

NEHEMIAH: DAILY STUDY

Written By David K. Ferguson

INTRODUCTION

Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

All of Scripture chronicles God's audacious rescue mission as He seeks to bring His fallen children home. The story repeats in concentric circles. His children succumb to selfishness and wayward thinking, drift further from God, and become ensnared. This critical error offers no hope of recovery, evoking Windows' blue screen of death or Mac's eternally spinning wheel. But just when all seems lost, God executes a hard reboot on the lives He desires for His people. He held down the power key as Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden under the prophecy of a coming Messiah. He shocks His children back to life as Noah's family fills the ark, at the Tower of Babel, and at the dry bed of the Red Sea. He will completely reset His mission from a humble manger and a hoisted cross. However, before He boldly marches into the New Testament, God makes one final attempt with the wandering Children of Israel.

You might not know that there are two Exodus stories in the Old Testament. From the moment the Hebrews left Egypt, they often turned to idolatry, embraced paganism, and strayed from the God of salvation. Eventually, six hundred years before Christ, God used the Babylonian armies to exile His people and start fresh.

If asked, many of us would mention Jeremiah 29:11 as a favorite Bible passage that inspires us during discouraging times. Some of us wave it around like a magic wand used to bring miracles to life. In doing so, we overlook its context and true meaning.

This well-known verse is part of a letter to the Jews in Babylonian captivity. In it, Jeremiah cautions against false prophets who claim imminent release and return to Judah. Note the rarely quoted words from Jeremiah 29:10, "*This is what the LORD says: 'You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again.'*" In this instance, the reboot requires holding down the power key for seventy years—all of this to bring His children home.

So, dear reader, welcome to our study of the first half of the book of NEHEMIAH. It tells the story of returning home, following God's calling, and grappling with the challenges of rebuilding the life He intends for us to live. We will start with a prologue to set the context, understand the surrounding events, and get a sense of how various puzzle pieces fit together. To assist with this, I've included a timeline of events. Refer to it for context as we explore the final chapters before the Old Testament falls silent in preparation for the greatest reset of all, Jesus.

Lovewell,

Pastor Dave Ferguson and the Crosswalk Series Guide writing team

WEEK 1: MONDAY

Prologue - Cyrus

Ezra 1:1-4

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the LORD fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom:

"This is what King Cyrus of Persia says:

'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem.'"

We begin our study of Nehemiah by stepping back to consider the context.

In 605 B.C., after repeatedly ignoring warnings, God allowed Jerusalem to fall to the Babylonians led by King Nebuchadnezzar. Over the next twenty years, a series of deportations and the city's destruction sealed the disaster. During this time, both Daniel and Jeremiah prophesied that their captivity (beginning in 586 B.C.) would last for seventy years, from the temple's destruction to its eventual rebuilding.

However, over the seventy-year period, Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered the Babylonians and took control of the Jewish exiles. The Babylonian strategy of subjugation involved capturing all leaders and influential individuals and transporting them to their capital city. Consequently, Daniel and others were taken. They also confiscated every significant worship artifact, including candlesticks, goblets, and other items from the temple, transforming them into playthings for their king. Thus, Daniel recounts the story of King Nabonidus' son, Belshazzar, and his noblemen drinking wine from the Hebrew temple goblets as the city fell to the Persians (Daniel 5).

The Persian approach to subjugation was more benevolent. They sought to help captives thrive under their rule, often permitting them to return to their homelands while still paying taxes. The first chapter of Ezra records Cyrus doing this with the Hebrew exiles. However, there are a few interesting points to consider before continuing with the story.

First, the historian Josephus presents an intriguing motivation for Cyrus' decree of liberation. Somehow, the Persian king learned that many years earlier, the Hebrew prophet Isaiah had written about a forthcoming king named Cyrus and requested that scrolls of this prophecy be made available for his study. Then, in Isaiah 44:28, the king read:

[I am the Lord] who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."

Cyrus concluded that Isaiah's words referred to himself. Here's the crazy part: this prophecy was given 140 years before the temple's destruction. Do you grasp what this means? Long before the problem

arose, God was already devising a solution. I wonder what challenges make you feel isolated, trapped, and hopeless. Consider that Jesus has always known what you need and has been working for your rescue from the very beginning.

The second surprise is this: Ezra 2:64-65 records that nearly 50,000 Jews responded to Cyrus' invitation and left for Jerusalem to undertake the rebuilding project. Scholars suggest there were around one million Jews in Persian exile at that time. Hold on... this means that nearly one million of the Children of Israel preferred captivity over following Yahweh's call to return home.

I wonder... Is it possible that you or I could become so comfortable in our enslavement to sin and the comforts of this foreign land that, despite His ongoing work for our salvation, we would prefer to stay put rather than respond to Jesus' invitation to come back home?

1. **What food, place, or thing makes you feel exceptionally comfortable?**
2. **What habit have you been unable to break? What is one you would like to begin?**
3. **What major issue are you currently facing? What would you like to say to Jesus about it?**

WEEK 1: TUESDAY

Prologue Continued – The Temple

Ezra 4:24-5:2

So the work on the Temple of God in Jerusalem had stopped, and it remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia. At that time the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem. They prophesied in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jehozadak responded by starting again to rebuild the Temple of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them and helped them.

Haggai 1:1-6

On August 29 of the second year of King Darius's reign, the LORD gave a message through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The people are saying, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.'"

Then the LORD sent this message through the prophet Haggai: "Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!"

Building anything demands significant effort. And to rebuild? That's an even bolder action verb, especially when the initial steps include removing, refurbishing, or reusing the old. Therefore, it is not surprising that the initial efforts to rebuild the temple stalled due to opposition and a lack of commitment.

In 522 B.C., with only six years left in Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy, King Darius (Cyrus the Great's son-in-law) committed additional resources and granted permission for the temple rebuild to resume. However, there is a problem, and the prophet Haggai steps up to address it.

The people have been postponing the rebuild. One imagines the excuses: "We don't have the resources. There aren't enough workers. It's not good timing. We'll get to it once we are done with" ... fill in the blank. Meanwhile, they have invested plenty of energy and resources in their own homes and fields. So, Haggai voices Yahweh's concern. Their luxury will never be enough to satisfy. Their food can't quench their hunger as long as they put God off for another day.

Haggai echoes the voice of Jesus in Matthew 6:33, *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* Every perceived treasure remains unfulfilling as long as God has no home among His people.

This provokes reflection. What has God been saying to you? Have you drowned out His voice by pursuing your own interests, finances, or security? Have you maintained a busyness that keeps Jesus at a distance? Can you feel Him knocking at the door of your heart right now, asking to live with you and change everything?

Haggai's words resonated with the people. They repented of their selfishness and resumed construction of the temple. In fact, they completed it a few years later in 516 B.C., precisely seventy years after the Babylonians had destroyed it, just as Jeremiah prophesied.

1. **What is something on your current to-do list?**
2. **What is something you enjoy making? Is there something you dislike making?**
3. **What have you been delaying because it seems too impossible to achieve? What is God telling you about that now?**

WEEK 1: WEDNESDAY

Prologue Continued - Esther

Esther 4:14

"... who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Many scholars believe that Nehemiah was the last book of the Old Testament to be written. Authorship is typically attributed to Ezra, who is also considered the likely author of 1st and 2nd Chronicles (originally a single book), as well as Ezra and possibly Esther.

The Chronicles are positioned as the final book of the original Hebrew Bible, serving as a summary of God's guidance from the creation of humanity to the exile and eventual return from Babylon. The concluding verses of 2nd Chronicles closely resemble the beginning of Ezra, as Cyrus grants any Jews wishing to return to Jerusalem the freedom and resources to rebuild the temple.

Although the temple was completed in 516 B.C., the activities described in the book of Nehemiah wouldn't take place for another 71 years. In the meantime, about halfway between the completion of

the temple and Nehemiah's undertaking to build the walls of Jerusalem, we find the story of Esther. Let's spend a moment considering some observations from this popular story.

