruitfully and successfully approached or accomplished by simply relying on human ability and strength. It requires and takes more than just physical and human wisdom, ability and strength to successfully serve God. The rigours of the work physically affected the workers and their ability to continue at the pace they were working, but the waning physical ability need not signify a waning spiritual desire.

So that we are not able to build the wall (Neh 4:10). The strength of the workers was reflected in the progress of the work, but the same physical strength failed them before the work was fully accomplished. The people who spoke discouragingly would naturally lead to the people murmuring against the work. What the enemy was not able to accomplish with his word was accomplished by the dissenting voice within the camp. True courage is not derived from, nor a show in, physical strength. It is derived from trust in God in spite of physical ability, strength or the prevailing and current circumstances. It would take courage for the people to finish the work. At a time when threats abounded and enemies surrounded, the thoughts highlighted were not on the progress made, but on the burdens left and the difficulties faced. The fears within and the thoughts straying then threatened to stall the work.

THOUGHT: Courage is trusting in God and doing what is right.

PRAYER: Father, grant me faith to trust Thee, and grace to obey Thee fully.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 27
NEHEMIAH 4:12-23
1 CHRONICLES 28:20-21

*“Be strong and of
good courage; and do it.”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (VI)

Dinsdale T. Young wrote concerning what to do when strength fails: “There must be great Trustfulness in such crises. Let not your faith fail. Cling in weakness to what you have proved in strength. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Be like John Wesley, who was never so calmly and hopefully trustful as when nature’s strength decayed. Be like a great and saintly minister of whom a friend said, ‘In the stress of his busy life it was his childlike faith and trust in the Heavenly Father that kept him from the wear and tear and worry of work.’ Say to thy wearied soul, ‘Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him.’”

They said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you (Neh 4:12). Wearied workers and increased burdens required action from Nehemiah and the builders. They had been praying and working. In the face of varied approaches from the enemy, they had, apart from unceasing prayer, put in effort to the work (Neh 4:6), and increased vigilance and watchfulness as they worked (Neh 4:9). Yet, they still received repeated news of impending and increasing danger.

Therefore set I... I even set the people... with their swords, their spears, and their bows (Neh 4:13). Though they had made many adjustments since the work began, they still needed to do more. They had to prepare to defend themselves. The first considerations were given to the “*lower places*” which would be more easily penetrable, and on “*the higher places*” where the view would be considerably increased. The defences would need to both repel and pre-empt (foresee) any attacks from the enemy, since the news that had been received was “*from all places... they will be upon you.*” As they set up defences, they also armed those who were to defend. They were armed with weapons that they could use both in repelling the enemies from afar, and in preventing and engaging the enemy in proximity. Nothing was to be left to chance, every situation was anticipated and prepared for.

THOUGHT: Courage is enhanced by preparedness (Eph 6:10-12).

PRAYER: O Father, help me to be ready whenever duty calls.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28

NEHEMIAH 4:12-23

PSALM 19:7-14

“O LORD,
my strength, and my redeemer.”

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (VII)

The value of watchfulness and precaution when serving God is highlighted in Nehemiah 4:12-23. The builders pressed on in the work, facing the challenges and the burden of the work and making progress by faith. They started the work after they had heard of the good hand of God and knew this work was God’s work. They were not presumptuous in their faith; they did not extend their “faith in God” beyond what God had revealed.

Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord (Neh 4:14). The difference between faith and presumption is knowledge. Faith is “... *the evidence of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1), and as such is based on and rests on what is revealed by God. When one acts in faith, one acts on the basis of assurance from the revealed Word of God. Nehemiah exhorted them to “*remember the Lord*” (Neh 4:14). Presumption, on the other hand, is what we can term as “fake faith.” While faith knows what God has promised, presumption assumes that God promises and acts on what He had not promised. Nehemiah called on the people to take courage and take action on behalf of their brethren (“*remember the Lord... and fight for your brethren*”). He did not presume that since they were doing the Lord’s work, and they were making progress, God would not allow anything to happen to them, and therefore they could ignore the present threats. Neither did he presume that since Moses told the people in Exodus 14:13 to “*Fear ye not, stand still and see the salvation of the LORD,*” they too needed to just stand still and let God deliver them as He did the Israelites under Moses. Instead, Nehemiah took precautionary steps by setting up watchers. The workload was heavy and the threats were repeatedly brought to their attention. Nehemiah did not assume that the people would be just fine and that this too would pass as the mocking did and they would continue with the same spirit. He took precautions to speak to the men, to encourage them and strengthen their faith and resolve, as they faced very trying times. They had been prayerful through it all, but they also had to make use of natural means. Trusting God to fight for them meant taking the steps they had taken to secure their safety.

THOUGHT: Matthew 7:22-23 shows the danger of presumption.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 19:13.)

THURSDAY, JANUARY 29

NEHEMIAH 4:12-23

2 KINGS 6:7-12

*“...and saved himself there,
not once nor twice.”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (VIII)

The enemy had been busy, but so had the servants of God. They had been plotting and planning, determined to cause the work to stop. God's servants, on the other hand, were praying and working, taking steps to secure their safety even though the load was wearing them down. As Nehemiah organised and armed the people, did he know if the enemy would relent or attack? We are not given a glimpse into his mind on this, but we are given to know of his resolve as reflected in the steps he had taken and in the words he had spoken to the men.

And God had brought their counsel to nought (Neh 4:15). The enemies relented. They changed their mind when they realised that their plans had been known and preparations had been made by Nehemiah and the people to fight and defend the work against them. Nehemiah rightly attributed the change of mind to the work of God and rightly affirmed the sovereignty of God in all things, though it is equally clear that they being responsible for their own safety and taking every step necessary played a part. God works and aids His servants more through providence than through miracles. The Lord indeed would fight for them (Neh 4:20) and prosper them (Neh 2:20), but they also had the duty to rise up and work (Neh 2:20), to set up a watch against the enemy day and night (Neh 4:9), and to trust in God, remembering that He is great and terrible (Neh 4:14). As they did their part, God brought the counsel of the enemy to nought.

We returned all of us to the wall (Neh 4:15). In the process of the work, they faced challenges and they addressed them. As they faced opposition from outside, they made provisions to secure their work and progress. When the opposition abated and the enemy relented, they returned to their work. This is a great testimony to their resolve and commitment to the work, that after such a great threat, and in the light of the increased burden and work, Nehemiah wrote that “*all of us*” went back to work. May God grant to us the resolve and desire to see His work accomplished, such that we too would still work despite obstacles.

THOUGHT: God's servants face life's service with a high view of God.

PRAYER: Father, grant me faith in Thee and grace to serve in every situation.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 30
NEHEMIAH 4:12-23
1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

*“Therefore let us not sleep, as do others;
but let us watch and be sober.”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (IX)

The people returned to the work, but they did not put down their weapons. The work had to continue, but the wariness towards the enemy also had to continue. They were then not only servants of God building the wall, but were also servants of God keeping watch against the enemy. The new roles and burden were not relinquished as they returned to work. They added new roles to their ongoing work.

And it came to pass from that time forth (Neh 4:16). The work had involved much prayer and much effort. The presence and threat of the enemy then added much watchfulness to the work. They did not stop watching because the enemy had retreated. They continued to watch, for as the thief comes without notice, the enemy could attack without notice. Much harm has resulted due to a lack of caution and vigilance in the work and service of God. He who has a mind to work, must mind his work.

Every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon (Neh 4:17). The work required the participation of all, and everyone took part in the work. Some were primarily builders, while others were primarily loaders bearing the burdens, yet every one of them, irrespective of the task and work at hand, was armed for the security of the work and those who worked. The temporary relief from the attacks of the enemy did not give room for laxity. They tried to accomplish as much as they could and continued to be as watchful as they could. The people were both intent and prepared to do all that was required in the service of God. If the work required them to build the wall as they were doing, they would do it, but if the threat of the enemy required them to stand up and fight, they were ready for that too. They had risen to work, and they were prepared to undertake all that would be necessary for the success of their work. The people had a mind to work and they did not mind the nature of work assigned to them. They adjusted, and rose to the occasion.

THOUGHT: Watchfulness is an indispensable responsibility in service.

PRAYER: Father, teach me readiness and willingness in service.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 31

NEHEMIAH 4:12-23

LUKE 9:23-26, 57-62

*“If any man will come after me,
let him deny himself,
and take up his cross daily...”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (X)

Successful work requires planning and preparation. Nehemiah, from the onset, had considered what it would take to accomplish the work:

- (i) He set a time when asked by the king, and he requested for letters and support for the work.
- (ii) He took time to survey the wall to see the nature of the work and to rally and solicit help for the work from the people.

But no one can prepare for all eventualities. Successful work requires more than just proper planning and preparation.

He that sounded the trumpet was by me (Neh 4:18). This verse introduces unforeseen aspects of the work. Nehemiah had not, prior to finding himself in this situation, planned for this. But circumstances necessitated making adjustments to the work plan, and Nehemiah did it successfully. The builders were armed and busy at work. The wall was vast, and the enemy could attack from any quarter. The need for alarm (when necessary) and for the people to be gathered together for a consolidated front against the enemy was addressed. A person was designated and assigned by Nehemiah (who, as leader, would be supervising the work and receiving reports both of the progress and threats to the work).

And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people (Neh 4:19). Appointing someone to raise the alarm, in case of an attack, would be profitable. It would work only if the people were aware of it, and were required to respond when the alarm was raised. This Nehemiah did, taking time to speak to the men, informing them both of the need and logic of the decision, stating that *“the work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another.”* And he gave direction as to the response needed when the alarm was raised: *“In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us.”* The work had to continue, and the work and workers needed protection.

THOUGHT: Communication and adjustments aid success in service.

PRAYER: Father, may I work and care for the welfare of others.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 1 MORNING
NEHEMIAH 4:12-23
LUKE 9:23-26, 57-62

*“For whosoever will save his life,
shall lose it...”*

A MIND TO WORK AND PRAY (XI)

Apart from proper planning and preparations, and adjustments and flexibility in view of unplanned eventualities, success of any endeavour, especially spiritual endeavours, require sacrifice and commitment. The people involved in the process and progress of building the wall had done much and prayed much, but much was still expected of them. They worked at repairing the wall, bearing the loads, clearing the rubbish, and repelling the enemy, yet for the work to be completed, they had to make sacrifices.

So we laboured in the work (Neh 4:21). The efforts of Nehemiah and the builders in their service, as portrayed in Nehemiah 4, have through the ages been turned into a proverb, “The Sword and the Trowel,” depicting dedicated service, a work that was accomplished amidst great opposition and conflict. In Hebrews 12:1-2, Paul presented the picture of the cloud of witnesses and the testimony of Christ, and exhorted believers to sacrificial endurance in service. He told them: “*Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin*” (Heb 12:4). From the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 to the halls of church history, God’s work and service had required of many great sacrifices. Even today, the same sacrifices are required of us. Nehemiah recorded men giving of their time, serving “*from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared*” (Neh 4:21) for added progress since their labour force was halved. Others gave up their homes to lodge within the city so that their presence and availability might offer additional efficiency in service and security ensuring that “*in the night they may be a guard to us, and labour on the day*” (Neh 4:22). Everyone sacrificed for the work of the building of the wall to ensure it be completed successfully. Nehemiah himself recorded of the sacrifice he and those who were with him had to make stating that “*none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing*” (Neh 4:23). The mind to work must be a mind willing to sacrifice, and be able to say with David: “*Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing*” (2 Sam 24:24).

THOUGHT: Sacrificial service honours the God we serve.

PRAYER: Father, may my life be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 1 EVENING
NEHEMIAH 5:1-5
ACTS 6:1-7

*“...when the number of
the disciples was multiplied,
there arose a murmuring...”*

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (I)

In the service of the LORD, prayerfulness, diligence and watchfulness are necessary. Nehemiah 5 presents to us the scope of our watchfulness in the service of God. Nehemiah and the people had succeeded in making progress in the work despite the mockings and threats of the enemy from without. Nehemiah 5 reveals another enemy, one who was more often very successful in hindering the work, namely the enemy within. As they watched against Sanballat and his coalition, they forgot to watch against their own hearts and the deceitfulness of the sinful self.

And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews (Neh 5:1). The work was great, and the people were organised to ensure efficiency and good progress. The organisation of the work would thus require others to take up responsibilities and duties. However, those who were given the responsibility abused it and started oppressing their brethren. People had responded to the call and came to work and serve irrespective of their economic or social status. Just as how God has brought us together in church today and made us one body of Christ though we come from different walks of life. In the workforce were men of all classes and there were those who had many mouths to feed (Neh 5:2), those who had mortgaged their property (Neh 5:3), those who had borrowed (Neh 5:4) and those who took advantage of others.

The nature and intensity of the work with people working from dawn to dusk brought with it other challenges. People sacrificed all to work meaning that they probably had no time to tend to their farms or find other ways of sustaining themselves. The result was an increasing number of people who would become dependent. Others who were wealthier became opportunists and set out to both oppress and take advantage of their brethren in their distress. They shared the same cause, they were of the same family and religion, they were brethren, yet, their selfishness made all of this inconsequential. They cared not about the plight of their brethren, but only about their own profit and gain.

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 4:23.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 119:35-36.)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 2

NEHEMIAH 5:1-5

LEVITICUS 25:35-43

*“Thou shalt not rule over him with rigour;
but shalt fear thy God.”*

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (II)

Internal strife and division were greater enemies to the work of God than the gathering led by Sanballat. Divisions and dissension within the camp acted the same way as weapons wielded by the enemy. James writing his epistle put it thus: *“where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work”* (James 3:16). Nothing would prosper as long as the people were disgruntled and divided. Selfishness robbed the people of their unity, their strength and progress in the great work they were doing for God.

Because of the dearth (Neh 5:3). The work was demanding, the times were difficult and the circumstances were dire. In addition to that, legal obligations were still binding and they had taxes to pay (Neh 5:4). The previous distress in Jerusalem had bonded them together to work. The presence of external opposition made them consolidate their efforts so that the work may continue. How was it then that the difficult times and dearth could not bring them to consider each one his poor neighbour? Had the Law of their God not made provisions concerning such? Why would complaints arise against their brethren at this time? Had God not given instructions concerning how to relate to the poor? Did not the Law instruct that *“thou shalt not harden thine heart... thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him”* (Deut 15:7-8)? Did not the Law forbid the enslaving of fellow Jews stating that *“thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant”* (Lev 25:39)? Did it not require the humane treatment of the brother whilst he was with them? And that they could not be retained indefinitely, but were to be released at appointed times and without ransom stating *“in the seventh (year) he shall go out free for nothing”* (Exod 21:2)? Yet, selfishness and materialism had blinded the Jews to the plight of their brethren, and to the provisions of their law. To them, the opportunity to gain wealth (as the walls of the city were being erected), blinded them to the opportunity to show compassion to their brothers and to *“fear thy God.”* The enemy within estranged them against one another, and against God’s law. Its attacks were severe, and it is one against whom we must be most vigilant.

