

Nehemiah Week One

Monday

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

³They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

⁴When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.¹ -Nehemiah 1:1-4

The book of Nehemiah was written during a critical time in the history of God's people, and it describes many important events that took place. A quick summary of its historical background is helpful to shed light on the elements that we will discuss in the book over the next few weeks.

In Israel's past, the city of Jerusalem had reached the height of its success: the city and its people were wealthy, comfortable, and enjoyed a largely peaceful era under the reign of many of its kings. The more prosperous they grew, the farther they began to move away from their relationship with God by worshipping other gods. They were warned by the many prophets in the Old Testament to return to their true God, Yahweh, or to risk being destroyed by one of their enemies. The warnings were ignored, and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the nation of Babylon in 586 B.C. (almost 600 years before Jesus began his ministry on Earth) and its people were taken from the city. About 50 years later, the nation of Persia overthrew Babylon and allowed the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it. As the rebuilding began (which you can read more about in the Book of Ezra in the Old Testament), other people who lived in nearby provinces were concerned that Jerusalem would become too strong again, and they encouraged the King of Persia to order Israel to stop building the wall around the city. Without a wall to protect them, the people were increasingly open to attack until 444 B.C., when the events of the Book of Nehemiah unfold.

Nehemiah begins with an update on the status of the people who have returned to live in Jerusalem. He learns that the people are in great danger, and he is heartbroken. Jerusalem was the hometown of his ancestors and the people living there now were his own relatives. The terrible news motivates him to take action, and he begins by mourning and turning directly to God.

Nehemiah displays for us a pattern of depending on God. In what ways do you see him doing this in this passage?

What connection do you think there may be between his emotions and his actions? How does his grief influence him?

What can you learn from Nehemiah's behavior here at times when you encounter a problem or see a need that someone else has?

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). Ne 1:1-4.

Tuesday

⁵ Then I said:

“O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

⁸ “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

¹⁰ “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king. ² -Nehemiah 1:5-11

After learning about the distress of the people in Jerusalem, Nehemiah mourns, fasts and prays to God for days. He then records this prayer that he says to the Lord. It is easy to see that this is no empty prayer. Nehemiah knows the history of his people, and he knows the history of the great love and wonderful promises that God has for them. Nehemiah has done his homework. Rather than approaching the Lord quickly with requests, he takes the time to humble himself and begins by simply adoring God and his faithfulness. He then confesses the mistakes that he and his people have made in the past, he repeats with confidence the promises that the Lord has made to restore his people, and then, finally, he submits his request for help. His simple request for compassion doesn’t seem so tremendous at first, but what he is asking for is compassion from a king. It is an incredible request indeed.

What makes the pattern of Nehemiah’s prayer so striking, and how is it different from most of the prayers that you hear or say?

When Nehemiah prays, who is his focus?

What specific elements do you see in Nehemiah’s prayer that you think you should apply when you approach God in prayer personally?

² *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). Ne 1:4–11.

Wednesday

¹ In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; ²so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” ³

-Nehemiah 2:1-3

While living in Persia, Nehemiah was the cupbearer to king. His job was to deliver wine to the king and to taste it to prove that it was not poisoned. With the constant access to the king’s cup, the cupbearer also had the greatest opportunity to poison the king himself, so the position of cupbearer was granted only to those that the king trusted. Because he was so trusted by the king, the cupbearer had the opportunity to become quite influential. This put Nehemiah in a unique position to make his great request to help his people, but he had to play by some serious rules. At the risk of being put to death, no one in the palace was allowed to look sad in the presence of the king, nor could they make direct requests of the king. Perhaps this is why Nehemiah took nearly four months to approach the king with the sad news about Jerusalem. We can see great care and planning in the way that Nehemiah chose to approach the king.

The way that Nehemiah approaches the king is much different than the way most people choose to approach authority today. Often we display an attitude of entitlement rather than one of humility. This often happens when we choose to spend more time complaining than in helping to create solutions. We believe that something just simply “should be” a certain way and we are upset that it is not, so we complain or gossip about it instead of offering to assist in the work to make the necessary changes. Instead of insistently making a request to the king, Nehemiah humbly trusts God with the situation and waits for the king to question him. And when he does, Nehemiah is respectful yet direct.

In what ways do you see people display an attitude of entitlement (in politics, in your family, at your job, etc.)?

