

SERIES: Studies in Nehemiah
Lesson 1

May 10, 1987
Nehemiah 1:1-4

DISTRESSED IN SUSA
(An Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah)

Introduction In our last two series of expositions from the pulpit, we have dealt with a prophecy (Jonah) and a New Testament epistle (I Peter). We want to begin a new series of expositions from another kind of Biblical writing, the narrative--or, we might call it "inspired history." The writing we are going to look at is a personal record written about a man who lived in difficult times. Nehemiah's life was lived near the end of the Old Testament writings, and most of the action of the book occurs in the spring and summer of the year 445 B.C. (see "A Selection of Dates" on the bulletin back).

In the Book of Nehemiah we will encounter a number of relevant issues. We will see something of God, and how He worked in the lives of His people 2,500 years ago--and we will draw some very definite similarities as to how He works today. Second, we will see something about prayer--prayer is a subject I think we can never hear too much about! We need encouragement from the Word about how to pray, and what to expect from the practice of prayer...We will also see some things about dealing with discouragement, particularly in the face of opposition. Also, we will encounter in the Book of Nehemiah a tale of recommitment to God on the part of His people. In a general sense, Nehemiah is the story of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy of about 175 years previous--that God would send the nation into exile for seventy years in order the win the recommitment of the people to Himself. A couple of other subjects we will run into are the necessity that God's people separate themselves from the seduction and religious notions of the world--that they keep their worship of God pure and undefiled. Part of this is engaged by God's forbidding again that His people should marry unbelievers, at the end of the Book.

I am convinced that even though we are a community of God's people in Christ living some 2,500 years after Nehemiah did, and even though our lives are technologically more advanced and far more mobile and far more learned--our problems as a people called out of the world by His grace are so very similar! Also, the Book of Nehemiah illustrates the people of God seeing the hand of God working in their midst! How many of you have I heard say in recent months, "I need to see the hand of God at work in my life." My hope and prayer is that through looking at this man we can draw great encouragement, courage and a recommitment to serving the Lord! Like the Jews of old, we too can grow cold of heart towards the Lord, apathetic, bored with hearing about His will for us--I trust this Book will warm your heart for Christ. I trust you will catch a new vision of the God you worship!

The Setting of the Book (Nehemiah 1:1) The book begins with "the words of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah." This book concerns a man named Nehemiah, which probably means "the compassion of Yah (God)." I think it would be special to have a name like that! My name means a dike or dam on a farm, in Danish. But to have a name which testified of the compassion of God--now that would be a name to be proud of!

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one in the Hebrew canon of Scripture. Nehemiah and Ezra were probably written by one man, perhaps Ezra, even though the first part of the book is in the first person. It is very likely that Ezra was copying from the personal journal of Nehemiah, and then expands the history.

Now Nehemiah was not a priest^{like Ezra} or a king or a prophet. He was a regular Joe, a businessman who had a secular profession. And as we shall see, Nehemiah's work was in politics. We pick up the account as he is in Susa the capitol, or probably better translated, "Susa the citadel," which was the winter resort of the Persian kings, or the Persian version of "the California Ranch." Nehemiah is an important staff member of the current Persian king, Artaxerxes I, the king who ruled after Ahasuerus--Esther's husband. As Nehemiah writes in his journal, it is probably somewhere between mid-November and mid-December of the year 446 B.C.

Have you ever thought about keeping a journal? I'm not talking about something that anyone else would read (unless you wanted to share it with them). But keeping a journal can be a real encouragement in the short run, because it provides an outlet to reflect on what you're going through these days and weeks... And in the long run, because you can look back and see how God has worked in your life over the years!

Bad News From Home (verses 2 & 3) For those of you who did not grow up in this area, you are probably like me in that you still have an interest in the area that you did grow up in. In the USA Today newspaper there is a section every weekday that gives a little news-blurb about something that happened in each state of the union. Every day that I buy a paper, I look at what's happening in Virginia (where I grew up). I have an uncle in Seattle, Washington who has not lived in his (and my Dad's) hometown of Superior, Wisconsin since 1934 but who still receives a daily copy of the Superior Evening Telegram newspaper in the mail.

So here is Nehemiah at work in Susa and he receives a visit from his brother and some other men from home in Jerusalem. And he asks for news from Jerusalem. We can only wonder at what he hoped to hear--news that the people were prospering, that repairs were underway on the city's structures, maybe even of the Temple's rebuilding, and some hope for the future of God's people, Israel.

Nehemiah also wanted news about how the "remnant" was faring. God always promised that a "remnant" of Israel would survive, would escape the nations' pillaging and destruction in Israel--that little group of survivors with whom the future of Israel would lie..."Maybe they are bearing up well, and are strengthened and prospering in spite of these seventy years of exile for our people," perhaps Nehemiah hopefully thought...

It has been ninety years in fact, since the Hebrews had begun to return to Jerusalem...the Temple had been rebuilt (536-516) since Nebuchudrezzar had wasted the city (587 B.C.) But the news was bad, and we can get a better picture in Ezra 4:7-23.

Ezra had enjoyed the favor of kings, but it had now come to ruin and Jerusalem was not only unarmed again, but totally alone. Don't you feel bad if you hear of some trouble with someone you love, who lives far away? There's nothing you can do about it from your vantage point...you feel helpless.

Actually though, helplessness is a good place to be when we are talking about the Christian life. Only when we are helpless are we forced to rely wholly on the Lord. Only when we are completely unable to change a situation can we really see that it is God who brings about righteousness in the world.

The phrase "God helps those who help themselves" is often an excuse to not trust God and to depend on my own sense of self-sufficiency to accomplish something. It is often a platitude used to turn a conversation away from the harder subject of going to the Lord with a problem, and waiting on Him to turn that problem for better.

Of course, when there IS something to be done, we need to do it--and the first course in pursuing some goal is prayer.

How Nehemiah Responded To The News (verse 4) We shall see that Nehemiah's basic personality is bent towards swift, decisive action in various situations. He was the kind of man who says, "What's the problem?--What can we do about it?" in the same breath...

But his reaction here is remarkable. He just stops in his tracks and seeks the Lord for several days. Now I do not know if Nehemiah took some sick days or how he worked it. Maybe he prayed and wept just on break-time and over lunch, but clearly he is greatly moved at the news he hears about his brethren in Jerusalem.

Dear ones, when you hear about your Christian brethren who are suffering in another land, what is your reaction?

Notice that the text says he was fasting and praying. Why did he go without food at certain times, or maybe even at all for those days? Did Nehemiah believe that there was some magical value to abstinence from food? Did he think that self-denial would somehow win God over to do what he wanted? I do not believe that is the answer at all!

We see from other places in the Scripture that fasting and prayer go together (just as they did here in Nehemiah's life). It is a time a person sets aside to seek the Lord earnestly--to show Him that he really means business about this matter! This is not because God needs the information. God knows our hearts and everything else about us. But when we demonstrate that we are really serious about something, that we think is within God's will (and the restoration of God's people was known to be within God's will, because He had promised to do it), and we make a concerted effort to seek the Lord about it--not to manipulate God into something--but to deal seriously, in faith and dependence with Him about it...to go "in conference" with the God of heaven...

we know then that the Lord is pleased to use it! From time to time we will call a day of prayer and fasting in our church. I hope that when we do that the whole Body will give time to seek the Lord about those things that are pressing. From time to time you may be led of the Spirit to seek Him and to spend a concentrated time in the Word and in prayer and fasting (using that time for prayer). I know that some of our sister churches in this area make quite the practice of prayer and fasting and sometimes I cannot help but wonder if they do not see more dramatic evidences of God's sovereign working in their lives.

The phrase "God of heaven" is significant in Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel because at this point in Israel's history God was not dwelling in that Temple in Jerusalem, even though it had been rebuilt. He had gone "back to heaven." It is for this reason that the Lord God is referred to as "the Lord God of Heaven" in those O.T. books written after the Babylonian captivity of Israel. In fact, I believe He does not appear again for over four hundred years, and then in Bethlehem when the angel said, "Glory to God in the highest," and God's Son comes to earth, veiled in human flesh! Then, He will come again one of these days, as He Himself said, "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven; and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).

So we leave Nehemiah, this morning, on his knees, deeply moved about the condition of his countrymen back in Jerusalem. When next we meet him we will look at how he prays, and then we will see him spring to action and the fun starts!

My friends, have each of you here today had that first-time experience of seeing your need of the work of God in your life? When a person is truly rescued from sin and guilt and judgement, through trusting in Jesus' blood, he has sought the Lord for rescue.

It is exciting to see in Scripture that when people seek the Lord sincerely, on HIS terms (and that means NOT on the basis of good-deed doing) He always pours out His wonderful kindness and mercy on them. May that have been your experience at some past time, or if not, may it be your experience this very day!

SERIES: Studies in Nehemiah
Lesson 2

May 24, 1987
Nehemiah 1:4-11

GOING TO THE GOD OF HEAVEN

Introduction What is the most important part of living the Christian life? Is it personal Bible study? Is it telling other people about the free offer of eternal life through faith alone in Jesus' blood? Or maybe it's making a point of treating other people like you enjoy being treated yourself... Is it making sure all your doctrine is correct? Is it being a good witness on the job by being a trustworthy and responsible worker? Is it keeping your family your first priority? Well, I don't think any of these things is more important than another--the Lord intends for Christians to work on keeping all of them in balance in my life.

But I will tell you what I think to be the most profound, and, the most exciting part of the Christian life...as well, I am persuaded that without this part of the Christian life in our lives IN ABUNDANCE, the Christian life will (either gradually or quickly) become a boring routine of just going from one activity to another. I am talking about the "life-blood" of the Christian life. Dear ones, I am talking about that tool in the Christian's tool box that we need every day; that one wrench that most often fits the rusty bolt we are trying to free! It should become second nature for the true Christian, and a part of his life so natural that he or she comes to the place where they cannot imagine living without it. And, *when times of real difficulty come*, it is the remedy FIRST employed. I am talking about prayer.

This morning we are looking at the prayer of Nehemiah, as he has just heard the news that Jerusalem is defenseless. Even though ninety years before (as if it were 1897 for us), a great number of Hebrew captives had returned to their homes from Babylon...even though seventy years earlier (as if it were 1917 for us) the Temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt...Jerusalem, the city that Nehemiah loved, lay defenseless to all the insults, robbing barbarians from the hills, and even possible military attack. Her walls were completely down and her front gates lay broken and burned. This was the news that Nehemiah heard. It grieved him greatly.

This week we heard about the U.S.S. Stark, with two hundred sailors aboard, moving in the Persian Gulf, attacked by an Iraqi Mirage and taking two Exocet missiles, one which killed thirty seven of our countrymen. We feel outrage, sorrow and bewilderment--not so much at the fact of the attack (since we are growing used to American servicemen and emissaries overseas being assassinated)--but bewilderment at the seeming defenseless condition of the Stark, one minute before the

Exocet struck. That condition is what has dominated the media this week. And the talk-show pundits have highlighted THAT aspect of this incident. The defenseless state of his countrymen is the burden that lay in the mind and heart of Nehemiah also, 2,400 years ago...

Nehemiah turned to prayer. That needs to be our course too, when we as individual Christians, and as an assembly of God's people, bound together by the conviction that God still hears the prayers of His people and delights in them, just as He did 2,400 years ago, and, as we shall see, just as Nehemiah had the same conviction that God did 1,000 years previous to his life, when He heard Moses' prayers.

Nehemiah's Approach to Prayer (Neh.1:4-7) Nehemiah had a great burden, and even though he is a man of quick, decisive action, he did not rush through his plans. One commentator (Cyril Barber) believes Nehemiah sought the Lord about this matter for four months before making his move. Nehemiah himself just recorded in his journal that sought the Lord "for days." Probably it was for a number of weeks at least, while carrying on his work responsibilities, and the matter simply would not leave him alone. Notice the four aspects in verse four to his seeking the Lord. He wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. For him this wasn't just a passing irritation in his mind. He couldn't shake his burden for the folks down in Jerusalem. The more he thought about it, the more he prayed. It was not a religious program. It was not necessarily part of the job description for the fifth-century, proper, self-respecting Hebrew captive. I think this prayer is representative of what he was going through all through these weeks. No doubt he actually prayed this prayer that he recorded and wrote down in his journal--but I think he prayed it and others like it more than once! Nehemiah's prayer is the classic example of pathos, the feeling of being consumed with the pathetic condition of someone else. Sometimes I think that we can become insulated from "pathos." We distract ourselves with personal interests, possessions, professional advancement...and we grow numb to the condition of those around us.

At this evening's Annual Meeting of our church, I am going to suggest that we resurrect this church's missionary program. I do not envision a boring, typical church program--just another series of meetings to put on the calendar. I don't like boring meetings any more than anyone else. And, quite frankly, as I have talked about missions increasingly these past few months, the discussion is generally met with sleepy looks on the part of those to whom I have brought it up. We lack "pathos".

It was Nehemiah's pathos that moved him to seek the Lord! His approach in prayer is to reflect on the character of God. He doesn't immediately bring up his request. He deliberately POSTPONES his cry for help; in fact, not until verse 11 does Nehemiah actually ask the Lord to bless the move that he is about to make. From verses 5-10 he reflects on God's character and on the history of how God had been dealing with His people, Israel.

Now, Nehemiah is not merely praying through a FORMULA. I do not believe it is in the back of his mind, "if I say the right words, in the right order, God will give me what I want." But it is the true God, after all, that he is talking to. And as he reflects on the wonderful and awesome nature of the God to Whom he is tal-

king, it is like cold water splashing on his face--reflecting on God's character in prayer (and in group praise too) has the effect of awakening us from spiritual drowsiness, just like cold water on your face in the morning. I enjoy hearing some of you pray like this during our Sunday morning prayer times! Some of you are especially sensitive to this prayer habit, and I hope we see more and more of it in the prayer time at 9:35, during the services, and during our midweek groups! And, I hope you will learn from Nehemiah's prayer for your own prayer life!

Nehemiah's approach to prayer involves here involves three elements: praise, prostration, and promise-dependence. The first two show up in verses 5-7.

The praise which Nehemiah gives the God of heaven, is an *intelligent praise*. He does not rattle off a series of memorized and repeated incantations. He honors the Lord by assuming that He is capable of understanding rational discussion. I find no comfort nor edification in prayer which insults the Lord. He has created us as rational, intelligent beings, and yet sometimes people (even Christians) approach prayer as if it were a sideshow intended to entertain a mythological Greek god or goddess. God does not need to be entertained! Nehemiah addresses Him for Who He is--this always pleases God, all throughout the Scripture, and He delights to have people, especially His OWN people address Him in a way that shows they truly understand something of WHO HE IS!

Notice that God is a God Who keeps His promises, in verse 5. But His promises (the ones that Nehemiah is depending on, at least) have a limit. They apply to those who love Him. God is a covenant-keeping God, and He keeps His promises NOT just out of some cosmic, duty-bound obligation, but because His love and kindness motivate Him to keep them!