THOUGHT: Opportunities in life are for selfless service, not selfish gain.

PRAYER: O Father, help me trust Thee and live according to Thy Word.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3

NEHEMIAH 5:6-13

MATTHEW 12:22-30

*“Every kingdom divided against itself
is brought to desolation.”*

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (III)

It is possible for one who is actively serving God to be blinded against his God-given duty towards his brother. The cry and plight of the people in Nehemiah 5 reflects the blight of humanity over the ages. It is possible to be united on many grounds and still be divided by selfishness and greed. And further still, it is possible that we be blinded to it. Whether by age-old adages of living in a “dog-eat-dog” world, or working in a “cut-throat” economy, or by economic principles like “supply and demand” leading us to take advantage of the high demand to “make a killing,” God’s children may find themselves hardening their hearts and closing their hands to their brothers because it does not make for good business.

I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers (Neh 5:7). The task Nehemiah had was an unenviable one. While leading and supervising the work in the presence of Sanballat and his allies, Nehemiah repeatedly spoke to *“the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people,”* encouraging them in the work even in the face of the enemy’s threats, urging them to *“...remember the Lord...”* (Neh 4:14), and to be prepared to consolidate their efforts since *“the work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall”* (Neh 4:19). But then, he received news that made him *“very angry”* (Neh 5:6) and had to speak to the nobles and the rulers. This time, it was not to exhort or encourage, but to rebuke. Such was the effect of selfishness and greed. They worked together on the wall, and were ready to respond to the call to join forces to repel the enemy in case of an attack, but away from the wall, they oppressed and exacted heavy burdens on those with whom they served together in the service of the Lord. No wonder, after Solomon had *“considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun”* said, *“I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive”* (Eccles 4:1-2). The reality of the corruption in civil states reared its head in the most noble of works led by one who served not for political ambition but for God’s glory. The provisions for lending and loaning (which were given to help the needy) were put to use, not for rendering help to the needy, but for enriching the lender!

THOUGHT: Selfish interest corrupts even the most noble of endeavours.

PRAYER: Father, grant me contentment and wisdom to serve selflessly.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4

NEHEMIAH 5:6-13

1 TIMOTHY 5:17-25

*“Them that sin rebuke before all,
that others also may fear.”*

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (IV)

It is possible for double standards of living to exist within the community of God's people. Relationships between people may be starkly different when they gather for God's work and service, and when they meet “out there in the world” or live their “normal lives.” But when this comes to light, how the community of God's people addresses it and what is done about it is very critical. Ignoring or glossing over it serves to reinforce the wrong and make it acceptable, even lawful. Addressing and correcting the wrong serves to reinforce God's standards for Christian life. God's work was still in progress, but the matter that had come to Nehemiah's attention was grave and had to be handled.

And I set a great assembly against them (Neh 5:7). What Nehemiah did was the only right thing to do. He did not choose to postpone it and focus on completing the wall first. He faced and addressed the issue soberly and decisively. He spoke to them directly “*and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother,*” and he publicly “*set a great assembly against them.*” The public assembly probably consisted of those who were oppressed and aggrieved, as well as those who were not guilty of the charges raised. The practice had to be denounced publicly because the people whom the charges were levelled against were people whom Nehemiah had worked with repeatedly. He had the charges openly examined and justice administered on those “*that sin.*” And he had them rebuked “*before all, that others may fear*” (1 Tim 5:20).

And I said unto them (Neh 5:8). In the presence of the assembly, Nehemiah pointed out the error of their ways and the effects of their actions. He showed a contrast between how they acted (“*ye exact usury*”) and how he and others with him had acted (“*we after our ability have redeemed our brethren*”) under the same circumstances. The selling of fellow Jews into slavery was not consistent with the redeeming of them from slavery. One was against God (Lev 25:42), and hence clearly wrong.

THOUGHT: Imitating the world often leads to open transgression.

PRAYER: Father, grant me grace to imitate Christ and walk in love.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5

NEHEMIAH 5:6-13

EPHESIANS 5:1-7

*“...because of these things cometh
the wrath of God...”*

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (V)

As children of God, we must be very careful concerning our conduct and choices in this world. What may be common and acceptable by the world may be sinful and wrong according to the Word of God. God's Word strictly forbade the selling of fellow Jews into slavery: *“they shall not be sold as bondmen”* (Lev 25:42). And Nehemiah, by his testimony, showed that it was possible for one not to conform to the world. It did not make sense that those who believed, and were jointly involved in the same service to God and living under the same circumstance would have contrasting approaches to a common challenge.

Ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God? (Neh 5:9). The contrast and difference had to stem from a matter of principles. The question Nehemiah posed to them presented the basis for the contrasting approach to the challenges of their time. Nehemiah and others like him chose to live by God's Word and to please Him. And this led them to a practice that seemed to be unprofitable to the world, but pleasing to God. The rulers and nobles who were charged before the assembly chose to live like the world. This led them to a practice that seemed to be profitable from a worldly perspective, but brought them under the wrath of God and led them to sin against their brothers. Who we choose to follow greatly affects and influences our conduct and manner of life. Hence, believers are exhorted: *“Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love...”* (Eph 5:1-2). The kind of life we choose to live is usually a product of the sum of choices we make in life. What does our conduct and life say about our choices and principle governing our lives? Paul solemnly reminded us: *“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live”* (Rom 8:12-13). We ought therefore to choose to obey God and live according to His Word than to follow the world's ways. We ought to walk in the fear of our God.

THOUGHT: Choose to obey God and live with joy, not with regrets.

PRAYER: Father, in life's choices, give me the grace to obey Thy Word.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6

NEHEMIAH 5:6-13

EPHESIANS 5:8-14

“Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord.”

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (VI)

Is it possible to be godly and prosperous? It seems impossible to “make it” in the world without compromising on principles of life. Is it necessary to use nefarious means in order to progress in life? Just like in the times of Nehemiah, godly examples (as presented by Nehemiah) went largely unnoticed, but the ways of the world were widely public. This continues to be so today, partly because godly ways are not publicised since those who practise them do not do so *“to be seen of men”* but do them silently and secretly because they are done for God *“which seeth in secret.”* Principles that govern life and relations presented in the Bible are timeless and practical, and ought to be the principles by which we choose to live.

I pray you, let us leave off this usury. Restore, I pray you, to them even this day (Neh 5:10-11). Though we live in this world, we are not of this world. And we must not be bound to follow, or adapt to, the ways of this world. As Paul exhorted, we ought to *“have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them”* (Eph 5:11). Not only was the action of the nobles and rulers inconsistent with the Laws of God, it also aided the cause of the enemies of God as it added to *“the reproach of the heathen our enemies”* (Neh 5:9). Nehemiah thus called for correction and change after setting up himself as an example. His appeal to them was “worldly gain is not worth eternal ruin” or as Jesus put it: *“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (Matt 16:26). *“Let us leave off this usury”* was Nehemiah’s appeal. It was an appeal that highlighted that compassion has more value than profit, and that there was the choice of loaning of food and money to the poor without “making a killing” from it. Paul’s injunction to the Romans (Rom 14:16-17) gives us a principle by which to govern our choices. He said, *“Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”* Do not devalue a brother’s life for your profit, nor degrade the poor for your gain.

THOUGHT: God’s children apply and use godly and lawful means.

PRAYER: Help me, Father, to resist sinful and worldly ways in life.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7

NEHEMIAH 5:6-13

GALATIANS 6:1-10

*“Bear ye one another’s burdens,
and so fulfil the law of Christ.”*

HINDRANCES AND CHALLENGES TO SERVICE (VII)

Today, the response of the nobles and rulers is a great encouragement to all who fear addressing issues within the community of God’s people. Church discipline is often dreaded and regarded as a cause of divisions within the body, and seen as something that drives people away. But in Nehemiah 5, we have a picture of how church discipline, when administered correctly, by those who have a good and godly testimony, can actually be corrective and not divisive. And again, correction can be taken positively and need not be taken offensively or negatively.

Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them (Neh 5:12). The approach taken to address the matter bore fruit. The words of Nehemiah, the testimony of his practice, and the presence of the assembly produced immediate conformity to the appeal. The men, who had taken advantage of the troubles of their time and oppressed the poor, acknowledged the error of their ways and agreed to change. This is a testimony to the truth that godly change can only be effected by godly steps. It is a grave mistake to think that ignoring an issue and keeping silent will, with the passing of time, allow for things to return to normal. It is sinful to put up with and endure internal evil “for the sake of peace” or postpone them out of expediency. It is worth noting that though the focus of both Nehemiah 3 and 4 was the work of rebuilding the wall, not once had the wall been mentioned up to this point in Nehemiah 5. The focus was on the problem and resolution of it, and thank God it was resolved! Nehemiah then proceeded to make the decision binding by the administration of an oath by the priests. They had followed the ways of the world as men. And as men, they were still susceptible to the same weakness of straying. Just as they had forgotten the laws and principles of God, they could still do so in the future. The awakening of the people’s conscience to their duty to God and their brothers was reinforced by an oath and a promise both before God as Nehemiah “*called the priests,*” and men as it was done in the presence of the assembly.

THOUGHT: (Read Ephesians 5:17.)

PRAYER: Father, may I walk and work with wisdom for Thy glory.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 8

NEHEMIAH 5:14-19

2 CORINTHIANS 12:14-19

*“I will very gladly spend
and be spent for you...”*

SACRIFICES FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE (I)

Success requires making sacrifices. In the pursuit of our goals, we often have to give up or sacrifice certain things in life because we value what we pursue. The sacrifices we are willing to make are therefore a reflection of the value we place on our pursuits. For Nehemiah to come this far and achieve this much, he had taken leave from his own work duties, endured the long journey to be in the dismal living conditions in Jerusalem, and endured much opposition and challenges in the discharge of his heart's desire and burden for Jerusalem. In addition to all these, there were the duties and responsibilities he took upon himself for the service to be accomplished: the organising, supervising and arranging of the work and the workers, the speaking to, motivating and challenging of the workmen, and the dealing with issues that emerged among them in the course of the work, even though the issues seemed to be “outside the workplace.”

Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah (Neh 5:14). This interlude that Nehemiah gave not only gives us information concerning Nehemiah's tenure of service, but also a picture of the value Nehemiah placed on his service. This value was reflected by the sacrifice he made for the twelve-year period in which he served as governor in the land of Judah. It also shows us that the record of the whole book of Nehemiah was written after the events of the book had happened.

I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor (Neh 5:14). Service can never be profitably done if the one who serves does so for monetary and selfish gains. Nehemiah did not serve for personal gain, and so he could willingly serve even when he did not receive the lawful remuneration that was normally gained by the tribute and taxes charged. He valued the service above the remuneration. And he was willing to forgo what was right and legal for he considered the times and distress that the people were in.

THOUGHT: I can pray for God's help when I seek to do His will.

PRAYER: Grant, O Father, that I may always trust Jesus.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9
NEHEMIAH 5:14-19
2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-12

*“Neither did we eat any man’s bread...
that we might not be chargeable to any...”*

SACRIFICES FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE (II)

Public service involves more than just the service done, and therefore requires those who take up positions of service to consider more than just the duties they will be called to perform. The ethics, character and example of the servant is of equal value and importance as the acts of the servant. Although the service rendered addresses and meets the need at hand, the person rendering the service sets himself up as a pattern and an example to all. Therefore, the character, attitude, relations and motivation of the person serving must be considered very strictly.

So did not I, because of the fear of God (Neh 5:15). Here, Nehemiah gives us the reason his tenure as governor was distinct and different from the other governors who had ruled over Judah. The character he portrayed and the restraints he exercised were *“because of the fear of God.”* The Bible clearly calls for the coherence, unity and consistency of word and act from all who profess faith in God. The failure to do so has always led to both Christianity and Christians being charged as hypocritical. We are familiar with the all-too-common excuse for the rejection of Christianity and church given by many: *“If only Christians practised what they preach.”* We ought to do as we believe, and this is possible only if, like Nehemiah, we do, or we do not, *“because of the fear of God.”* It is the fear of God that must be the guiding purpose in both our action and inaction. It should call us to action as we align ourselves with what God has revealed in His Word, as well as draw us into a deeper relationship with God. As we are open to God’s instructions and Word, we trust, and find delight, in His Word and will for our lives. Like Nehemiah, this may at times require us to sacrifice or forgo what may seem like a right or profit. It will also keep us from the many snares and temptations that abound in the course of our service to God. Like Paul, this will allow us to serve freely without overbearing or abusing the offices given to us (re: 1 Cor 9:18; 2 Cor 11:9; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8). And we can serve our God blamelessly, and joyfully. Proverbs rightly stated: *“Happy is the man that feareth alway: but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief”* (Prov 28:14).

THOUGHT: (Read Colossians 3:17.)

PRAYER: O Father, keep me in Thy fear, and away from mischief.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10

NEHEMIAH 5:14-19

1 PETER 5:1-4

*“...not by constraint, but willingly;
not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind.”*

SACRIFICES FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE (III)

“What do I get in return?” is one question that greatly affects service and decision-making when considering whether to do something or not. It is a question that reflects one’s expectations. And the expectations one has can either bring one joy and peace, and add purpose and zeal to one’s endeavours, or lead to hurt, disappointments, frustrations and greatly limit the effort and selflessness with which one chooses to serve. Expectations either derail and devalue the service one renders or add hope, meaning, and value to what one does. In Scripture, selfless service is a biblical principle that is consistently emphasised.

Neither bought we any land (Neh 5:16). Genuine desire to serve is a prerequisite for all Christian service. All that one does has to be done willingly. This willingness is reflected in counting the cost of service and being willing to bear it as one prepares for and enters into service. It is also reflected in the selflessness and the sacrifices made in the course of service. One place that greed often shows itself in Christian service is at the “negotiating table” when seeking to determine terms and conditions for service to be rendered. These talks often lean towards a pursuit of filthy lucre and, in the long run, become a hindrance to the work of God. In Nehemiah’s case, we clearly see that sacrifice did not hinder, but rather furthered Christian service. Nehemiah did not stop serving. Instead, he *“continued in the work of this wall”* (Neh 5:16), despite not being *“chargeable unto the people”* (Neh 5:15) like others before him. In Nehemiah’s case, sacrifice did in fact fuel service as it helped him maintain a singular focus on the work at hand. He and all his servants *“gathered thither unto the work”* (Neh 5:16) since they did not have the distraction of attending to side-pursuits or other interests besides the work at hand. He could therefore be consistent in the work since he did not have any other personal interests to mind. Like Joshua dividing the land to the children of Israel without seeking for himself *“a worthy portion,”* he did not seek to enrich himself in any way in the course of his service to God and to his brethren. He especially did not do so at the expense of the poor people.

THOUGHT: Serving others for gain and recognition is sinful.

PRAYER: (Use Proverbs 30:8-9.)