What can you learn from Nehemiah’s example regarding humility and people of authority?

In what specific areas of your life do you think you need to exercise more humility (at home, church, school club, social networking?)

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). Ne 2:1–3.

Thursday

⁴The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

⁶Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. ⁴ -Nehemiah 2:4-6

After learning of the danger that Jerusalem was in, Nehemiah had waited four months to make his request of the king. He knew that this was serious business, and that his very life depended on the favor of the king. So when the king asks Nehemiah what he would have the king do, we see something fascinating occur. Standing right there in the palace of the King of Persia, in the middle of a conversation, Nehemiah sends out a prayer to the Lord.

Many of us have ideas about what a prayer “should be” which usually involve lengthy periods of time, sunrises (or sunsets), kneeling or standing (or both), and specific words that are verbally spoken or perhaps written. They usually start the same, end the same, or even have the same content every time. What is beautiful about this passage is the feeling of freedom that comes when we realize that prayer is available to us anytime, anywhere, in any way. The person with the long commute can spend that time behind the wheel in prayer; the busy mother can pray for patience and strength right there in the kitchen when voices start to rise; the young child at school can pray on the playground when she sees a friend being bullied. There is freedom in knowing that we have the ability to talk to God in many ways; we don’t have to try to make it fit a certain blueprint.

Do you find that your own prayers tend to be more ‘formal’ (such as the prayer in Nehemiah chapter 1), more ‘conversational’, or a combination of the two?

What do you think about the idea that there are many ways that you can pray?

Do you find it difficult to find the time to pray or to make it a priority in your life?

If you don’t already pray consistently, try to brainstorm some ways that you can begin to find more time to pray. Is it easier if you set aside a specific time of day? (Perhaps in the morning, night, when you have your coffee, your lunch break, or while you are preparing dinner?) The possibilities are endless. Just consider times that are the most realistic for you and write them down.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). Ne 2:4–6.

Friday

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ⁵

¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. ⁶ -Nehemiah 2:11-13, 16-18

When Nehemiah arrived at Jerusalem, he set to work inspecting the walls and carefully creating a plan to restore the walls of the city. He waited to gather his information before presenting his plan to the rest of the people. Nehemiah had with him the written orders of the king of Persia giving him permission to restore the city and instituting him as the official governor of the province; he could have arrived in Jerusalem displaying those orders and declaring himself as the man in charge of the new project, yet he chose to arrive quietly and to set about his work. He presented his plan and encouraged the people by telling them how God had provided support through the king, and they eagerly chose to follow the leadership of Nehemiah.

In our power-driven, success-seeking culture we are often taught to "dress for the job we want" and to "act the part we want to be." In other words, we believe that if we go in looking and acting like a difference maker, we can become one. But the Bible tells us through the lives of many people that often the greatest difference makers are the ones who don't look the part or even seek it. It is through appropriate action, and a humble and willingly conditioned heart that God himself raises them up as such. Difference makers don't necessarily pursue making difference as an end in and of itself – rather they serve God and others and a difference being made naturally follows.

When you think of a 'difference maker', who comes to your mind first?

What qualities does that person possess that makes you think of them as a difference maker?

Do you consider yourself to be a 'difference maker'? Why or why not?

Everyone is meant to make a difference for good in one way or another whether they realize it or not. If you are married, a parent, a neighbor, an employee, a boss, a friend, a student or a teacher- your life serves as an example to

⁵ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). Ne 2:11–13.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). Ne 2:16–18.

Monday

¹When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ²and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?”

³Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”

⁴Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

⁶So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.”

—Nehemiah 4:1-6ⁱ

The rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem was underway, and the governors of the nearby regions were concerned that they might lose their positions of power if Jerusalem became a strong city again. Sanballat the governor of Samaria and Tobiah of Ammon sought to stop the work of rebuilding the city walls. They began by planting suspicion and distrust towards Nehemiah by implying that he might be starting a revolt against the King of Persia. When that did not work, they resorted to ridicule. The people were working hard and risking their lives while being laughed at and taunted daily.