Children's story versions of the events of Esther's book ignore its more disturbing realities. The rule of King Darius (of our previous day's discussion) is followed by that of his son, Xerxes. We know him in the book of Esther as Ahasuerus. Historians portray Xerxes as a particularly violent man with a quick temper and a creative mind for the torture of those ignorant enough to cross him.

Meanwhile, Esther is among the group of Jewish exiles who decline to return to Jerusalem when given the option. It is hard to ignore the questionable advice of Uncle Mordecai as Esther enters a contest to become the next queen. In fact, the story is filled with objectionable choices we are tempted to overlook.

God has repeatedly asked His people not to intermarry with idolatrous non-believers like King Xerxes. Esther is young (possibly 15) and inexperienced. Nevertheless, she is encouraged to enter the king's beauty contest, which leads to her becoming part of the king's harem. It seems clear what must have been required for her to become Xerxes' favorite among the concubines as described in Esther 2:12-17. Finally, we notice the deception necessary to become queen without Xerxes realizing she is a Jew.

What should we make of all this? Is God compromising His values? Does He not care for the young girl who will become queen? Or is this yet another example of how He uses the flawed and imperfect? Perhaps we should be cautious about idolizing the characters we encounter in Scripture's stories as if they perfectly followed God's will. Is it possible that God can use people without sanctifying all their actions?

If you have been waiting to volunteer your efforts to God until you are a bit more perfect or cleaned up, take a lesson from Esther. Instead of waiting until we are at our best to serve Him, perhaps serving Him is what brings out our best.

1. **What is one of your favorite childhood stories?**
2. **What compromise have you struggled with recently?**
3. **What is something you would like to do for God that still remains undone?**

WEEK 1: THURSDAY

The Cupbearer

Nehemiah 1:1

These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah.

In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa.

Nehemiah 1:11

In those days I was the king's cup-bearer.

The story of Nehemiah is considered the last recorded activity before the Old Testament Scriptures fall silent, anticipating the coming Messiah of the Gospels. Our study begins in 445 B.C., 160 years after

Daniel and his friends were taken captive to Babylon. Ninety-three years have passed since Cyrus permitted the first trickle of Jews to return to their homeland, and seventy-one years since the temple was completed.

Our main character, Nehemiah, served as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, the third son of Esther's husband, King Xerxes. Only twenty years have passed since the events chronicled in the book bearing her name. In fact, Jewish historians suggest that Queen Esther was still alive when this passage begins.

The cupbearer to the king held an esteemed position. Nehemiah likely spent considerable time in his presence and could only have attained this role due to Artaxerxes' profound trust. The king's safety depended on the integrity of this exiled Jew. Artaxerxes ascended to the throne in the wake of his father's murder at the hands of Artabanus, commander of the guards. Therefore, he would have been especially cautious about whom he allowed access to his presence. Did Nehemiah receive this position based on the recommendation of the now-famous Queen?

As we study this book, we will regularly examine Nehemiah's experiences, seeking connections to our own lives. We will consider the implications for our personal journeys, as well as the principles relevant to our community of faith. If you feel spiritually stuck and helpless or lead an organization facing change, pay careful attention. Perhaps you are part of a new, emerging campus, are at the Redlands campus during the transition of an important leader, or are here in Chattanooga launching a daunting building project. In all these situations, we hope to find inspiration in Nehemiah's example. So keep your eyes open and your heart attentive to the voice of God.

- 1. Who are three people I trust deeply? Why do I trust them so much?**
- 2. Who has shown me the most trust in my life?**
- 3. What aspect of my character would I like to invite Jesus to work on with me today?**

WEEK 1: FRIDAY

Questions

Nehemiah 1:2

Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.

I have a longtime friend, Phil, who routinely finds himself in the most amazing conversations. Whether it's with close friends or perfect strangers, if I step away for a moment, upon my return, he will be fathoms deep, receiving scientific explanations I don't understand, unraveling the mysteries of parenting, or concluding a discovery about the seven degrees of separation that reveals a networked web of relationships.

For a long time, I wondered how he managed to do this so effortlessly. As I watched and studied Phil's approach, it occurred to me. He has a natural curiosity about people. He is slow to blurt out his thoughts and quick to ask questions.

Intrigued by the power of this technique, I began to look for it in others. Time and again, I have observed that the best leaders and high achievers have mastered the art of asking great questions.

As our story begins, Nehemiah entertains visitors returning from Jerusalem to Susa. By most measures, Nehemiah is the most important person in the room. However, he refrains from boasting about his personal achievements, the influential people he has met, and the difference he is making in the kingdom. Instead, the fourth sentence of this book starts, “I asked.” The impact of Nehemiah’s story rests entirely on his use of these two words.

There are many things in this world, within my church community, and in my life that could use some change. But maybe, before I rush to share my brilliant observations on how to save the day, I should take a cue from Phil and Nehemiah. I should start by asking questions.

1. **Who do you know that asks great questions?**
2. **What challenges or tasks are you facing right now? What key questions should you think about asking?**
3. **What question(s) are you currently asking God? What question(s) are you avoiding asking Him? Consider journaling the possibilities of His responses.**

WEEK 2: MONDAY

Tears

Nehemiah 1:2-4

Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.

They said to me, “Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”

When I heard this, I sat down and wept.

Two important points stand out from today’s verses. First, Nehemiah listened.

We’ve discussed the importance of asking great questions. However, this matters little if you don’t listen. We have all participated in a class where the professor poses a question with the clear intention of answering it themselves. The brilliance of great questions lies in the listening that must follow. Nehemiah asked, and then he listened.

Secondly, saying that Nehemiah listened doesn’t capture the whole story. He listened deeply, not just with his ears, but with his heart. His question has flipped a switch and prompted a heart-wrenching story. This can only be true because Nehemiah cares profoundly about the Hebrew faith and the history of God’s people.

We can only conjecture why Nehemiah remained in Susa while others departed for the homeland. Did he stay out of selfish inclination and a desire to maintain his powerful position? Was he hesitant to embark on such a dangerous journey, many miles into the unknown, preferring the comforts and safety of routine? Or did he prayerfully labor over the calling of Yahweh, only to conclude that he must continue where God had already stationed him? Either way, he is now deeply moved by the plight of his people and the smoldering rubble of the city.

Here we find an important principle. Oftentimes, God illuminates our next steps by bringing tears to our eyes. If you are considering God's calling and the mission He might have for your life, a helpful indicator is your answer to the question, "What makes you weep?"

Whether Nehemiah remains the cupbearer out of avoidance or by calling, his emotional reaction to this conversation spurs him to action. The stirring of the Holy Spirit prevents him from staying passive. He must respond. But how?

1. **Do you have a favorite comedian? If so, who is it? What makes you laugh?**
2. **What makes you angry?**
3. **What circumstances make you cry?**
4. **What could God be communicating or requesting from you through these responses?**

WEEK 2: TUESDAY

Time

Nehemiah 1:4

When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 2:1

Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan...

I love action. Many of us do. But I love it to the extreme. This may be why I struggle to remember to ask questions or listen carefully to the responses. If I can be vulnerable for a moment, I often need to scold myself because my mind races too quickly through solutions the moment a problem is shared. I can recall times when a person isn't even finished describing their scenario, that I realize I've got my phone out to call the perfect person for the job I believe comes next.

All of this leads me to read Nehemiah's reaction to his brothers' news with a sense of awe and wonder. He is moved to tears. More strikingly, his weeping is so convulsive that he must sit down. What does he do? Nothing! Or so it seems at first glance.

Be careful not to equate action with outward activity. I might have reacted quickly—making the call, loading the truck, or calling the meeting. Not Nehemiah. He directs the action inward. This is very different from doing nothing.

Nehemiah lets the information play over in his mind, considering and reconsidering it. He feels deeply, mourning purposefully as he breaks his routine through fasting. He prays, engaging in conversation with

the One who cares even more than he does. He suspends any conclusion or reaction for a time. The upcoming verses reveal that Nehemiah experiences confession, repentance, and gratitude during these lengthy exchanges with Yahweh. He gains clarity about what God is asking him to do, the resources needed, and the time required for the mission. All of this accumulates, tear by tear, thought by thought.