The NIV translates this "His covenant of love." Here is that wonderful Old Testament word (which I can't get enough of), "hesed." It is the word for loyal love, covenant love, the love between lovers who have committed themselves to each other--except in the biblical context, so often, the bride deserts the groom. But the groom maintains his covenant love. The Lord maintains His loyal love for His people.

Dear ones, when you approach the Lord in prayer (if you are a Christian), you can be assured that the Lord is listening NOT JUST BECAUSE HE IS SUPPOSED TO--but, because He loves to. That boggles my mind, that the Lord of the Universe would desire my fellowship. But He does. And if you have accepted the free gift of adoption into His family, by faith alone in the cross, then you have that assurance!

Nehemiah also doesn't hesitate to prostrate himself. Can you see this in verses 6 and 7. He humbles himself and this prostration ALWAYS involves confession! Nehemiah confesses the sins of his people (remember, he is not a prophet, priest or king--just a businessman). And, he confesses his own sin and that of his family. Confession essentially means to agree with God about your part of the problem.

If you're like me, when you come into conflict with someone, you probably tend think of six or seven ways to blame the other person. Conflict brings us face to face with our own stubbornness

and unwillingness to change. At this point in Nehemiah's life, at least, He knows to admit where he himself has participated in the unfaithfulness and disobedience of Israel. Nehemiah was not a larger-than-life hero. He struggled too, and he knew it!

Better, he agreed with God's word, that he too was part of the problem. He prostrated himself before the Lord and knew that he had to approach God empty-handed with his requests...but also knew that he could depend on the promises God had made, as we see in verses 8 through 11.

Nehemiah's Prayerful Dependence on God's Promises (Neh.1:8-11)

Nehemiah is empty-handed, but not uninvited (Derek Kidner's Commentary). He knows the promises of Scripture well enough to make a *strong*, not a tentative plea. He draws on several passages in Deuteronomy, significantly in verse 10, he draws on Deut.9:29. At that point, Israel had been threatened with extinction. Now it looks like Nehemiah sees the situation as pretty much the same!

"Yet they are Thy people, even Thine inheritance, whom Thou hast brought out by Thy great power and Thine outstretched arm."

Nehemiah identifies with Moses and stands in the midst of the crisis, interceding for the people he loves.

Have you ever felt that someone else's spiritual safety was imperilled? Or maybe, you have feared for someone's physical or moral or psychological safety...Seek the Lord about it. Dwell on the character of your God. Admit your own failures to Him. Place yourself consciously on the bedrock of His promises and boldly ask Him for His intervention!

Let us therefore [since we have a great High Priest in Jesus] draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may find mercy and may find grace to help in time of need. *Hebrews 4:16*

At the end of his prayer, Nehemiah brings up the request on his heart. "Lord, please make me successful. I've got this plan. It's risky. It's bold. Some people will think it's wacky. But Lord, please prosper it."

A good leader makes himself available and personally involved in meeting needs. Nehemiah didn't simply pray, "Lord, take care of it." He prayed, "Lord, please use me in taking care of it!"

Prayer is the most important tool in the Christian's toolbox for the Christian life. It is prayer which is full of intelligent praise, prostration and humility, promise-dependence--and it is prayer wherein the person views himself NOT as aloof from the situation, but involved with it! Dartmouth Bible Church, may we be the kind of assembly which is prayer dependent; which delights in times of prayer together and most importantly as individuals! May God help us to determine to be that kind of church.

SERIES: Studies in Nehemiah (2:1-8)
Lesson 3

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
June 14, 1987

THE GOOD HAND OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN

Introduction I will tell you the main point of today's message right up front. It is found in the last verse of our Scripture passage, in fact, the very last sentence:

And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests (Neh.2:8c, NIV).

Today's main point is that *if you will be a seeker of Christ*--willing to obey what you know He wants--*you will see dramatic answers to prayer in your life.* Now that's a good main point! I know it is for us, because I know for many of you, that you need to see God's GRACE working in your life. You are involved to varying degrees with the activities of the Christian life, but you need a major "act of God" (as the insurance industry might call it) in your own walk with Him. For some of you it has been quite a while since you have "heard the voice of the Lord" (and, I do not mean audibly) in your daily lives...So, when I suggest to you that the Lord Jesus WILL respond to your prayer requests--it is a relevant thing that I say!

I wish to remind you (and myself) that when our God moves in our lives, it is not just because we have appeased the "old man." When God moves in our lives it is because He delights to be involved with His children and to pour out His GOODNESS upon them. As I read the Scripture, I see a God who really ENJOYS interacting with His people. *And* he seems distant, it is not because He is on vacation, or out to lunch, but because we have slipped and become distracted...

Now Nehemiah was going to see some dramatic answers to prayer NOT because he was a special prophet, a faithful priest or a favored king. Nehemiah was a businessman. He says at the end of 1:11, "Now I was the cupbearer to the king."

King Artaxerxes is the man to whom Nehemiah reported as cupbearer. Being cupbearer doesn't sound very impressive. The position sounds comparable to the dishwasher, or at best to the butler or the table waiter. But the cupbearer was far more important than that. The cupbearer tasted the wine before the king drank it, and he tasted the food before the king ate it. If the dinner was poisoned or if somebody was trying to slip the king a "mickey"--no more cupbearer, but long live the king. And through the practice of this custom, an incredible *intimacy* developed between the taster and the partaker, between the cupbearer and the king. In fact, it has been suggested by ancient historians that the cupbearer, like no one other than the

king's wife, was in a position to influence the monarch.

--from *Hand Me Another Brick*, by Chuck Swindoll

So here Nehemiah is, in the month of Nisan--about April. It is four months since he received the news from home. He has brooded over the news. He has been praying, and seeking the mind of the Lord...Now is the time for action!

ROUND 1 - THE CONFRONTATION (2:1-3) Nehemiah had sought the Lord so earnestly because he knew that only the Lord could change his superior's heart! Oh sure, he could have depended on scheming--maybe he could outsmart his boss...He could have attempted to deceive the boss to accomplish his goals. But he chooses a *more efficient* way! He chooses to let God do the work of changing his boss's heart!

Now remember that his desire (Israel's restoration) is something that Nehemiah knows would be honoring to Jehovah. His motives are not selfish. He is not saying, "Lord I have been seeking you for four months now, so how about that Lincoln Town Car?" Nehemiah's goal, and the plan that has evolved in his mind, are things which are not for his own personal gain but for the ultimate good of God's people and for Jehovah's own glory. Have you been contemplating some project for the Lord? Has some superior or other person blocked the way--or maybe, you have *feared* that they would block the way?

Now verse 2 is interesting because it is clear that Nehemiah is not putting on a show. To be melancholy in the presence was a crime punishable by death. You didn't bring gloom into the throne-room! And clearly also, Nehemiah is not a whiner. But, at the same time, the Lord gives him the wisdom to let just enough of his grief through on this particular day--the day that Nehemiah had determined he was going to make his move (1:11).

The king sees that something is not quite right on the face of his trusted "comptroller." It's a good lesson for us on the side, dear ones, that **TRANSPARENCY** is usually a profitable practice! Leaders especially who maintain an air of invulnerability usually fall apart somewhere along the line, just from the pressure of "saving face!" It is important that we are genuine with each other.

And something genuine showed through on Nehemiah's face. On this day, after he has sought the Lord and really prayed about the matter, Nehemiah takes the risk of laying all the cards on the table. In verse 3 Nehemiah doesn't say, "Well, Art, I was wondering about how you might use your resources on a little side project..." No, he doesn't try to slip one over on the king, but he lays it out just as honestly as he feels about it!

NEHEMIAH TAKES A DEEP BREATH (2:4) Now the king utters those four words which Nehemiah has longed to hear for four months now..."What would you request?"

And since he has been seeking the Lord and giving himself to prayer, Nehemiah is going to see some dramatic answers to prayer! But first, as kind of a last deep breath, Nehemiah prays again.

It's easy to relate to this! After you have really prayed about something--your heart and mind have become so used to talking with the Lord about it, that you can be drawn one to prayer one last minute before you act! Maybe you have been contemplating a confrontation with your boss, or husband or wife or mother or father...Have you

really prayed about it first?

Taking the time to make the matter a SERIOUS matter of prayer can do several things for you: 1) Prayer keeps us from being too impulsive! When you're praying about something, you can't act on it at the same time! Prayer forces you to leave the situation with God, at least for the time you're praying! 2) Prayer can clear your vision, and help you see the issue more clearly--it can help you "burn through the fog" when an issue is confusing for you. 3) Prayer quiets the heart. It's hard to worry and pray at the same time! Prayer replaces anxiety with the peace of the Lord (Philippians 4:6,7)...4) Prayer activates your faith! After praying about some issue, you are more prone to trust God--and "how petty and negative and critical I am when I don't pray!" (Swindoll)

Nehemiah experienced all these benefits from having sought the Lord about his plan. He was banking on the fact that since he had sought the Lord, that He would see a dramatic answer to his prayers! I don't know if Nehemiah felt NO SENSE of risk...I don't know if he *knew* exactly HOW God was going to answer his prayers...What he *did* know was that God WAS going to answer his prayers, and it would be dramatically, noticeably and beneficially!

NEHEMIAH'S PLAN OF ACTION (2:5-8) Again in verse 5 Nehemiah mentions his "fathers' tombs." This is a tactful and well-thought-out notion to which he refers. I think he must have known that mention of "my fathers' tombs" would strike a sympathetic chord in Artaxerxes' heart--it was an idea particularly sacred to all ancient Near-Easterners--much like if I came to you and said, "Oh man, am I ever sad...the beaches in Virginia have all been devastated by a storm." If I said to you, "The deserts in Virginia have all been swallowed up in an earthquake," you may say, "So what?" But a reference to a kind of place that is special to you too, strikes a chord in your heart. That's what Nehemiah is doing--he is a tactful man, here and he plays his cards with wisdom--NOT WITH GUILE, but smartly!

The king wants to know when he'll be back (I can't think of any other reason why Nehemiah would record that the queen was sitting next to the king, unless the queen whispered in the king's ear, "Ask him when he's coming home"). Now, Nehemiah does the responsible thing--he says "You can depend on me to be back on such-and-such a date."

Part of maintaining a good witness to the world--especially if you have a non-Christian employer--is to be a dependable worker. This is also important in Christian leadership. If a Christian leader is not dependable, how can he expect the flock to act responsibly?

Then, Nehemiah gets down to business. He wants the paperwork! Now I can get excited about this!! He hasn't simply asked the Lord to part the Red Sea here, but he is a practically thinking man, and he chooses to TRUST GOD to work through the system--and he knows he's going to need a certain amount of paperwork to get the job done! In THIS CASE, at least, he hasn't said, "Lord, would You eliminate the RED TAPE," but rather, "Lord, would you handle the red tape!"

Many times Christians would rather watch God do some spectacular physical miracle, than to watch Him work (*JUST AS SUPERNATURALLY, I might add*) within and through the mundane. I will freely admit,

it would be much easier to trust the Lord Jesus with the details of my life if He said, "Neil, every week I'm going to work a miracle over at your house, or at the church."

Verse 8 involves quite a request made to Artaxerxes--a request for a "presidential voucher" for lumber! Nehemiah was so sure that He had God's will in His mind, and God's blessing with Him IN the plan, that he was bold enough to ask for free lumber--and probably the BEST, and a lot of it!!!

But because Nehemiah has honored the Lord in his heart, and had sought the Lord all through the *planning stages*, the Lord is going to dramatically answer His prayers! The commentary at the end of verse 8 is exciting! It is out of His goodness that the Lord is working with Nehemiah on this one. Nehemiah prospers in the work of the Lord (and no doubt he himself drew a great amount of satisfaction from it) because he has taken the time to seek the Lord.

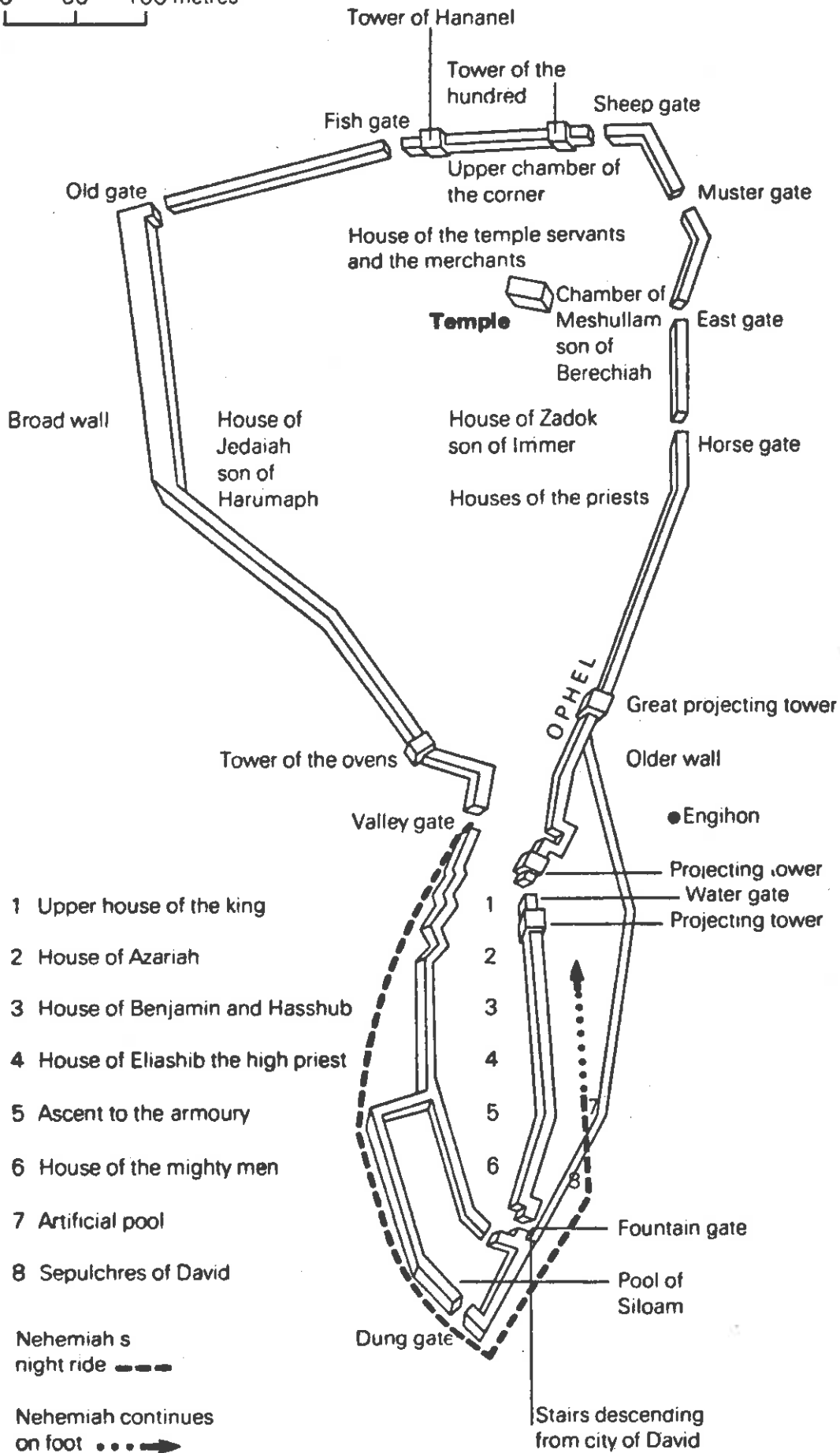
Dear ones, when you're planning something or if someone is on your heart to minister to, have you really prayed about it? How serious about it are you? That will be reflected by how much you have prayed about it!