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11

NEHEMIAH 5:14-19

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-8

*“A bishop then must be...
given to hospitality...”*

SACRIFICES FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE (IV)

Sacrifice has two sides. The first, and more common side, is in the things that one gives up or forgoes in order to serve, as well as in the course of service. But there is another side to sacrifice: the generosity, care and welcome one extends to others. Hospitality, as an act of sacrifice, presents Christian love and compassion towards others by sharing with them your space, time, energy and resources. It is also a reflection of the value placed on others and their needs, as you set your priorities to be gracious.

At my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers (Neh 5:17). The picture presented here is of one who willingly served and focused on the work at hand without selfish interests of personal gain. It is also of one who was gracious to others as reflected in his hospitable sharing of his goods and opening up his home to others. Nehemiah entertained a hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, in addition to not pursuing interests, or amassing wealth, for himself (Neh 5:16). He also did not take from them food or drink, nor tax them (Neh 5:14-15). On top of these, he did his best to redeem those Jews who had been sold to the heathens (Neh 5:8). All these took place during a very difficult period when *“because of the dearth”* (Neh 5:3), many had *“mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn”* while the rulers and nobles would *“exert usury, every one of his brother”* (Neh 5:7).

Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep (Neh 5:18). Nehemiah 5:18 is not a record of the extravagance or gluttony on Nehemiah's part, but rather it was the cost of his hospitality and the sacrifice of his generosity. This was part of his cost of service. Nehemiah had sought to serve without being a burden to the Jews and this cost him. He bore this burden so that he might not burden the people he had come to serve. Despite this daily cost, Nehemiah did not make any financial demands on the people.

THOUGHT: Service rendered costs the one who renders it.

PRAYER: Father, may I be willing to serve Thee and Thy people, even when it costs me much.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12

NEHEMIAH 5:14-19

HEBREWS 6:9-12

“Think upon me, my God, for good...”

SACRIFICES FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE (V)

Nehemiah's testimony showed that he was willing to exchange a life of ease, luxury and pleasure for one of labour and sacrifice for God and His children. He attempted and did all within his ability, giving up all he possibly could so that the work God had placed in his heart would be accomplished and that he would set an example for all. He was diligent and committed in his efforts. He exercised wisdom in his dealings, and he was prayerful and faithful in his approach. Having done and attempted all he could, he still committed himself and his welfare to God.

Think upon me, my God, for good (Neh 5:19). This prayer of Nehemiah intimates, firstly, his relationship with God. He prayed to and called upon God as *“my God.”* His zeal and commitment, his faithfulness and sacrifice came from a personal relationship with and knowledge of the God he served. We can never serve and sacrifice beyond our knowledge of, and faith we have, in God. Like Daniel's three friends, our confidence in God can only be as strong as our knowledge of our God. Therefore, those who desire to grow in faith, commitment and service must first *“grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet 3:18). Nehemiah's prayer, secondly, intimates his reliance on and trust in God. As he prayed, he just said, *“Think upon me... for good.”* He did not need to tell God what to do for him, for he knew that whatsoever God would give would be good for him. He trusted in God's goodness and wisdom. He understood that what God requires of His children and the fear of the LORD are *“for our good always”* (Deut 6:24) and that they who faithfully seek the LORD *“shall not want any good thing”* (Ps 34:10). Finally, his prayer intimated his clear conscience and motive in all that he did as well as his understanding of God's attributes. He did not serve for gain or for personal profit. Hence before God he prayed *“according to all that I have done for this people.”* He served faithfully and selflessly, knowing well that *“God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister”* (Heb 6:10).

THOUGHT: (Read Revelation 22:12.)

PRAYER: Father, forgive me for my selfish service. Help me to serve Thee selflessly.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13

NEHEMIAH 6:1-4

MATTHEW 10:16-23

“But beware of men.”

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (I)

The focus of the book returns to the progress of the work of building the wall. The progress of the work invited more difficulties as the adversaries of the work (previously mentioned in Nehemiah 4:7), intensified their efforts to have the work stopped. The work was much advanced. The adversaries' previous efforts had not borne them any fruit. They had failed to breach the work as the people had a mind to work. The adversaries gathered for another round of attack. They then focused their attack and attention upon the individual Nehemiah.

Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me (Neh 6:2). Those who vehemently opposed the work, had mocked both the work and the workers. They had also threatened the work. Then suddenly, and with no clear evident basis, they took a conciliatory tone. The warning of Christ, *“Beware of men,”* comes to mind. Enemies have been known to change tact. When force and threats do not work, they use deception to great effect, like the wooden horse of Troy! Jesus taught His servants to be *“wise as serpents.”* Therefore, we must not be ignorant of the devices and wiles of the enemy.

They thought to do me mischief (Neh 6:2). What intent did the invite have? It is important to evaluate intent and expected fruit of all forms of fellowship or communion extended, irrespective of how friendly they seem, especially when they come from those who have made known their displeasure and opposition to the work clearly in the past. Fellowship has to be built on shared conviction that is essential for mutual cooperation and service. Sanballat and his allies had not been able to stop the work so far. They had not been able to use fear, threats and anger to distract Nehemiah. So, they changed their approach and sought to separate Nehemiah from the work. They used what seemed like an open invitation to a leader-to-leader dialogue, and they invited Nehemiah to choose a meeting place. But the intent was to isolate him and eliminate him, thus putting an end to the work.

THOUGHT: A friendly invite can be a deadly trap. Appearances deceive.

PRAYER: Help me, Father, to be wise and resolute to focus on Thee.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14

NEHEMIAH 6:1-4

ROMANS 15:14-24

“...having a great desire
these many years to come unto you.”

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (II)

When we have had to deal with opposition and challenges for a while, we make the mistake of thinking that things are taking a turn for the better whenever there is a change in the tactics of the enemy. We also begin to review our position, the value of the stand we have taken and the work we are engaged in. This usually marks the beginning of our failure and downfall. The enemy often accomplishes by craft what he was not able to accomplish by threats as we review and change our perspectives.

I am doing a great work (Neh 6:3). Nehemiah's reply to the seemingly open and friendly invite revealed his resoluteness, perspective and focus on the work. Much had happened, in terms of progress in the work, and what he and the people had endured and gone through in the course of the work. Though there was no breach in the wall, and the work left was that of setting up the doors and gates, Nehemiah's view of the work had not changed. His focus and resolve were maintained. He did not think “I am almost through,” but rather “*I am doing a great work.*” God's work is a great work from start to end. Even when it is almost complete, the part remaining still remains a great work. Its value is not determined or diminished by the portion or amount left, whether big or small.

Why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? (Neh 6:3). The burden that God had placed upon Nehemiah was for a work in its entirety. It was not a burden to begin without completion. Rather it was a burden for the complete building of the wall. The burden was not diminished as the building of the wall progressed, but would remain until the wall was completed. Likewise, Paul spoke of his burden for the Roman Christians (Rom 1:10-13) as one he carried for them “*these many years*” (Rom 15:23), even as he finished the work at hand and looked forward to doing the same in Rome.

THOUGHT: A burden for the Lord is to be borne till fully discharged.

PRAYER: Help me be kind through my words, acts and attitudes.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 15

NEHEMIAH 6:1-4

JUDGES 16:13-21

“...his soul was vexed unto death.”

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (III)

The persistent onslaught of the enemy can be overwhelming. Nehemiah, like Samson, faced a relentless foe who repeatedly pressured him, seeking to gain the upper hand over him. Nehemiah successfully repelled the onslaught and achieved great success, while Samson failed at a great cost. The differences between them were great too. Samson was pressured while engaging in the pursuit of his own fleshly lusts, not the call of God; Nehemiah faced the pressure while engaged in the work of God. Samson gave a different answer every time, while Nehemiah gave the same answer every time.

I answered them after the same manner (Neh 6:4). Resolve is seen in the position and stand one takes. Sanballat and his allies were undaunted by the first reply, and tried again. Nehemiah was firm and fixed in his views, and sent the same reply to the same question. Nothing had changed for Nehemiah for him to give a different answer. He was still occupied in the same work, and irrespective of the amount done or left, it remained a great work that could not be left incomplete for any reason. The importance and value of the work do not decrease with the progress made in the work. The determination of Sanballat and his allies was met with a resolute and focused Nehemiah who gave the same reply. The burden Nehemiah had as he set out from Shushan to Jerusalem was what he focused on while in Jerusalem. He did not have a change of perspective, or look for “better things” to do when the work was going on well. He did not allow himself to be drawn away from the work that he had set out to do. He did not think that the work would progress in his absence. His answer showed that he understood that his presence was valuable for the work. How we should pray that God will give us a high value and a resolute perspective of His work and service. The reason for focus and persistence in the work is the value and perspective the servant has of the work. Like Delilah, the world will be relentless and persistent to pressure us to change and conform to it. Spiritual strength and fortitude will be reflected in one's unwavering faith and focus on God and His call, and on the work of God at hand.

THOUGHT: (Read Romans 12:1-2.)

PRAYER: (Ask the Saviour to help you, He is willing to aid you.)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16

NEHEMIAH 6:5-9

2 KINGS 18:26-32

*“...hath he not sent me to the men
which sit on the wall...?”*

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (IV)

Sanballat and his allies, after failing to draw Nehemiah away from his work by an invitation to dialogue, resorted to using fear to try and get Nehemiah to leave the work and come to meet them. They trumped-up a false charge against him, accusing him of being selfish and ill-motivated, engaging himself in a rebellious movement.

...the fifth time with an open letter in his hand (Neh 6:5). This is not an entirely new onslaught. It is just a different approach on the attack that had been going on. The previous invitations had not borne fruit. Then an open letter (which was deliberately intended to be made public) was sent by a servant. The open letter came with no restrictions, and every one could read and hear the contents of the letter.

This was like when Rabshakeh insisted on speaking to Hezekiah's representatives in the Jewish language (and not in the Assyrian language) loudly and publicly so that the threats might be public knowledge. This was meant to add some measure of internal pressure from those who heard his words. Similarly, Sanballat sent a servant with an open letter to Nehemiah which bore grievous charges against him concerning the work that was then nearing completion.

Thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall (Neh 6:6). Apart from just an attempt at drawing Nehemiah out with the treasonous charge, there was probably also an attempt at discrediting Nehemiah in the eyes of the people. The dissemination of the contents of the letter among the people would cause the fearful to stop cooperating since the charges were very grave, casting doubt on Nehemiah's real intent in the work. The people had probably seen messengers being sent to Nehemiah. As is normal to man, there would be some curiosity. Though the charge had not been previously laid, the message was made public this fifth time. It was akin to twisting Nehemiah's arm into accepting the invite so as to clear his name.

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 37:7-8.)

PRAYER: Give me grace, patience, and strength for Thy work, O Father.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17

NEHEMIAH 6:5-9

EZRA 4:1-5

“...the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah.”

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (V)

The enemies of the work of God tried and failed to seduce Nehemiah away from the work. They then resorted to a new method. They tried to use fear and intimidation. The opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem was not going to relent despite the progress in the work. Previously in Ezra 4, when the enemies tried and failed to join themselves to the work, they resorted to the same use of fear and intimidation. They succeeded when they wrote a letter to the king, and got the work stopped.

Thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem (Neh 6:7). The slander against Nehemiah was made plain and public in the open letter. He was charged with leading and collaborating with others in treason. Sanballat suggested that Nehemiah was bent on setting up a kingdom against the king of Persia, and that he also collaborated with and appointed “*prophets*” to proclaim him in Jerusalem. Sanballat brought to question the support that Nehemiah had in Jerusalem. They went to great lengths to isolate Nehemiah.

Now shall it be reported to the king according to these words (Neh 6:7). The malice intended was then clouded with fake care for Nehemiah: the information might reach the king, and his treasonous acts be dealt with by the king himself. It was then presented that this could be averted and avoided by Nehemiah accepting the invitation, which until then he had refused to accept. With the words “*Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together,*” they presented an offer of help. Like good neighbours, they were willing to listen to his side of the story so that they might help counter the common stories being spread among the heathen. Otherwise, the supposed treason might reach the ears of the king and bring dire consequences upon Nehemiah and the Jews.

The open letter was written by seemingly concerned friends who appeared wanting to help. Yet, they were the ones who had fabricated the whole story, seeking to hinder the work.

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 20:6 and 28:20.)

PRAYER: Give me grace, patience, and strength to do Thy work, O Father.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18

NEHEMIAH 6:5-9

1 JOHN 3:19-24

“Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.”

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (VI)

If there is a lesson we can learn from Nehemiah, it is that the servant of God has to keep his focus on the work and call of God placed upon him. Nehemiah's attitude was that nothing, not even a conference for personal vindication, was worth deviating from one's main call and purpose in God's work for. Nehemiah's focus and care in the pursuit of God's work and call also gave him a clear conscience in the midst of very grave accusations.

Then I sent unto him (Neh 6:8). There was no need for him to take time off the work to defend himself as the falsehood in the charges was clear. Nehemiah was content to respond with a word and had no need to present himself for examination to clear his name. His intention in coming with *“the king's letters”* (Neh 2:9) had been clear from the beginning. Even Sanballat knew that *“there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel”* (Neh 2:10). Furthermore, since his coming, his business and focus had been singular. He had engaged himself in nothing other than what brought him to Jerusalem. Therefore, he confidently and rightly responded to the charges: *“There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart”* (Neh 6:8).

Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands (Neh 6:9). Upon sending his reply to Sanballat, Nehemiah prayed to God. He had dealt correctly with the charges in not giving them a basis or foundation. He had lived and behaved above reproach in the call of duty. When the charges were brought to him, he did not cease from the work to go and engage in a discussion with them as they had requested. Rather, he dismissed them summarily, and continued with the work. Focusing on the work, he prayed and asked for strength. Many, when their good work for the Lord is evil spoken of, have given up the good work. But Nehemiah prayed for strength to continue with the good work.

THOUGHT: (Read Galatians 1:10.)

PRAYER: Help me, Father, and keep Thy faithful steward from all assaults of the enemy.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19

NEHEMIAH 6:10-14

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-18

*“We are troubled on every side,
yet not distressed.”*

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (VII)

Nehemiah's journey of accomplishing the will of God and fulfilling the call of duty to God was full of challenges and trials. Yet, the records were not just an outline of the trials and struggles of the servant in the line of duty. Rather, they were a testament to the resolve of the servant and the success of service. The burden that the Lord placed in the heart of Nehemiah was one that he would be able to discharge, against all odds, to the glory of God. Nehemiah trusted his Master and committed himself to the work at hand.

Let us meet together in the house of God (Neh 6:10). The account of Nehemiah, with regard to the opposition, included a trial that came from an unlikely source and sought to draw him away from his work and do him mischief at an unlikely venue. As was observed previously, nothing was worth deviating from one's main call and purpose in God's work for, not even something that was covered with a cloak of "false spirituality." Nehemiah was being tempted by Shemaiah to secure his own safety by hiding in the temple. Imagine he who had trusted and served God to then run and hide in fear. He who had been steadfast and resolute, who in the course of his duty and service to God had sacrificed personal comfort (Neh 4:23) and personal rights (Neh 5:14), to then flee for personal safety based on unconfirmed reports of threats "*for they will come to slay thee*" (Neh 6:10). He was one who prayed unto God, set up a watch and armed the builders when the enemy conspired together "*to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it*" (Neh 4:8). Yet he was now advised to meet "*within the temple*" not to pray, but to "*shut the doors of the temple*" in order to secure personal safety. What message would this send to the men who did the work of building, and to those who periled their lives keeping watch in the night? Nehemiah responded with a resolute and fearless "*I will not go in*" (Neh 6:11). He refused to trespass even for personal safety (Num 18:7; 2 Chron 26:18).