By the time Nehemiah is ready to voice his request before King Artaxerxes, four months of prayer and solitude have taken effect (the time between the months mentioned in Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1). I wonder, is there something happening in your life, or in the life of your spiritual community, that could benefit from a slow cook—a reduction born of time and temperature that fosters a deeper sense of commitment and purpose? And what might God wish to communicate that will remain unheard amidst the rush for solutions too eagerly pursued?

1. **On a scale from 1 to 10, how impulsive are you? What do you think contributes to this?**
2. **Have you recently made a purchase that you regretted or had to return? What prompted your decision?**
3. **What current issue in your life do you believe God wants you to sit with and reflect on for a while?**

WEEK 2: WEDNESDAY

Prayer

Nehemiah 1:5-11

Then I said, "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.

"Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'

"The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."

Nehemiah must have prayed about many things during his four months of reflection. Sometimes, the language wouldn't have been very specific. It reminds me of when Mother Teresa was asked by a reporter what she said when she prayed. Her response? "Well, I don't say much. I mostly listen." Surprised, the reporter asked, "So what does God say to you?" Mother Teresa responded, "He doesn't say much. He just listens."

At other times, the language would have flowed freely, like the prayer recorded in our passage for the day. Scholars note that this prayer of Nehemiah closely follows the elements of Jesus' model prayer

found in Matthew 6. It acknowledges the honor due to the God of heaven and expresses concern for His kingdom. It includes confession, repentance, and requests submitted to God's will.

These prayers remind us to approach our Savior with every concern of our hearts. We are encouraged to do so with a sense of proportion, acknowledging His sovereign identity and immense power. Willingly, we listen for conviction as we admit our guilt and confess our sins. Then, we ask with boldness that He work in the midst of the challenges we face, hurrying to add, nevertheless, not our will but Yours be done.

Thank you, Lord, for teaching us how to pray.

- 1. If you could spend an afternoon talking with anyone across time (in addition to God/Jesus), who would it be? Why?**
- 2. How easy do you find it to pray? Privately? Out loud?**
- 3. Take some time to trace Nehemiah's prayer, turning it into words that apply to your life.**

WEEK 2: THURSDAY

Confession

Nehemiah 1:6-7

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses..

Matthew 6:11-12

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Before we move on to the second chapter of Nehemiah, I'd like to share an observation about confession, lament, repentance, and forgiveness.

I've noticed a generally negative response to the concept of corporate confession and lament. Common commentary often includes a reluctance to apologize for wrongs someone didn't directly commit. While significant examples can be found on the large scale of national politics, global churches, and scrutinized systems, corporate sins are often much more local and familial. It is far more common to spend significant time denying, excusing, or explaining why it's not my fault rather than expressing sorrow and seeking forgiveness. My personal favorite is the playground defense, "ya, but did you see what they did?"

We readily admit that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23) and need forgiveness. However, many of us feel uncomfortable with public admissions on a corporate level. This seems especially true in the Christian church. Instead, Christians show an increasing tendency to express blame rather than lament.

Juxtaposed against this dissonance, consider the prayer of Nehemiah. He offers a corporate confession, requesting forgiveness for the sins of his father's household and all of Israel. Unmistakably, he confesses the sins that led to captivity many years before he was even born. Given time, would he plead for forgiveness for the rebellion of our first parents in the Garden of Eden? And what would be wrong with

that? Clearly, he values sweeping statements of sorrow. Like the best leaders, he takes responsibility for his people.

Before you jump to the conclusion that Nehemiah is a weirdo, take a closer look at the Lord's Prayer. It isn't just the weeping prayer of the cupbearer that uses corporate plural language in its confessions. "Forgive US OUR debts, as WE forgive OUR debtors." (Matthew 6:12) We might try to excuse the language somehow. But why? Jesus makes it clear that confession always leads to His forgiveness. Why would I stop short of even a single ounce of forgiveness available to me, my household, and those I love? Is it possible that corporate lament fosters a greater sense of responsibility and accountability for the actions of the communities to which I belong? Would I expend more energy and influence to positively affect the groups I inhabit if I took corporate confession more seriously?

Finally, I want to emphasize that loyalty, patriotism, and love for our communities feel stronger rather than diminished when we acknowledge our wrongs and seek forgiveness. Why do we spend so much time pretending, lying, and engaging in various forms of hypocrisy?

Today, I ask forgiveness for my sins, as well as for the sins of my family, my generation, my church, and my country. While we are at it, "Search my heart, O God, and see if there is any offensive way in me." (Psalm 139:23-24) Then, forgive me... not just a little bit. Please grant me all the forgiveness needed to be completely clean.

1. **On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy is it for you to say, "I'm sorry"? What do you think contributes to that?**
2. **Have you ever felt embarrassed by your family? If so, why?**
3. **What corporate confession would you make if you knew you would receive instant and complete forgiveness? What would you like to say to Jesus about that right now?**

WEEK 2: FRIDAY

Sad Face

Nehemiah 2:1-3

Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. So the king asked me, "Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled."

Then I was terrified, but I replied, "Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

Four months have passed since Nehemiah received disturbing news about the conditions in Jerusalem. Whether he has appeared before Artaxerxes in court during that time is uncertain. On this significant day, as the cupbearer serves the king wine, something feels off.

Artaxerxes is very familiar with Nehemiah, so much so that he can distinguish between a look of sadness and one of sickness. Two things stand out about this. First, Nehemiah's behavior and service have clearly endeared him to the king. Friends might be too strong a label, but there is genuine caring between the

two. Second, this servant's generally cheerful demeanor contrasts sharply with today's mournful spirit, sparking conversation.

On a side note, have you noticed how many Christians struggle to look happy? We believe we are saved by grace and serve the risen Jesus: the Resurrection and the Life. We are going to live forever. Don't you think we should tell our faces?

Everyone needs the help of others along the way. Is it possible that how we present ourselves on the days we need no help affects the response we receive on the days we do? The way we treat the people around us makes a difference that impacts the kingdom of God. Perhaps I should consider my smile as a matter of spiritual stewardship.

In essence, the king has asked what is wrong. Nehemiah has prayed for this moment for days. He has asked God for guidance, success, and to be treated with kindness. Hopefully, he has also requested courage. Because no matter how prepared you are, when these pivotal moments arrive, they can be frightening.

Meditation and prayer serve as God's practice field, preparing us to confront upcoming moments of tension and fear. As we communicate with Him and reflect on the needs He brings to our minds, He allows us to rehearse the language and anticipate situations that might otherwise feel too frightening to face.

Our story has come down to this: Artaxerxes opens the door, and prepared by days of prayer, Nehemiah walks through.

1. **Who are the people who notice if you are sick? When you are sad?**
2. **Do you like your smile? Why or why not?**
3. **Is there something you want to say to someone that scares you to think about saying? Why is that?**
4. **What fears would you like to discuss with Jesus?**

WEEK 3: MONDAY

Asking

Nehemiah 2:4-8

The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?"

With a prayer to the God of heaven, I replied, "If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried."

The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked, "How long will you be gone? When will you return?" After I told him how long I would be gone, the king agreed to my request.

I also said to the king, "If it please the king, let me have letters addressed to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, instructing them to let me travel safely through their territories on my way to Judah. And please give me a letter addressed to Asaph, the manager of the king's forest,

instructing him to give me timber. I will need it to make beams for the gates of the Temple fortress, for the city walls, and for a house for myself.” And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me.

Relationships matter. Nehemiah repeatedly appeals to the king based on their connection. “If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me...”, he urges. This reminds me of the Charlie Brower quote, “Few people are successful unless a lot of other people want them to be.” By most definitions, King Artaxerxes is an outsider to the people of God. However, he behaves as if he is on the inside. I wonder if that stems from a long history of trusting Jewish people.