Finally will you notice that Nehemiah calls God HIS God? Is God your God? Do you own Him in your heart? The Reformer Philip Melancton said,

To know Christ is to *know His benefits*, NOT to contemplate His natures.

Do you personally enjoy relying on the benefits of knowing Christ. Is the Lord Jesus YOUR God? Walking with Christ in the Christian life is not always easy, but it is definitely never boring--because Jesus Christ is never boring! I hope we are becoming a people of prayer. A church where everyone prays often and trusts their Lord is a successful church, no matter what the size of the church, how nice a building or how many piano players they have! May Jehovah and His true Son burden us as individuals, to seek Him more often, more fully and more consistently--then we will see more dramatic answers to prayer, and our building will not be able to contain the excitement!

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SERIES: Studies in Nehemiah (2:9-20)
Lesson 4

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
June 21, 1987

"TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS" (THE GOOD WORK OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN)

Introduction Sometimes we think of Bible characters as people who were somehow bigger than life. But they were real people who lived a day to day existence just like you and I. They got up in the morning and set about their work, whatever that was. For some Bible characters it was the life of a fisherman. Others were tradesmen of different sorts-- Paul was an outfitter of camping equipment, some others were soldiers, others were shepherds, others were preachers, and others were prostitutes. Some made their living in politics. In fact, there are quite a few Bible characters who in some sense, at least, were politicians. David and Solomon were kings. Matthew was a tax collector. Deborah was a Judge. Nehemiah was a "special counsel" to the President! He was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, and now in chapter two, he has become Project Manager for the rebuilding of Jerusalem--in fact, really, he is now an engineer!

As I studied this chapter this week, I was encouraged again at how real the Scripture is. This section basically records three days in Nehemiah's life--there are no real whiz-bang miracles here. He doesn't get any visions here. In this section, we just have an account of the business to which Nehemiah set his mind. I would like you to see today, dear ones, that this section of Scripture shows how God works in and through our daily lives. He is looking for daily faithfulness in us, and ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS, IS WHERE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIVED! I'm going to call it "the T.C.B. theory of the Christian life"--TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS!

You and I need encouragement that the normal Christian life is something that basically is slugged out in the trenches on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. We need to be aware of our sovereign and loving God's work out there--on Monday afternoon, on Thursday morning, on Saturday night. The Christian life isn't lived in this little room here, which was built for worship--it's lived in your car, in your living room, in your bedroom, at the plant, at Shaw's, in the parking lot at Ann & Hope, in the company truck...I'm here to lead you this morning, through an account of a Christian leader who set his mind to the task of doing a job, and doing it well, and doing it smart. And praise God, HE was working through and in Nehemiah's life all along, and Nehemiah was aware of it, and Nehemiah did not hesitate to testify of God's presence, either to his Hebrew brethren, or to the pagans in his life!

THE BUSINESS OF REVIEW AND EXAMINATION (verses 9-16) I like the way Nehemiah checks out the situation before he decides on a plan. On his way into town he was protected by what sounds like half the Persian army. The secular locals (the "townies") weren't very happy about this--it was going to no doubt upset their status-quo. But God hasn't asked their permission to rebuild the city of the sons of Israel!

In verse 12 Nehemiah "and the boys" check out the ruins. Ruins are something we in middle class society know little about. It must be extremely hard to walk about your town and look at the houses or docks or stores and see it all laying there in ruins. After the '38 hurricane I think some of you can remember what that feeling was like. Many Europeans and Japanese can remember what it's like to look at your home town and see it all wasted. But most of us cannot imagine really what must have been going through Nehemiah's mind. It must be a grief and a feeling of despair unmatched by anything! And they were taking it all in!

Notice that he has a plan. Who is the author of this plan? It WAS in Nehemiah's head, but God was the author. That is a wonderful thing, how the Lord sometimes burdens His people with one kind of enterprise of another! I think the Christian life is most exciting when we have a plan--and then we set about to bring the plan about. If we are praying along the way, the Lord will crystallize the plan, help you think through the details, filter out the stupid stuff, and gradually the plan will unfold into reality! That's part of how the Lord works--but we need to be prayerful and bring Him in on our plans.

I think it is a good thing to make prayerful plans for the future. In fact, I have begun to pray and think about what would be a good "Three Year Plan" for Dartmouth Bible Church. When you're making plans it doesn't mean you can't go from Plan A to Plan B in "midstream." But it is a good thing for God's people to *HAVE* some plans and goals, both personal and corporate, as a Body.

What would God have Dartmouth Bible Church look like in 1990?
Will we be content to be about the same in every respect as we are now?

Nehemiah had a plan on his heart. He took some bold steps, which were bathed in prayer beforehand to bring about his plan. Was he foolish to ask his employer for time off, military escort and certain commodities with which to accomplish his project? No, he was not, because God was the author of his plan (vs.12).

Now it is proper and profitable to use good judgement and caution in doing God's work--Religious people today are claiming God's leading for many projects which I must really question. We must not hide selfishness, vain glory or competitiveness in our hearts and then say that God has authored some project we want to do, when really it is one of those things that motivates us. But when we see a plan for furthering the Kingdom--let's pray about it, let's make some good plans--maybe bold ones--let's survey the situation--and let's do it!

THE BOARD MEETING (verses 17,18)

Now Nehemiah calls together "the board." He is not unrealistic about the conditions they must start with, but he is decisive. A good leader is decisive, and also reminds the workers of how the Lord had blessed in times past. God has blessed US here at Dartmouth Bible Church. We have a great group of Christians who work hard at living a Spirit-controlled life. We have weathered some hard times and we have learned, and are learning more about the kinds of things we can do for the Lord. The "good hand of the Lord HAS been favorable" to us here! You are the most sincere group of people I have ever been associated with. You are willing, and looking for ways to share the Gospel with folks around you, MORE than any church I have been associated with. You have been kind to me financially, and sensitive to our needs. We are developing a good reputation I think among many non-Christians in the town. God has blessed us!

In verse 18, the people responded to Nehemiah's plan and review of God's blessings with, "Well, let's get to work then!" They were not content with the status-quo. They said "Let's press on!"

We have two major outreach projects coming up in July: the Booth Ministry at the Whaling City Festival, and Vacation Bible School. Now we have done these two ministries for some years now, and we know what we're doing--we have achieved a level of competence at running them. But will we be content with the status-quo? Or, will some of you that have NOT been involved be willing to take a little risk and come out and GET involved in building the Kingdom of Jesus Christ? Maybe some of you who have not really invited children you know WILL invite some new kids? Maybe we can reach a lot of people this year? Wouldn't that be exciting?

THE OPPOSITION (verses 19,20)

Sometimes the opposition that Christians face is not physical or economic, at first--it is a war of nerves. The opposition says, "You can't do that..." Or, "You'll never get any better than you are right now!" Or, "Christian, what you are doing is unpatriotic!"

RIDICULE is a very effective weapon that the devil and his children use against the Kingdom of Christ. And we sometimes *FEAR* it, don't we? Dear ones, we need to see that if the task we are undertaking has been bathed in prayer, initiated by the leading of the Lord...we need to fear nothing!

In dismissing his accusers, by saying they have no *portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem*, Nehemiah is saying that they have no past, present or future among God's people. There are two kinds of people in the world--those who have been grafted by faith into the family of the Lord Jesus Christ, and those who have not.

My friends, we will move ahead. We will, by God's grace and provision, continue to see the good hand of the Lord here, and continue to see HIM build a little more of His Kingdom through us. If you are a Christian, will you commit yourself to *PRAY* for God's leading and prosperous hand in the ministry among the four churches of Dartmouth? If you are not yet a Christian, you CAN be. Examine your heart. Does Jesus live there? Do you have the assurance that He has saved you from your sins and you will surely go to heaven? He offers complete hope and joy because of the work which He completed on the cross--may you flee to that cross and trust completely in it...

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah (Chapter 3)
Lesson 5

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
June 28, 1987

"IT TAKES ALL KINDS"

Introduction The Church is a unique institution. There is no organization like it in the world. Let's picture the Church just for a moment, as if it were a company. Here you have about eighty "employees" going about their jobs for no pay whatsoever, where you never see "the boss" (the Lord Jesus Christ)--only His under-bosses (the elders and deacons), and you're not always too sure if you like them! The *service* your company sells is in an EXTREMELY COMPETITIVE MARKET: there are about one hundred OTHER companies marketing the same kind of service in our own city; in fact, about 60 of those companies all belong to the same parent company, and they have a monopoly on about 85% of all local customers. So selling our particular brand of this service we offer is an uphill battle. Also, many of our "employees" here have come to us from one or another of those other companies, and they may have some different ideas about "policy": "Well, we didn't do it that way at XYZ Religious Services, Inc."

Now, I do not mean to pollute your concept of our church, but from a strictly organizational standpoint, we have a very unique look to us!

Of course, when people consider the Church strictly through secular "spectacles" they will always get a distorted picture. The Body of Jesus Christ does not run on the profit motive (or at least the Holy Spirit is not leading it to). The members of the Body of Christ do not punch a clock, neither are they present at it's meetings just because they are *supposed* to be there. The leaders probably have not climbed any ladders within the Church to get to a position of leadership, in fact they may very well not be the wealthiest, smartest or prettiest people in the Church. And any good, Bible-believing, Spirit-filled Church does not view itself in competition with other like-minded Churches--although I make no apologies whatsoever for wanting to get people to leave any Church which does not teach the Scripture responsibly or comprehensively.

But one of the most distinctive things about a New Testament church is the fact that it is made up of all kinds of people who are seeking the same goals. They put up with each other, go out of their way to help one another--even if they don't always naturally like one another. They listen to each other teach, and they allow one another to teach and minister to their own children...They put their money together in one

box and support a common work. They learn each other's strengths and weaknesses, and learn to accept one another--all because Jesus Christ has profoundly accepted THEM! In other words, "it takes all kinds."

Nehemiah begins the work in Jerusalem in chapter three, and the interesting thing is that there TOO, it took all kinds! He had all kinds of people to work with. Some probably didn't like getting up at the crack of dawn...Others woke up like clock-work at 5:00 A.M.! Some probably were "talkers" (yak-yak-yak, all the time)...others were more the quiet, reserved types. Some weren't used to hard, physical labor and others had worked all their lives by their hands and the strength of their backs. Some were heavy equipment operators...and others were detail-type people, their trade was in some very delicate, detailed kind of work. But Nehemiah is a decisive leader, and he brings them all together for the common goal. Note: Without goals, people, even God's people, will flounder and become discouraged and distracted.

Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but happy is he who keeps the law. *Proverbs 29:18*

If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time. - Hendricks

Today, let's look at how the Lord used all different kinds of people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. I believe this point is one of the main reasons that Nehemiah recorded the work in such detail. As we read the chapter, look for some common themes. Don't let the names distract you, but listen for what is really happening as Nehemiah coordinates this tremendous effort! Now, let's read the chapter together...

There are three themes I would like us to harvest from this chapter today--three themes that all show that in God's work "IT TAKES ALL KINDS." Not everyone is the same in the Body of Christ, and it is unfair, and in fact sinful, I believe, to *expect* everyone to be the same. When there is a spirit of godly TEAMWORK, it will involve:

DIVERSITY Nehemiah had a lot of different kind of people he had to work with. On the one hand he had priests who loved Jerusalem and on the other he had "out-of-towners" who had nothing personal to gain from working on Jerusalem (the men from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon and Mizpah, Zenoah and Beth-Haccherem, Beth-Zur and Zelah).

He had well-to-do folks and poor folks. In verse 12 there was Shallum, another political officer--and he's out there at work with his daughters--a family project!

And not all the diversity was pleasant either. In verse 5 we see that the nobles of the Tekoites thought themselves too good for this kind of work. That probably always has been the case and probably always will be the case--you have a few who are too proud to do certain kinds of ministry work, who don't want to get their hands dirty.

Nehemiah's good leadership enabled him to coordinate all these different kinds of people. I can just see them up on that wall, laying brick and one says "Hey, men of Jericho, let's sing a hymn! Let's sing "Holy,

Holy, Holy!" And the men over on the next section say, "No, we don't like the hymns, we want to sing a praise-song. Let's sing "In Moments Like These." And back and forth they go...And Nehemiah steps in with the megaphone, "Keep laying that brick, and we'll sing a hymn and then a praise-song, and then another hymn, and then another praise-song."

Let's consider also Paul's words in *I Corinthians 12:12-27*...

SPECIAL ABILITIES Each worker had his own special abilities. All were doing brick laying and gate-building, but each had unique abilities. I think this says something to us about the use of spiritual gifts today. When Christians discover their spiritual gift(s), sometimes they lock themselves into thinking they can only do that one job. Everybody was working hard under Nehemiah though, even though all were not masons or carpenters.

No doubt also, some of their special abilities were very useful in the project. God has given each Christian here some special ability, "spiritual gift" which is a tool to use in ministry. You may not know what it is yet, or you may feel inadequate, but be assured, the Scripture states that each Christian has at least one, and some of you have more than one.

Now I do not believe we should treat the issue of spiritual gifts as if it were some kind of Christian horoscope, to be mystically consulted at every meeting. But rather, in the church there is a "toolbox", a collection of tools to be used for the betterment of the Body. Some are gifted in administration. Others are gifted in mercy. Others are gifted in giving, and others in evangelism. And also some are gifted to instruct and exhort.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP Nehemiah was able to pull it all together, and I'm sure he must have ended more than one of those days with the sigh, "It takes all kinds!" He had to deal with certain internal problems of course--not the least of which was motivating the folks to hard work.

Since Nehemiah knew all these names to write them down in his journal, I must believe that he had taken some personal interest in them. A leader in the Body of Christ today must take a personal interest in the people whom he leads. There is a disturbing trend among some students training for the ministry, that "I just want to teach the Bible--I don't really want to get involved in anyone's life."

But a good leader will be involved with his people, accept their differences, mold them together, keep them moving towards the common goal, and COMMEND them when they are working well. As we see more of Nehemiah in coming chapters, we will see that he was able to manage his workers emotionally, socially and functionally. He was able to keep a balance between the fragile egos, and the "big picture" of seeing the city of the sons of Israel rebuilt.