Ridicule is difficult to face. Many people can strong and keep their cool when faced with emergency situations, difficult decisions, times of trial or even military service, and yet crumble when they encounter ridicule. Few things can suck the life out of a person’s spirit quicker than being made fun of. But Nehemiah did not give in to his enemies by giving up. He stayed strong and recognized the mockery for what it was: another attempt to hinder God’s plans for his people. He also did not return their insults, but trusted God to take control of the matter instead. Nehemiah kept the people focused on their work and encouraged them to stay strong in spite of the ridicule.

Have you ever worked hard at something you believed was important, only to have other people make fun of you for it? How did that affect you and your work?

How do you usually respond when faced with ridicule? How much of a difference does it make to you when a close friend or relative is there to encourage you to stay strong?

It is important to remember that everyone who does something to make a difference is usually made fun of at the beginning, and are often told that what they are trying to do is either impossible or a waste of time. The ideas of people flying airplanes or going to the moon were once considered ridiculous, just as feeding the hungry children of the world and seeing orphanages empty now sound like impossible dreams. But when God’s people band together and encourage one another to make real change, the impossible suddenly becomes possible. What are some of your “impossible” dreams?

Tuesday

¹⁰ Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.”

¹¹ Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.”

¹² Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

¹³ Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. ¹⁴ After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”” –Nehemiah 4:10-14

The people have been working under the threat of violence with their enemies watching their every move. The hard work is wearing them out, and despair begins to set in. Nehemiah boldly calls on the Israelites to remember the importance of their work and who they are doing it for. He inspires them to look beyond their current problems, reminding them that they are working with the help of a mighty God for the future of their people and the safety of their families. Difficult tasks are made easier when people have a passion for what they are doing and when they care about those they are working for. If we can look beyond ourselves to see the bigger picture, our own problems appear less daunting and despair fades away.

Nehemiah does more than comfort the people with words; he protects them by his actions. How?

Why do you think Nehemiah tells the people to remember God and their families?

Have you ever worked at something where the well-being of someone else was at stake? Did that make you more or less motivated to do your best?

Do you feel discouraged or hopeless at times? When?

What can you take from Nehemiah’s example and apply to your own experiences with feeling that something is hopeless?

Wednesday

¹When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—²Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me;³ so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”⁴ Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.⁵ Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter⁶ in which was written:

“It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king⁷ and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.”

⁸I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”

⁹They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”” —Nehemiah 6:1-9

The people of Jerusalem have worked day and night to complete the walls around the city of Jerusalem. They have risked their lives to do it, and are now almost finished. The enemies of Israel have tried to stir dissension among the people by first implying that Nehemiah is starting a revolt, and then by ridiculing the people and taunting them. When none of that works, they take desperate measures by attempting to lure Nehemiah out of the protection of the city to meet with him. However, Nehemiah knows that they intend to either capture or kill him which would most likely mean that the project of rebuilding the wall would stop. He declines the invitation to meet with his enemies, and they try to wear him down by calling for him five different times. When Nehemiah encounters discouragement, he utters a simple yet powerful prayer: “Now strengthen my hands.” He trusts on God to handle his troubles, and simply asks for the strength to continue on, knowing that his difficult task is almost complete.

The trials of life tend to be persistent, don't they? The car always seems to break down the same month that the furnace needs to be replaced, and your boss delivers you that overly critical performance review while you are dealing with the loss of a loved one. During these times, the troubles of life can become difficult to bear. Discouragement sets in, and our hands and hearts become painfully weak.

Have you ever experienced a season in your life that had ‘persistent trials’? When?

When you felt discouraged, how did you get through it?

When you face discouragement for trying to do what is right, how can you depend on God to ‘strengthen your hands’?

Thursday

¹⁰ One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you."

¹¹ But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" ¹² I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³ He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me." -Nehemiah 6:10-13

After several attempts to discourage the people of Jerusalem and threats of violence against Nehemiah himself, one last effort is made by the enemies of Israel. They couldn't wear the people out, kill their leader, or discourage the people from working, so Sanballat and Tobiah come up with a final plan: they will discredit Nehemiah. If they can get Nehemiah to waiver in his trust of God, the people may choose to stop working for him. No one wants to work for someone who will save themselves but put others at risk. They hire a man to tell Nehemiah that he is in danger and that he should protect himself by hiding inside of the temple. But Nehemiah knows that abandoning the people for his own safety is the wrong thing to do, so he maintains his faith that God will help him to complete the rebuilding of the wall.

How do you think the people would have responded if Nehemiah had become intimidated and had hidden himself inside of the Temple? How would Nehemiah's sudden absence have affected the project?