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 55:22.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 55:23.)

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20
NEHEMIAH 6:10-14
DEUTERONOMY 13:1-5

*“...was he hired,
that I should be afraid,
and do so, and sin.”*

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (VIII)

Ungodly counsel may be disguised as friendly and brotherly concern as in the case of Shemaiah. The Bible is replete with accounts of those who were destroyed by the counsel of friends who offered ungodly advice and solutions. From Amnon who listened to his friend Jonadab and paid with his life, to Rehoboam who saw the kingdom divided because of one wrong decision. The Bible plainly warns in Proverbs 1:10 that *“if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.”* The responsibility is on us to make right and godly decisions, even if it is made under the influence of others. We have to discern whose voice it is that we give heed to.

And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him (Neh 6:12). The call to be vigilant to test the spirits to see whether they are from God is given for the safety of God’s children in light of the danger that abounds. Nehemiah was able to see and discern truth from error since the advice given by Shemaiah was unbiblical. The Scriptures provide the rule and standard for what we must believe and how we are to live our lives. Moses had instructed that whatever we hear should be consistent with what God has revealed, and any prophet who would lead God’s people into disobedience to God’s revealed will, even if he supported his claims with signs and wonders, was to be put to death. Shemaiah’s counsel was not from God as it would lead Nehemiah to sin and be a snare and *“an evil report”* against him. In heeding Shemaiah’s advice, Nehemiah would have been guilty of fear both before the people and his own conscience. It would also raise suspicions as to the veracity of the accusations of rebellion and intent of setting himself up as king in Jerusalem. In addition, the act of hiding in the temple itself would have been a trespass as it was forbidden for *“the stranger”* or unauthorised persons to intrude into that which was set aside for the sons of Aaron (Num 18:7). Nehemiah was baited to sin. Thank God he saw through it. We must always be diligent to perform our duty and fulfil our responsibility. Like the Bereans, we must search the Scriptures daily and confirm *“whether those things were so”* which are told to us. This is that we may not, *“being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness”* (2 Pet 3:17).

THOUGHT: (Read 1 John 4:1-3.)

PRAYER: Grant me, Father, wisdom and discernment for service.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21

NEHEMIAH 6:10-14

2 CORINTHIANS 11

*“...whose end shall be
according to their works.”*

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (IX)

The relentless pressure of the opposition in drawing Nehemiah away from the work was such as would drain anyone's strength. Nehemiah did not seek to stand on his own effort and strength alone. As he had done from the beginning when his heart was burdened by the news about Jerusalem, he turned to God in prayer. He did not allow himself to be distracted by the calls and threats. He also did not allow himself to be unsettled by the frequent attacks. He did not take matters into his own hands, but beseeched God in prayer to remember what Sanballat and his allies were doing. And he continued in the work God had given him to do.

My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works (Neh 6:14). In this prayer, we see what the believer's course of action is when constantly pressured while in God's service. Many have been derailed and drawn away from God's work due to the works and acts of others. They leave God's work so as to “deal with the troublemakers first.” They do so thinking and hoping that after dealing with the troublemakers, they can resume God's work and accomplish it “in peace.” This is a common course that we take especially when we feel that there is no law or course of redress to aid us. When no law will relieve us, it does not mean that we are left with no option and that we must take matters into our own hands. We still have the Throne of Grace. We still have God to call upon. We must not allow ourselves to be distracted from our duty and service to God by what we cannot handle. Instead, we must trust God to handle. Prayer is always our first course of action as we are called “*in every thing*” to pray. Prayer is also our last recourse. We pray both when we think we are able, and when we think we are not able; when we have options, and also when we have no options. The nature of the internal conspiracy against Nehemiah and the infiltration by Sanballat and Tobiah came to light with the mention of “*the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets.*” The pressure that he had endured was revealed in the clarification “*that would have put me in fear.*” It was clear that many sought to mislead him, and the enemy was influential in the city.

THOUGHT: (Read Romans 12:19.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 28:1-4.)

"...power belongeth unto God."

PERSPECTIVES FOR
SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (X)

As we read the record of the completion of the building of the wall here at the end of Nehemiah 6, it is worth noting that the first 6 chapters of Nehemiah presents to us the account of the undertaking and accomplishing of this great project starting from the burden through the perspective of Nehemiah. The lessons drawn from them give good principles for effective and successful Christian service.

So the wall was finished... in fifty and two days (Neh 6:15). The great work was accomplished under great pressure and opposition with great speed and urgency. Jerusalem was once again a fortified city. The project prospered and was done with great speed because of the following:

- (a) It was God's will and work. God's work will never lack God's supply. The work was committed to the LORD from its inception (Neh 1:4ff). It was not done for personal reasons, but purely for God's glory. It was God who brought it to pass (Ps 37:5).
- (b) It was well thought out and planned. Nehemiah, who sought to serve, had counted the cost and understood the task at hand. He did not rush into the work, but surveyed it first.
- (c) It was well organised. The large number of people involved in the work were organised and distributed throughout in a manner that facilitated its speedy execution.
- (d) Nehemiah and his servants continually encouraged the workers and reminded them of God in order that they might persevere in the work.

For they perceived that this work was wrought of our God (Neh 6:16). The work that the enemies had endeavoured to stop had progressed to its completion despite their scorn and derision (Neh 4:1-3). Their threats of attacks and every planned mischief had failed. The workers' resolve and effort were remarkable. Their hands were not weakened. All this could only be due to, and was rightly attributed to, the "LORD God of heaven" to whom Nehemiah prayed (Neh 1:5). His hand had prospered Nehemiah in his journey and requests (Neh 2:8, 18). He fought for them (Neh 4:20), and whose fear governed Nehemiah's conduct (Neh 5:15).

THOUGHT: (Read Matthew 5:16.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 62:7-8.)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23

NEHEMIAH 7:1-4

1 PETER 5:5-11

*“...your adversary the devil,
as a roaring lion, walketh about,
seeking whom he may devour.”*

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (XI)

Vigilance is mandatory in service, and Nehemiah had demonstrated it in the course of the wall-building work. But now that the wall was completed, was it still necessary to maintain the same levels of discipline, vigilance and commitment? Gains made must be preserved and protected. History is replete with the sad reality of great works of service that were begun and accomplished for God's glory, which subsequently were destroyed because a generation was complacent and not vigilant. Seminaries, churches and other sound Christian organisations have capitulated. Warren Wiersbe rightly stated, “Every Christian ministry is one short generation away from destruction, and God's people must be on guard.”

For he was a faithful man, and feared God above many (Neh 7:2). The duty of preserving the gains and progress made in God's work is as equally important as the work that has been accomplished. In many respects, it is an equally daunting work too. Nehemiah said he sought for this task Hanani and Hananiah, names which were previously mentioned. Hanani was the one who brought news to him while in Shushan (Neh 1:2), and Hananiah was mentioned in the building work (Neh 3:8). Whether they were the same persons or different persons with similar names we may not be exactly sure, but what is clear is that they were men who had been tested. They were known for their firmness and stability; and were chosen for their faithfulness. In the New Testament, responsibility in service and ministry in the church was to be given to men who had been proven and were approved by the church (2 Cor 8:22; 1 Tim 3:10). The Apostle Paul's charge was that things received should be committed “*to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also*” (2 Tim 2:2), and who could be trusted. It is said that Genghis Khan breached the Great Wall of China in 1215 by bribing a messenger, and again the Manchus did the same in 1644 by bribing a Ming general at Shanhai Pass. The wall of Jerusalem would offer security and safety only if the gates were under the charge of faithful men.

THOUGHT: “Every Christian ministry is one short generation away from destruction.” Will I watch and pray?

PRAYER: Give me grace, Father, to be faithful and steadfast in service.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24

NEHEMIAH 7:1-4

ROMANS 12:1-5

*“We, being many,
are one body in Christ...”*

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (XII)

Apart from the men assigned to man the gates, watchfulness and vigilance were extended to, and required the participation of, every one who lived within the walls. The testimony of Hanani was that he was faithful, and he feared God *“above many”* (Neh 7:2). This implied firstly that he was not the only one faithful; there were others also. He excelled in graces that he shared with many. Just as the building required many hands, so did the preserving and watching. Thus the church today still requires that all be faithful and fear God. As much as we look for and set apart faithful men for service and ministry, we must still require of all members of the body, the same grace and faithfulness: *“every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house”* (Neh 7:3).

Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot (Neh 7:3). The watchmen were given instructions to guide them in their duty and standards by which their responsibility and faithfulness might be measured. The work was to be preserved, and the city secured by men who worked under the set standards. They were to faithfully and willingly adhere to the guidelines set for the work and service they were given. The threat of the enemy was still great. Opening the gates at sunrise, or while it was still relatively dark, would increase the risk of attack. Thus, the recommendation, though not common practice elsewhere, was necessary for their safety. We ought to remember that we are called to *“be not conformed to this world”* (Rom 12:2). Many who have capitulated started by forsaking God’s Word and its spiritual guidelines, and replacing them with common worldly practices.

And while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them (Neh 7:3). At the end of the day, nothing was to be left to chance, carelessness was to be countered by deliberateness. The gates were to be ensured closed, not assumed closed. This was to be done while they stood by, and they were to stand by until the doors were shut and barred.

THOUGHT: (Read Deuteronomy 17:11-13.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 19:13.)

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25

NEHEMIAH 7:5-7

EZRA 2:1-2

“...that they might be reckoned by genealogy.”

PERSPECTIVES FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE (XIII)

This is the second section in Nehemiah that gives a list of names. In the first list of names in Nehemiah 3, it was a record of the people who rose up to work trusting in God to prosper the work. This second list gives the names of the people who rose up to return to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. Both lists give the names of people who rose up to fulfil God's plan, whether it was the rebuilding of Jerusalem, or the return to Jerusalem. In both cases, it was God's will and a step in God's plan for the redemption of man.

And my God put into mine heart (Neh 7:5). It was of God, and by His providence, that led Nehemiah to do this work, seeing *“the city was large and great: but the people were few therein”* (Neh 7:4). God stirred his spirit and led him to seek and find *“a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first”* (Neh 7:5). Since the safety of the city would be the duty of every member of the city, preserving the city would require populating it. When the city would be adequately inhabited was a question that Nehemiah could not answer. The register of genealogy of those who came up out of the captivity and returned to inhabit Jerusalem was a testimony that God would faithfully accomplish His will and plan for His people.

And found written therein (Neh 7:5). The list of names was a testament to God and His providential workings, ruling over the hearts of men, including kings, that indeed *“the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it withersoever he will”* (Prov 21:1). He had, as prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah, moved the heart of Cyrus to make a proclamation for the return and rebuilding of Jerusalem as recorded in Ezra 1:1-4. It was also a testimony of God's providential moving and leading of those who rose up and returned: *“them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem”* (Ezra 1:5). Indeed, though the city had few inhabitants, it shall be filled (Zech 2:4).

THOUGHT: God is faithful to protect His children and fulfil His will.

PRAYER: (Use 1 Chronicles 4:10.)

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26

NEHEMIAH 7:8-38

EZRA 2:3-35

“...*the very hairs of your head
are all numbered.*”

PROVIDENCE, THE CONFIDENCE FOR SERVICE (I)

God's concern for His people is clearly demonstrated in the Scriptures. During the Exodus, the people were numbered twice, with the first taking place in the second year (Num 1) and the second taking place in the thirty-eighth year (Num 26) of the exodus.

The children of... (Neh 7:8-38). In Nehemiah 7, the census was done in family units with the term “*the children of*” being used. The pattern seems to be similar to the pattern in the census in Numbers with the families counted being introduced with the same phrase (Num 1:20-43). This phrase occurs more than fifty times in Nehemiah 7, as if it were putting faces to “*the children of Israel*” whom Nehemiah had interceded for in Nehemiah 1:6, and for whom he had travelled to Jerusalem to seek their welfare (Neh 2:10). The list named the family and the number of persons which was previously given by Ezra in chapter 2. It is a testimony to the faithfulness of God, preserving those who trusted in Him when they relocated to Jerusalem which had been desolate for over seventy years. God not only led them in the journey and brought them safely to Jerusalem, He had kept them through the hardships and challenges. God had indeed been faithful not only to keep the families, but also to increase them. This could be seen in the difference in the numbers as recorded by Ezra from that as recorded by Nehemiah. There were families that though had declined in numbers, were not totally consumed. Eg. the “*children of Zattu*” (Neh 7:13) at the time of Ezra's record were 945 (Ezra 2:8), but here in Nehemiah's record, they were fewer by 100. There were also families that had increased in numbers like “*the children of Azgad*” (Neh 7:17), who at the time of Ezra's record were 1,222 (Ezra 2:12), but here in Nehemiah's record were 2,322. The factors attributed to the decline or increase in the numbers are not made clear to us. What is clear from the lists is that God is concerned about His people. He knows them, He keeps count of them through the years, He leads, preserves and uses them for His glory. These lists bring to light the providential care of God over His own.

THOUGHT: (Read Matthew 10:28-31.)

PRAYER: (Use Job 42:1-6.)

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27

NEHEMIAH 7:39-45

EZRA 2:36-42

“Let all things be done decently and in order.”

PROVIDENCE, THE CONFIDENCE FOR SERVICE (II)

The lists in Nehemiah and Ezra also portray God's order and distinction. God has concern for and knowledge of His people, but He also has order and standards for them. Distinction was made in the first census conducted in Numbers, with the Levites not numbered among the children of Israel (Num 1:47). In Numbers, the census was to get the count of those who could be used of God in the time of war. The Levites were excluded as they were, according to God's order, set apart for use in God's house and thus exempted from war.

The priests... The Levites... The singers... The porters (Neh 7:39-44). After the list of the children of Israel by their families, the genealogy then turned to those who served in the house of God by families. As God stirred the hearts of the children of Israel to return, He did not bring them back to Jerusalem without those who would perform spiritual duties as was set when the worship and its order were instituted in the law. As the people returned to Jerusalem from captivity, there were also *“priests”* whose office was to *“minister unto me”* (Exod 28:1, 3, 4, 41; 29:1, 44; 30:30) *“unto the holy place”* (Exod 28:29, 35, 43; 39:41) while bearing *“the names of the children of Israel”* (Exod 28:29). Apart from the priests, there were also *“the Levites”* who were appointed over the Tabernacle and its vessels (Num 1:50-53), to minister to the priests (Num 3:9), and assigned to teach the law (Deut 33:8-10). *“The singers”* were drawn from the Levites when the order of Temple worship was established by David (1 Chron 9:33-34). *“The porters”* like the singers were also *“chosen to be porters in the gates”* by David from among the Levites (1 Chron 9:21-32). And *“they lodged round about the house of God, because the charge was upon them, and the opening thereof every morning pertained to them.”* Indeed, apart from the task of rebuilding Jerusalem, there was also the building up of the people in faith and maintaining their relationship with their God. For this purpose, the LORD made sure that as the people returned, worship and service would proceed according to the order that was laid before the carrying away to Babylon, and that nothing new would be invented.