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah
Lesson 6 (4:1-14)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
July 12, 1987

"DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT FROM WITHOUT"

Introduction It is a hard thing to wake up to...but as Christians we need to accept the fact that, in general, the world is going to OPPOSE the Body of Christ--especially when the Body of Christ is really making a NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE!

Now I am not trying to alienate you from your non-Christian friends or family. Christian churches should encourage their members to live an attractive life-style before the world and churches should NOT be constantly driving a wedge between believers and non-believers, by their philosophy of ministry, preaching or by making the Christians paranoid of non-Christians. Many non-Christians so desperately need to be loved with a Christ-like love by Christians and to see the reality of Jesus in our lives in that way...

But as Christians we also need to be wise and take to heart the Scripture which tells us to expect opposition from the world and the devil. In general, the world is going to manifest hostility, resistance and counter-measures to our work in living for the Kingdom.

This morning we are going to consider the matter of "dealing with discouragement from without," that is, from those unbelievers who oppose the work of the Lord. I am keenly aware that often we can grow discouraged "from within." We can grow disillusioned with other Christians. We may nurse certain expectations of our brothers and sisters, and when they do not meet them, or are unable to meet them, we may get discouraged. We also may get discouraged "from within" by the status of our own spiritual progress.

A Christian I was speaking with recently said, "I need another Christian or two outside of my church with whom I feel free to share my 'church frustrations.' I wouldn't want to cause dissension--the problem might just be me."

If you are not growing in grace, you will definitely get seriously discouraged. We try to help you here in the fellowship--I have run off some copies of two messages I delivered in April on "dealing with discouragement from within." Guy Lumpkin is doing an adult Sunday School elective right now on "Awakening Our Spiritual Lives." We have two

fellowship groups available, plenty of opportunities for getting involved with ministering to others, fun activities, and we're of course always willing to pray together.

But today we want to consider the kind of discouragement that can come from forces outside the Body of Christ. As we last left Nehemiah, he had set up the work-teams for rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. He had taken on a task *he had never tackled before*, and probably had done all that could be expected of him! Opposition, however arose from a quarter Nehemiah could not control--the pagans, the unbelievers, as the Pilgrims would term them, "the strangers," the world.

Even though our world is very different in terms of technology, education, mobility and customs, it is NO DIFFERENT when it comes to the basic nature of men. God's view of men is profoundly uncomplicated! Jesus said,

"He who is not with Me is against me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters."
Matthew 12:30

"...the field is the world, and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the Kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels."
Matthew 13:38,39

Neh. 4:1-3 The local leaders got very "ticked off" at the progress of the work of the Lord. They mocked it, and patted themselves on the back in so doing! Verse 2 is a good example of how evil motives and actions can be multiplied when there is a group. I have often wondered how many tough street kids are quite so tough when they walk down the street alone as opposed to being in a group. Boldness is easy when there's a whole bunch of compatriots to back you up..."Yeah, what he said!"

The morale of the church in America is a real field of application for this chapter before us! There is much of the kind of ridicule we see here, being leveled at us in the world today. True, evangelicals sometimes set themselves UP for ridicule, because they sometimes act ridiculous. But the world is not fair at all, and they will jump on the opportunity to make fun of Christians at any turn. Sometimes too the attacks are more substantial than just ridiculing us. The Church is under an intellectual attack. Columnist George Will recently wrote about the recent Supreme Court's striking down (by a 7-2 decision) Louisiana's law requiring the teaching of "creation science" when evolution is taught. In that editorial, he states that creationists disregard the scientific facts:

"There is poignancy [sharp pain] in the plight of fundamentalists whose spiritual serenity is under siege from facts."

The Church in quite a few countries is also under physical attack. It was recently reported in a Christian publication that about 50 Christians have been executed in Angola this year. Did that news make the front pages of secular newspapers?

Locally, there are a few of us who are trying to oppose elective abortion in practical ways. We do this because of our belief in the sanctity of human life, which we believe the Bible clearly teaches begins at conception. The opposition to this idea is profound though. (And the apathy by Christians is equally profound!)

But the individual members of the Body can also come under fire for their attempts to live a Christ-honoring life. We have all met people such as this Sanballat. They take delight in putting others down. They might pass your office, after you've received a promotion for doing a good job and say, "You don't really believe all that the boss said about you, do you?" Or, "They've only given you the job while they look for someone else." Their words immediately put you on the defensive. You just want to do an honorable job, but THAT ethic is a threat to others and so they joke, poke, sneer or even threaten.

The reason today, as with the reason 2,400 years ago with Sanballat and Tobiah ("Sam and Tobey"), is that a worldly individual can never truly understand the work of the Lord. Unbelievers will often fire off salvos of "You'll never amount to anything," or, "The job is too big for you," or, sarcasm, like with Tobiah, "A fox walking on top of it will topple their feeble efforts to do their God's work."

My friend, expect opposition from the world. It will always be there-- Sometimes we will meet an unbeliever who is sympathetic to what we are doing for Christ. Praise God for those! And we need to really be praying for those that the Spirit will draw them.

There is another aspect to this building program of Nehemiah's that comes into play here. The amount of opposition to the work of the Lord is proportional to how NOTICEABLE and radical that work is. If we aren't making much of a dent in people's lives, the opposition will be pretty low-level, probably. But, like Paul's ministry, if we are taking Kingdom principles along with us into the marketplace, the opposition might get pretty hot. Let's look for a moment at *Acts 19:23 ff.*

Nehemiah 4:4-6 Here is a true Old Testament prayer for justice. Under the New Covenant we have a better answer for how to deal with evil, that is to meet it with the love of Christ. But we can learn from Nehemiah to look to God, not to ourselves, for vindication. All too often our habit is to postpone prayer when we are frustrated, and look frantically for some seemingly "more effective" measure...

Also we can learn from Nehemiah to NOT FOR A MOMENT accept the world's low estimate of our calling as Christians. I find this pretty relevant for us here at Dartmouth Bible Church, where sometimes we feel like we need to apologize to an employer, a family member or even the community, because we are trying to live consistently for Jesus Christ. Do not apologize for trying to walk in the Spirit and for making decisions

which please Him. Do not apologize for deciding not to work on the Lord's Day (if you feel led to make that decision). Do not apologize for not laughing at carnal jokes. By all means do not apologize for wanting to tell someone about the Gospel. The Gospel is GOOD NEWS, not bad news! --If you blow it, and blow UP at someone, or make a foolish decision, then absolutely apologize for that, but do not apologize for living for Christ!

Verse 6 is a milestone in the book. The tendency is to give up half-way through a project isn't it?--to grow discouraged right about here. Pastor Frank Tillapaugh calls it the "mid-wall crisis," and I think that is an apt description of how the Lord's work sometimes goes. Half-way into it, we can lose the mind to work. In this text the temptation was because of opposition from those without, and the discouragement aimed by them. But here also, will you notice the phrase, "for the people had a mind to work." When God's people have His will in their hearts, and a good plan of attack rolled under their arm, and the determination to see a job through--LOOK OUT!!

Nehemiah 4:7-14 Again, Nehemiah records the anger of the opponents of God's work. Again, I say to you, dear ones, expect it! Don't be surprised when non-Christians rage at you for wanting to live for Christ, or for your participation in part of His work.

Verse 10 is interesting because Nehemiah records what some of God's people were saying: "Yet there is much rubbish." But there is no more rubble around in chapter 4 than in chapter 2! The people, midway through the job have stopped being God-gazers and have become rubble-gazers!

In verse 14 we have another feature of a good leader. Surrounded by workers who are discouraged and afraid, he himself remains courageous and seeks to lend courage to the workers. The Body of Christ needs strong leaders. We don't need a million of them, But "we're looking for a few good men (and women!)" We need leaders who do not topple under fear at the first sign of opposition. We need leaders who are willing to be strong and ENCOURAGE others.

Then those leaders need to take some concrete measures to protect the Body and to make sure the job gets done. I like a description I read recently about President Lyndon Johnson, by someone who worked for him. This person said, "He was a can-do man." I like that. It speaks of courage and determination to see a job through to its end!

The goals Nehemiah had were simple. Protection for the Hebrew families. Our goals right now are simple too: Reach the lost, keep our families together, keep growing as individuals for Jesus. Let's not get lost in discussions about what kind of stone to use on the walls. Let's not get sidetracked about, while we're up there working on the walls and singing songs, whether we sing songs of Type A or Type B. Let's remember the Lord who is great and awesome! Let's press on with His great work and watch HIM perform that work!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah
Lesson 7 (4:14-23)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
July 19, 1987

A GOD WHO TAKES SIDES

Introduction The greatest need that men and women have today, is the same basic need they have always had: to really know the Living God. When you KNOW somebody, you can anticipate how they will act. You understand their motivations and you learn to depend on them to be predictable, if they are your friend. It is not a virtue to be unpredictable, in spite of the glamor the media attaches to that. Our God, who represents absolute holiness, is completely dependable--people desperately need to KNOW God, how He acts, and why He does what He does. Our guide to understand God then, is the Bible. Our conviction is that the Bible is a perfect reflection, an accurate and dependable "oracle" of WHO God is, and what He expects from us. It was dependable in 1787, in 1887, and it will be just as dependable in 2287 (should the Lord tarry, and not return by then).

When we read about the events in the Book of Nehemiah, we're not just reading stories. It is not just a nice, little homily for us to quaintly reflect on. It is real history and the events occurred just as you're reading them. That assumption makes some of Nehemiah's statements very incredible! Notice in verses 15 and 20 what Nehemiah records about God...

...and that God had frustrated their plan...Our God will fight for us.

That sounds like God is taking sides! Well, that is exactly the case. But before you "turn in your badge" and say, "The Bible says that God shows partiality...He plays favorites," think on this: When God calls out of the mass of depraved humanity a "people" for Himself, and chooses to bestow His mercy on them--is THAT what they deserve? Shouldn't all sinners pay for their own injustices and shouldn't a just God allow all people to atone for their own sins. How is it that He has chosen to rescue some? How is it that He would call out for Himself a distinct people, and fight for their side? Nehemiah seemed quite convinced that Jehovah God of Israel would protect the wall-masons, the families, and the work of rebuilding Jerusalem.

This is why people need to KNOW GOD and to know Him well. You and I need to know in our hearts just how the Lord works in the lives of His people. We need to know in what ways we can depend on Him to "fight for us." We essentially face three major foes: the world system (which opposes righteousness), our flesh (which is "bent", as C.S. Lewis calls it, with the inclination to disobey God, and the devil (thought both popular and obsolete, by different people in our world today). Our greatest defense against these three very real enemies, is our heart-felt knowledge of our God--not just what we know about Him (and I certainly hope that you will be learning more and more about Him), but a defense built upon a deep-seated DEPENDENCE upon Him to act in your life, day to day, according to how He has promised to act! THAT's what knowing God is all about! Nehemiah knew He could depend on God to prosper their efforts in the work, and to defend them in it. The threat was very real. The spears and arrows of Sanballat and Tobiah were very sharp! But Nehemiah depended on His God to defend them too in a very real way!

NEHEMIAH'S STRATEGY But beyond just saying to each other, "Trust the Lord," we need a practical strategy. Nehemiah was a practical man. He has them put a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.

This sword-and-trowel strategy could have been a fiasco, but Nehemiah knew the truth of *Psalm 127*,

*Unless the Lord builds...Unless the Lord watches over the city...
It is in vain.*

Builders, needing both hands free, had swords at their belts; carriers, ranging further, and risking more, needed weapons at the ready. But the heavier and longer-range equipment couldn't be dealt with in such ways (verse 16), nor could defence be simply a matter of every man fighting for himself (although too many Christians today opt for that strategy!) The answer was the shift-system for some, the posting of officers, unified by a single commander, and clear communication (verses 18b-20).

Nehemiah was concerned about having rebuilt the walls, but leaving the city as an empty shell! His resources in people, weapons, energy were not endless--he had to work smartly with what he had, all the while trusting God with the success of the work.

For us the trowel is the work we do on the inside. It is like Jude wrote the early Christians,

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. Jude 1:20

1 family
2 min.
3 friends (pre-c)
4 exam.
5 nurture

You and I have two kinds of spiritual work to do: One is the kind where the trowel is the tool. We are each building a little piece of the Kingdom--a little piece of the wall, if I may apply the Nehemiah text to us...one brick is your family. You are trowelling in the brick of a family which is growing in grace. Another brick is your ministry. Each of you should have a part in ministering in the Body of Christ--as part of Dartmouth Bible Church perhaps, and in other ways beyond the walls of this church. Another brick you are trowelling into the Kingdom is the part you have in sharing the Gospel with non-Christians. And another brick, is the work of pre-evangelism, by works of kindness and mercy out in the world, no strings attached. The last brick that you are trowelling in, is the nurture of your own soul. My friends, nothing is more important than the nurture and care of your own soul. I wish I could flip a magic switch and impress you deeply with that fact.

The other kind of spiritual work we do, is defence. We are to be concerned with the defence of each other from those three foes. It is not just MY JOB to defend you. It is my job, but it is also yours to hold those weapons of spiritual warfare mentioned in *Ephesians 6* at the ready. Your example to each other is important--we are affected by how each other is doing in the Christian life. Your prayer ministry for each other is vital. Your willingness to share the Word with each other is also vital. These are the weapons we have to use today--we are not in circumstances where we hold spears and bows and shields (although there may easily be times of "shielding" one another...)

Nehemiah made his contribution to the cause effective. He couldn't do everything--so often the work of the ministry seems like it is done primarily by a few, while the many just come to church and benefit from the blessings of fellowship and teaching and worship. But Nehemiah made the most of what he had to contribute. His leadership was needed. His skills were desperately needed! Lastly, His alertness was vital, and no doubt set a real example.

At the beginning I told you that we need to really KNOW our God, how He works in the world (He does side with His people--do not be ashamed to believe that). We need to be alert to Him, so that we know how to trust Him, and can detect His moving in our lives, even when bad things happen. But the Scripture also warns us to remain alert to the devil:

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

I Peter 5:8

Many Christians today have fallen asleep at their posts. Don't let it be true of you. Be alert spiritually. Take whatever steps you need to, but keep that sword loose in its sheath!

If you're with us this day and you feel like God is distant--like you have not yet met Him personally--you can! Simply trust Him in the person of His Son, and through the finished payment He made on the cross. And He shall always defend you, and fight for you!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah
Lesson 8 (5:1-13)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
August 16, 1987

NEHEMIAH, THE GOLDEN RULE, AND RISING INTEREST RATES

Introduction People are funny about money. Eyes which are usually kind and trusting, often narrow and fill with suspicion when the topic of personal finances comes up. I have seen Christians otherwise full of victory, shackled when it comes to their attitudes about money. Sometimes our problems are not on the outside of the city walls--they are within the city walls, within the church walls, within the walls of our own families. Sometimes the thing that defeats us is our own greed and the hunger and lust for more money...