Have you ever had a part in a project in which you suddenly felt overwhelmed and wanted to quit? How would (or how did) choosing to quit affect everyone else on the team?

Making a difference in someone's life takes a lot of commitment. Parents who choose to leave their children, CEO's who quit when times get tough, and students who give up halfway through a project all bring discredit upon themselves when they leave a mess behind for others to clean up. On the other hand, people know they can count on someone who sticks by them through the tough times in life. These are the real difference makers.

Who do you know that is going through something difficult that makes them feel like 'giving up'?

What can you do to encourage that person and help make a difference in his or her life?

Friday

¹⁵“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.” -Nehemiah 6:15-16

When the wall around the city of Jerusalem was finished, it stood about 16 feet tall and 4 ½ miles long. This was an incredible task. Amazingly enough, the project was completed in only 52 days! How could such an overwhelming task be completed so quickly? Nehemiah tells us how: “with the help of our God.” God’s help in the project was apparently so undeniable that Nehemiah’s enemies even acknowledged it; and it made them afraid.

Nehemiah encouraged the people to trust in God to complete something that seemed impossible. How did he do this?

How important do you think the community was in completing the wall? What lessons can our own church learn from Nehemiah’s community about working together to make a difference?

In what areas of your life do you think God wants you to help to make a difference? Is there a need in the community that you know of or perhaps a person you know that needs you to share the love of God with them?

Nehemiah always gave the credit to God for the work that was done. Although he was an important governor he had an attitude of humility, even when he was dealing with his enemies. What do you consider to be the biggest successes of your own life?

Take a moment and thank God for his help in those accomplishments.

ⁱ All scripture is quoted from the New International Version, 1984.

Nehemiah- Week Three

Monday

¹Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. ²Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.”

³Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

⁴Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”” –Nehemiah 5:1-5*

When the city of Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C., the people were enslaved and taken to live in the lands of the Babylonians. During the time of their captivity, the people no doubt dreamed about returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, and probably passed on glorious stories about the beauty and great wealth of the city and about the great God who would one day return them to Jerusalem. With a shift in world politics, the people were given permission to return and to rebuild their great city. What a miraculous day this must have been! You can imagine the excited crowds of families, animals and caravans traveling to Jerusalem. God had kept his promise, and they were headed home!

But they arrived to find conditions quite different that what they had expected. Surely they expected the city to require a lot work, and they knew there would be opposition to the reconstruction. Yet there were two problems that they did not anticipate: famine and debt. Because of the famine they had to sell their property for food, and when they ran out of property they had to sell their own family members. This must have certainly been quite distressing! The people are left with two options: they can either pack up and head somewhere else in search of better conditions, or they can stand strong in their faith and trust that God will provide a better way.

Can you think of a time in your life when you looked forward to something that was exciting and promising only to find that it wasn’t quite as great as you expected it would be? (Such as marriage, a job change, or a new home?)

How did you deal with the difficulties you encountered?

What can you learn from the Israelites choice to stick around and resolve their troubles in regards to your own unexpected situation?

Tuesday

⁶“When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! ¹¹Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.”” -Nehemiah 5:6-11

The severe famine caused everyone to sell their property and to even sell some of their family members into slavery just so they could purchase food. What was even more appalling was the fact that the landowners that were driving everyone into debt were fellow Israelites. In other words, the rich were charging high interest rates (the “usury” mentioned in verses 7 and 10) to those who had less. The people then had to sell their loved ones into slavery, only to have them purchased back by other Israelites who were spending their own money to help return the people to the city. Nehemiah was furious to discover that many of the people were already returning to one of the sins that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in the first place: oppression of the poor. He called the guilty people out and demanded that they be merciful to the people so that they could survive the famine.

What were some things that Nehemiah did personally to help people to survive the famine?

What does this tell you about Nehemiah’s character? What was important to him?

What do these verses tell you about how we should deal with ‘our own’ (family, church members, or people of the community) when they have a need?

What are some practical things that you can do personally to help out someone who is in need? (Perhaps bring meals to those returning from the hospital, give financial assistance to someone who needs a car repair or donate items to an orphanage?)

Wednesday

¹² ““We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!”

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.”