THOUGHT: (Read 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40.)

PRAYER: Give me grace, Father, to serve according to Thy Word.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28

NEHEMIAH 7:46-60

EZRA 2:42-58

*“...thou shalt not respect
the person of the poor,
nor honour the person of the mighty...”*

PROVIDENCE, THE CONFIDENCE FOR SERVICE (III)

The third group of people mentioned and recognised in the lists of Nehemiah and Ezra was a group that was easy to overlook and ignore. The world despises and undervalues manual and hard work. As such, those who do the heavy lifting and the manual, tedious and sweat-filled work are often overlooked and not recognised on many occasions. But this is not so with God. He remembers, knows and acknowledges all His children, irrespective of the world's view of their work and occupations.

The Nethinims... (Neh 7:46). The Nethinims were those who were chosen to be servants to assist the Levites as they went about their tasks in the service of the temple. They did mainly manual and tedious work required in the temple during the services, such as wood-cutting and water-carrying. They too were ordained and set in place during the reign of David and were mentioned in 1 Chronicles 9:2 in conjunction with the Priests and the Levites. They were mentioned again in conjunction with the Priests and the Levites in Ezra's account of his arrival in Jerusalem in Ezra 7:7, 24. Ezra stated that the Nethinims had been *“appointed for the service of the Levites”* by *“David and the princes”* in Ezra 8:20.

In the case of the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, they deceived Joshua into making peace with them. As a result, they were condemned to a life of servitude and tedious labour (Josh 9:21). Yet, God helped Joshua and the children of Israel to defeat the armies that had gone to fight against Gibeon (Josh 10). They were not deprived of God's faithfulness and justice when they became the victims of Saul's cruelty as recorded in 2 Samuel 21:1-9. Likewise, the Nethinims, though in the eyes of the world were a people who had a life of lowly manual work, were still counted and their record was found in the genealogy of God's people both in Ezra's list as well as in Nehemiah's.

THOUGHT: (Read Leviticus 19:15 and Acts 10:34-35.)

PRAYER: O Father, give me grace to overcome partiality.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 1

NEHEMIAH 7:61-65

EZRA 2:59-63

*"...his brother's wife come unto him
...loose his shoe from off his foot..."*

PROVIDENCE, THE CONFIDENCE FOR SERVICE (IV)

The balance between the strict adherence to God's order and gracious dealing without unjust bias is set for us in the fourth group of people in the lists of Nehemiah and Ezra. When extending grace, and receiving and acknowledging others, care must be taken to ensure that everyone is placed rightfully in accordance with God's ordinance.

And these were they... (Neh 7:61). The list then turned to those with whom were some measure of uncertainty. There were those who had come from captivity together with the children of Israel, and whose hearts were moved by God when the king gave his decree. But, they *"could not shew their father's house, nor their seed, whether they were of Israel"* (Neh 7:61). There were also those who were *"of the priests"* (Neh 7:63), but who when they *"were reckoned by genealogy,"* were not found and as such were *"as polluted"* (Neh 7:64). These could not be sent back or away. And God's order could not be transgressed. Thus, they were mentioned and numbered separately. Care was taken to ensure that they were *"put from the priesthood"* (Neh 7:64), and forbidden from partaking *"of the most holy things"* (Neh 7:65) until they were confirmed, according to God's instructions, through a *"priest with Urim and Thummim."* This was to prevent their sin from bringing upon them and the congregation of God's people the wrath and judgment of God. But their names were not struck out of the genealogy. Their inclusion in the genealogy served to teach us how high a value we ought to place on God's call and standards. What reverence to God's Word they showed! They adhered to the exclusivity of the Aaronic priesthood, such that those who could not prove they belonged were not given any benefit of the doubt. They were excluded from partaking of the office and its benefits. This is a very needful lesson today when many have taken liberties to include into the pastoral ministry those who do not meet the standards set by God in Scripture. The push to open the pastoral ministry to all regardless of their aptness for the office is akin to the rebellion of Korah. Today, may we search the scriptures before admitting any to eat of the most holy things.

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 24:3-5.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 139:23-24.)

MONDAY, MARCH 2
NEHEMIAH 7:66-73
EZRA 2:64-70

*“...all things work together for good
to them that love God...”*

SACRIFICE, THE CONDITION FOR SUCCESS IN SERVICE

The work of the LORD, by God's ordinance, is not only to be done by God's chosen children, but also to be supported willingly and freely by them. The first half of the book of Nehemiah gives us the account of the willingness of the people to rise up as the servants of God to build (Neh 2:20). Upon completion of the work, we have a record of the people willingly giving to support and preserve the work. Congregational giving towards the work of God is something that has been part of congregational life from the beginning. Beginning with the freewill offering taken up for the construction of the Tabernacle while in the wilderness, God's people have through the ages supported and sustained the work of God with their freewill offerings.

Some of the chief of the fathers gave (Neh 7:70). The record closes with a summary of the whole congregation of God's children as well as an account of the offering they gave to the work. Even in Ezra's list, the record was that *“some of the chief of the fathers... offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place”* (Ezra 2:68). Another account said that *“some of the chief of the fathers”* gave to the work, and another recorded *“some of the chief of the fathers”* gave into the treasury. And *“the rest of the people”* gave freely of their gold and silver and *“priests' garments”* (Neh 7:71-72). Rarely do we consider generosity as a mark of concern for the progress and protection of God's work, but it is. At the time of the decree from Cyrus concerning the return and rebuilding of Jerusalem, the king urged those not returning to help those who would be returning. He said, *“And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem”* (Ezra 1:4). The main purpose for the return was to rebuild *“the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”* So, though the wall was completed and security enhanced, the work was not yet finished, and the people understood that clearly. The success of the wall would probably encourage them as they pursued the building of the Temple. The provisions would be very necessary for the building of the Temple.

THOUGHT: Through our generosity, we participate in God's work.

PRAYER: Give me grace, Father, to do and give my best for Thy work.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

DEUTERONOMY 31:9-13

*“...that they may hear,
and that they may learn,
and fear the LORD your God...”*

CENTRALITY OF GOD’S WORD IN SERVICE (I)

Nehemiah 7 ends with the wall completed, and the people encouraged to settle within the city (since few people were living in Jerusalem) and to give towards the building of the Temple. Though they had earlier given, as recorded in Ezra, the work was yet to be completed. Nehemiah 8 then turned from the wall, to the people. The wall was built with mortar and bricks; the people were to be built by the Word of God!

And all the people gathered themselves together (Neh 8:1). This phrase points to the congregational gathering of God’s people, which was not the first, for there is a record of another similar gathering in Ezra 3:1-7 when the people first came into the land and were still living in the cities. In the first gathering, they gathered to offer burnt offerings to *“the God of Israel”* and to keep the feast of Tabernacles. In Nehemiah 8:1-8, they gathered to hear the Word of God read as they called for *“Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses”* (Neh 8:1). This gathering of the people was commanded by Moses in Deuteronomy 31:10-13. And as was commanded, the people came together *“before the water gate”* in Jerusalem which was according to the command of Moses *“the place which he shall choose”* (Deut 31:11). The congregation comprised *“men and women, and all that could hear with understanding”* (Neh 8:2). This was again just as was commanded by Moses in Deuteronomy 31:12 where he said, *“Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates.”* And just as was required by the law of Moses, and as they had requested, the *“book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel”* (Neh 8:1) was brought before the congregation for a public reading and exposition of the Law before them. May the church of Christ never lack ministers like Ezra, who are not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but are ready to bring out the Word of God, to read it and expound it to the understanding and blessing of the congregation of God’s people. Like Archippus, may we *“...(t)ake heed to the ministry... that thou fulfil it”* (Col 4:17).

THOUGHT: It is the Word of God that instils the fear of God.

PRAYER: May we and our children hear, and learn, and fear Thee.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4

NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

ROMANS 10:14-17

*“...faith cometh by hearing,
and hearing by the word of God.”*

CENTRALITY OF GOD’S WORD IN SERVICE (II)

The preparation of the people for continued service to their God was not done without their participation. Nehemiah 8 presents to us the centrality of God’s Word in the people’s lives, and the events of the day. These were events that happened in accordance with God’s Word as was given to Moses. Also presented to us is a picture of the kind of people who would serve God both successfully and acceptably. Their participation and their attitudes as the events of the day unfolded cannot be ignored.

And the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law (Neh 8:3). The reading and exposition of God’s Word from the law of Moses was met with the attentive ears and hearts of a people who had desired the Word to be read to them. And as the Word of the LORD was opened before them for the reading, the people responded with reverence which they showed by standing up (Neh 8:5). The people were gathered *“before the water gate from the morning until midday”* (Neh 8:3). By this, they showed their commitment, both in setting apart the better part of the day for holy worship and fellowship, and by their patient continuance in attending to the reading of the Word. In churches today, both reverence and commitment to the reading and preaching of God’s Word are evidently lacking as witnessed by either the short sessions of Bible reading, or in some cases the total absence of Scripture reading. Indeed, we live in times when men *“will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears”* (2 Tim 4:3). Today, we gather together under better physical conditions, in well-furnished churches. Yet, we have shorter services. And still many would leave at the end of the church service either like prisoners released from prison, glad that it is over, or like disgruntled and unsatisfied customers shortchanged of their time, murmuring how long the service was, or how long-winded the preacher was, or how long the responsive or congregational reading of Scripture was. The places many rush to after worship in church make matters worse. No wonder we fill churches but do not reflect Christ outside church.

THOUGHT: Efficacy of the Word read is enhanced by receptive hearts.

PRAYER: Father, draw me to my church with reverence and commitment.

THURSDAY, MARCH 5

NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

1 TIMOTHY 4:12-16

*“...give attendance to reading,
to exhortation, to doctrine.”*

CENTRALITY OF GOD’S WORD IN SERVICE (III)

The picture presented in Nehemiah 8 does not only give us a picture of a people desiring the Word of God and gathering to hear from the Word with reverence, commitment and patience. It also gives us a picture of ministers of God committed to their charge, and faithful to their calling. Ezra, when approached to read the Word, obliged and read the Word. The Levites, who stood beside Ezra, made sure that all who came to hear the Word of God understood the Word that was read.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people (8:5). The sequence of events attributed to Ezra as he fulfilled his calling may appear very strange in some churches today. What did Ezra do? First, he opened the Book in the sight of all the people while he *“stood upon a pulpit of wood”* (Neh 8:4). He was visible *“above all the people.”* It is a travesty for the minister of the Word to stand before God’s people and not open the Word of God before them. Second, *“Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God”* (Neh 8:6). He prayed before he read and preached the Word. Many today have forgotten that as ministers *“we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord”* (2 Cor 4:5), and hence they do not seek His blessings, guidance or Spirit. Preaching without prayer is sacrilegious. Third, *“they read in the book in the law of God distinctly”* (Neh 8:8). The public reading of Scripture is intended for the public to whom it is read, and therefore, such reading must be audible and distinct to all in attendance. Scripture reading is not a speed-reading contest, and it is not a chore that is to be completed in haste. The minister has a sacred duty to the Word he reads, as well as to the congregation he reads to. *“(G)ive attendance to reading”* (1 Tim 4:13) is the apostolic injunction to Timothy, and as such the minister cannot first meet with his reading at the pulpit. A preacher unfamiliar with the Scripture should not stand in the pulpit, and one who has not acquainted himself with the portion for congregational reading should not stand to lead in reading. We should all study to show ourselves approved unto God. Rightly dividing the Word of truth must include, first of all, distinctly reading the Word.

THOUGHT: When we believe God’s Word, we focus on our duty.

PRAYER: Give me grace to assess myself in the mirror of Thy Word, Father.

FRIDAY, MARCH 6
NEHEMIAH 8:1-8
EXODUS 19:7-17

*“And the LORD came down
upon mount Sinai.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (I)

The congregational gathering in Nehemiah 8 presents the elements of congregational worship. What elements are essential for a congregational gathering for worship? This is a vital question especially in light of the varied types of services fronted in this age, with every proponent claiming that their variation is spirit-filled or spirit-led. We have seen earlier that the gathering in Nehemiah 8 was in accordance with the command of Moses given in Deuteronomy 31, and that it focused on the Word of God being read and expounded.

And all the people gathered themselves together (Neh 8:1). Without a congregational gathering, there cannot be a congregational worship. This element of worship is increasingly challenged today by the advances in technology especially in the area of remote meetings. Many today would conveniently choose to “attend” worship services from the comfort of their homes. They disregard the call, *“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together”* (Heb 10:25). In Exodus 19, which presents to us the first occasion of congregational gathering, Moses was instructed that *“when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount”* (Exod 19:13). And on the appointed day of the meeting with God, *“Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God”* (Exod 19:17).

And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation (8:2-3). The second element of congregational worship is the reading and exposition of Scripture. The centrality of the Word of God in the worship service has been highlighted in the previous devotions. It is clear that the climax of any congregational worship gathering must be the reading and exposition of the Word. In Exodus, at Mt Sinai when Moses led the people to meet with God, God spoke to the people (Exod 20:1). The people in response requested Moses to *“let not God speak with us, lest we die”* (Exod 20:19), and to relay to them God’s words. God uses faithful and holy men to bring His Word to His children.

THOUGHT: (Read John 4:23-24.)

PRAYER: (Pray for grace to be faithful in attending worship services.)

SATURDAY, MARCH 7

NEHEMIAH 8:9-12

EXODUS 24:1-11

*“...and all the people answered
with one voice...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (II)

The third element of congregational worship that is found not only in Nehemiah 8, but also in Exodus as well as other occurrences of congregational worship, is the congregational response. True worship does not only include biblical elements. It also evokes a biblical response from those who are in attendance.

Because they had understood the words that were declared (Neh 8:12). The congregation is not a group of passive onlookers, but active participants in the service. This, however, has to be done with the understanding of God and His order, design, Word and Will for man in instituting and requiring worship. Therefore, congregational participation in worship is best learned from Scripture. Today, when we look around, there is much confusion concerning this. As the term states, it is a response, not an initiative. This means that it has to take into account God and His attributes, purposes and intents. The One who draws and calls us to worship has the requirements and standards. As we draw near to Him, we must know what He requires and seeks from us. The congregational gathering attended the service with reverence, attentiveness and commitment, as we have already noted. That constituted part of congregational response, which was based on their understanding of their unworthiness and sinfulness before their most holy God, rather than their emotion. And they mourned their state (Neh 8:9). The Levites then instructed them further to rejoice in the Lord. They responded accordingly after understanding what was required of them by being still (Neh 8:11-12). Just like their fathers at Mt Sinai, congregational response is based on the Word of God (Exod 24:3-7) and is covenantal (Exod 24:8-11). From this, congregational response is thus both an exercise and expression of obedience and gratitude to God, who by His mercy and grace, has drawn them unto Himself and spoken to them His Word. Whether done collectively or individually, congregational response must be in obedience to God's revealed Word.

