

so much pain and hurt. He challenged them in their church life. Be a giver. Lovers are givers. It's possible to give without loving but its impossible to love without giving. Love God. Support God's kingdom mission through the church by giving your talents, time and treasure. Failure to give indicates a drifting of the heart. Lack of giving opens up room for evil (like Tobiah) to squirm into your life, your temple and take up residence there. Giving of yourself is the secret to staying alive and fresh in our spiritual life. If you are bored in your spiritual life, you are not "all in". I love you guys! Says God. Trust me to provide financially and protect you relationally.

We are all prone to wander. Do you find yourself drifting in any of these areas? If you were to sit down with Nehemiah this afternoon, he would tell you to stop the drift by getting back to the Word. Re-sensitize yourself to God's word. Nehemiah was **joyfully responsive to God's Word**. The people began to read God's word and discovered they had not been celebrating the feast of booths, they began to mourn and weep from their disobedience and missing out on God's best for them. Nehemiah and Ezra told the people to stop mourning, but delight in the forgiveness, and freedom they have from God. (8:10) "The joy of the Lord is your strength." So they did. They built temporary shelters out of branches and camped out with each other (think church family camp at Farragut), remembering what it was like to live in the desert after escaping from slavery in Egypt. It was a week-long feast of celebration and thanksgiving.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength". It is good to be broken over our sin against God, but it is even better to take joy in God's forgiveness, take joy in His strength. We tend to think we will gain joy when we become strong, when we overcome that sin, victory over that struggle. We think if I can only be strong, then I will have joy. This is one of my favorite verses in Nehemiah because it tells me joy doesn't come when I finally get strong enough, but when I take joy in the Lord. Then his strength come flowing in. I don't need to be stronger, I need joy in the Lord and then comes my strength. It is joy that gives us strength, not strength that brings us joy. Perhaps if you were to remember one thing from our study in Nehemiah remember 8:10, "The joy of the Lord is my strength".

"Remembered for What?"

Nehemiah Overview

Sermon Series: Nehemiah



NORTHVIEW BIBLE CHURCH

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Nehemiah

Pastor Norm Schwab

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I remember as a kid, resting on freshly cut grass, looking up into a warm September sky. I'd watch the clouds float by quietly transforming themselves from rabbits to elephants. I loved watching the triangle of Canadian geese winging their way south. It was fascinating to see them fly in military formation one just behind the other, next to that one and so on. At first look you might think the ones drafting in the back were just sponging off the front one's hard work, but if you watched closely for a few minutes you would see the point goose rotate leadership. He couldn't handle all the turbulence for the whole time all alone. They seem to choose a group of stronger leaders who took turns buffeting the wind for the others. No one bird stayed out in front all the time. The rest of the birds would be honking their encouragement to the point goose. No one goose could make it to the distant destination on their own. They all flew together in order to reach their goal. They had to be a team. One goose next to another goose, next to another goose, bearing the work together, heading in the same direction.

That is not a bad model for the church. We need leaders who can handle the turbulence, but also leaders who are humble and aware enough to know they need to share the load, share the leadership...They can't do it all by themselves. It's not healthy or effective long term. It works well when the others in church are all honking out their encouragement, using their gifts, inspired by heading in the same direction.

Nehemiah was a leader, a rebuilders of walls and a restorer of people. He was a servant leader who humbly knew how to encourage, coach and motivate people while at the same time take a good share of the turbulence in the point position. In his journal, the Old Testament book with his name attached to it, in seven prayers Nehemiah asks God "Remember me." This morning we look back through some of his character traits that challenge us to lead well, love well and live well. Nehemiah believed that God rewards those who seek him. Nehemiah knew that God could reward him far more than the perks and privileges of this world ever will. He recognizes God as the ultimate rewarder and wanted to be remembered in the future. Am I looking for that greater reward? How do I want to be remembered?