-Nehemiah 5:12-13

Nehemiah had just learned that some of the rich people were taking advantage of the poor, taking advantage of their need and driving them into debt. He calls the wealthy land owners together and insists that they give back the land and money to the poorer families so that they can survive the famine. They agree, and Nehemiah calls in witnesses and performs this memorable and symbolic gesture of shaking out his robes. As the people watched on and agreed with an ‘amen’, they were entering into a type of formal agreement that was common in ancient times. Nehemiah is bold when he faces these wealthy leaders, and doesn’t hold back at fixing the problem. And he doesn’t sweep it under the rug or shrink back from doing what needs to be done.

How does Nehemiah deal with injustice when he sees it?

Have you ever witnessed an injustice being done? Were you able to do anything about it?

An injustice may be something as obvious as an abuse or crime, or it may be much more subtle and more difficult to recognize. It could be bullying, gossip, or neglect. Do you ever witness these types of wrongs on a regular basis?

What can you do to make a difference the next time you encounter a wrong being done to another person?

Thursday

¹⁴ “Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. ¹⁵ But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. ¹⁶ Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.” -Nehemiah 5:14-16

This part of the book was taken from Nehemiah’s own journal. He writes about the privileges that were given to the governors of the region. As a governor, Nehemiah would have been completely within his rights to collect taxes, excessive amounts of food and land from the people he governed, the Israelites. Yet he recognized the burden that it would put on the people, and consciously chose to give up rights. His focus was not on the benefits of his position, but on what he needed to do to truly make a difference for his people. He did this by doing something that is often referred to as ‘servant leadership’, which means that a person chooses to lead others by serving them. One of the greatest characteristics of a servant leader is the way they choose to serve other people because of their love for God.

Why did Nehemiah and his men choose to surrender their leadership privileges?

How did serving people make Nehemiah a more effective difference maker?

When you think of people who make a difference by serving others, who comes to mind? Why?

What are some ways in your own life that you could make a difference by serving someone? (In your family, at work, at school, at church or in your community?)

Friday

¹⁷ Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸ Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

¹⁹ Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.” Nehemiah 5:17-19

One of the benefits of being a governor was having a great deal of food available to you for parties, meetings, and for meeting the needs of the other officials. The large amount of food was another one of the rights that Nehemiah gave up because he knew that it would burden the people of the city to provide it for him.

We see attitudes of entitlement everywhere in our culture. Many times we simply expect that we should be able to have whatever we want and we are angry if we do not get it. We collect massive amounts of possessions without realizing the burden that our many ‘wants’ put on other people and on the planet. We may feel cheated if we get overlooked for that promotion at work, jealous of someone with a larger home and bitter if we believe that our actions are not appreciated as much as we believe they should be. Although it is normal to have all of these feelings, the problem comes when we spend more time focused on ourselves and our own wants and needs than on the needs of others.

An attitude of “entitlement” can be a frightening thing. When people of influence are more concerned with benefits than they are about making an impact on people’s lives, priorities can get dysfunctional. Have you ever seen this happen?

The opposite of entitlement is humility. With this in mind, how can humility impact your ability to be a difference maker?

What are some things you can do to become a person with more humility? (Keep in mind that humility is not about putting yourself down, it is about surrendering your rights to honor another person.)

* All scripture referenced is from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1984.

Nehemiah- Week Four

Monday

¹All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

²So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law..."

⁵Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground." –Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5, 6*

In chapter 8 we find the Israelite people at a very exciting time. They have just completed the wall around Jerusalem in only 52 days and have committed to pursue integrity in their lives out of devotion for Yahweh God. Here they are at the moment they have been waiting for! So now they need to know: what's next? At this critical point, they could easily miss their purpose by simply falling back into what they have always known. Instead, they choose to depend on the scriptures for the direction for their future. They call in their head scribe and priest and begin reading the Hebrew scriptures from cover to cover. It is clear from their response that the people were hungry for truth; most of them had lived their lives without access to the Bible at all. How amazing it must have been for them to hear the full story concerning the awesome God who created this beautiful world, who called them to be his people and who revealed his greatness and faithfulness to them time and time again. What a message this must have been when it fell on the fatigued and discouraged hearts of the people returning from exile!