It was all Nehemiah could do in the first four chapters of the book which bears his name, to keep the restoration-project moving. In 4:20 he encouraged the Jews with the charge, "Our God will fight for us." And then, no sooner does he turn around, and his countrymen are strangling each other financially! He is wearing himself out dealing with external dangers, when he stumbles over a serious internal problem!

Let's take a "commercial break" for a minute...Why do you suppose this chapter is in this book? What do you suppose the author's intent was, in recording this rather sleazy part of the history of God's people? In fact, why was this Book of Nehemiah handed down to us at all? A well-known preacher did a series on Nehemiah. He said, "Jerusalem's walls were in ruin, and that speaks of the broken-down walls of human personality. Nehemiah represents the Holy Spirit who comes to rebuild the walls of human personality." As this preacher taught, just about everything in the book represented something else or meant something symbolic. When Nehemiah got to the King's pool in his ride around the walls (2:14), the preacher said this meant the baptism of the Holy Spirit; and from there he went on to teach the importance of speaking in tongues...Rather, it is vital for us to *keep on track* with what the author himself is trying to communicate, in what he wrote down! THAT is good Bible-interpretation, and THAT is what the church needs to become skilled at. So then, why do we have this Book of Nehemiah before us today, and why bother looking at chapter five, in particular? The apostle Paul answers that question in *I Corinthians 10:6*. "*Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved.*"

So dear ones, I want to lay out for you clearly what the Bible says, try to suggest a responsible interpretation, and stimulate you to take the Bible passage we have looked at, and build into your lives some significant applications. THAT is the task of preaching: expounding the Bible ACCURATELY and MEANINGFULLY.

Now, back to our regularly scheduled sermon!

The Problem

Nehemiah is confronted in the first five verses, with three distinct groups. The first group (verse 2) is the laborers and merchants, the second group is the farmers, and the third group are having trouble with their taxes. FINANCIAL STRESS WAS RAMPANT.

But why are these people impoverished? Only ninety years earlier, the first of their number to return from exile in Babylon had come back well supplied with worldly goods (Ezra 1:5-11). Those who chose to remain in Babylon had given liberally to their support. Even the Babylonian king, Cyrus, had opened the doors of HIS treasury and lavished upon them "vessels of gold and silver." My friends, the Lord was *good* to them! When was the last time someone lavished on YOU vessels of gold and silver? And then, in Ezra 2:66,67 we read about the vehicles they used to leave Babylon...(today we use Mustangs, Pintos, Lynxes, and Barracudas--then, they used asses, horses, camels and mules!) Then the prophet Haggai (1:4) reported that many of the newly arrived Jews were able to panel their homes--something previously reserved for kings! Only 13 years earlier (458 B.C.) Ezra had brought a second group of colonists from Babylon and the Babylonian king and his counselors had contributed freely toward their needs then too! Large gifts were still coming in from the Hebrews back in Babylon too (Zechariah 6:10,11)-- God was blessing! He had not abandoned them! So why this outcry that we read about? What could have caused such poverty?

As we read the complaints to Nehemiah by the three groups, we see that the problem is a simple one. It is called usury. Usury is when one person (or organization) loans money to another person and charges an incredibly HIGH interest rate. At this time, the interest rate being charged was 12% per year (verse 11).

The first group of people had large families. These are essentially the working class Jews. And, in spending many daylight hours on the wall, their resources are used up. The second group, the farmers, were in debt up to their ears, and had to borrow money against their forthcoming crops--if any adverse circumstances interfered with the crop, they were "up the creek." A great way to make money, eh? Exploit their circumstances, and make use of the fact that they have to borrow more. And then, their creditors were taking their land as payment, and when they ran out of land, the creditors took their children as slaves.

In the Law, God had made provisions for how Israel was to handle her internal economy. To be sure, the poor would always be numbered among them, but in God's economy they would never become completely destitute. Even if compelled to mortgage their lands, or forced to sell themselves

into slavery, it was only to be for a limited period of time. To make provision for the poor, the Lord had established that the rich were to lend to them (Deut.15:7-11) WITHOUT CHARGING INTEREST (Ex.22:25; Lev.25:36). *But these wise provisions that God had made, had become a dead letter!* The sabbatical years had not been kept and the year of jubilee had been ignored. Slaves were not released, debts were not cancelled, the rich exploited the poor (instead of helping them), oppression was rampant, injustice prevailed, and THIS WAS ALL WITHIN THE FAMILY OF GOD--that's the incredible thing!

As I said at the beginning of this message, people are funny sometimes about money, even God's people...

Nehemiah's Reaction

Nehemiah is a good leader. When he hears from the three delegations, he gets mad. Now getting MAD, as a leader, is not necessarily always good. But getting MOTIVATED because you're mad IS A good thing. Nehemiah channeled his anger in a productive way. He didn't get onto a denial trip ("Oh I'm a servant of Jehovah--I don't get angry...") That is a false sense of spirituality--God never says, "Stop being human--make sure you never get angry..." Nehemiah doesn't form a committee to look into it. He doesn't break up everyone into discussion groups to deliberate. He just comes right out and tells his countrymen what's what, and tells them they need to walk in the fear of God in their financial dealings just like in every other area of life.

Why it is that even believers can become so blinded about this particular area is beyond me. I expect non-Christians to ACT like non-Christians, in finances, and in everything else. But believers you would think, would try to maintain a godly perspective on their wealth...

Nehemiah cares enough about his countrymen to confront the abusers, and he had the courage to act. We do not read whether they changed their ways or not, but the message that Nehemiah gave them is clear: If the people live in accordance with God's Word, they will enjoy His blessing; if they do not, they will not, but will only buy into a deepening misery.

The basic problem is that believers can still fall back into greed and heartlessness. The answer was to discover what Jesus said several hundred years after:

Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:42)

Therefore however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. [the "bottom line!"] (Matthew 7:12)

And Paul wrote,

And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Eph.4:32)

Some Applications:

1. Consider that ALL of your resources (cash, investments, property) belong to Christ. That way, if some of it departs from you for one reason or another, it will be easier to let go of it.
2. Consider YOURSELF God's employee, and you are in charge of a certain amount of His property...
3. Be open to helping your brothers and sisters in need. Be creative in giving. Giving to the Deacons' Fund here at church is fine, but maybe you could just give directly sometimes, when you see or hear of a need.
4. If you are in the situation of being a lender, ask yourself the question, "How would Jesus do it?" Would He be interested in having His money work for Him by charging interest of a brother or sister?
5. When you give, give freely! As a black brother of mine in seminary says, "Brother, you've got to cut it loose!" Remember, the Lord searches the hearts, and the more our hearts are unencumbered with any grudge-type expectations on each other, the more meaningful and clean our worship of Him will be!

This week I read a long article from *The Boston Globe*. It was about The Bible Speaks, and the lady who, over a couple of years, had donated \$6.6 million to that ministry. As I read this article (I read it three times), I was saddened. I was saddened for the cause of Christ in New England. I was saddened for those Christians who have had to see their church torn apart. And I was deeply saddened for the lady, for whom the issue of finances, and in particular church finances, was the undoing of her young faith and seeking God...

Dear ones, let's pray for revival in our hearts concerning our attitudes about finances. Let's determine as Christian families to plan together, not as individuals...let's give OFF THE TOP. Let's bathe our financial decisions in prayer.

If you are with us and you have never yet really put your personal trust in Jesus' work on the cross, you are bound to be in some kind of bondage. It may be as a slave to your baser instincts about money, or it may be some other kind of tangible bondage. But Jesus will set you free from guilt, and from the greatest debt that ALL men owe--being sinners. May God help you to trust His Son!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah
Lesson 9 (5:13-19)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
August 23, 1987

INTEGRITY THROUGH THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Introduction Christianity has the reputation among some as being scary. They consider the Christian idea of having a *personal* relationship with a HOLY God as being more than they wish to investigate, thank you... Even Christians may sometimes *be afraid* of getting too close to God. It may be that a verse like Hebrews 4:16 ("Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need") is of ONLY LIMITED COMFORT, when it is intended to be of GREAT comfort--because even a Christian may still have something of a wizard-of-Oz view of God (at Dorothy & Company's first visitation with him)... Unfortunately, Biblical Christianity suffers from a poor reputation with some who confuse fright with the "fear of the Lord."

In today's passage we read that Nehemiah was a man whose life was governed by this thing called "the fear of the Lord." He didn't just preach about it, he made a practice of it, and consistently allowed his daily decision making to be tempered with the knowledge that he was a first-echelon servant of Him Who was bringing this incredible rebuilding project to SUCCESS!

Today we want to look at what IS the fear of the Lord and how walking in the fear of the Lord affects a Christian's integrity. But first let's read again verse 13 of chapter 5...

The "Tie-In" With the Previous Section Nehemiah made the leaders actually *take an oath* (make a vow to God) that they would cease from financially strangling their brethren in the faith by charging incredibly high interest rates. We read in verse 13 that they responded by agreeing--then by praising the Lord, and then by following through with obedience to their vow.

Nehemiah had used his reputation and the respect which he had earned from them, to do away with oppression of the people by the wealthy financiers... Now, the first Hebrew word in verse 14 is the little word *gam*. It means "moreover," and he ties in what he has just accomplished for the people with the testimony that he had shown himself

unselfish DURING HIS WHOLE OFFICIAL CAREER, "and shunned no sacrifice by which he might lighten the burdens that lay upon his fellow countrymen" (C.F. Keil, p.213).

It may strike you as braggy that Nehemiah has included this last part of chapter 5 in his journal. But remember he is not only a respected leader among the people of God, but has now become the governor of Judah, and stays in that capacity from 444 to 432 B.C. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, He was led to include his perspective on his leadership position. He felt that it was important that he publicly review for the people what his practice had been. It was not bragging; it was smart leadership and useful to head off any suspicions as to his own integrity.

Christians today need to be reassured that their leaders are above reproach in the financial realm. Elders, pastors, deacons, evangelists and other Christian workers need to have "clean" tax records. Their people need to have confidence that they are not making money in some morally questionable way, and that they are not seeking to become wealthy from their positions in the ministry. They need to be trustworthy and to share what they have in kindness and as a good testimony to Christ. The idea of rich ministers puzzles me...

Nehemiah was not a prophet, a priest or a king (although he becomes accused of political ambitions towards the crown in the next chapter!) He had some wealth we read, but he was quick to share it.

What IS the Fear of the Lord? In verse 15 Nehemiah said he did not take advantage of the "fringe benefit" of the governor's food allowance because of the "fear of God" (*yir'ath Elohim*). He was entitled, as the governor, to do just as his predecessors had done, to charge the Jewish people food and wine, AND money in order to entertain various dignitaries of State. Had he exacted this "bennie" it would have been nothing unusual. But he chose not to draw the amount. Instead, Nehemiah's REVERENCE FOR GOD kept him from placing a heartless burden on his fellow Jews. He exercised compassion for those under him and refused to use his privileges at the expense of others. What motivated him? It was His sensitivity to his Lord. He was walking in the fear of the Lord.

Now, the fear of the Lord should not be confused with fright or dread.

For you [Christians] have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" *Rom.8:15*

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law [of Moses], in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that they might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" *Galatians 4:4-6*

The fear of the Lord is the REVERENCE OF the Lord, where by we walk daily in worshipful awe of Him. It does little good to worship Him in awe here in this building if we are not worshipping Him when we are by ourselves in our cars, and in our homes, and with our families, and when we're tired, and when we're on the job...

Your life and my life are really a series of decisions. I decide whether to read my Bible or not. I decide whether to pray or not--it's not "the Force" that cosmically determines my day. I can't blame the wrong decisions on "a bad day." I DECIDE what kind of decisions I'm going to make today and tomorrow. I don't decide tomorrow's until tomorrow, but I can PLAN TO WALK IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD, and to remember that He never takes a nap and misses something I have done today, something either spiritual or fleshly.

For Nehemiah walking in the fear of the Lord translated into his determination not to be selfish. Undoubtedly his checkbook balance decreased as a result of this decision he was making to pay the entertainment costs out of his own pocket.

What kind of people we are in the private "conference rooms" of our own minds--where we make the decisions we make--is determined by how much integrity we have. Christian leaders are under real scrutiny these days. Jerry Falwell has predicted that not a single pastor in the country will escape the new watchfulness and skepticism born out by recent events. Let's look at something else the apostle Paul wrote:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, that you may have an answer for those who take pride in appearance, and not in heart. *2 Corinthians 5:11,12*

Paul and Nehemiah are telling us that they did what they did because they tried to walk humbly before God, NOT because they were arrogant or because they wanted the admiration of the people to whom they ministered.

The motivation to live with integrity should be motivated first of all by the fear of the Lord. I am sure that if the spiritual realm were completely visible to us we would have less trouble with talking ourselves out of living for Christ. If we could see heaven, the abode of God, or if we could see all the things that angels and demons involve themselves with, I think we would take our spiritual lives much more seriously.

Walking in the fear of the Lord may keep you from pursuing a sinful impulse when your rationality is switched off, when you don't "feel" like obeying Christ, or when your other spiritual defenses are low.

Walking in the fear of the Lord will motivate you to DO other things when the immediate personal reward may be minimal.

If you are in the Word regularly and praying regularly and interacting with other Christians in meaningful fellowship regularly--these things are immensely HELPFUL in keeping a vital vision of God at the front of your attention. Remember, the devil, the flesh and the world are out to destroy you, and their devices are clever and cruel. Scripture does not speak of the Christian life as a warfare for no reason!

These are the truths that Nehemiah modeled to his people. He walking in the fear of God and made decisions, FINANCIAL decisions based upon his conviction that he was first and foremost a servant of Jehovah! You and I need to walk the same way.

I would like to close by sharing some applications on Nehemiah from Chuck Swindoll's book, *Hand Me Another Brick*.

1. *God is pleased when we handle our money wisely.* That is because He views the decisions we make about our money as believers, as part of our worship (just like the other decisions we make).
2. *Prolonged personal sins take a heavy toll on God's work in your life.* This excludes no one and sin follows you around like your shadow! You will notice little spiritual growth in your life if you are nurturing some prolonged personal sin. If there is sin there, lay it before God and get rid of it!
3. *Correcting any problem begins by facing it head-on.* Some of us are pros at avoiding the truth. Because it is painful to confront sin, we dodge it or excuse it. But enduring the pain of really facing a sinful tendency head-on is much less than the pain of losing God's blessing, or the awareness of it!
4. *Correction is carried out most effectively when we make a promise, preferably a PUBLIC promise.* Now, you may say, "Oh I could never humiliate myself like that..." Well, no one is asking you to humiliate yourself or to grovel. But a public commitment or confession is a biblical and a healthy thing!

Our integrity as Christians is evidenced by absolute honesty and a REFUSAL TO IGNORE reality any longer. It means being sensitive and obedient to the Father's instructions. Then, His blessings will become very real and evident to us!