THOUGHT: (Read John 4:23-24.)

PRAYER: (Pray for grace to be obedient to God's Word during worship.)

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 8

NEHEMIAH 8:13-18

HOSEA 6:1-6

*“Then shall we know,
if we follow on to know the LORD.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (III)

Man's most important responsibility, irrespective of other achievements or accomplishments, is his duty to God, and to obey what God requires of him. Hence, Hosea's statement *“I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6) and Samuel's statement to Saul *“Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams”* (1 Sam 15:22) help us put the right emphasis on Scripture and its centrality in the life of God's children.

And on the second day were gathered together (Neh 8:13). The duty to know God through His Word is our life-long duty. Its profitable accomplishment requires us to seek the Word daily. The leaders of the people gathered for further reading of the law after the congregational gathering had ended. They returned to Ezra for further exposition of the law and they learned more of what God had commanded through Moses. As they learned, they also had to do. The Word of God had to be understood and that was accomplished by the work of Ezra and the Levites. The Word of God understood had to be applied and put to practice, and that was what the leaders who gathered together realised and desired.

So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths (Neh 8:16). Upon reading, they discovered their duty. They chose to obey and do what God had commanded. They performed their duty according to God's Word with *“very great gladness”* (Neh 8:17). And they continued in the Word daily. The people responded immediately and followed the Word and its requirements to the letter, for *“they kept the feast seven days”* (Neh 8:18). What a lesson for us today. We must be a people who are ready to learn and willing to practise what we understand from God's Word. Our ministers must be available both to read and expound the Word of God whenever the people come to them, seeking God's Word.

THOUGHT: There are blessings in hearing and obeying God's Word.

PRAYER: May I be both a hearer and a doer of Thy Word, Father.

MONDAY, MARCH 9
NEHEMIAH 9:1-3
LEVITICUS 23:33-37

“The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles...”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (IV)

The feast of tabernacles is the third of the annual covenant feasts the LORD instructed through Moses that required congregational gatherings at Jerusalem: *“Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the LORD thy God”* (Deut 16:16). They would take part in this feast by building and living in tents as directed while listening to the Word of God. Again, the instructions given by Moses in Deuteronomy 16:16-17, that they were not to *“appear before the LORD empty: Every man shall give as he is able,”* point to and stress congregational response and duty.

Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month (Neh 9:1). The feast of tabernacles was, according to the law, supposed to start on the fifteenth day of the month and end on the twenty-second day (since it lasted for seven days, and the eighth day was a sabbath) according to Leviticus 23:39. Yet, the record given stated that on the twenty-fourth day the people *“were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes”* (Neh 9:1). This indicated that the congregational response and duty did not end with the end of the service, but extended beyond that. Their coming together with fasting and sackclothes revealed the effect of the Word they had heard during the service upon their hearts and lives. They returned mourning for their sin. They had feasted and fasted! And upon the instruction of the Levites, they rejoiced under the comfort of the “holy day” and *“the joy of the LORD”* (Neh 8:9-12).

And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers (Neh 9:2). After all that had happened during the feast, they returned. We are then given a summary of the effect of the Word of God upon their lives. The act of separation surely did not start only after the feast. Rather, it was present during and continued after the feast because there was no mention of strangers in the congregational gathering of Nehemiah 8. The observance of the feast, in accordance with the law of Moses, required the separation spoken of here.

THOUGHT: Separation is a congregational response to God’s Word.

PRAYER: (Use 1 Kings 8:52-53.)

TUESDAY, MARCH 10

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3

ACTS 2:42; 6:1-7

*“...we will give ourselves
continually to prayer, and
to the ministry of the word.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (V)

The congregational gathering in Nehemiah 9 was in response to the Word that was read and expounded during the gathering for the feast of tabernacles. This gathering, like the one for the commanded feast, turned its attention and focus to the Word of God. A congregational gathering that deliberately and consistently neglects the Word of God, or emphasises and focuses on any other thing at the expense of the reading and exposition of the Word of God, cannot be rightly termed a Christian congregational gathering.

And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God (Neh 9:3). As in Nehemiah 8, the record draws our attention to the Scriptures. The commitment, attentiveness and patience of the congregation towards the Word is unmistakable for they spent *“one fourth part of the day”* (Neh 9:3) attending to the words of *“the book of the law.”* It had been read to them from the first day (Neh 8:2), and the leaders had sought it out *“on the second day”* (Neh 8:13). And again during the seven days of the feast, it was read *“day by day, from the first day unto the last day”* (Neh 8:18). Now, they *“stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God”* (Neh 9:3).

And another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God (Neh 9:3). The “seeker-friendly” mentality of today’s church has done much harm, and has robbed the church of its true worship. The biblical devotion to Scripture naturally leads to prayerful worship. The New Testament church sought to maintain this focus and balance in light of the growing duties and responsibilities in Acts 6. Duties were distributed such that all would serve together under a system that would still put the emphasis of the life of the Christian community on prayer and the ministry of the Word. The prayer life of the people of God is born out of the right understanding of the Word of God. And a congregation that is centred on the Word of God demonstrates both a right worship of God and a practical obedience to God that is drawn from God’s revelation in Scripture.

THOUGHT: Spirit-led worship is in fact Scripture-based worship.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 43:3-4.)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

NEHEMIAH 9:4-38

1 KINGS 8:46-53

*“...hear thou their prayer
and their supplication
in heaven thy dwelling place...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (VI)

The relation of prayer and ministry of the Word, as emphasised by the Apostles in Acts 6, is recorded in Nehemiah 9. Their focus on the Word led them to pray aright and acceptably. The content of their prayer clearly reflected their knowledge of God's Word and God's dealings from the time of the patriarchs, a knowledge that was drawn from Moses' law. The content of their prayer reflects what true biblical prayer is like.

Then stood up upon the stairs, of the Levites... and cried with a loud voice unto the LORD their God (Neh 9:4). With the order of the worship of God as instituted in the Word maintained, the Levites led the worship service in a time of confessional and intercessory prayer. In their prayer, they began with acknowledging God in His divine attributes as the one and only living and true God, creator of the heavens and the earth, who upon finishing His work of creation, continues to uphold, sustain and direct His creation by His providence. As such, He is the only one worthy to be worshipped (Neh 9:6). They then went on to affirm God as the gracious and faithful covenant-keeping God who chose Abraham out of all nations to make of him a nation, giving him the land He had promised (Neh 9:7-8).

In these first two attributes, they affirmed their faith and knowledge of God not only as the Creator and Ruler of all things, but also as the personal, faithful and covenant-keeping and fulfilling God who not only chose, blessed and led Abraham, but also continued to extend His covenant faithfulness to Abraham's seed. This theme

- (i) is repeated in Old Testament prayers and can be found in Solomon's Temple prayer (1 Kings 8:23), Jehoshaphat's prayer (2 Chron 20:6-7), and in the Psalms (Ps 105:5-11),
- (ii) was the basis of the instruction given to them at the renewal of the covenant before entering to possess the Land of Promise in Deuteronomy 29:1-13 and before possession of the land in Joshua 24:1-15, and
- (iii) informs their boldness and confidence to approach God.

THOUGHT: Is Christ my everlasting delight?

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 36:9-10.)

THURSDAY, MARCH 12

NEHEMIAH 9:4-38

1 KINGS 8:22-30

*“...even toward the place
of which thou hast said,
My name shall be there...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (VII)

The content of the prayer in Nehemiah 9 continues to show their knowledge of God and His attributes. After presenting God as creator and sustainer of all things, as well as the God of election, they went on to ascribe to God attributes in relation to specific works that related to their life and heritage as the nation of God.

And didst see the affliction of our fathers (Neh 9:9). The prayer, after acknowledging God, then recognised and highlighted His works in the lives of His chosen nation. This became both a recounting of their history as well as an overview of the Old Testament Scriptures. They affirmed that their deliverance was by the hand and work of God (Neh 9:9-11) and this act of God further confirmed both His power and covenant faithfulness which were highlighted in the previous verses. In order to accomplish the deliverance, God (i) saw the affliction and heard the cry (Neh 9:9), (ii) showed signs and wonders and got Himself “*a name, as it is this day*” (Neh 9:10), and (iii) divided the sea and overthrew Pharaoh’s army (Neh 9:11).

Moreover thou leddest them (Neh 9:12). After affirming their deliverance from Egypt, they recounted God’s abiding presence and full provision in and throughout the wandering in the wilderness (Neh 9:12-15). Once again through this, God was confirmed and both His power and covenant faithfulness were revealed as highlighted in the first two attributes. The presence of God among them was first physical and visible in the form of the “*cloudy pillar; and... a pillar of fire*” (Neh 9:12). Through this, God directed their paths and controlled their journey: the people folded their tents to travel when the pillar lifted, and unfolded their tents to camp when the pillar settled. God’s provision and supply were constant and unfailingly providing bread for their hunger and water for their thirst (Neh 9:15). Second, God’s presence was also spiritual. This is seen in the personal nature of God’s activity as emphasised in the use of the personal pronoun “*thou*” and also in the giving of the law (Neh 9:13) and sabbath (Neh 9:14) to guide their life, service and worship.

THOUGHT: We have the promise of His presence (Matt 28:20).

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 51:11.)

FRIDAY, MARCH 13
NEHEMIAH 9:4-38
1 KINGS 8:31-40

“...because they have sinned against thee...”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (VIII)

The attributes and works of God recounted in this prayer are set in contrast to a people stiff-necked and sinful, a people unworthy and totally undeserving. They were a people who deserved only wrath and judgment based on their response and relation to the God who had clearly, and without fail, showed Himself powerful and faithful on their behalf.

But they and our fathers dealt proudly (Neh 9:16). The third work highlighted in the prayer was that of long-suffering and mercy. They recounted how God both abode with and fully provided for the nation despite their sinfulness, not because the people were good or deserving. The attributes of God were magnified by placing them against the one overarching attribute of man, namely, his total depravity. In this section of the prayer, there was an admission of guilt, one that they shared with those who had transgressed since they who had transgressed were “*our fathers*.” The disobedience, hard-heartedness, pride and rebellion of the people magnified the mercy, grace and long-suffering of God which they rightly highlighted in Nehemiah 9:17.

Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This is thy God (Neh 9:18). The people were not only disobedient, hard-hearted and rebellious. They were, as Paul in his letter to the Romans put it, ungodly and unrighteous men “*who hold the truth in unrighteousness*” (Rom 1:18). Despite the visible and spiritual evidence of God’s deliverance, presence and provisions, they still “*changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image*” (Rom 1:23). But God, even in the face of such provocations, remained a faithful and covenant-keeping God whose leading and provisions failed not. God did not withdraw the visible evidence of His presence (Neh 9:19), neither did He withhold His spirit to instruct them (Neh 9:20). He constantly and continually provided for them those forty years (Neh 9:21). He gave them victory over established and powerful kingdoms, and gave them inheritance promised to Abraham (Neh 9:22-25). In all these, God showed Himself merciful and long-suffering to them.

THOUGHT: We, like them, are a depraved and stiff-necked people.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 51:1-4.)

SATURDAY, MARCH 14

NEHEMIAH 9:4-38

1 KINGS 8:46-53

*“...hear thou their prayer and
their supplication in heaven
thy dwelling place...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (IX)

Sinfulness and depravity were man's attribute. Their depravity thus continued to be manifested even while dwelling in the Land of Promise. God continued to be faithful, and the people, sinful.

Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee (Neh 9:26). God's long-suffering mercy continued beyond the period of the exodus into the period of their living in the Land of Promise. Their relationship with God in the Land of Promise can be summarised by cycles of (i) Provocation (Neh 9:26): in which the people “*were disobedient, and rebelled*” rejecting God's law; (ii) Chastisement (Neh 9:27a): in which God “*deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies*” receiving vexation and trouble; (iii) Pleading (Neh 9:27b): in which the people turned back to God and “*cried unto thee*” for help, which God graciously heard and (iv) Deliverance (Neh 9:27c): in which God “*gavest them saviours, who saved them.*” These cycles characterised the entire history of Israel from the time of possessing the land up to the time of going into captivity (Neh 9:28-29). The testimony of their history is that, a sinful and rebellious people though they had been, God continually showed Himself a long-suffering and merciful God to them (Neh 9:30-31).

Now therefore, our God (Neh 9:32). They were conscious of their nature from their history, but as they approached God with respect to the condition they were in (which they recognised to be by virtue of their rebellion and sin), they sought to renew the covenant. As they did so, they did it not lightly, for they not only had a sense of their unworthiness, they also had the sense of God's greatness, might, faithfulness and justice (Neh 9:32-33). In addition, they also had a sense of their unfaithfulness to the same covenant, for they did not make a new covenant, but renewed the same covenant (Neh 9:34-35). They acknowledged that the only way to enjoy the benefits of the covenant was to choose to be dependent on God.

THOUGHT: We can return to God, trusting His mercy and help.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 51:5-10.)

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 15

NEHEMIAH 10:1-27

JOSHUA 24:16-28

*“So Joshua made a covenant
with the people that day,
and set them a statute...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (X)

With regard to the biblical responses under the third element of congregational worship, namely, the congregational response, Nehemiah 8 emphasised the Word, and Nehemiah 9, prayer. In Nehemiah 10, we have another biblical response: commitment and consecration to God. The prayer of Nehemiah 9 was not just a recounting of history and knowledge of God's Word, nor was it a theological discourse on the attributes of God and sinfulness of man. It was a renewal, commitment and consecration of a people who, through attending to Scripture, had not only known their God in His attributes and their sinfulness, frailty and weakness as man, but had also known what they ought to do and their responsibility and duty. Despite their frailty, they sought by covenant with God, to endeavour (trusting in God's leading and help) to walk with God and fulfil all that was their duty to do.

And because of all this we make a sure covenant (Neh 9:38). The covenant being made was a national commitment to God, with the spiritual and civil leaders representing the people. They put down in writing what they, through the ministry of the Word, had resolved in their hearts. They had purposed to walk in the law of God and obey His commandments as revealed to them in Scriptures. Communally, they signed and sealed an agreement, intending to fulfil their commitment and hold one another accountable in the process, trusting God's mercy and faithfulness. But they were also aware that they too, like their fathers before them, would be liable to chastisement from God when they strayed and rebelled. The list of those who signed began with

- (i) Nehemiah and Zidkijah as civil leaders (Neh 10:1): Nehemiah was identified with the Persian title “*the Tirshatha*” as those who would have governance responsibilities over the people;
- (ii) followed by the priests (Neh 10:2-8) and the Levites (Neh 10:9-13): They had the duty and responsibility of reading and expounding the law; a duty which they performed willingly and joyfully (Neh 8-9);
- (iii) and the chiefs of the people (Neh 10:14-27): They were representatives of the clans that returned to Jerusalem.