For the past few months we have dissected and dismembered, extruded and exsicated this book of Nehemiah. Usually that would be where the study ends. We would hang up our white coats with the book laying on the lab table still in bits and pieces...and walk out the door. We have learned

much from our detailed study but I'd like to put Nehemiah back together again. This morning I want to step back and enjoy a big picture look before we rush off to another exciting adventure in exploring another section of God's Word. My goal for us this morning is for everyone here to be able to think their way through the major character traits and truths that we have learned from Nehemiah so that one year from now if anyone asks you if you have ever heard of Nehemiah, you won't have to respond. "Nehemiah? Hmmm. Wasn't that the shortest guy in the Bible?...knee-high-miah (yes, groan). I want to put Nehemiah all together in a package for us focusing on what makes Nehemiah a leader of impact, a rebuilders and restorer of walls and people.

Let me start by briefly refreshing our minds of the historical context. Here is a quiz: Where would you drop Nehemiah into a biblical timeline? A. Time of Abraham b. The Israelite kings c. Babylonian exile d. After the exile e. Right between the two testaments (intertestamental) f. Time of Jesus? The answer is "D" Zerubbabel led the first group of people out of captivity from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Then Ezra led a second group back and built the temple. Then finally Nehemiah led a 3rd smaller group back in 444BC with the purpose to rebuild the walls.

Right in the very first chapter of the book we get a sense of his **passion and compassion**. Nehemiah had a very important and powerful job in the government and yet there was a defining moment for him when his brother Hanani came to visit him. "now it happened..." That kicked off the purpose driving the entire book. Hanani told of the hardship and mocking shame that the people of Jerusalem faced because the walls around God's holy city still lay in ruin. 1:4 Nehemiah heard these words, "sat down and wept and mourned for days, fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." There was no protection. Few people lived in the city. There was just the temple and they had cleared just enough rubble to get there to worship. Nehemiah loved God and loved people. His first concern was for the glory of God and his second concern was for the good of the people. He saw a need and responded. We see this kind of passion and compassion all through the book especially in the very first and the last chapters. In chapter 13 his passion comes out. He is pulling people's hair out in anger and love for them because he could see into the future where their disregard for God's commands would take them if left unchecked. Nehemiah was a man who felt deeply about the things that God was concerned for. What makes you cry? Am I open to be broken? What need do you see? Am I willing to be available?

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Is my primary concern for the glory of God and also for the good of other people? Nehemiah was a man of passion and compassion.

Nehemiah was also a man of **leadership and vision**. Leaders have the vision, the ability to see what God wants them to accomplish through their lives and stay focused on this. In 6:2 when others were attempting to distract Nehemiah from the pursuit of his God given goal he replied, "I am doing a great work here, I cannot come down to meet with you." Leaders must see what others don't see, then challenge others to follow until they do see. Nehemiah's vision from God was far bigger than repairing gates and rebuilding walls. People were pleasantly shocked that part only took 52 days. Nehemiah saw beyond that. He could see long-term at repairing hearts and rebuilding lives.

Certainly vision is perception, a mental picture of the preferable future, but it is also practical. Nehemiah had well researched plans. The leader must be able to organize, anticipate and plan what to do. Great ideas with a half-baked plan will often fall flat. Certainly we must look to the Spirit's leading in our plans, but God gave us minds and Nehemiah is an example for us that planning is not a sin. We must be good stewards of the resources we are allotted and plan. He spent much time in prayer and preparation over these plans. He spent time explaining to the king and convincing others of the excitement of what could be. Nehemiah was an observer of events and people. He asked good questions and listened well. When he arrived at Jerusalem he surveyed the extent of the project by himself. He gathered information of the reality of the challenge before he began to convince others to join him. Yes, the reason the wall hadn't been rebuilt wasn't that there had been no attempts. The rubble was huge. The ruin looked impossible. But Nehemiah could see what they couldn't see. Nehemiah saw that God was in this. This was God's work, God's project. Leaders shine in the darkest of times. Spiritual leaders shine light toward God in the darkest of times. Nehemiah defined reality for the people. "We can't keep living this way." What is that rubble in your life that right now looks too deep, too destroyed for too long that you have become convinced its impossible to ever rebuild? Do not limit the powerful, creative, restorative power of Almighty God. In the worst darkness of our rubble, He shines the brightest.