Back in 1958 a small community in northeastern Pennsylvania built a little red brick building that was to be their police department, their fire department, and their city hall. They were proud of that building; it was a result of sacrificial giving and careful planning. When the building was completed, they had a ribbon-cutting ceremony, and more than six-thousand people were there--nearly all the town's residents. It was the biggest event of the year! Within less than two months, however, they began to notice some ominous cracks on the side of this red brick building. Sometime later, it was noticed that the windows wouldn't shut all the way. Then it was discovered that the doors wouldn't close correctly. Eventually, the floor shifted and left ugly gaps in the floor covering and corners. The roof began to leak. Within a few

months, the building had to be evacuated, to the embarrassment of the builder and the disgust of the taxpayers. A firm did an analysis shortly thereafter and found that BLASTS from a nearby mining area were slowly BUT EFFECTIVELY destroying the building. Imperceptibly, down beneath the foundation, there were small shifts and changes that caused the whole foundation to crack. You couldn't feel it or even see it from the surface, but quietly and down deep there was a weakening. Ultimately, the building had to be demolished. This is what happened in King Saul's life, and it is what happened in King Solomon's life. There was a time when each of them was full of praise to the Lord, and His joy. But they slowly slipped...The erosion went unnoticed--it was a quiet and lengthy process. (Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, pp.110,111)

Let's pray that we take our walk with Christ seriously, and that we can learn more COMPREHENSIVELY to walk in the fear of the Lord!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah
Lesson 10 (Chapter 6)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
September 13, 1987

DEFENDING AGAINST DISTRACTION

Introduction In a little over an hour, the 1987 National Football League season will begin. For the past two months about 2,800 young athletes around the NFL training camps have been sweating, grunting, smashing, sprinting, zig-zagging, passing, kicking and studying with the single hope of making the final cut for one of the twenty eight teams. Each team starts out with around 100 football players in camp in July, and then pares down to the 45 player limit. The final cuts are made a week before the season starts. If the player makes the cut, he finds himself with a very lucrative job and one of a very select few in the country. If he plays "up to his potential" (as they say), his future is very secure--and the rewards are substantial--especially if his team wins any kind of championship. An average blue-chip NFL player will earn in one season what you or I will earn in maybe 10 full years of work, and even though his playing (and earning) career is limited to only a few years, he can set himself up pretty well! *IF he makes that final cut...*

But what happens to more than a few, is that SOME DISTRACTION WILL COME ALONG, and *SIDETRACK HIS PROGRESS*--maybe even PUT HIM OUT OF THE LEAGUE PERMANENTLY!

The Christian life is largely a battle to stay on the right track, and to KEEP FROM BECOMING SERIOUSLY DISTRACTED. The NFL Football player worries about 1) injury 2) money and finances (one of the reasons, I believe, why some end up using drugs) 3) losing confidence in himself 4) losing confidence in his leaders 5) competition.

The Christian faces certain DISTRACTIONS too... He may suffer some hurt too, or he may come into physical trials (as some of you are facing even this week). He may become bewildered by some failure on the part of his spiritual leaders (as has been much in the news this year). He may become intimidated by the brash attacks of the world--or by his own sin-habits or weaknesses. The believer, attempting to walk daily with the Lord Jesus, may become subtly and slowly enticed by some attraction in the world, which, the more he pursues it, the more his/her spiritual alertness (and zeal) become dulled. He becomes fully distracted, disinterested, and then, if the process isn't checked, fully defeated...

It is not good for us to dwell on the prospects of failure in the Christian life--the Lord has promised to unfailingly provide everything we need to live for Him--but it IS good, I believe, to soberly calculate how to live the Christian life, and what plans and adjustments can be made to AVOID becoming distracted from walking closely with Jesus Christ. Because, dear ones, you and I can never really be happy when we are NOT walking closely with Him, and enjoying the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Nehemiah 6 is a lesson in *DEFENDING AGAINST DISTRACTION*. In his case it was from external forces mainly, and we shall emphasize that source of distraction today. But let's beware that we are not immune from becoming diverted by the world, the devil, our own hearts and minds and interests. And let's see how Nehemiah dealt with the DISTRACTIONS that popped up as he was seeking to complete God's will in his life.

TURN
Using DILIGENCE To Defend Against Distraction (Neh.6:1-4)

You will remember that Nehemiah has been overseeing the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The locals have not exactly been supportive. In fact they have been doing everything they can to discourage Nehemiah's vision for a revitalized Hebrew capital! And then in chapter five, Nehemiah turns around only to stumble over some serious internal problems.

read >
1-4
Now in this chapter, the scene again turns outward and Nehemiah receives an invitation to a "pow-wow" of sorts, with the very pagan leaders that were earlier after him. And, he knows they are after him again.

Sometimes Christians today can get a little paranoid, I think. They may get consumed with looking for demons under every bush, or behind every sinful impulse they themselves feel. Or, a Christian may slowly begin to view the world's basic hostility to the Gospel with such fear that he may begin to subconsciously view nearly every non-Christian *as an enemy*. This style of the Christian life is an imbalance, and that believer needs to adjust his thinking to be more in tune with God's lovingkindness, demonstrated by His sending of His Son INTO the world.

On the other hand, there IS a real conflict going on. It is not IMAGINARY. Paul tells us clearly that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (*Eph.6:12*)

If you have trusted Christ, and are walking with Him, you are in a battle, whether you are aware of it all the time, or not. It is not cause to become paranoid, but it is cause to become wise and careful about your spiritual life. It can become DIS-TRACTED easily.

To this invitation to put off the work for a while, Nehemiah responds wisely. The New English Bible has a good translation of verse 3, "I have important work on my hands." The temptation (and very real danger--"the plan smelt of treachery" [Kidner])...was to lay down the

trowel and go off "with the boys." But Nehemiah appeals to DILIGENCE. They were persistent enough. Nehemiah certainly had plenty of chances, didn't he? But he stays with the task that God has given him to do. He knew that distraction would lead to his undoing, and he kept busy with the work of the Lord!

I don't know how many Christians I have known who terminate some ministry they have had--teaching, serving, visiting folks, evangelism--and they say, "I need a rest." And it may be true; they DO need a little rest. But they open themselves up to diversion from all spiritual pursuits. They become apathetic. They become involved and committed to other things--GOOD things, maybe. But the work of the ministry slowly moves out of their interest.

Dear ones, you may need a rest from what labor you put into the ministry. But don't rest too long! If you need a change in ministry, that is great! But don't allow what too often happens, to happen to you. The devil truly does NOT want you to be effective for the Lord Jesus Christ. He wants you and I to just sort of "frump" along in the Christian life...

Nehemiah stayed busy with the work he had determined to do for the Lord. He also took a very DIRECT approach to the trouble he was facing...

Using DIRECTNESS to Defend Against Distraction (Neh.6:5-13)

The problem was fright. If you can intimidate someone, and frighten them, then they are much easier to manipulate and handle--or so went the reasoning of Sanballat and Tobiah. But Nehemiah was not so easily frightened--he confronted the threat with a directness, a straightforward reply, *to himself as much as to them!* In verse 11 he says flatly, "Should a man like me flee?" And back in verse 8 he told them that the sinister plot they were accusing him of, THEY had invented it in their own minds! He also is very direct in deciding that this supposed prophet Shemaiah (vs.10) is not a real prophet--but a paid false prophet, hired by Sanballat and Tobiah.

To confront what we feel is false prophecy today takes some courage and directness too. I believe many people in America even some Christians, are distracted from the real important things in life by the utterances of theological error. And it is a rare preacher who flatly and directly calls error "error."

> *distracting each other*

So fear and intimidation should be met with DIRECTNESS. Remember the Scripture which says, "If God be for us, who can stand against us?" For most of church history, and in many areas of the world today, Christians have had to stand firmly for the work of the Lord.

A study of Martin Luther's life is a case-study of standing firm for the Scriptures and for staying on the track in the Christian life. At one point, Luther's life was in such danger because of his direct teaching of the Bible, that some friends kidnapped him for his own safety. There he is miles and miles away from friends, family and his work in Wittenberg--but he puts himself to a new

task--translating the Bible into German, for the common citizen. His direct approach to fear and intimidation helped him greatly win OVER those troubles!

Using DEPENDENCE ON GOD to Defend Against Distraction (Neh.6:14)

We must not gloss over this little prayer of Nehemiah's! It's like the little prayer he uttered at the end of verse 19. He was a man of prayer, and the way these little prayers just pop up in the narrative, you get the idea that prayer was very natural for Nehemiah. I hope it is for you too. Prayer can become as natural as eating! You do it often, and you do it with great joy! You even LOOK FORWARD to it! And it is a great tool to use to ward off the temptations that would distract us from Christ, and walking closely with Him!

I know it as overworked preacher's peeve--but, if you determined to pray for just HALF the time you watch television this next week--would that be a profitable and useful thing for you spiritually? I am absolutely persuaded that if those of you who are struggling with apathy, or sluggishness in your Christian walk would ATTEMPT an experiment like that, you would be delighted at its effect in your life!

Using DETERMINATION to Defend Against Distraction (Neh.6:15-19)

I get a kick out of verse 15--it's so dryly stated, "So the wall was completed on the 25th of the month..." Determination on the part of Nehemiah as a leader and on the part of the people, saw the project through to its completion. They managed to defeat distraction. Nehemiah managed to defeat distraction! At the end of the passage, old Tobiah was still sitting on the sidelines, taking potshots at Nehemiah, trying to distract him, but determination defeated him!

You and I need some determination. We need a little back-bone and a little stiffness, when it comes to the things of the Lord. We need to keep HIS vision for reaching the lost, and for ministering selflessly and faithfully to our families and to each other in the Body. Let's be aware of the distractions that try to steer us off the path. Let's not allow 1) materialism, 2) entertainment, 3) pride, 4) prejudice, 5) greed or 6) insecurities to distract us, or to intimidate us. We are after all, adopted children and heirs of the Kingdom!--the Kingdom of the Creator and Savior! Will you recommit yourself to a diligent life-style in spiritual things? Look directly AT your fears or foes--in love, speak straightforwardly at them and say, "Should a Christian like me flee?" Be determined to press on to maturity in Christ. You will not be disappointed!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: Nehemiah
Lesson 11 (Chapter 7)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
September 27, 1987

PLANNING, STRUCTURE and SPIRITUALITY

Introduction The history of God's people is marked by rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall. During the Old Testament era, God's people seemed to cycle from revival to rebellion and then after a time of chastisement from God, back to revival. The Church's story is also "punctuated" by contrasting generations of revival and revolt against the true Lordship of Jesus Christ. Even this church has had its periods of "ebb and flow tides."

Now this is not to say that a season of coldheartedness towards the Lord is inevitable! God doesn't want His people to grow cold to Him. Neither are the affections of God's people compelled to alternately warm and cool by some kind of "cosmic, predeterminate clock." We can avoid growing cold to Christ by determining to keep concentrating on the important things in the Christian life...by watching for distractions...by renewing our hearts and minds daily in the Word of God, and by making specific decisions to do His will.

Nehemiah lived his life just at one of those times in Israel's history, when they were on the brink of revival. His book is divided in half at the point where we arrive in our exposition today. The first six chapters tell us about Nehemiah's "restoration project." They are fighting back from defeat, destruction and depression. Now, as we get to chapter seven, they turn a corner.

From my standpoint, this fellowship turned a corner sometime in 1986. At least from how I look at us, and analyze where we have been and where we are at now, we are sort of the same place that the Jews were in Jerusalem at the time of chapter seven: 6:15 occurs at about September 20, 458 B.C. (Gene Getz, pp. 654, 686, B.K. Comm.). Chapter seven, then, occurs shortly thereafter--an interesting coincidence! So, almost exactly 2,445 years ago 42,360 of God's people have "turned a corner" in their lives together. The past is the past, and with Nehemiah leading them, they look to the future. Today, here, about 60 of God's people are gathered, worshipping exactly the same living God, trying to see His hand in their lives, and seeking to honor and glorify Him! I think the parallel is exciting! We can learn some things about planning, structure and spirituality from this chapter. Now, let's see what things Nehemiah does at this turning point in his life--and in his book...

FIRST STEPS OF PLANNING (Neh.7: 1-4) Here, Nehemiah tells us that he made sure that the city was guarded. Normally the singers and Levites had nothing to do with the service of watching the gates and guarding the people. Their job was to assist the priests in their duties. And yet Nehemiah assigns them to guard duty.

Flexibility is important to the ministry. These singers and Levites *could* have gotten real hard-headed and said, "Hey, Nehemiah, you can't ask us to do something that's not written in the contract! We don't DO that job."

Christians in the body of Christ need to be flexible in how they view their service to Him. If you want to be a spiritual person, then be open to ANY ways in which you might be able to minister! Being Spirit-filled means to be controlled by the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit wants us to be flexible with one another.

The opposite of being flexible, is being RIGID. Sometimes we can get so set in our ways--we think that everything always has to be done the same. Or, we may think that the other person has to live his Christian life just like I live mine! "If you don't have your Quiet Time at the same time that I have mine--or in the same way, then you just don't cut it!" That's not flexibility (or love)--that's just being rigid.

When it comes to leadership decisions, Nehemiah mentions two characteristics that Hananiah, the Hebrew commanding general, possessed. First, he was FAITHFUL. Nehemiah was delegating to Hananiah a pretty big job: charge for the whole city. He is Nehemiah's number two man, and Nehemiah chose him in part because of his proven record of faithfulness.

Faithfulness essentially means dependability. It is something that the Spirit produces IN a believer that, over time, causes he or she to maintain their loyalty to whatever they have committed themselves to. Changes in commitments may still be made, but within any commitment, the person says, "I'm sticking with it."

Faithfulness is something of a rare thing, even among Christians. American Christians are not immune from the "me-generation" influence of the world; and there is much of that in today's churches--even the good ones!

Leadership in a church should be delegated to those who are faithful to the Lord in their personal lives, and who are faithful TO THAT FLOCK. It inspires confidence in the flock when they think of a faithful leader who has dedicated himself or herself to that fellowship.

The other characteristic was that Hananiah feared God more than many." Now you've heard the expression, "So and so is a fine, God-fearing person." What does it mean to fear God? Why does that partially qualify a person for leadership (at least in Nehemiah's mind?)... Let's look back to chapter five for a minute: in *verses 9 and 15* he

talks about fearing God. You will remember that this does NOT mean that believers are to walk in terror of their God, but to order your lives in awe of His presence and in worship to Him. That means certain decisions will be made each week. You may decide to do something out of love and honor to Him. You may decide NOT to do other things for the same reasons. Hananiah apparently was a man who lived his life, generally, in this way. It prepared him to have a significant ministry of leadership among God's people. Dear ones, you have the right to expect that your leaders here, too, live in integrity and walk in the fear of God.

The job of guard-duty was important (vss.3,4). It took people of integrity to apply themselves to it responsibly. The welfare of the people was at stake.

The job of watching over this flock is important too. It is a full-time job, believe me. But I am not the only one who watches. Your deacons and the Women's Service Team have the responsibility to watch over certain needs too.