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 14:34.)

PRAYER: (Pray as instructed by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:1-4.)

MONDAY, MARCH 16

NEHEMIAH 10:28-39

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

*“...come out from among them,
and be ye separate.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XI)

Commitment and consecration take many forms in the believer's life, eg. marriage vows, baptismal vows, reaffirmation of faith or confirmations, etc. Though they may involve some questions and answers, they require more than just the words or answers given. They require concrete steps and actions that follow the answers or vows made. This is what we see in the second part of Nehemiah 10.

The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves (Neh 10:28). The section begins by giving the involvement of the rest of the people in the renewal of the covenant. They were identified as *“all they that had separated themselves”* (Neh 10:28) which signified consecration. This separation formed the basis of their consecration by its two-fold effect. Their act of separation was firstly a separation *“from the people of the lands”* which was necessary for worship according to the law of Moses (Neh 9:2), and necessary for the work of the building of the wall, just as Nehemiah had told Sanballat when he excluded them saying *“ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem”* (Neh 2:20). Their act of separation was also part of their consecration, as they were separated *“unto the law of God”* (Neh 10:28). The husbands/fathers as heads in God's order probably ordered and taught their families (wives, sons and daughters), and led them to share and participate with knowledge and understanding in the same oath. Their act of separation was secondly a step towards fellowship. In separation, they *“clave to their brethren”* (Neh 10:29). As they were separated from the peoples of the lands, they walked in the light with those who had come to the same light, who had *“entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law”* (Neh 10:29). Since they had the same oath to keep, the same law to follow, the same God to serve and the same LORD to obey, they could cleave to their brethren.

THOUGHT: (Read 1 John 1:7.)

PRAYER: Father, give me wisdom to prepare my children spiritually for life.

TUESDAY, MARCH 17
NEHEMIAH 10:28-39
1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-11

“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XII)

The people, united in resolve and purpose, took concrete steps and made tangible decisions that would help them in their consecration. Some of the decisions were difficult from the human point of view, but their view was expressed clearly in their prayer and in the oath they took.

We would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons (Neh 10:30). The people recognised that compromise would weaken resolve and a *“little leaven leaveneth the whole lump”* (Gal 5:9). They therefore purposed to separate from the people of the land in all facets of life. They purposed to practise what they believed at all costs, deeming the safety of their souls and the pleasure of God worth every sacrifice and loss made. Thus, in marriage, they refused to intermarry with the people of the nations (Neh 10:30). In economics, they chose to honour God, and thus resolved to observe the sabbath and not profane it. They would not promote those who dishonoured the sabbath. They also purposed to follow God’s instructions on debts and gave the God-ordained release in the year of release as instructed in Deuteronomy 15. Thus, they would conduct business, not by the accepted norms and practices, but according to God’s Word (Neh 10:31).

Also we made ordinances for us (Neh 10:32). In addition to the provisions of God’s law that they decided to live by, they also made provisions that would help them provide for the house and work of God. This was because of the challenges of the times and the conditions they were living in, seeing that the Temple was yet to be built. To facilitate the services during the difficult times they were in (remember the poverty and drought that was addressed in Nehemiah 5), they taxed themselves (Neh 10:32-33). They also offered to bring wood for the altar, taking turns according to lots that were cast (though this had been the Nethinims’ duty before the captivity), adding to their works of piety and charity. Their intent was clear: to do all they could so that worship would continue as required.

THOUGHT: God’s Word puts value to life, and gives direction to decisions.

PRAYER: (Pray to live right and to support God’s work as much as possible.)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18

NEHEMIAH 10:28-39

GENESIS 28:10-22

“Jacob vowed a vow.”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XIII)

Their commitment and intent to ensure that worship continued as prescribed in the law were both noble and necessary. They understood their oath and the means they deemed necessary for its fulfilment. They had purposed to live according to God’s law. Some of the instructions given in the law related to the house of God and worship. Because the Temple was yet to be rebuilt, they made provisions for fulfilling all of the law including those related to the worship of God.

We will not forsake the house of our God (Neh 10:39). The house of God is not a building. Jacob sleeping under the stars with a stone for a pillar awoke with the realisation that *“this is none other but the house of God”* (Gen 28:17). The house of God is not defined by anything physical, not the structures put in place, nor the number of people present in attendance, nor the furnishings nor revenues it has. The house of God is spiritual and sacramental. The people, having no physical edifice ready, having neither riches, nor revenue sufficient to run and sustain the operations instituted by law and to support the priests and Levites ministering to them, made for themselves ordinances that would enable worship to be biblical and acceptable. They made provisions for the *“service of the house of our God”* (Neh 10:32) taking into account provisions for (i) the wood for the altar (Neh 10:33-34); (ii) the priests that ministered in the house of the LORD (Neh 10:35-36); (iii) the Levites that assisted the priests and ministered in all the cities the people lived in (Neh 10:37-38); and (iv) the porters and singers who served where the vessels of the sanctuary were (Neh 10:39). In other words, their vow to live according to His Word included supporting the work of the ministry and the ministers God had given to them. They understood that their continued faithfulness to their vows rested in their continued growth in and understanding of the Word of God. This meant it depended on the faithfulness of those who read and expounded the Word of God to them and led them in the worship of God. How necessary it is for us today that our ministers are faithful, and that we fulfil our duty to support them.

THOUGHT: Possible to have a Cathedral without it being God’s house?

PRAYER: (Pray to have the right view of the church and to support its work.)

THURSDAY, MARCH 19

NEHEMIAH 11:1-24

PSALM 84

“Blessed are they that dwell in thy house...”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XIV)

The choice of where to live is a personal one and many consider various factors when making the choice. Few would put the choice of where to live as part of their congregational response and factor in their spiritual growth and well-being. By the time the wall was completed, there were few people living in the city (Neh 7:4). God put in Nehemiah's heart the desire for its repopulation. In Nehemiah 11, we are given a record of those who took up dwelling in Jerusalem.

And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem (Neh 11:1). The people in their commitment to the oaths they made, led by their leaders, made provisions for repopulating Jerusalem. Their rulers and a portion of the rest of the people took up residence in Jerusalem. Those who relocated were listed in groups: (i) Judah (Neh 11:4-6), (ii) Benjamin (Neh 11:7-9), (iii) Priests (Neh 11:10-14), (iv) Levites (Neh 11:15-18), (v) Porters (Neh 11:19-20), (vi) Nethinims (Neh 11:21), and (vii) singers (Neh 11:22-24). This exercise was done by the casting of lots. This was not due to reluctance among the people, because at the completion of the exercise, *“the people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem”* (Neh 11:2). This implied that the men who chose to live in Jerusalem prioritised public and spiritual good over any personal preference, and so they chose to relocate with joy. The spiritual good was seen in Jerusalem being *“the holy city.”* The public good was seen in the security of the city being enhanced, and the duties of those who lived in Jerusalem performed with *“every one in his watch”* (Neh 7:3). They were willing to make such a choice despite their personal interests and inconveniences. Those who took up residence within the city were mentioned. Those who willingly offered themselves to dwell within Jerusalem also willingly offered themselves to: (i) give up their previous residence in the cities of Judah where *“dwelt every one in his possession”* (Neh 11:3); (ii) give up previous convenience and to take on additional duties by virtue of relocating to Jerusalem like the Levites who had *“oversight of the outward business of the house of God”* (Neh 11:16).

THOUGHT: Choose to live where my spiritual growth is best aided.

PRAYER: (Pray for grace and wisdom to make spiritual choices.)

FRIDAY, MARCH 20
NEHEMIAH 11:25-36
MALACHI 3:6-18

“...a book of remembrance was written...”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XV)

Not everyone would be accommodated in Jerusalem. The populating of Jerusalem did not amount to the forsaking of all other cities. Thus, there had to be a balance. The other cities of Judah were also part of the Land of Promise and, as such, were their possession and inheritance too. The second part of Nehemiah 11 gives the record of those who lived outside Jerusalem in *“the villages, with their fields”* (Neh 11:25). They too were listed, not by groups of people, but rather by direction in relation to Jerusalem with (i) Nehemiah 11:25-28 mentioning those who lived in the Negev South of Jerusalem, (ii) Nehemiah 11:29-30 mentioning those who lived in the Shephelah West of Jerusalem, and (iii) Nehemiah 11:31-36 mentioning those who lived in Benjamin North of Jerusalem.

The lesson that we must draw from these lists of names in Nehemiah 11 is that any sacrifice made and service rendered for the house of God and the good of God’s people are neither wasted nor forgotten. Oftentimes, we make a distinction between spiritual and secular life, and go on to make decisions that contradict one another, affecting both spiritual growth and service. The people who had committed themselves to living consecrated and separated lives considered not only their congregational lives to make this possible, but extended it to their daily lives including social choices (like marriage as in Nehemiah 10:30), and economic choices (like in purchases and debts as in Nehemiah 10:31) among others. Their spiritual growth and improvement would be affected by every choice they made and, as such, they willingly sacrificed and served. Through their service and sacrifice, they improved their fellowship with God and with one another. We also note that their interest and love for God, His city, His Word and His house were not forgotten. Their service and sacrifice were also accepted and were not forgotten. What is not included in these lists are those who did not sacrifice nor serve. Indeed, as Christ said, *“whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it”* (Mark 8:35).

THOUGHT: (Read 1 Samuel 2:30.)

PRAYER: Grant me the grace, contentment and joy in serving Thee, Father.

SATURDAY, MARCH 21

NEHEMIAH 12:1-26

1 KINGS 12:25-33

“...and he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places which he had made.”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XVI)

The last two chapters present to us additional aspects of congregational response which reflected the people's consecration and commitment to God. Nehemiah 12 begins with yet another genealogical record which gives a register of the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel from exile. This list affirmed that the worship and service of the House of God could be conducted by those chosen by the LORD. The register contained names that had been mentioned in earlier lists which was significant especially when we consider the purpose of the various lists. This would mean that the worship and service would be conducted not only by those authorised by the Lord, and those who qualified, but also by those who:

- (i) volunteered to return at the word of Cyrus (in the list of Nehemiah 7),
- (ii) ministered to the people (in the lists of Nehemiah 8–9),
- (iii) represented the people and signed the oath/covenant renewal and led the consecration of the people to God (in the list of Nehemiah 10),
- (iv) willingly relocated to live in Jerusalem (in the list of Nehemiah 11).

Moreover the Levites... (Neh 12:8ff). The names that were repeated in the different genealogical registers in Nehemiah included the following:

- (i) Maaseiah, who was named among the builders in Nehemiah 3:23; among the Levites who caused the people to understand in Nehemiah 8:4, 7; among the Levites who signed the pledge in Nehemiah 10:25; and among the *“the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God”* (Neh 12:40).
- (ii) Kadmiel, who was named among the returnees' register in Nehemiah 7:43; among the Levites who expounded the law of Moses in Nehemiah 9:4-5; among the Levites who signed the pledge in Nehemiah 10:9; and among the Levites mentioned in Nehemiah 12:8, 24.
- (iii) Bani, who was named among the builders in Nehemiah 3:17; among the Levites who caused the people to understand in Nehemiah 8:7; among the Levites who read and expounded the law of Moses in Nehemiah 9:4-5; among the Levites who signed the pledge; and among the Levites who lived in Jerusalem in Nehemiah 11:22.

THOUGHT: Where my name is listed says something about me.

PRAYER: Give me wisdom to make choices that bring a good report.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 22

NEHEMIAH 12:27-43

DEUTERONOMY 20:1-7

*“What man is there
that hath built a new house,
and hath not dedicated it?”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XVII)

The completion of the wall was a great feat. It was done with the help of the Lord, and with great commitment and dedication especially in view of the opposition and threats. It was also done in very difficult times of oppression and famine. They did not forget to dedicate the work to the Lord. Like the nine lepers (in the account of Jesus healing ten lepers), it is easy to get carried away when our prayers are answered, and to rejoice in our accomplishments and not return with thanksgiving to worship the Lord for His grace and mercy extended to us. But they did not forget. They had spiritual leaders who led them in the dedication service.

And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places (Neh 12:27). The people once again gathered together as they had done in Nehemiah 8 and again in Nehemiah 9 and 10. They came together *“to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps”* (Neh 12:27). It is vital that in everything we give thanks to the Lord. It is equally vital that, as people who are consecrated and committed to the Lord, all our achievements too are dedicated to the Lord. If we are to do all things for the glory of God, then we should be able to dedicate all things to the glory of God. We should be very wary of pursuing and doing things that we, upon completion, cannot dedicate to the Lord and give thanks to the Lord. As we set ourselves apart for the Lord, and for His use and glory, can we afford to pursue and spend time, effort, talents and resources on things that we would be ashamed to attribute to the Lord, or to give thanks to the Lord for? Can we, upon completion of projects, call upon our ministers and Christian brethren to join us in a session of thanksgiving to God for our accomplishments? Upon completion of the wall, the Levites (Neh 12:27), the singers (Neh 12:28-29), the princes (Neh 12:31-34), the priests (Neh 12:35-36), and Ezra (Neh 12:36) were gathered for thanksgiving (Neh 12:38-40) and sacrifices (Neh 12:43) with joy, led by ministers who had *“purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall”* (Neh 12:30).

THOUGHT: It is a blessing to be able to rejoice and sanctify our works.

PRAYER: Grant me, Father, grace to rejoice and give thanks for Thy mercies.

MONDAY, MARCH 23

NEHEMIAH 12:44-47

1 KINGS 13:31-34

*“...but made again
of the lowest of the people
priests of the high places...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XVIII)

The changes and developments that had occurred in Jerusalem had brought the need for organisational adjustments. The zeal of the people towards God and the House of God, together with their consecration to God, brought about repeated expressions of worship and thanksgiving as part of their congregational response. This resulted in the increase of offerings and tithes. Thus, organisational measures were needed. The faithfulness of the people in giving was to be met by faithful administration and management of the gifts.

And at that time were some appointed over the chambers (Neh 12:44). The giving and offerings of the people were a biblical congregational response and an indication of commitment, loyalty and obedience to God. It was also a clear response to the Word of God read and understood by the people. The law governing the offering of the tithe and the offering of firstfruits was given by Moses in Deuteronomy 26:1-11. It required the people to declare their gratitude to the Lord for the land and inheritance they possessed. This was to be done in word (by a verbal declaration which recognised God's faithfulness to His gracious covenant given to their fathers), and deed (by a generous gift of a basket of firstfruits which was to be received by the priest and set down before the altar, followed by a covenantal declaration).

Their bringing of gifts during the spiritual feasts brought to their attention the inadequacies that were present in the support and provisions for their ministers (the priests and the Levites). That led to the arrangements to appoint men over the Temple stores and to gather and bring in the tithes, the firstfruits and the heave offerings *“out of the fields of the cities the portions of the law for the priests and Levites”* (Neh 12:44). What was offered and brought was to be gathered efficiently, used lawfully and prudently, and kept holy. Those appointed over the chamber treasures had to be priests and Levites, and those who would faithfully, gladly and joyfully discharge their duties.