Our passage includes what might seem to be a throwaway line: “The king, with the queen sitting beside him...” Jewish tradition suggests there is only one reason Ezra, the writer, would include this note describing who sits beside the king. They believe the queen in question is none other than his stepmother, Queen Esther. King Artaxerxes has associated with trusted Israelites all of his life. Based on these relationships, he doesn’t behave like an outsider in the conversation. He is engaged, helpful, and responsive.

We should all be cautious about drawing lines of exclusion. Have we placed some in the category of “the enemy” that God would have us call “friend”? There is very little downside to the indiscriminate expressions of friendship and trust. I wonder who might be willing to step up to help us today if only we would ask?

Oh, and then there’s this... Artaxerxes seems worried about whether Nehemiah will return. This highlights the rarity of their relationship. I wish it were more common that when God’s people ask for a favor, the immediate response is to hope we could be around more often. Nehemiah’s response isn’t recorded. Perhaps it’s more significant that Artaxerxes asked.

Throughout this entire interaction, we witness a combination of boldness and respect, careful pre-planning and wonder, concern mixed with gratitude. Such a difference is made when we rest in the hand of God.

- 1. Who are three people, outside your family, that you could ask for a big favor? Why did you choose them?**
- 2. What physical improvements would you like to see in your home? At your place of worship?**
- 3. What recent answer to prayer are you thankful to God for today?**

WEEK 3: TUESDAY

Danger

Nehemiah 2:9-10

When I came to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, I delivered the king’s letters to them. The king, I should add, had sent along army officers and horsemen to protect me. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of my arrival, they were very displeased that someone had come to help the people of Israel.

With little fanfare, our story shifts from Nehemiah's requests to the journey itself. Here, we note a benefit of having friends whose insights align with their resources. The king has anticipated the challenges of this journey and equipped Nehemiah with letters of permission and the protection of soldiers he hadn't considered requesting.

The moment our construction team crosses the borders of Jerusalem, we encounter a recurring character in our story, Sanballat. He consistently serves as the archenemy to our hero.

Sanballat believes in God. He is part of the Jewish lineage that remained in the region while others were deported to Babylon. Over time, both he and his ancestors adapted the Hebrew faith to incorporate elements from surrounding religions, mingling through marriage and theology. His name is derived from the Sumerian moon god, and the people he governed were called Samaritans. He will oppose Nehemiah's work at every turn.

Not all believers are the same. I often reflect on the difference between saying I am a Christian and saying I am willing to be identified with every Christian. A similar distinction must be made for Adventist Christians.

The importance of undiluted allegiance to Yahweh was to the Jew what Christ is to the Christian. It isn't enough for Jesus to merely be in the mix, one of many important notions or fundamental beliefs. He must be the center and circumference of our faith. As Paul says in Colossians 1, *"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."* (1:17) And as Jesus himself put it in the Gospel of John, *"I am the way and the truth and the life."* (14:6)

For today, recognize the reliability of this truth. Wherever Jesus is lifted high, people are drawn and enemies are mobilized.

- 1. What activities do you think are too dangerous to take part in? Why?**
- 2. Whom do you consider wise? Whom do you seek counsel from regarding major plans?**
- 3. Have you ever felt discouraged from following Jesus because of the behavior of other Christians? If so, how?**

WEEK 3: WEDNESDAY

Showing Up

Nehemiah 2:11

So I arrived in Jerusalem.

I recognize the simplicity of what I'm about to say, but it merits serious consideration. The first step in any great accomplishment is **SHOWING UP**.

Part of my resume includes ten years as a high school teacher and eight as a college professor. During those years, I frequently engaged in conversations with young people eager to ask me what I believed would lead them to become successful students. We would discuss study habits, effective note-taking strategies, surrounding themselves with the right people, and other related topics. However, over time, something else emerged as the simplest yet most profound ingredient of success: showing up.

I have come to believe that students who get out of bed and make it to class on time, stay awake during lectures, and trace their fingers across the page when the professor references a textbook or syllabus will automatically find themselves in the top quartile of their peers in either undergraduate or high school (no matter their I.Q.). Read what you are asked to read. Be where you are asked to be. Give it the “college try” and show up.

Similarly, I’ve come to believe that the most impactful parenting principle is practicing the art of presence. While counseling parents through troubling circumstances, I always begin by encouraging them to be unshakably present. Look your children in the eye. Listen to their voices. Find ways to engage in their activities and conversations. Show up.

Honestly, this is the guiding principle of my pastoral ministry. While I may not know the answer to a parishioner’s theological question, I’ve decided it’s more important to walk together than to be the spiritual answer man. Because of this, I’ve grown comfortable worshipping alongside people with whom I surely disagree, counting them as family. In a faith community, the power of presence and belonging sustains us through confusion, heartbreak, and misfortune.

In one of the most vivid depictions of this principle, Jesus describes Himself as standing at the door of our hearts and knocking. He shows up. And for anyone who opens the door, He will come in... the art of presence. (Revelation 3:20)

Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem will be a complex and challenging task. None of it will happen without step one. It all begins with showing up.

- 1. What hobby have you always wanted to pursue but have yet to act upon?**
- 2. Who in your local area have you always wanted to meet? Who could help you reach that person?**
- 3. Have you heard Jesus knocking on your heart’s door today? Have you welcomed Him in? What conversation should you have with Him regarding this?**

WEEK 3: THURSDAY

Patience

Nehemiah 2:11-12; 16

So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later, I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem.

The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration.

One of the most challenging lessons is learning when to hold your tongue and when to speak. Perhaps you have a friend who can’t help but routinely stick their foot in their mouth, speaking first and thinking later. In high school, I realized that I had lost a friendship by saying things without thinking. It was a difficult experience to process. But I now see the wisdom in Nehemiah’s approach.

Make no mistake, he has strong feelings about the issues in Jerusalem. He is equipped with resources, permission, and nothing else on his agenda. Therefore, it is remarkable that Nehemiah has the discipline to slow down, pause, and gain the perspective that comes from listening before speaking.

The more critical the information we need to share, the more essential it is to first earn the right to do so. It is instructive that Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine for nearly 30 years before He began His public ministry. Habitually, He would spend time with people before offering instructions or criticism. Remember the woman at the well? Jesus intentionally crosses the borders of Israel into Samaria to speak with this woman. He has important things to say. Nevertheless, He takes the time to ask for a cup of water, a deeply controversial move, and allows the woman to engage in conversation at her own pace.

The next time we sense a friend is making poor choices and we have thoughts on how to improve the situation, perhaps we should pause, take a deep breath, and reflect on whether we have invested the necessary time and energy to earn the right to speak up.

As it turns out, love is patient.

- 1. On a scale from 1 to 10, how patient are you? What do you think the reason is?**
- 2. Who in your life do you consider to be extraordinarily patient? How do you experience their patience?**
- 3. Which friend or family member is on your mind right now? What prayer might you offer for them as you take a moment and practice patience before voicing your thoughts?**

WEEK 3: FRIDAY

See for Yourself

Nehemiah 2:12-15

I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding. After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble. So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate.

During the few days since his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah has been busy... quiet, yet busy. He takes care to avoid drawing attention to his activities by walking the broken city walls at night instead of during the day. This makes his work more challenging, but it is worth it. Painstakingly, he circles the city, sometimes by donkey and other times on foot. He is committed to seeing for himself.

This is essential for us to internalize. Have you ever found yourself worked up by stories shared by a friend or colleague? Your blood pressure rises, and you spring into action. Sometimes we begin by hurling accusations and launching a scorched-earth campaign. Have you ever done this only to find out you were acting on inaccurate or incomplete information? Whoops. We apologize, but it is nearly impossible to return things to their original state.

Never assume the walls are broken down solely based on what others say; see for yourself. This principle is especially true for our relationships. I wonder how many marriages, friendships, and spiritual connections are ruined because of incorrect information that is quickly seized upon?