STRUCTURING GOD'S PEOPLE (Neh.7:5-69) The beginning of verse 5 is interesting. God put it into Nehemiah's heart to build some structure into the community. Being able to trace their lineage was important, and he wanted to know who was truly Hebrew, to what families they belonged, and how many there were.

"His immediate concern was to get his people rightly oriented, sure both of their inheritance and their calling."

--Kidner, Tyndale Comm. on Neh.

Now the idea of organization in a church rubs some Christians the wrong way. It may seem too much like the world, and indeed, church structure and organization CAN replace having the leading of the Lord, and the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit, if it is allowed to!

But can you see that God prompted Nehemiah to build into Israel some structure. Some structure is useful. In fact it has become clear to me in the past four years that some structure is necessary. It is NOT UNSPIRITUAL to have an organized ministry. If the organization becomes RIGID, then Christians begin to concentrate on maintaining the castle instead of the troops INSIDE the castle. But an inefficient and sloppily run fellowship is not an honor to Christ and is not spiritual!

As the needs arise, we will continue to build in facets of organization into our fellowship. And as long as I am here, at least, they will not be a burden or a hindrance to the Body, but a useful tool.

It may seem "Baptist" or "religious" (or some other connotative association), but if we need small groups of people here to see that certain jobs are done, then let's have them--and let's not worry, too much at least, about what we call them...

Verse 5 is also an example of "enrollment." I am going to draw a comparison to our membership roll. If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your own personal Savior then, dear one, you are for sure just as much a full member of the Body of Christ as anyone else who has made the same commitment to Him. But for practical reasons, and for reasons of encouragement, it is helpful to maintain a list of committed members to THIS work.

Now you may say, "Fine for Nehemiah: he had over 42,000 people to keep track of--when we get there, then we'll need it too, but not till then." But it is a real encouragement to me and to the other "organizational members" here (or, what we call "corporate members"), when someone says to the Body, "I would like to join you, and thus send you the signal that I am committed to you, in the Lord, so long as He leads me to do so." That sense of belonging to someone, in little tangible ways, is not unspiritual, it is edifying!

NUMBERING GOD'S PEOPLE AND THEIR GIFTS (Neh.7:66-73)

Not only did Nehemiah have it in his heart to enroll the new inhabitants of the rebuilt Jerusalem, but he apparently kept track of what was given to the work of the Lord (verses 70, 71). It is a good thing for the Body of Christ today to accountable in how they handle their money. Nehemiah wrote down in his records how much of what there was--even the number of donkeys! I see this as a bit of financial organization being practiced by the leader of God's people.

An honorable leadership will take the prompting of the Lord to be responsible with our resources. The world watches, and even we can grow suspicious and distrustful if we remain silent about such things, or let them just "take care of themselves..."

CONCLUSION: Planning, Structure and Spirituality

My friends, I sincerely hope you will learn from this chapter--by thinking about what I've said about it, and by going back over it yourselves--that some advance planning, some wisely incorporated organization--are good things to have in a growing church. When you see them being practiced it is not necessarily a sign that the church has left its first love.

We should use the tools the Lord has given us, and use them well. He has given us brains, the ability to concentrate, plan, seek Him, and undertake to care for our own well-being. Should we do any less for each other in the Body of Jesus Christ, for whom He laid down his very life--than we would for the companies for which we work???

May the living God, whose excellencies and wonders we will never exhaust, lead us and "put into our hearts" to have just the right amount of structure, and to have HIS plans for our church in the months to come! And I am confident that He shall!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

SERIES: NEHEMIAH
Chapter 8

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
October 11, 1987

A PROTOTYPE ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD OF GOD

Preliminary Scripture Readings: Malachi 2:1-9; Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction When Malachi was written, it is only about ten years after the time of Jerusalem's "refit" under Nehemiah. How quickly revival can turn into apathy! When the Apostle John sent the message from the Lord Jesus to the church at Sardis sometime between 90 and 100 A.D., it was less than 50 years after the church was founded! Now, it is NOT that growing cold towards God is inevitable--it is not. But we are not immune from getting apathetic, and in times of blessing it is good to apply ourselves to knowing and meditating on Scripture. Why do you suppose it is that the speakers from this pulpit are continually commending to you a disciplined study of the Bible? It is because **A GENUINE ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD OF GOD WILL HUMBLE A PERSON, AND HUMILITY ALWAYS MARKS THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN A PERSON'S LIFE.** And you are I need to see some evidence of the presence of God in our lives!

Nehemiah 8 is a wonderful chapter! We are going to see a lot of things that show what a Spirit-filled body of God's people looks like. Like Dr. Nicole observed a couple of weeks ago,

Some portions of Scripture must be mined deep to get the flow of oil; others need only the surfaced scratched to strike it rich!

Nehemiah 8 is a place where the oil lies just beneath the surface, and we will find principles which we can directly apply at almost every verse...

On the back of your bulletin today, you will find a chart of chapter 8. The chart breaks the chapter down into three sections, each describing a different thing that happens when people get re-excited about their relationship with the Lord--when they have a fresh new encounter with Scripture. The first is that a person's *intellect* is involved. (7:73b-8:8a). Worship which detours around a person's brains is not worship; it is sensuality. These Hebrews had a 1) hunger for God's Word and 2) an understanding of it. They didn't say, "Hey Ezra, make it funnier." Or, "Hey Ezra, make it shorter," or, "Hey Ezra, make it a little less

convicting..." They were not consumed with enjoying a "maximum entertainment experience", but with hearing what had come down from the mouth of the Living God, and how those words applied to them.

You know, the Law of Moses to which they were listening (Genesis through Deuteronomy) is not primarily theological material. It is applicational and historical. When you read those books you are reading about how God worked among His first followers, and about how He wanted them to live lives which were pleasing to Him.

The second section of the chart (across the middle) shows how an encounter with the Word of God, having touched the mind, appeals to the emotions (8:9-12). That modern evangelical Christians got the idea that to be a dignified and respectable Christian, you have to CONCEAL your emotional side, is a contradiction of God's Word. When these Hebrews heard the Law of God...

And, notice it is somewhere between Genesis and Deuteronomy that they were listening to--they didn't have the Gospels, Romans, Revelation, etc.

...they responded to it out of their *humanity*. They responded to it emotionally. They wept, they felt joy and the result was a feeling of strength.

Some of us were raised with no resistance at all to a show of emotions. Some of us are very emotional people. We like a good belly laugh, we can well up with tears easily, we fly off the handle sometimes. OTHERS of us were raised to conceal almost ALL strong emotions. What is correct is to allow the Word of God to move you in a natural way. If a Christian is stifling some genuine emotions--that is wrong. If you feel like crying, cry. If you feel like saying, "Amen," then say it. Or, if a Christian is given to excessive emotions and selfish outbursts, that person needs to activate more of his/her intellect in the Christian life and exercise a little self-control (which, by the way, is something the Spirit is trying to produce in our lives anyway).

The third section of Nehemiah 8 describes for us how the Word of God challenges the will (8:13-18). The way your "will" is to respond when it encounters the Word of God, is to *become obedient*. You may like to learn about the Word of God. You may enjoy being moved emotionally when you hear the Word of God sung or preached. But unless your WILL is submitting itself, learning and feelings are useless.

As we look at this chapter in some detail, will you pray and ask the Lord to challenge your will, your desire and determination to submit to His will!

Dear ones, it is not just learning that we are about here. It is not only feeling some special emotions that we are about here. What we are about, in the Body of Christ, is CHANGE. You may not want to change according to *my* agenda, and I may not wish to change according to *your*

agenda...but change and growing MORE LIKE JESUS, according to His agenda is what we are all about. And real change comes only by allowing the Word of God to take root in your life. You control that, not this church, not your spouse, not your kids or parents... May God help us, as He has unconditionally *promised*, to be willing to change in ways we have not yet! May we be a people in love with the effect the Word of God seems to have on Christians--causing us to desire, a little more each week and month, to be like Christ!

Now, let's begin to look at the chapter in some detail.

Nehemiah 8:1 The section really begins in verse 73 of chapter 7. The situation has been stabilized in Jerusalem, the people consolidated and some structure instituted. Now in verse 1, there is a *rare mood of responsiveness* among the people. It is not something that was legislated or imposed on them by the leadership--it is a general desire to hear what God has said.

Now this is a "Water Gate" to be happy about! The people gathered "as one man." They were unified, they were committed to the same purpose that day.

Notice again, what it was they wanted to hear: "the book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel." They asked for "no new manifesto, but the foundation articles of the faith" (Kidner, Comm.). For once, the people knew that they needed to be *nourished* by the Word. Many years later, the Apostle Peter wrote in his first letter,

"...like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." I PETER 1:2,3

Also, in verse 1 Ezra finally emerges from relative obscurity. It was typical of him that he quietly waited to be asked for--his earlier humility had a powerful influence among the people (Ezra 9:3 ff; 10:1,6).

Ezra was both a priest and a scribe--neither profession is often represented favorably in Scripture (as we read in Malachi, only ten years after this). But Ezra is a godly example of a man devoted to prayer and exposition of the Scripture. His impressive qualifications for both the office of priest and that of scribe is laid out in Ezra 7: 1-6. Here, he fulfills the true calling of the Old Testament priesthood to *teach* as well as to lead in worship.

How often, it seems, people in public ministry are characterized by arrogance or self-promotion, even if their "pulpit speech" is basically sound. Nothing should be further from us! Those who make their profession in living near to the Word of God should obviously be the most touched by it, and by Him Whose Word it is!

Now, I am not your priest. All true Christians are priests--Peter tells us we are a "nation" of priests, all equally capable in Christ of approaching the throne of grace. But I am your "scribe", so to speak. And it is calling and responsibility to bring the

Word to you each week in a meaningful, accurate and relevant way. Any person who publicly expounds the Scripture and does not realize those responsibilities is not called to preach or teach, or is not yet ready.

Nehemiah 8:2 Children, as well as men and women were taught the words of God. Our goal in teaching is not just to get people to regularly follow certain rituals and learn certain spoken routines--it is to impress upon the hearts of people of ALL ages to understand God and how to walk with Him. We are not maintaining a religious machine, which exists simply for its own sake. We are exposing people to the written revelation of a Living God. If God has indeed spoken, we need to hear it, and we need to understand it, right?

The pagans of that day, as those of *this* day, were so marked by mindless superstition ("*They cannot understand*", Isaiah 44:18f). But worshipping the true God is not enhanced by imagination or superstition. God has given us much information about Himself, and how He does things--in fact, He invites us to investigate Him! He wants us to use our intellect, our minds, to inquire about Him.

It is so important that you and I and our children understand well what God has said in His Word. Reading comes hard for some of you--it is hard work. That's OK; it was no doubt impossible for some of those about whom we are reading. It does not mean you are a second-class Christian. But do you *hunger* to understand what God has said. If reading comes hard, do you look for other ways to gain understanding about God? There are tapes, videos, conferences and music to help you. If you are hungry enough, there are plenty of tools to help you gain understanding about the Lord, and to see Him work His Word into your life...if you are hungry enough...

Nehemiah 8:3 Notice that the people, gathered as one man, were hungry, apparently, because they listened to it being read, from the standing position, for about six hours. Now these are not fairy-tale people--much of their history is marked by times like what occurred only ten years later:

"...'*how tiresome it is*', and you *disdainfully sniff at it*..."
Malachi 1:13

But here at least, they were hungry, they were humbled, and they wanted to hear the Word of God.

Being able to listen, both with the head and the heart, and being willing to absorb what God says, is a valuable and (unfortunately) rare quality. May we be a church filled with people like that, a vault of people hungry and eager to listen to the Holy Spirit!

PRAYER REQUESTS:

A look at Nehemiah 8!

THE BASIS OF SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

<p><u>Appearance of the People</u></p> <p><u>Ministry of Ezra</u></p> <p><u>Challenge to the Mind</u></p> <p><u>Response of the Mind</u></p>	<p><u>READINGS OF THE WORD</u></p> <p>All the people gathered Ezra requested to read the Law Men and women stood Leader's led by example</p> <p><u>Propagation of the Word</u></p> <p>Gathered themselves Stood from morning to midday</p> <p><u>Attention</u></p> <p>All stood—unity of purpose Lifted up their hands</p> <p><u>Retention of the Word</u></p> <p>Heard with understanding At the Water Gate</p> <p><u>EXPLANATION OF THE WORD, Nehemiah 8:8b</u></p>	<p><u>Method Adopted</u></p> <p>Scribes stood Expounded distinctly</p> <p>Gave the sense Caused the people to understand</p> <p><u>The Time</u></p> <p>1st day of 7th month</p> <p><u>The Place</u></p> <p>Broad place (outside the Temple) At the Water Gate</p> <p><u>Time</u></p> <p>7th Month First Day 7:7:3a—8:8a</p> <p>First day of the Feast of Weeks</p>
<p><u>SENSIBILITIES</u></p> <p><u>EFFECT ON THE EMOTIONS</u></p> <p><u>Result of Conviction</u></p> <p><u>Change of Disposition</u></p>	<p><u>EXHORTATION FROM THE WORD, Nehemiah 8:9-12</u></p> <p><u>Response to the Word</u></p> <p>Natural reaction 8:9 Emotions (Guilt)—weeping Proper reaction 8:10 Joy</p> <p><u>Result: Strength, 8:10</u></p>	
<p><u>CHALLENGE TO THE WILL</u></p> <p><u>Discovery of the Word</u></p> <p><u>Will</u> <u>Instruction in the Word</u></p> <p><u>Obedience to the Word</u></p>	<p><u>OBEEDIENCE TO THE WORD, Nehemiah 8:13-18</u></p> <p><u>Submission to the Word</u></p> <p>The pattern for submission, 8:13-15, 18</p> <p><u>The implementation of submission (action)</u></p> <p>The people gathered and understood, verse 13 They found and published, verse 14 They went and gathered, verse 15 They made booths and sat under them, verse 17 They read the Word.</p> <p><u>Result: THERE WAS VERY GREAT GLADNESS</u></p>	<p>Second Day, 8:13</p> <p>(Total of one week, 8:18)</p>

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

Series: NEHEMIAH
8:9-12

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
October 18, 1987

RECOVERING THE JOY OF THE LORD

Introduction: When I was saved, I was nineteen years old. Before that I had always believed IN God, and IN Jesus--that is, that they existed, and even that they cared. I could cuss up a storm, but only very rarely did I use the Lord's name in vane--I always felt there was something profoundly wrong with that. I had often prayed for various things as a child and as a young teenager. But I was not a Christian in the biblical sense. I had never *trusted* in Jesus' finished work on the cross, and I had never made a commitment to follow Him that was *personal*. Even though I didn't see myself as pagan, I was still unsaved--lost.

Then at nineteen I became a Christian and started walking with the Lord. One of the first things I noticed as a brand new Christian, was the new and deep feeling of well-being. Oh sure, I had been happy plenty of times before I was saved. But there had never been this tremendous conviction in my heart and mind that, "It's all going to be OK in the end, Neil."