Are we so different from them? Our world is still filled with injustice, poverty, and death. Our people are just as starving for the message of God's truth as they were in Nehemiah's day. Our world needs difference-makers who will choose to allow God's word to transform them: in life, in thought, in action. But how can we become transformed if we will not yield our time and our energy to knowing God more deeply? And how can we know him more deeply if we neglect the scriptures that he provided for us? The problem with our culture is that we have so much access to Bible information that we take it for granted. The more information we have available to us, the less we seem to use it. What we need is a fresh perspective about the Bible and humble hearts that are willing to take the time to seek out God with a desire to know him better. We need to go back to the beginning before we can move ahead.

What is your primary source of information about God, the Bible and Christian life?

How much of a priority is Bible reading in your life? How consistently do you read it?

What changes would you like to see in your personal study of the Bible? What changes can you make in your life to take it to the next level? (Perhaps read it consistently, join a small group, or take a local Bible class?)

Tuesday

⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. ⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.”

¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.” —Nehemiah 8:7-12*

As the people read through the Bible together, they were overcome with the history of their people and how far they had wandered away from the Lord, and they began to weep. It certainly was a lot to process. Thankfully, the priests were available to explain to them what they had read and the people’s mourning turned to joy.

Reading large amounts of the Bible can be a bit like taking a drink of water from a fire hose, it can be overwhelming. Jumping into an unfamiliar part of the Bible without knowing anything about the book, the people in it, or the form of literature in which it was written can leave anyone confused. This is why it is so important that we work together to help each other to understand the Bible more; when we learn about the Bible, we learn more about God himself. And when we can teach people more about God, we can help to make a difference in their lives. Teaching people about the Bible isn’t as difficult as it may sound; you don’t need a PhD to do it. Start by simply talking about the fascinating things that you learn and how they change your life, make it a part of who you are and teach by example. Read the Bible with others. Consider purchasing a Study Bible that includes many helpful background notes, maps and charts that help you to understand when and where everything took place. The Bible was written for real people who lived in the real world; take some time to learn a little about them. When you are ready, there are many great study materials out there that you can explore. The more we understand what the Bible meant to the people who originally read it, the more we can understand what it means for us today. Above all, be patient; it takes time.

Do you ever talk about the Bible with people? Who? When?

Do you enjoy teaching people about the Bible? What are you the most passionate about when you teach it?

What steps can you take to understand the Bible more so that you can talk about it with more confidence?

Do you have a difficult time understanding the Bible? Is there someone that you can reach out to that can help you to understand it better?

Wednesday

¹³ On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written.

¹⁶ So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

¹⁸ Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.” —Nehemiah 8:13-18*

While reading through the scriptures together, the people discover that an important week-long festival is just around the corner: the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast celebrated the way that God provided for his people while they wandered in the wilderness for forty years after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. This feast had special meaning for them since they were returning from their own kind of wandering, living as exiles in other nations. So the people, enthusiastic as they are beginning to understand their scriptures, are excited to make them a part of their lives and this Feast is the perfect opportunity to get started.

Bible knowledge without life-change is meaningless, isn't it? To be completely honest, it can be dangerous. It can become the root for hypocrisy in a person's life when they claim to hold to certain godly standards that their life does not measure up to. This does not mean that we can't make mistakes; what it means is that we refuse to be in denial about our mistakes or to believe that we are exempt from following the standards that we expect others to follow. We need to do more than learn about the Bible, we need to do what it says.

What ways do you see the Israelites responding to the Bible as they read it?

How do you usually respond to the Bible when you read it? Do you try to do what it says?

What things can you do right now to use what you *learn* from the Bible so that you can *live* what it says?

Thursday

¹“On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. ²Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. ³They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God.

^{5b}“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

⁷“You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. ⁸You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.”” –Nehemiah 9-1-3,5b-7*

Chapter one of the book of Nehemiah contains a prayer from his memoirs that is fascinating because it reveals to us a profound way to pray that is much different than how we often do today. If you are familiar with chapter one, you will probably notice something interesting about chapter nine: this corporate prayer follows the same pattern as Nehemiah’s personal prayer of chapter one. The people begin by simply adoring God and celebrating his faithfulness, then move into confessing their sins and admitting the ways in which they have abandoned the Lord. They recount the story of God’s promises, knowing that God has promised forgiveness to those who turn to him, and then humbly make their request for God to provide his protection. The most striking aspect of both of these prayers is how God-centered they are. What we see here in chapters eight through ten is how learning more about God through the scriptures changes us from being “me-focused” to being “God-focused.” It is through his words that we are led to humility and repentance, and through repentance that we are equipped to live for God as true difference-makers.