In Matthew 18, Jesus suggested a reliable way to avoid these losses. He says that whenever we believe someone has wronged us, we should go to them directly and privately, seeking to reconcile the relationship. Skip discussing it with others who are not involved, as that tends to make things worse and often muddles the truth of the situation. Go, see for yourself what the problem is. Imitate Nehemiah, stubbornly circling the broken city walls by probing with questions, striving for full understanding, and then try to fix it from there.

Nehemiah has tested his assumptions and seen for himself. This leads us to one last note for the day. If you truly want to go on a mission for God, ask Him to guide you through the brokenness that pains His heart. Invite Him to lead you into the rubble of the lives He bled and died for. Align your heart with the heartbeat of God for those in need or far from Him.

Lord God, reveal your calling to us. May we see for ourselves.

- 1. Which sense resonates more with you: hearing, seeing, or touching? What makes you say that?**
- 2. Have you ever lost a relationship over something that wasn't true? What did you do about it?**
- 3. When you pray, do you feel God calling you to a specific mission? How could you test your assumptions about that project?**

WEEK 4: MONDAY

Community

Nehemiah 2:16-18

The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration. But now I said to them, “You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!” Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king.

They replied at once, “Yes, let’s rebuild the wall!” So they began the good work.

Here, our story transitions from personal to corporate application. To fully understand this, we must acknowledge the differences in sensibilities between the ancient Hebrews and our contemporary Western world.

The Children of Israel found their greatest identity in belonging to the community of Yahweh. The scriptures repeatedly recount meaningful connections across time by listing genealogies that demonstrate familial bonds. We have already noticed a pattern of corporate confession and lament. The ancient Hebrews valued the concept of community over individualism, and belonging over isolation. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that Nehemiah begins his work by building consensus and creating buy-in among the community of Hebrews already living in Jerusalem. He has no intention of moving

bricks or stones by himself. The work of God will be accomplished by His people rather than any single individual. “We” will rebuild the wall. Success will come as a group, God’s church, the body of Christ.

Our current culture places the highest value on rugged individualism. Our greatest source of pride is the story of someone picking themselves up by their bootstraps with help from no one. No wonder it’s so easy to decide to discontinue participation in church and go it alone on our journey with Jesus. However, we need to shift our understanding to fully grasp this story. Perhaps we require this same shift to truly realize the calling God has for our lives.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus, Peter, and Paul use corporate language to describe God’s work. A community of belonging is God’s plan for the apostolic church, not just the ancient Hebrew nation. We were never meant to follow God alone, as if we were some grotesquely dismembered part of His body. The Scriptures tell a story of something bigger than you or me. Within it, we discover our identity by belonging to the Kingdom of God. Implicitly, God’s children work to function in His family and seek to build this Kingdom.

We need to wrestle with today’s application of Nehemiah 2:18, which uses pluralized language. We must pray to understand God’s mission for our church. As we strive to build communities of belonging, may we discover unified work and develop our corporate mission.

- 1. What team sports do you enjoy playing or watching? Why?**
- 2. Did you prefer individual or group projects in school? Why?**
- 3. What is your understanding of the mission of your church? Where do you find your place in this mission?**

WEEK 4: TUESDAY

Nehemiah – W4, D23 – Seats on the Bus

Nehemiah 2:19-20

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously.

“What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” they asked.

I replied, “The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem.”

Did we already discuss Sanballat? Whenever he appears in our story, we typically find two things. First, he tries to act as if he’s on Nehemiah’s team: helpful and a believer. Second, he is actually attempting to undermine the mission through subversion, criticism, distraction, and other tactics.

Nehemiah wastes no time trying to win Sanballat’s group over to his side. His discernment is so sharp that he barely pauses for conversation. He says, “We are going to do this with God’s blessing, and you won’t be a part of it. You can move along now.” Wow! Nehemiah is brutally no-nonsense.

In the popular book “*Good to Great*,” Jim Collins describes the most common behaviors and ingredients among organizations that outperform their above-average competitors and achieve the highest levels of sustained performance. Among other things, Collins illustrates a crucial leadership behavior through the metaphor of seats on a bus. He explains that the best leaders invest significant energy in analyzing

whether their team members are in the right seats on the bus. If they are not, leaders diligently shift their team from seat to seat until each member fulfills their ideal purpose. A critical leadership task arises when they recognize that there is no appropriate seat on the organizational bus. In such cases, the leader must act swiftly and thoughtfully to remove the team member from the bus altogether.

Does that sound un-Christian? Nehemiah says no. In fact, we dilute our church's mission by allowing those without any intention of participating in the work we've defined to assume leadership roles. It's crucial to continually realign our teams with the core values that bring life to the Crosswalk community and the end statements we espouse.

It is essential to insist on the clarity of the message and mission while inviting everyone to belong. This work is crucial; a steadfast focus is necessary for these walls to be built.

- 1. What is it that draws you to Crosswalk? What do you know about its stated mission?**
- 2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how open are you to exploring a leadership role at church? Why?**

P.S. – For more information on Crosswalk's end statements and our core values: Belonging, Momentum, and Experience, go to crosswalkvillage.com and glance through the About pages.

WEEK 4: WEDNESDAY

Teamwork

Nehemiah 3:1-3

Then Eliashib the high priest and the other priests started to rebuild at the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set up its doors, building the wall as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and the Tower of Hananel. People from the town of Jericho worked next to them, and beyond them was Zaccur son of Imri.

The Fish Gate was built by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid the beams, set up its doors, and installed its bolts and bars.

V6-7: The Old City Gate was repaired by Joiada son of Paseah and Meshullam son of Besodeiah. They laid the beams, set up its doors, and installed its bolts and bars. Next to them were Melatiah from Gibeon, Jadon from Meronoth, people from Gibeon, and people from Mizpah, the headquarters of the governor of the province west of the Euphrates River.

V13: The Valley Gate was repaired by the people from Zanoah, led by Hanun. They set up its doors and installed its bolts and bars. They also repaired the 1,500 feet of wall to the Dung Gate.

Nehemiah's third chapter consists of various names of individuals and groups working to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem—fairly boring stuff. However, we discover that the work is often done in groups, by teams. In fact, as we move through the passage, we encounter the phrases, “worked next to them” (v2, 7, 9, 19), “beside him” (v4), and “next to him” (v10, 16, 17, 20). The words “then” and “next” are similarly used to create the mosaic of a continuous chain of workers. This isn't a list of separate builders; it is a portrayal of a massive team.

While ineffective teams yield disappointing results, productive teams significantly surpass the collective capabilities of their individual members. This observation is frequently made and is pertinent to our reflection on God's plans for His church. It might be beneficial to contemplate why certain teams achieve such high levels of effectiveness.

Many years ago, Kurt Lewin documented a groundbreaking study on the power of synergy: the act of two or more organisms to produce a result that each is individually incapable of achieving. Here are some of the impressive reasons he uncovered.

1. Improved decision-making: perspective, clarity, and synthesis.
2. More likely to identify and dismiss incorrect solutions.
3. The memory of facts is more accurate and complete.
4. Increased motivation to succeed.
5. Riskier decisions can be made with greater safety and caution.
6. Heightened commitment from participation in decision-making.
7. A more stable growth of values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to implement decisions.

Other studies suggest that individuals who engage in functional teams report higher levels of happiness than those who do not. Ultimately, God's call to participate in His body is not only beneficial for His kingdom; it also leads to a better life for us.

I invite you to "work next to them".

1. **What task have you recently tackled as part of a team? How did it turn out?**
2. **What team activities do you engage in with your family (your partner or children)? How much do you enjoy that? Why?**
3. **What teams are you involved with in your family of faith? Which ones would you like to join?**

WEEK 4: THURSDAY

Isolation

Ecclesiastes 4:7-9

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone... Two are better than one...

Yesterday, we discussed the benefits of teamwork. Today, I'd like to explore the flipside: the destructive impact of isolation.

First, let's acknowledge the difference between alone time, introversion, or even social anxiety, and isolation. We don't mean regular time to recharge or critical periods of solitude (a spiritual discipline). Rather, isolation is characterized by the complete absence of social support, friendship, and community.