Nehemiah's leadership was marked with a distinct lack of ego. He sacrificed time and money for others. He left his own name off the list of those helping out. He was not self-promoting. His concern was for God's glory and the peoples' good. He helped others. He wanted others to succeed. He was not intimidated by the excellence of others, in fact he encouraged it. He never abused his position but gave rather than get. He worked. He wasn't above getting his toga sweaty. He built his leadership in-

fluence not by issuing dictates and commands, but in servant leadership (5:14-19) He recognized who put him in his position. He refused to take advantage of others. He feared God more than other people. He looked to God as the ultimate rewarder. (V.15). He worked hard, sacrificially served (V.16, V. 18) He fostered his heart for the hurting. He lifted up the average, the ordinary, the weak. Oswald Sanders wrote in his book Spiritual Leadership, "The man who is impatient with weakness will be defective in leadership." The evidence of our strength lies not in streaking ahead, but in a willingness to adapt our stride to the slower pace of our weaker brethren, while not forfeiting our lead. If we run too far ahead, we lose our power to influence."

Nehemiah was a man of passion and compassion, leadership and vision. He was also **prayerful**. He was one of the most praying people in the Bible. Almost every chapter in this book records a prayer. Isn't it encouraging to see a high profile political person on His knees in prayer? A prayerful person is a dependent person, not independent. In chapter 1 when Nehemiah hears the need and his heart is broken, he instinctively moves toward prayer 1:4, "I heard these words...and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven." (V.11). That was his instinctive response when struggles same. Is that my first response? I tend to first try to fix it on my own. I may try to ignore it and hope it goes away, or run and hide. Just like a fish can breathe naturally and instinctively under water, as soon as crisis hits, threatening to drown Nehemiah, he instinctively drops to his knees in prayer. Maybe we should call him Knee-high-miah. He always had prayer on his mind. It was almost a constant conversation between he and his God. It's close to the challenge in the New Testament to "pray without ceasing." Luther wrote, "To be a Christian without prayer is not any more possible than to be alive without breathing."

He prays because He knows the One to whom He is praying. He knows a God who comes through (1:5), "a great and awesome God who keeps his promises and whose loyal love never fades with time." Nehemiah boldly claimed God's promises. Prayer empowered the flow of Nehemiah's life. He prayed expecting God to move and change and often it was Nehemiah who was changed and moved and strengthened to work and challenged to sacrifice. Augustine wrote, "Pray as if everything is depended on God and work as if everything depended on you." Philips Brooks wrote, "Oh do not pray for tasks equal to your strength, pray for power equal to your tasks." Are you beginning to grow those prayer gills? Are you growing thirsty for a prayer relationship with God, the kind that Nehemiah had? Maybe you will join and pray with the people before services, or Wednesday mornings, or the missions prayer times. Maybe you want to commit to pray more intentionally on your own. Nehemiah

knew how to pray and he practiced it. Knee high-miah earned his name.

Nehemiah was a man of passion and compassion, of leadership and vision and prayerful dependence. He was also a **motivator**. He continually points people back to why they are doing this project. "This is God's work. He is in it. He will accomplish this work through us." In chapter 3 he placed people working on sections of the wall that meant most to them. He had them work on the wall right in front of their home. He placed them in teams, together next to this guy and next to this guy. 31 times he mentions the phrase, "next to him". They didn't have to do the whole project alone. He understood team. When the building project was physically threatened by violence, he had the people work in teams, in shifts. One guy would stand guard with a spear while the other guy could slap on mortar without fear of taking an arrow. Nehemiah remembered peoples names. Several chapters (7 and 11) take up a lot of Bible space just listing the difficult to pronounce specific names. Nehemiah who wrote this book remembered peoples names. He thought it was important that they get mentioned. It takes a team. He wants to give credit to those average ordinary people who worked hard. There are few things more beautiful than ordinary faithfulness. We are not called to be impressive. We are called to be faithful. The world may quickly forget you, but God remembers your name. What do you want to be remembered for? By whom do you want to be remembered?