What do you think are some differences between a “me-focused” prayer and a “God-focused” one?

What is it about Nehemiah’s prayers that make them so God-centered?

What relationship do you notice between prayer and Bible reading?

What changes can you make in your own prayer life to become someone who is more focused on God?

Friday

³² ““Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. ³⁴ Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. ³⁵ Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

³⁶ “But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. ³⁷ Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

³⁸ “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”” –Nehemiah 9:32-38*

It is said that “confession is good for the soul.” But confession has become a nearly lost component of today’s Christian life. We don’t understand what it is or why it should be done. John Ortberg describes it this way:

“...what many of us are searching for is not simply another message reassuring us that God forgives freely. As wonderful as it is, that information alone is not enough to enable people to grow in their *experience* of God’s liberating forgiveness. Many of us struggle at this point- not so much with understanding the message of forgiveness, but with living in the reality of it. This inability to accept the reality of forgiveness is the reason that God has given us the practice of confession... We need to confess in order to heal and be changed.”¹

Yes, God certainly does forgive both freely and abundantly. But before we can truly live in that generous forgiveness, God wants us to own up to our sins; not for his benefit, *but for ours*. We are often afraid to truly take our transgressions before the Lord or to seek out mature Christians that we can trust to help us to deal with them. So we live with the same secret struggle year after year and we find ourselves in a place of spiritual bondage. Yet if we can just open up and break the secrecy that our sins create within us, sin will lose its hold on us and we will learn that we are not as alone as we thought, nor is our sin as unbeatable as we once believed. It is then that we are open, tender, and ready to experience healing so that we can move on. This is where we find the Israelites in chapter 9. They refuse to deny any longer the sin that they and their ancestors lived in. They are prepared to admit to their past guilt, commit to make changes, and then move on in freedom.

Do you think that confessing our sins to God and to one another is important? Why or why not?

Was there ever a time in your life that you sought someone else to help you with some sort of sin you were struggling with? How did you do this, and what were the results?

What sins are you struggling with now that you need to confess, and seek healing and forgiveness for? Take a moment and tell God about them, asking him to bring healing to you.

¹ John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: spiritual disciplines for ordinary people*.

*All scripture referenced is from *The Holy Bible, New International Version, 1984*.

Nehemiah- Week 5

Monday

¹“On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, ² because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) ³ When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

⁴ Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, ⁵ and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.” –Nehemiah 13:1-5*

After the wall around Jerusalem was completed, Nehemiah stayed and served as the governor of Israel for 12 years. After that, he returned to his duties at the palace of the King of Persia where he served as the King’s cupbearer. He was there for some time before he came back to Jerusalem where he served the people of Israel again as their governor. Nehemiah returns to find that many of the people have reverted back to their previous patterns of living; in this case, the people had broken the law that said that foreigners were not allowed to serve in the Temple of Yahweh. The reason for this was because it encouraged political and religious alliances with people who did not serve the God of the Bible, and the people had been led into idolatry in the past because of it.

When Nehemiah returns, he finds none other than Tobiah living within the Temple. Tobiah appeared several times throughout the book of Nehemiah as one of the neighboring governors who attempted to thwart the plans to rebuild the wall. Tobiah, an Ammonite, was concerned that he would lose his own political power if Jerusalem became strong, and here he was now living within the Temple of Jerusalem itself. Through an unfortunate alliance, the priest Eliashib gave him a room that was intended to store the food for the priests and the objects used for their worship. Nehemiah quickly saw to it that Tobiah was removed and the room put back to its intended use.

Tobiah seems like a very unlikely person to find living in God’s Temple. But consider how often we allow our own “Tobiah” to take up residence in our hearts, a place intended for God’s presence. We choose to live for God, allow him to change our lives, and then eventually find ourselves falling into our old patterns of living. Like Nehemiah, we need to kick Tobiah out!

Why was Nehemiah so upset to find Tobiah living in the Temple?

What does it say about the spiritual condition of the people in Jerusalem at the time?

Do you have a personal “Tobiah” that you know does not belong in your life? (Perhaps it is raunchy music or TV, a secret sin pattern that you have, or an unhealthy relationship that distracts you from God.)