Isolation undermines our well-being in multiple ways. Firstly, research indicates that our physical health deteriorates in the following manner. Social isolation:

- a. Significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.
- b. Was associated with approximately a 50% increased risk of dementia.
- c. Was linked to a 29% higher risk of heart disease and a 32% higher risk of stroke.
- d. Among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly fourfold increase in the risk of death, a 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and a 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.

Additionally, social isolation is linked to significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Sociologists indicate that recently, our youth and young adults have experienced the greatest increases in these issues.

Considering these factors, we can confidently assert that isolation serves as an effective tool of the devil against God's people in the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. In contrast, God's solution is to invite us into a community of belonging, friendship, and trust.

No wonder Paul exhorts us in Hebrews 10:25, *"Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."*

1. **Would you consider yourself an introvert or an extrovert?**
2. **What activities do you prefer to experience alone, and which ones do you like to pursue in groups?**
3. **Consider what an average day spent in worship at your community of faith looks like. What do you enjoy the most about it?**
4. **Who comes to your mind to pray for today? Consider sharing with them that you prayed.**

WEEK 4: FRIDAY

Insults

Nehemiah 4:1-5

Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, "What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?"

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!"

Then I prayed, "Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land! Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders."

Throughout our story, Sanballat's presence consistently stands out. Unsupportive and uninvolved, he employs various tactics to thwart Nehemiah's team. Today's strategy involves insults and derision.

You may have grown up in a friend group that relentlessly insulted one another, poking and prodding each other to vie for positions on the social ladder. Sometimes, the group unites to target one person. At other times, there's a battle of wits as two friends engage in a back-and-forth exchange. These interactions often appear humorous and harmless, just good-natured ribbing.

One such example is the interaction between Winston Churchill and Lady Astor. She reportedly said to the prime minister, "If you were my husband, I'd poison your tea." To which Churchill responded, "If you were my wife, I'd drink it."

At their mildest, insults provoke laughter and make the speaker feel good about themselves. At their worst, they drain energy meant for good work, cause us to question our self-worth, and entice us into regrettable behavior. Usually, it's better to ignore insults than to reply to them.

Nehemiah doesn't engage directly with Sanballat or Tobiah. He doesn't argue or present a counterpoint. Instead, he directs his team in prayer, surrendering his frustration to Yahweh. We should do the same. When we do, we need not sugarcoat our feelings. God can handle our rawest emotions and most extreme language. He can also soften our hearts, remove our arrogance, and correct our stubbornness. Jesus is the perfect place to turn when we are insulted or belittled.

After entrusting the insults to God, the builders resumed their work on the wall.

1. **On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you enjoy arguing? What do you think contributes to that?**
2. **Can you recall an occasion when a friend insulted or tried to embarrass you? How did you respond?**
3. **Is there someone you often tease? How do you think they feel about it?**
4. **What relationship provokes you to fight? What would you like to discuss with Jesus about it?**

WEEK 5: MONDAY

Suffering

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

A little over twenty years ago, Matt Redmond published the song "*Blessed Be Your Name*." At the time, it stood out to me as particularly profound because of its contrast to many other praise songs from that era. Halfway through its second verse, the lyrics say:

*Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering*

*Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name*

While most of the song celebrates the positive experiences of our journey with Jesus, it is refreshingly honest to acknowledge the likely presence of suffering in the Christian life. There is something disingenuous about listening to sermons on repeat that extol the theology that if you give the right offering and pray the right prayer, your prosperity is guaranteed and everything will be fine. Also, this perspective doesn't square with human experience.

One point of Jesus' parable about a wise man who builds his house on the rock in Matthew 7 is that the rains and floods come for both the foolish and the wise. God's presence carries us through difficulties rather than around them.

We must prepare ourselves in both our personal lives and our faith community. Challenges are ahead. Should we even use the term suffering? If we aim to achieve anything worthwhile, the waters will rise.

In our story of Nehemiah, trouble appears every few verses. Long before Paul articulates it in 2 Corinthians 4, Nehemiah experiences it: "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed." So we sing with full voice, "Blessed be your name, on the road marked with suffering."

1. **What's your favorite praise song and why?**
2. **What difficulty have you been through that challenged your ability to praise God?**
3. **What challenge do you need Jesus to help you through today?**

WEEK 5: TUESDAY

Protection

Nehemiah 4:6-9

At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm.

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.

In a previous study, we found that one of the advantages of teamwork is the capacity to remain strong amid perilous situations. Our narrative shifts from passive aggression to the potential for genuine physical violence as Nehemiah's enemies become increasingly desperate. The threat escalates, and the builders need growing amounts of resilience. Fortunately, they are not alone.

I have rarely experienced anything resembling these conditions. However, I have faced attacks from adversaries seeking to undermine work that is important to me. For example, a year and a half ago, a group of individuals seized upon some misinformation and launched an attack on Crosswalk Chattanooga through a series of articles. It quickly became apparent that they weren't interested in uncovering the truth. Their aim was to eliminate the enemy, and we were in their crosshairs.

When this occurs, it's hard not to overreact. Instinct pushes us to come out swinging, with our backs against the wall. Too often, we mirror the enemy's tactics, thinking, "they did it first." Besides, all is fair in love and war, right?

Remember, our responsibility is to follow Jesus, not to win some turf war. This includes protecting yourself whenever possible, just as Nehemiah's workers must do. It also involves centering ourselves on Jesus through prayer and practice.

The writer of Proverbs reminds us, *"The name of the LORD is a strong fortress; the godly run to him and are safe."* (18:10) Notice that safety comes "in the name of the Lord." This safety doesn't mean we can't be touched; it means Jesus has control of how our story ends. Put another way, Jesus says in John 16:33, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

Whatever today's attack may be, take heart. Be at peace. Run to the name of Jesus.

- 1. Who do you consider a protector in your life?**
- 2. Who are you trying to protect? How is that going?**
- 3. What situation is jeopardizing your peace? What do you want to say to Jesus about it?**

WEEK 5: WEDNESDAY

Discouragement

Nehemiah 4:10

Then the people of Judah began to complain, "The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves."

The work that Nehemiah's team has accomplished in such a short time is truly remarkable. However, predictably, they are reaching a quitting point, and completion is at risk.

Several factors lead us to contemplate quitting. We might have a low tolerance for pain, frustration, and hard work. At times, we assume things will be easy. However, when unexpected challenges arise, we hit the eject button. Some of us have cultivated a habit of quitting, in which case, it's really just a matter of time.

In all but the easiest tasks, a quitting point presents itself before we reach the finish line. Marathon runners report that, often around mile 20, they hit a wall and nearly quit. Powering past that point changes everything, and a second (or third) wind arrives.

The leader of a team plays a vital role in helping groups overcome the barrier of discouragement. Some of the tools at their disposal include affirming hard work, creating purposeful moments of celebration (celebrate small accomplishments, not just the big ones), maintaining open channels of communication to address discouragement, consistently reminding team members of why we are doing this work in the first place, and modeling the hard work required for completion.

In the end, attitude plays a bigger role than abilities in resisting quitting points. I once heard someone say, “Leaders are peddlers in hope.” That’s it, isn’t it? Whether we call it “light at the end of the tunnel,” vision, or inspiration, the task of the leader is to paint a hopeful picture of the future we are working toward.

I ask you, what is the vital work you are doing for God today? Is there a fast-approaching quitting point? Never forget, “You are the light of the world, you are the city of hope.” (Matthew 5:14)

- 1. What is the farthest distance you have ever run? Have you ever considered running a marathon? Why or why not?**
- 2. What partially completed task are you discouraged by right now?**
- 3. What aspect of your life could use a boost of hope? What would you like to express to Jesus about that at this moment?**

WEEK 5: THURSDAY

Rehearsing the Negative

Nehemiah 4:11-12

Meanwhile, our enemies were saying, “Before they know what’s happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work.”

The Jews who lived near the enemy came and told us again and again, “They will come from all directions and attack us!”