Nehemiah was a man of passion and compassion, of leadership and vision, prayerful dependence, a motivator. He was also a **man of courage**. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the resolve to do what is right even when we feel afraid. No person or project that seeks to honor God and advance his kingdom will go unopposed by Satan. In chapter 4 the opposition against Nehemiah ramped up. If you are not getting criticized or taking no shots, no heat, then chances are you are not getting anything done. If what you are doing is worthwhile you will at times face opposition, ridicule, mocking. Opposition is always part of our journey toward what God wants to rebuild in our life.

While encouragement to the leader makes the heart glad, **Criticism** is sulfuric acid to the soul. Nehemiah faced criticism from people who should have known better. He took shots from within and without. These people loved hearsay, rumors, inaccuracies, "It has been reported...", they resist change, run in packs. They exaggerate not only the size of the problem but also the extent of your weakness. They ignored God. Pray boldly and persist humbly. Listen well. If something sticks, admit it and work toward change. Be courageous. Joshua 1:9 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'

One of the devil's favorite tools 4:10-23 is

discouragement, caused from fatigue, life rubble, fear. As leaders our job is to keep hope alive. Regain perspective and remind people (yourself) who God is. Remember who you are and remember who God is. Nehemiah placed guards in the gaps and recruited a team. Have you guarded the gaps where you are vulnerable? Have you recruited a team to come alongside you, to stand with you when the attacks come flying? What good is a city wall to protect people if those inside the city are abusing and tearing down each other? Admit the conflict and deal with it head on. Listen. Listen. Listen.

If direct attack fails, the evil one will want to distract us from our goal. He loves **compromise**. It's usually not a matter of just saying "no" to the bad things. Often it's the good things we must say no to that are not in line with our mission. "Come out and meet with us on the plains of Ono", Sanballet and Tobiah called to Nehemiah. No "I am doing a great work and cannot go down there." Avoid getting distracted by clarifying your mission. Know when you are vulnerable. Know when you are weak and exposed. Be assured the enemy knows.

One of the more dangerous temptations is **the shortcut** to fulfill a legitimate need but in an illegitimate way. It happened right after a great success. The wall was finally completed. We are most vulnerable right after a great victory. We need to be very aware right after our building is completed. Satan would love to weasel pride and dissension on the heels of success. Chapter 6:10-19 Shemmiah acts like a friend, warning Nehemiah of a death threat.

"Hurry Nehemiah they are after us, lets run into the temple and save yourself." Legitimate need; protection from death threats? Absolutely! But Nehemiah wisely refuses to fulfill that need in an illegitimate way. I love Nehemiah's reply in 6:11, "should a man like me flee" into the temple? Remember who you are. When tempted to fulfill a legitimate need for affection, or finances or significance ask yourself, "should a man like me do that? Should a woman like me do that?"

Nehemiah was not afraid to **confront**. He got angry about the right things. How you handle conflict says a lot about your character. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after several years away and discovered arch enemy Tobiah had taken up residence in a luxury suite in the temple complex, in the very rooms that had been intended to store the resources for temple worship and supply the priests, he blew a cork! He refused to allow wrong to live in a place that was built for right. He confronted the people on their work life. Rest people. God loves you and gave you a day of rest for good reason. You are human being not a human doing. Please rest and worship and refocus and refresh. He challenged them in their love life. Marry people who are headed the same way you are going spiritually. I want to protect you and save you from