What can you do today deal with the “Tobiah” in your life so that you can grow closer to God?

Tuesday

¹⁰ I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. ¹¹ So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

¹² All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms. ¹³ I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their brothers.

¹⁴ Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services." –Nehemiah 13:10-14*

Nehemiah returned to find that the Israelites had neglected to provide for the priests and the Temple; the situation was so serious that most of the priests had to quit serving at the Temple and go back to farming. This revealed a lot about how the priorities of the Israelites had changed and how they had lost much of their concern for worshipping the Lord. Nehemiah stepped in to see that changes were made so that the Levite priests would be able to return to their work in the Temple so that the people would be able to worship God once again.

What were some of the ways that the Temple was being neglected?

What effect did it have on the community?

Are there some ways that you know that you should contribute to God's community? (Perhaps with service or finances?)

How do you think it would affect the church community if more people chose to make a difference by serving God with more of their time, finance and abilities?

How would the community of Metro Detroit be affected if all its Christians chose to do this?

Wednesday

¹⁹When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. ²²Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.” –Nehemiah 13:19-22*

The Sabbath was an important day for the Israelites; it was a day to refrain from working and to enjoy life and the blessings of God. It caused the people to slow down and take the time to notice the presence of God in the world, and to worship the Lord with family. However, while Nehemiah was away the Israelites slowly fell back into the pattern of their neighbors: they allowed their lives to become so busy that they no longer had time to properly observe the Sabbath. Essentially, they chose commerce over worship. So Nehemiah took drastic measures to do whatever it took to keep the busyness outside of the city.

How do you think the Israelites initially reacted when Nehemiah ordered the gates to remain closed?

What kinds of changes do you think the people had to make in their lives to return to observing the Sabbath day?

Do you have time in your own life for a “Sabbath” day (a day to rest and to worship God), or is your life currently too busy?

What changes would need to be made in your life to create time for a day of worship and rest? Sometimes this requires a change in priorities.

Thursday

²³ Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. ²⁴ Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. ²⁵ I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. ²⁷ Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?"

–Nehemiah 13:23-27*

The problem with foreign marriages was not a concern over some type of racial or genetic purity. In ancient times a person's culture was intertwined with their religion, so when people married the religions of their community would merge. For cultures that worshipped many gods, this was not viewed as a problem. But for the Hebrew people who worshipped only Yahweh God, this was a recipe for disaster indeed. Nehemiah reminds the people of the example of King Solomon, the king who was known to be the wisest person who had ever lived. Yet even with all of his wisdom, he gave in to the temptation to try to follow the gods of his wives along with Yahweh God. If the wisest king in history could be led into idolatry, then the average Israelite certainly could to.

In what ways does our own culture attempt to "mix" faith with things that we know aren't pleasing to God? (Such as music, popular books, TV. shows, college classes?) What do they say about faith and how you live your life?

How do you think a difference maker like Nehemiah would deal with those things?

Are there any areas of your own life where you have allowed things that displease God to move in?

How do you need to deal with those areas so that you can focus on your relationship with God?

Friday

³⁰“So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. ³¹ I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me with favor, O my God.” –Nehemiah 13:30-31*

There is no doubt that Nehemiah made a tremendous difference in the lives of the Israelite people by helping them to build the wall and protect their city, by restoring them to a deep relationship with Yahweh God and then later by returning to make sure that they were holding to their commitments. Chapter 13 makes it very clear to us that Nehemiah took the peoples’ relationship with God seriously. He took action when it was necessary, and he very often did things that were certainly unpopular. Being a difference maker is not easy, and it is not always comfortable. It may require travel, money, insecurity, taunting, opposition and even danger. But standing up against injustice is always a worthy cause, and if this world is ever going to change then someone needs to be willing to do it. Nehemiah followed what he knew God wanted him to do, knowing that he was not alone. He did not do it for power or for personal gain. He did it out of faith and love for God and his people. Will you take the risk of becoming a difference maker? If you won’t, then who will?

In what ways have you felt that God may be calling you to be a make a difference in someone’s life?

What are some ways that you can do begin to do this, or people you can meet with to discuss it?

What changes in your life would need to be made so that you can become a difference maker? Pray about this, and ask God to show you how you can begin. Remember that small, consistent steps are often more impactful than huge commitments that are difficult to keep.

* All Scripture referenced is from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).