Nehemiah’s team faces formidable enemies. It isn’t clear whether Sanballat and his crew will carry out their threats of violence or if they are merely trying to intimidate the builders. However, their comments have captured the imaginations of the Jews themselves.

Sharing negative news can be irresistible, even when it’s frightening. Did you hear...? The portion of the 12th verse translated as “again and again” is more literally “10 times over” in the original Hebrew. On ten separate occasions, these messengers come to repeat the memo. They rehearse the terrible news over and over like a funereal chant: “We’re gonna die, we’re all gonna die.”

This is dangerous. Unless quickly interrupted, negative talk can become habitual. Neuroscientists suggest that repeated negative thinking creates neural pathways predisposed to sadness, distortions of truth, and a downward cycle of negativity. These cycles take a toll on our physical, emotional, and social health. The Biblical principle, “By beholding we become changed,” is both a promise and a warning.

What should we do when members of our own team adopt negative patterns? We can interrupt this cycle by replacing it with scriptural promises and prayer, remembering the blessings of God through the spiritual discipline of gratitude, embracing preparation and effective planning, and surrounding ourselves with positive thinkers. By engaging in these habits, we safeguard our hearts and minds against the subtle takeover of the enemy.

We should not ignore danger, threats, or problems. However, we must devote extra energy to preventing them from becoming the soundtrack of our lives. As Philippians 4:8 says:

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

- 1. Who is your favorite person to spend time with when you need a boost of positivity?**
- 2. What Bible promise do you turn to for encouragement?**
- 3. What negative thoughts often come to mind? Consider turning them over to Jesus and releasing them.**

WEEK 5: FRIDAY

Strategic Planning

Nehemiah 4:13-23

So I placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas. I stationed the people to stand guard by families, armed with swords, spears, and bows.

Then as I looked over the situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, "Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!"

When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall. But from then on, only half my men worked while the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah who were building the wall. The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. All the builders had a sword belted to their side. The trumpeter stayed with me to sound the alarm.

Then I explained to the nobles and officials and all the people, "The work is very spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!"

We worked early and late, from sunrise to sunset. And half the men were always on guard. I also told everyone living outside the walls to stay in Jerusalem. That way they and their servants could help with guard duty at night and work during the day. During this time, none of us—not I, nor my relatives, nor my servants, nor the guards who were with me—ever took off our clothes. We carried our weapons with us at all times, even when we went for water.

As our builders enter the final phase of construction on the wall, things are clearly serious. The enemy's plans are well known, but so is the job at hand. Nehemiah calls the workers together and gives a couplet of instructions: "Remember the Lord, and fight for your family."

Occasionally, a situation arises that prompts someone to exclaim, "Just pray about it." Prayer is always a vital component in addressing our challenges. In fact, we should pray without ceasing. Nonetheless, we can mistakenly treat prayer as a lucky charm that allows us to disregard the abilities God has already bestowed upon us... minds capable of careful, effective planning.

Nehemiah might as well have said, “Remember God, come before Him, and plead with Him through prayer. Also, strategize, make careful provisions, anticipate the enemy, and prepare appropriately.”

It is quite impressive how thoughtfully these followers of Yahweh approach their circumstances. They will build and protect. While it may take longer and introduce more complexity, they will get the job done. If they experience losses, it won’t be due to spiritual laziness or cavalier attitudes. They will engage in the mental work needed to match their sweat and sore muscles.

When the church encounters challenging tasks, we should always remember to pray. We must also acknowledge that God has already answered some of our prayers by granting us clear minds, tactical options, and His word of truth. The followers of Christ should excel in strategic planning.

1. **What strategy games do you enjoy playing?**
2. **Are you more inclined to act without careful planning, or spend so much time planning that you miss the chance to act? Why do you believe this is the case?**
3. **What task do you need to plan today? Who would be a good strategic partner for this planning?**

WEEK 6: MONDAY

Battling Ourselves

Nehemiah 5:1-11

About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews. They were saying, “We have such large families. We need more food to survive.”

Others said, “We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and homes to get food during the famine.”

And others said, “We have had to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay our taxes. We belong to the same family as those who are wealthy, and our children are just like theirs. Yet we must sell our children into slavery just to get enough money to live. We have already sold some of our daughters, and we are helpless to do anything about it, for our fields and vineyards are already mortgaged to others.”

When I heard their complaints, I was very angry. After thinking it over, I spoke out against these nobles and officials. I told them, “You are hurting your own relatives by charging interest when they borrow money!” Then I called a public meeting to deal with the problem.

At the meeting I said to them, “We are doing all we can to redeem our Jewish relatives who have had to sell themselves to pagan foreigners, but you are selling them back into slavery again. How often must we redeem them?” And they had nothing to say in their defense.

Then I pressed further, “What you are doing is not right! Should you not walk in the fear of our God in order to avoid being mocked by enemy nations? I myself, as well as my brothers and my workers, have been lending the people money and grain, but now let us stop this business of charging interest. You must restore their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes to them this very day. And repay the interest you charged when you lent them money, grain, new wine, and olive oil.”

When squabbling, abuse, or misbehavior arise within a team, it is almost always more harmful than an open attack by an opponent. We are more likely to quit due to infighting than as a result of an enemy. This is probably because of the deep sense of “stabbed in the back” betrayal. Trust is broken, and cohesion dissolves.

The situation in Jerusalem is quite dire. Less fortunate family members have been forced to borrow from their wealthy brothers and sisters to stay fed and alive. However, these affluent relatives have leveraged the loans to impose exorbitant interest rates, and, in some cases, children have been sold into servitude. Morale has plummeted, and Nehemiah must take action.

We don’t need to look to ancient stories to find terrible behavior that harms members of God’s community. Many of our friends and family members struggle to participate in church because of something said or done to them. The betrayal of a fellow believer feels worse than bullets from an enemy.

Poor behavior from God’s people must be met with more than handwringing and regret. Leaders need to stand up and call out the wrongs we commit. Our community must be challenged to repent, ask for forgiveness, restore those who have been wronged, and change our behavior. That’s what good leaders must do. Thankfully, Nehemiah is that kind of leader.

- 1. Have you lent anything to someone recently? What was it?**
- 2. Have you witnessed behavior recently that came to mind while reading today? What was it? What steps could you take regarding it?**
- 3. Who do you know that needs to be restored to the family of God? What act of love could you offer to assist with that restoration?**

WEEK 6: TUESDAY

Distraction

Nehemiah 6:1-4

Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies found out that I had finished rebuilding the wall and that no gaps remained—though we had not yet set up the doors in the gates. So Sanballat and Geshem sent a message asking me to meet them at one of the villages in the plain of Ono.

But I realized they were plotting to harm me, so I replied by sending this message to them: “I am engaged in a great work, so I can’t come. Why should I stop working to come and meet with you?”

Four times they sent the same message, and each time I gave the same reply.

As God’s people race to complete their work, their enemies diversify their attacks in a last-ditch effort to thwart the project. Today’s tactic is distraction.

Focus is a powerful tool. It is essential for our best work. However, in today’s attention-deficit society, the struggle to eliminate distractions and complete our tasks has intensified significantly. We are surrounded by noise. Our screen time has skyrocketed: there is always an email or text to respond to or an

unsolicited message to delete. There are Instagram shorts to watch and YouTube rabbit holes to explore. When we venture out, there are errands to run, kids' softball games to arrange, and groceries to pick up. We go to work each day, worship on the weekend, and then start all over again.

We also face distractions from our spiritual mission as a faith community. Often, the most challenging distractions are positive ideas that vie for our attention. While there are many things we could pursue, the church should continually ask what area of focus God is inviting us into today. Nehemiah must not only reject the invitation of his enemies but also be cautious of distractions that arise from his own team if he ever hopes to finish.