THOUGHT: God's house must be ordered according to God's Word.

PRAYER: Father, grant us faithful ministers and help us provide for them.

TUESDAY, MARCH 24

NEHEMIAH 13:1-14

ROMANS 16:17-20

*“I beseech you, brethren, mark them
...and avoid them.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XIX)

The reading of the book of Nehemiah clearly brings out two particular emphases. In the first six chapters, it is clear that the focus is on the work Nehemiah and the children of Israel did in the building of the wall. Beginning from chapter 8 to the end of the book, there is repeated reference to the reading of the book of Moses with the phrase “*read in the book*” appearing in Nehemiah 8:8, 18; 9:3; and 13:1. Congregational response as the third element of congregational worship has, in this book, mainly been presented as a response to the reading and exposition of the Word of God. The response of the people to the Word that was repeatedly read and expounded to them is highlighted in chapters 10 to 13. In this final chapter, the importance of maintaining biblical standards and the gains made are emphasised to us.

On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people (Neh 13:1). The response of the people to the Word was an unending and progressive duty. Vigilance was needed to ensure continuing adherence and obedience to what the Word said. Upon the reading of the Word, duty was found, and the necessity to conform to it followed. Vigilance was also necessary since the enemy that opposed the work would not relent, but would device new ways and continue to seek the downfall of God’s people and the stopping of God’s work.

Eliashib the priest... was allied unto Tobiah (Neh 13:4). The enemies of the work had not been mentioned since the wall was completed, but that did not mean that they had resigned themselves to defeat and had let God’s people be. They had infiltrated and were within the holy city. It was upon the reading of the Word of God and recognising the duty to separate from those who had mingled with them that revealed their presence. The duty to separate is one that has been generally neglected today, and its neglect has greatly undermined our service of God and ceded much ground and gain that the church has made.

THOUGHT: Biblical Separation is an obedient response to God’s Word.

PRAYER: Oh, Father, grant me courage to practise Biblical Separation.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

NEHEMIAH 13:1-14

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

*“...let him that thinketh he standeth
take heed lest he fall.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XX)

The absolute necessity of separation was clearly presented in this passage when we consider the persons involved and the effect that the infiltration had on the House of God and the ministers of the house of God. There was clear erosion of personal and corporate purity by the infiltration of Tobiah in Nehemiah 13. And the effect of compromise was greatly visible in the unmistakable change in the willing and joyful obedience to the Word of God among the people.

Eliashib the priest... was allied unto Tobiah (Neh 13:4). The name Eliashib first appeared in Nehemiah 3:1, 20 as the High Priest and one who led by example in the building of the wall. In Nehemiah 12:10, the name appeared again, pointing out that he was the grandson of Joshua the High Priest. The concurrence between Nehemiah 12:10 and Nehemiah 13:28 confirmed that it was the same person. This shows the necessity of Biblical Separation. The compromise that took place was aided by one who had great heritage, and who had played a great and leading role in the progress of the work of God.

And he had prepared for him a great chamber (Neh 13:5). Nehemiah 10 to 12 present great strides in the spiritual progress of the people. Order was put in place for efficient and faithful management of the worship and offerings of the people. But all that changed with the presence of Tobiah in the Temple. The chamber that was set to house the generous gifts and offerings of the people was used to house the one who had from the start voiced his opposition to, displeasure at, and anger against the work of God in the building of the wall. The gifts and offerings (that were displaced to create room for Tobiah) were a testimony of the people's allegiance, loyalty and obedience to God's Word, and were for the sustenance and support of the ministers of the Word of God. The effect of compromise was clearly visible, and spiritually detrimental. It undermined the ministry of the Word since those who were to serve had to leave their service to go and work in the fields: *“the portions of the Levites had not been given them...were fled every one to his field”* (Neh 13:10).

THOUGHT: Even spiritual leaders can transgress. All must be vigilant.**PRAYER:** (Pray for vigilant leaders and members in the church.)

THURSDAY, MARCH 26

NEHEMIAH 13:1-14

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21

*“...mark them which walk
so as ye have us for an ensample.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XXI)

Biblical Separation is the only recourse in dealing with compromise and infiltration. Biblical Fellowship is exclusive and must be extended only as defined by the Word of God and based on the dictates of His Word. Where infiltration or compromise is found, the only way of showing care and concern for the members involved is church discipline. The only way to deal with the enemy, who through infiltration has entered the fold, is separation.

I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah (Neh 13:7). The events that brought Tobiah into the chambers of the treasury took place in the absence of Nehemiah. Upon his return, Nehemiah found out what had happened and had to address it. He dealt with both Eliashib who had welcomed Tobiah, and Tobiah who had infiltrated the city. He dealt with Tobiah decisively. He first *“cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber”* (Neh 13:8), and removed him from Jerusalem. Upon expelling Tobiah from Jerusalem, he then purified the chambers and restored it to its rightful use. It is difficult to restore true worship without first removing the errors and compromise. He then dealt with Eliashib who had *“oversight of the chamber”* (Neh 13:4). He evidently removed him from this duty and replaced him with other treasurers taken from both the priests and Levites. The men were chosen for this duty because *“they were counted faithful”* (Neh 13:13). He also contended with the rulers and charged them for the neglect that had taken place, restoring order in the community and congregation of God’s people. The courage and zeal of Nehemiah is desperately needed in the church today because much damage has been done. Many past gains have been eroded due to the lack of courage and prudence to make the hard choices and take a biblical stand against sin and compromise in the house of God.

THOUGHT: Even though hard or painful, Biblical Separation and church discipline are still important and mandatory duties of the church.

PRAYER: (Use Nehemiah 13:14.)

FRIDAY, MARCH 27
NEHEMIAH 13:15-31
JUDE 1:3-4; 2 PETER 2:1-3

*“...there were false prophets
also among the people,
even as there shall be...”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XXII)

Spiritual growth and reformation are never completed. Those who are reformed must maintain vigilance to stay reformed. As they grow, they need to go on reforming. The history of the church since the Reformation presents a picture of a church that is always reforming. Every generation maintains the biblical standards and creeds of the past generations, while fighting their own battles and raising up a standard against the contemporary challenges they face and against the inroads the enemy tries to make. So did Nehemiah. This section highlights the need for constant self-evaluation and commitment to continual growth.

In those days saw I in Judah... (Neh 13:15). At the beginning of the covenant renewal, the people made for themselves ordinances. Among others, they resolved that *“if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them”* (Neh 10:31). But, with the passage of time, they had moved from this position to *“some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses”* (Neh 13:15). This presented the deceptive nature and influence of the world even on people who had purposed and willingly affirmed to *“make a sure covenant, and write it”* (Neh 9:38). The lure of the world and rationalisation of things that we once took a firm stand on have, over the ages, repeatedly affected the church. Hence the need for vigilance among God’s people. Nehemiah was not the only one who saw what was happening on the sabbath day. But it was he who was concerned. To others who saw it also, it seemed to be normal and acceptable. Similarly, today, the displacement of the Word from the pulpit seems normal and acceptable. The replacing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs for a “worship experience” seems normal and acceptable. The replacing of the pulpit with a stage, and pastors with motivational speakers, seem normal and acceptable. Like Eliashib giving a place to Tobiah in the chambers of the treasures of God’s house, today new things abound where biblical things once reigned. Yet, few there be who see the need to *“contend for the faith”* (Jude 1:3).

THOUGHT: “Reformed and always reforming” means growth, discipline and correction must always remain in the church.

PRAYER: (Use Nehemiah 13:14.)

SATURDAY, MARCH 28

NEHEMIAH 13:15-31

HEBREWS 12:4-13

“...if ye do so again,
I will lay hands on you.”

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XXIII)

There is also need for resolve and resoluteness in the process of reformation, in addition to the vigilance required in order to maintain biblical standards. The pressure to conform to the world is always great, and only those who are resolute can truly “(l)ove not the world, neither the things that are in the world...” (1 John 2:15), and thus be able to weather the storm and onslaught.

I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath (Neh 13:19). The measures taken may seem extreme, but similar measures had been used before. When the threat from the enemy was visible and real, they had set a watch at the gates. For their safety and security, the instruction was: “*Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them*” (Neh 7:3). Yet now, when the physical security seemed achieved, and the enemy not threatening as before, there was laxity. Those who agreed with the measures in Nehemiah 7 for the physical security of Jerusalem, had to see the need for the measures in Nehemiah 13 for the spiritual safety of the nation. As Nehemiah contended with the nobles, he reminded them of the danger they were in. The actions that seemed normal and acceptable to many had in the past brought “*wrath upon Israel*” (Neh 13:18). And if the evil of the compromise was not visible to the people, then it was upon Nehemiah to take action for their safety and security. His resoluteness was necessary since “*the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice*” (Neh 13:20). Addressing the evils of our days, especially those that have compromised the stand and faith of the church, will require us (and especially leaders in the church) to speak out resolutely against them. It will also require biblical measures to help resist the onslaught of worldliness and sin against the church. We cannot imagine how unpopular the closing of the gate of Jerusalem might have been to the inhabitants who had considered buying and selling on the sabbath as normal. But Nehemiah resolutely reformed the city.

THOUGHT: Firmness/consistency is essential for fruitful discipline.

PRAYER: (Use Nehemiah 13:14.)

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 29

NEHEMIAH 13:15-31

1 TIMOTHY 6:11-16

*“Fight the good fight of faith,
lay hold on eternal life.”*

ELEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE (XXIV)

Reformation does not only require vigilance and resoluteness. It also needs comprehensiveness. Reformation can never be accomplished selectively because any area compromised will affect the whole. As Nehemiah addressed the issues at Jerusalem, he had to handle different aspects which, from a casual and outward look, seemed unrelated. We cannot afford to neglect any area of life and still expect to maintain a biblical and godly stance. History clearly shows that all straying and apostasy begin, not by a total rejection of everything godly and biblical, but rather, by a selective approach to a biblical stand.

In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives (Neh 13:23). Again, even in this matter, it is clear that there was a departure from a previously accepted position. In Nehemiah 10, the resolve of the people at the covenant renewal was that “*we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons*” (Neh 10:30). How is it that they moved from such firm resolve to thus, that “*wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab, And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language*” (Neh 13:23-24)? This is a testimony to the need for vigilance, resoluteness and comprehensiveness if standards are to be maintained. The neglect of one area eventually erodes all. Their departure was seemingly not visible to them. Nehemiah in contending with them “*made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves*” (Neh 13:25). This was according to their previous resolve. He also reminded them from their scriptural history of the effect mixed marriages had on Solomon, king of Israel (Neh 13:26). Yet the same evil had happened among them with the high priest's grandson marrying Sanballat's daughter (Neh 13:28). Nehemiah insisted on separation. He made a public example of the high priest's grandson. This was what Paul would later exhort Timothy to do in 1 Timothy 5:19-20. When Nehemiah said, “*I chased him from me*” (Neh 13:28), he actually did “*rebuke before all, that others also may fear*” (1 Tim 5:20), and through this, he cleansed “*them from all strangers*” (Neh 13:30).

THOUGHT: Compromise leads me to substitute God's will with mine.

PRAYER: Father, help me to understand my duty, and be faithful.

MONDAY, MARCH 30

2 PETER 3:11-18

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-16

*“...let us walk by the same rule,
let us mind the same thing.”*

LESSONS ON SERVICE (I)

The book of Nehemiah has given us many vital lessons and principles for Christian service. Through this book, we have drawn lessons from Nehemiah and his burden, planning, organising and persevering in the building of the wall (Neh 1-6). We also considered the three elements of congregational worship and paid attention especially to the congregational response. From all that we have considered, may God grant us grace and wisdom to reform and continue growing. May we have renewed purpose and zeal, and walk with carefulness and vigilance and commitment to God our Saviour. From the book of Nehemiah, may we remember the following:

There is possibility both of successful service and of spiritual failure. Remember that Nehemiah, through prayer and proper planning, arrived at Jerusalem for the great work God had placed upon his heart. Please do pray and plan to serve God in the days ahead. God can, and will, prosper you. Remember also that upon arrival, Nehemiah exercised wisdom to understand the scope of the work ahead, to motivate and rally the people to rise up and serve God. He was careful to exclude those who had no part in the work and continually monitored, motivated and encouraged the workers at the wall. Do not forget the challenges of the service he undertook. Remember the relentlessness of his enemy. Know that our adversary still walks about seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet 5:8). Do not forget that Nehemiah prayed through the trials and attacks of the enemy. He maintained his resolve and focused on the work. He considered it a great work and a priority all the way to the end of the work. He did not allow himself to be distracted or deceived, whether it was by the enemy's wiles, or by those who were hired to cause him to fear and to sin against God. Finally, do not forget the sacrifices Nehemiah made in order to accomplish such great service for the Lord in a record of fifty-two days. We too can succeed in what God guides us to do. We need to have consistent dedication, endurance under trials and challenges, and faithful effort for the glory of God.

THOUGHT: God leads His dear children along.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 43.)

TUESDAY, MARCH 31

2 PETER 3:11-18

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-16

*“...beware lest ye also, being led away...
fall from your own stedfastness.”*

LESSONS ON SERVICE (II)

As we prepare for the days ahead, looking for opportunities to serve our God and Saviour, let us not forget the possibility of spiritual failure. Let us remember history, and even our own past, and beware the weakness of man (ourselves included). Let us be wary and watchful. Let us be faithful and careful. In the book of Nehemiah, we saw the congregational response in worship, and considered the centrality of the Word in Christian life, worship and service. The congregational response was primarily a response to the Word of God read, expounded and understood by God's children. Let us purpose to read, memorise, understand and obey the Word of God. From the book of Nehemiah, may we remember the following:

There is necessity for continual vigilance, resoluteness and comprehensive Biblical Separation. Remember from the accounts of the spiritual service and worship in Nehemiah 8 to 13 that heritage and history (no matter how rich and spiritual), do not replace our duty and response to the Word of God. Spiritual growth is a personal duty that is never completed. Hence, our dependence on, and obedience to, God's Word is our never-ending duty. Remember how Eliashib the high priest, after leading by example in the building work, compromised greatly despite his personal involvement, duty and rich heritage of being the grandson of Joshua the post-exilic high priest. Do not forget how the people, in response to the faithful ministry of the Word under Ezra and the Levites, grew in understanding of the Word and will of God. They made ordinances and resolved to separate and consecrate themselves to God. Do not forget how, in their obedience to God's Word, they restored biblical worship and service to God, and supported the priests and Levites, generously giving as the law required. Finally, do not forget how quickly the gains were eroded by compromise. How they turned from every resolve and promise they had vowed and made. How they were quickly led astray and fell from their stedfastness. We too, like them, are men subject to failure. Only God's Word can keep us true and faithful. Our stedfastness depends on our abiding in Christ's Word.

THOUGHT: God will direct His children.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 43.)