In his book, *Great by Choice*, author Jim Collins (whom we mentioned in an earlier study) uses the two 1911 South Pole expeditions of Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott to illustrate better and worse organizational practices. Amundsen's expedition succeeded, while Scott's failed miserably, resulting in the deaths of the entire team. Among other things, Amundsen practiced a discipline Collins refers to as the "20-mile March." Scott's group traveled varying distances each day depending on the weather, illness, and other factors. Amundsen insisted on completing a full 20 miles (and no more) each day.

As it turns out, the most challenging part of the 20-mile march was stopping on sunny days when the group felt good enough to continue. I have certainly experienced the application of this metaphor in church ministry. When things are flourishing, people are making decisions for Christ and discovering a sense of belonging, individuals come from miles around to suggest ministries the church should add. Instinctively, we strive for more and more, even though it jeopardizes our central mission. It requires immense restraint to adhere to today's 20-mile march.

The arrows of distraction zip past Nehemiah, both the bad ones and the good ones. Time and again, he sharpens his focus and remains on the wall.

- 1. Which social media platform captures more of your attention than the others? What do you enjoy about it?**
- 2. Is it easy or difficult for you to maintain your focus? What do you think causes this?**
- 3. What is the most vital mission of your faith community? What distractions do you believe your community faces?**

WEEK 6: WEDNESDAY

Rumors

Nehemiah 6:5-9

The fifth time, Sanballat's servant came with an open letter in his hand, and this is what it said:

"There is a rumor among the surrounding nations, and Geshem tells me it is true, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel and that is why you are building the wall. According to his reports, you plan to be their king. He also reports that you have appointed prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim about you, 'Look! There is a king in Judah!'

"You can be very sure that this report will get back to the king, so I suggest that you come and talk it over with me."

I replied, "There is no truth in any part of your story. You are making up the whole thing."

They were just trying to intimidate us, imagining that they could discourage us and stop the work. So I continued the work with even greater determination.

After facing Nehemiah's repeated rejections, Sanballat's team transitions from entrapment and distraction to the art of spreading rumors.

Rumors typically have a distinct DNA. Firstly, they thrive on anonymity. When someone comes to report that, "People are saying..." I usually assume they are one of the people saying it. Additionally, rumors are often shared randomly rather than with the individuals the rumor concerns. I find that asking, "Do you mind if I quote you on that?" usually shuts the conversation down.

The second popular ingredient of a rumor is exaggeration. Take a bit of fact, spice it up with bad motives and evil intent, and then bathe it in exaggerated language. Now you've got yourself a rumor that is easy to spread.

The third practice to perpetuate a rumor is to conveniently omit crucial context. Avoid including clear reasons for what happened or comprehensive paragraphs of surrounding information if you intend to spread gossip. Inject a tone of surprise as you share, even when you know full well why something occurred.

Finally, rumors are never started to build someone up. Can you imagine someone going to the trouble to make up stories to highlight the impressive qualities of those around you? Rumors are designed to hurt and tear someone down. This is not the spirit of Christ. Paul reminds us, *"Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them."* (Ephesians 4:29)

No matter how untrue they are, rumors hurt and distract. They consume large amounts of energy intended for the work of God's Kingdom. So heed the lesson from Nehemiah: identify rumors as just that, and continue the work with even greater determination.

- 1. When someone tells you something salacious, what is your strategy for redirection?**
- 2. Who do you know that has suffered from the attack of rumors? How can you encourage them?**
- 3. Have you recently been involved in spreading rumors? What would you like to say to Jesus about it?**

WEEK 6: THURSDAY

Compromise

Nehemiah 6:10-13

Later I went to visit Shemaiah son of Delaiah and grandson of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home. He said, "Let us meet together inside the Temple of God and bolt the doors shut. Your enemies are coming to kill you tonight."

But I replied, "Should someone in my position run from danger? Should someone in my position enter the Temple to save his life? No, I won't do it!" I realized that God had not spoken to him, but that he had uttered this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. They were hoping to intimidate me and make me sin. Then they would be able to accuse and discredit me.

One of the most intense challenges of leadership is resisting the temptation to take shortcuts when opportunities arise. What do you do when the success you've prayed for becomes available, but through the wrong means?

As the work on the wall nears completion, Nehemiah visits Shemaiah, whom he has no reason to distrust. Unbeknownst to him, Shemaiah has been hired to propose a compromise. It is well-known that enemies wish to eliminate the Jewish leader and halt the Jerusalem project. However, Sanballat's group has encountered such little success that they decide to change their tactics. If they can persuade Nehemiah to make a selfish choice, they can undermine his leadership and put an end to the progress that way.

Shemaiah suggests they meet in a safer place than his home. No one would notice if they met in the temple in a section where only priests were expected. Yes, technically, they weren't allowed to go into those areas. But who would see? Nehemiah is too important to risk capture or murder. Perhaps God has established the temple for just such an occasion as this.

Integrity acts as a safeguard against compromise. When you combine integrity with faith in God's promises, a significant problem is averted. Nehemiah stands firm, and the plot is revealed.

In this story, we hear echoes of the serpent in the Garden of Eden suggesting compromise to Eve, David's men in a cave urging him to murder Saul, and the devil in the wilderness offering Jesus the kingdom if He will bow down. The pages of scripture are filled with opportunities for compromise. However, the followers of God take the long way around and trust in Yahweh.

Once again, Nehemiah shows wisdom and strength, enabling the work to continue without hindrance. We, too, must resist the compromises so readily offered.

- 1. Have you ever played a game with someone who attempted to cheat? How did you feel about that? What did you do?**
- 2. Were you ever offered "help" in school with a paper, project or test that you knew was inappropriate? What did you do?**
- 3. What area of your integrity could use some forgiveness and restoration? What would you like to say to Jesus about that?**

WEEK 6: FRIDAY

Completion

Nehemiah 6:15-16

So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God.

Nehemiah 8:5-10

Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet.

Then Ezra praised the LORD, the great God, and all the people chanted, "Amen! Amen!" as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites... then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "Don't mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the LORD your God." For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

And Nehemiah continued, "Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!"

Absolutely amazing. Over the course of a few months, Nehemiah went from being unaware of the problem to prayerfully passionate, from hopelessly weeping to fully resourced. He led an expedition from Susa to Jerusalem, strategizing the project as the 900 miles passed. Once he arrived in town, he listened, inspired others, and worked diligently. Nehemiah worked tirelessly to fulfill the mission amidst every form of intentional discouragement. He faced attacks from enemies outside and dysfunction from within. In fifty-two days, the walls and gates were completed. The city was safe. The work was done. Or was it?

With the protective walls and the temple restored, what else remains to be done? As the eighth chapter of Nehemiah begins, the people gather for a special assembly and ask Ezra to bring out the scrolls of scripture and read to them as an act of worship. As Ezra read, the Levites explained each passage. Then the crowd (the church) began to weep.

Have you ever been certain of what you needed, only to receive it and discover it wasn't the complete answer? The people had thought, "If only we could return from captivity, all would be well." But once home, they lacked a temple for worship or walls for protection. Eventually, the building projects were completed, but something was still missing. As the reborn nation gathered before God, listening to His words, they recognized how far they had strayed from His intentions. They became deeply convicted, repentant, and sorrowful. The people wept as one.

As we conclude our study on Nehemiah and this incredible project, don't miss the ending. You may have a campus with significant infrastructural and material needs that hinder the work of God. That's our situation in Chattanooga. But as you strive to raise funds, plan diligently, face discouragement, and contend against opponents and naysayers, remember this point: none of our buildings, coffee, sound systems, or children's rooms matter unless God's people experience revival.

The people of Judah confront their guilt. They mourn so deeply that their remorse is incapacitating them with shame. However, Ezra and Nehemiah remind them that this is the rebuilding they have needed:

hearts reborn through conviction and confession. This is a day of rejoicing, “for the joy of the Lord is our strength.” (8:10)

- 1. Have you ever built a Lego creation? If so, what is your favorite thing that you’ve built?**
- 2. When you feel guilt that threatens to turn into shame, which passage of scripture helps you return to joy since the Lord is your strength?**
- 3. As you reflect on the immense love of God and His call to repentance, what do you wish to confess to Him at this moment?**