For those of you who are married, I want you to think back to those *few moments* right after you said, "I do." What was it like? You may have felt relief; you may have felt a little apprehensive of the unknown of embarking on a life with this strange person... But without a doubt, in those first few minutes, as you changed out of your wedding clothes and into your "going away" clothes, there was a unique and powerful feeling of rejoicing! Before you were married, you hadn't felt that particular kind of joy before!

Christian joy is something that, once you have tasted of it, you very much want to taste it again. It may come through the ministry of some other Christian, it may accompany the solving of some problem you have been facing, it may or may not move you to a VISIBLE DISPLAY of it, but real Christian joy has it's source in your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Non-Christians cannot know what Christian joy is. I may describe it from the pulpit, they may have someone else explain it; but they cannot really understand what it is to *know* that wonderful assurance that since the Living God is helping you and near you, NOTHING can really undo you!

The "Jerusalem Jews" in Nehemiah had just heard the Law of the Lord read to them. Most probably didn't understand Hebrew (even though they were Jews), and so there were teams of Levites and teachers who went around and translated and explained what Ezra had read. The reading was from somewhere between Genesis and Deuteronomy, and the immediate effect on the people was conviction. Do you ever feel conviction about something you are doing, and shouldn't, or aren't doing, and should--when you read the Bible, or when you hear it read?

Repentance Comes With Revival

A real revival will always be preceded by a deep burden on the part of God's people to repent. To "repent" means to change your mind about something. It means to change *your thinking* about some issue about which God has spoken.

I cannot repent for being a Democrat (if I am one), because God hasn't said anything about being a Democrat. But if I come to believe, and live the politics that abortion or homosexuality are not morally wrong, then I need to repent of those things. I don't need to repent of being a Republican (if I am one), because God hasn't said anything about being a Republican. But if I turn a cold heart to the destitute, or adopt the attitude that healthy big businesses are the bottom-line in a successful society, and nothing else matters--my friends, Scripture says MUCH about that and I need to readjust my thinking back into line with what God has spoken. I need to repent, and make whatever changes in my day-to-day life reflect that repentance!

When a whole bunch of Christians, together, become burdened about their own individual lives, and begin to seek the Lord together, and pray together FOR one another about their lives, CORPORATE REPENTANCE happens. You absolutely, positively, indisputably MUST have that, if you're going to see a real Holy Spirit revival.

Verse 9 tells us that the people were weeping when they heard God's law. They must have felt like the bumper sticker you see sometimes, "Jesus is coming back, and boy is He mad!" The Jerusalem Jews were thinking, "God's been gone, and now He's back, and boy is He mad!" But the problem is, He never left. Man's the one who left!

But Nehemiah and Ezra and their men were saying to them, "No, YOU are the ones who left. But you should celebrate today, because the marvelous God of Heaven still stands with open arms and says, 'I'm ready to forgive and forget--I'll take everyone who will repent. Come to me just as you are. I'll take you.'"

My friends, when a person realizes that God is actually like that, it cannot help but bring joy! Much of the sadness we may feel, the depression, the drudgery is rooted in forgetting what God is really like! Yes, He is absolutely holy. Yes, He is all-powerful and sovereign. But He is full of lovingkindness, and even His people, the ones in the world whom you would think would know it the best--even they sometimes forget what He is like.

Dear ones, reconnect your thinking with WHO God really is. Nehemiah said to them in verse 10, "Let's rejoice! The Lord is good, and He is doing a GREAT THING FOR US!" The joy wasn't just in having a wall when they didn't have one before--it wasn't in having a new possession. The joy was in the fact that God was working in their lives! In tangible ways! He answered their prayers, and even though they didn't deserve His grace, He still brought the nation back into existence out of exile in Babylon. What a good God! What a wonderfully sovereign God, who brings about HIS PURPOSES even if in the short-run from our perspective, things look bleak. What an excellent God!

The Hebrew at the end of verse 10 reads, "Joy in Jehovah is your refuge." It's like when you have that assurance and conviction that the Lord Jesus is with you, it's like a fortress for you.

Notice that Nehemiah didn't tell them that the joy of the Lord would make them completely problem-free. Nor, that they would have gleaming prosperity. It is refuge and new strength that Christian joy gets you.

A Holy Day, When the Word Was Taken To Heart

The day was proclaimed "holy". That meant that it was different; it was to be special. Now, we don't have holy days. And in America today we seem absolutely obsessed with stripping each and every and ALL days of any kind of specialness concerning the Lord. Christian preachers preach against Christmas and Easter, and Christians slowly shrug off any conviction that ANY TIMES are special and should be set aside for worship and rejoicing.

By way of application (not interpretation--because this is not talking about the Sabbath), I hope you will set aside Wednesday night, November 25, the evening before Thanksgiving. We are having a joint service of Thanksgiving with Hixville Church, and we are this year inviting the little group of believers at Pacific Union Congregational Church to join us. I hope you will be burdened to join together on that evening with your brothers and sisters to give thanks to the Lord, and to testify to His goodness. I hope you won't say, "Well, Neil, only if there's nothing else to do." I hope you'll set it aside!

And I hope there is a growing number of you who regard Sunday as special, too! Sunday should and can be a time, NOT TO GET down and discouraged (although the devil loves it when that happens), but to be happy and restful, and to rest from the things you normally are concerned with, and to rejuvenate yourself and refocus your attention and readjust your perspective.

I entitled this message "Recovering the Joy of the Lord." If you are a Christian, you have had it, and you can have it again. Joy is the sort of thing that once you have tasted of it, you want to taste it again. I think this is one reason charismatic churches are growing. It is because there is quite often a lot of corporate joy present in the meeting. And my friends, that's not just charismatic, it's spiritual.

It's the way Christian worship is supposed to be. Let us be praying that each and every person in this fellowship will be in, or re-enter a time in their lives THIS FALL when the joy of the Lord strengthens them, and gives them new energy to live for the Lord and to serve Him. It may just accompany revival!

If you are with us, and you have never had any joy about the things of the Lord, maybe you are not really one of His children yet. Perhaps you know certain doctrines, and perhaps you have believed IN Jesus, and yet you look into your heart and do not find any memories of well-being and real peace with the Lord. Maybe you're still frightened of Him.

You can have that joy, by making your relationship right with Him. The only way then, to make it right is to be RECONCILED to Him and have your sins put to Jesus' account and His perfect righteousness put to yours. That transaction is done by simply accepting in your heart and mind, the free gift of eternal life. May God bring it about that every soul in our fellowship has that assurance!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

Series: NEHEMIAH
Lesson 14 (8:13-18)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
November 8, 1987

HAVING FUN WHILE SERVING JEHOVAH

Introduction I am not sure where modern Christianity got the reputation of being dreary. Jesus Christ is not dreary, neither is He boring! And He does not intend that as we live the Christian life, that WE should be dreary or bored... In fact, I want my Christianity to be fun (at least sometimes!) When a person trusts Christ--when they enter into eternal life, and have all their sins forgiven, and are adopted into Christ's family--they really become "alive" for the first time! And if their walk with the Lord is anything other than fully alive, there is something wrong!

I think this is one reason why the charismatic movement has known the success that it has. People do not want "truth" if it means just *dead orthodoxy*. They want something that is alive! And Jesus Christ is alive, and so should walking with Him be alive too!

That is why I think that our Christianity is supposed to be exciting and challenging and bold and energized and sometimes, at least, FUN!

The world, of course, markets fun in many, many different kinds of packages. Generally, "fun" in the world means "indulge the flesh." But to me, real fun is to be walking in the joy of the Lord, and seeing His hand really at work in my life.

The Jews that had reoccupied Jerusalem under Nehemiah were on the verge of revival. Chapter nine records the revival, and it begins here in chapter 8. We shall see that real joy and fun in serving God comes by living in obedience to His revealed will. When you are in God's will, and you know it, there is a joy in the heart that what the world offers cannot even begin to match!

That joy, I think, is mingled with a peace; the peace that the Spirit provides, that sense of well-being, when you know God is pleased with you.

The Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) The Hebrews were to set aside the third week of October each year for the "Feast of Booths." They were actually supposed to camp out for a week, and the dwelling in booths was to be a reminder to them of the fatherly care and protection of God while Israel was journeying from Egypt to Canaan.

The Bible is full of ceremonies that are intended to be useful by God's people in remembering some kindness that God has shown. Why is that? Because we tend to *forget* the kindness of God. The physical object lessons in both the Old Testament and the New Testament were given, not just to keep God's people busy with endless activities, but TO REMIND A FORGETFUL PEOPLE of how good and merciful their God is!

Jesus washed the disciples' feet in John 13. Was that because they were dirty? It was to show that even He was a servant, and if He could humble Himself, how much more should we? What if we actually had a footwashing service? Would you be offended?

The Hebrews were forgetful people too. This feast had become non-essential (as if anything God says "DO" can become non-essential) for these Hebrews. But now, as they have encountered the Word of God, are thinking about how to recover some of the earlier joy they had as younger believers, they again comply with this feast (Leviticus 23).

Dear ones, is there something you have decided is non-essential about your walk with Christ? Have you decided you no longer need to read your Bible often? Are you tempted to become like the theologian Paul Tillich, who when asked if he prayed, he responded, "No, but I meditate." Have you decided that sharing the faith, sharing yourself with your brethren in ministry, giving an offering to the Lord, or other activities are not important enough to remember?

We are praying for revival these days. It will come when God's people change their ways. It will come when we pray enough and when we are personally touched with the need to love Him more. That will be fun when it comes...I won't want to watch TV on the night it invisibly begins (even if the Redskins are on!)

Notice that in this section of Nehemiah, the people aren't made to reinstitute this feast. God honors our need to choose to do His will, as believers. And these people wanted to do what He had commanded. You and I need to desire to please Him. When you hear a passage of Scripture read (as these Hebrews did), or when you read it yourself, what indication can you find of how God wants us to live for Him--ask yourself that question as you read the Scripture tomorrow.

Renewed Obedience Brings Joy (verse 17) I think there is nothing so pitiable and miserable on this earth, as a Christian who is living in disobedience. There is nothing "cool" or "hip"--nothing admirable about a believer who has decided to live for himself.

BUT--renewed obedience brings back that joy and that fun in serving God. It is no more complicated than that! I have done enough pastoral

counseling, and heard enough complicated problems--people can be so confused when they are in sin, and they want the counsellor to chart out some sophisticated solution--when all it takes is, "Obey your God." Then a joy comes. Restoration comes. The fun comes back into the Christian life! cf. John 7:2; 37-39.

I would like to make another observation on our passage. When the people discovered this commandment (to make the Feast of Booths), they had two weeks to get ready for it. They busied themselves with the work of God! Now we have no feasts, per se, as Christians. The early Christians did--the "agape-feast" built around the Lord's Table. And yet, what a fury of activity we are facing in the next two months! I hear people say, "Well, we can't plan too much for November and December because that's when the Holidays are..." "That's when the feasts are!" But I like it, I enjoy it, its fun to me when God's people busy themselves with getting ready for some festival or series to honor the Living God and His Son! I have decided I'm not going to apologize for (gently) prodding Dartmouth Bible Church to have activities often that honor God. We will not get mingled with worldly activities, fear not. But let's feel good about the activities we have; let's be creative; and let's have fun at them!

There is no reason we have to allow ourselves to grow bored or dreary! Let's obey God and have fun. I wonder what the Latin for that would be...maybe it should be our motto! And, that's the message non-Christians should get about Christians. "JOY IN OBEYING AND SERVING GOD."

"Obedience is a matter of choice to act upon the right."

—Dr. Ted Ward

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

Series: NEHEMIAH
Lesson 15 (9:1-3)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
November 15, 1987

CONFESSION OF SIN: THE "BOTTLENECK" OF WORSHIP

Introduction I can think of nothing harder to do than to confess my sins. On the other hand, I can't think of anything easier to do in the Christian life, than to confess my sins. Confession of sin is at the same time both hard and easy...

The picture we are looking at from Israel's history as recorded in the Book of Nehemiah, has been a portrait of a large group of God's people stricken with the *need for revival*. And, as they have desired it, and have heard God's Word read, they determined to obey what they heard.

"Obedience is a matter of choice to act upon the right."
-Dr. Ted Ward

They have re-instituted this Feast of Booths, and are enjoying a real and genuine RECOVERY OF THE JOY OF THE LORD. I would like to be there and see it, wouldn't you? They would be dressed differently and would of course speak differently. But many of them would be your spiritual brothers and sisters, and it would be neat to go back in time for a few hours and observe this revival among the people of God!

The Word of God had a tremendous impact on God's people as they were gathered together. It pointed the people to their sin (8:9), led them to worship (8:12,14), and gave them great joy (8:17). Now, the Word of God led to another very important part of revival: it led to the CONFESSIO OF THEIR SIN. On October 15 they had begun the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) and finished it on the 22nd. Then verse one of chapter nine tells us they waited a day, and gathered all together again on the 24th. And before we read about their confession (and that is the main thing we're going to look at today), we read that they did TWO OTHER THINGS first...

Assembling with Fasting Through the centuries the church has come to "mysticize" a number of ancient religious practices that we read about in the Bible. Sometimes the church has legislated some of them, and attached all kinds of magical meanings to them. I want to know exactly what the real meaning behind those practices were--like the sacrifices made for sin in the Old Testament; and the role of priests; and the feasts; and so forth. Another ancient practice that has come to mean

something different today in the minds of some, is fasting. Isaiah 58 is a central passage on what fasting is all about, and I've made some copies of a message I did a while back on that chapter if you would like to read it.

In short, fasting was something God's people did to give themselves more time to seek the Lord. It was to be a private thing, between the individual and God, or between a COVENANTED COMMUNITY and God. The point was not to impress each other with asceticism, but to intensively seek the Lord. Even to the point of giving up meal times, and the substantial time needed to prepare meals in those days.

I mentioned the COVENANTED COMMUNITY. What I mean by that term is a group of people, such as we read about in this revival, who bind themselves together out of a "kindred spirit." They were brothers and sisters in God's family. During feast times, and especially during times when revival was upon them, they ate together, worshipped together, talked about the things of the Lord together, and here, they fasted together. It's like a whole bunch of Christians having an intensive joint Quiet Time! And for this time of humbling, and wanting desperately to perceive God's presence, they fasted together...

It was a humbling time. Notice that they wore special "revival uniforms:" sackcloth. It wasn't pretty! They put on sacks, and smeared dust on their faces. Modern Christians go to great ends THE OTHER WAY, sometimes. But to the ancient Jews, they were real big on doing physical things that were symbolic and had meaning. We can be so cerebral and heady in our faith today. But then they counted it a point of dignity to "get down and get dirty for the Lord" together. It is primitive Judaism at its best!

Assembling as a Separated Community The other thing they did before this confession was to physically separate themselves from the non-Hebrew pagans in their midst.

Separation from paganism, however it is done by God's people will NEVER be understood by the world. We can try to explain it--I'm sure these Hebrews attempted to explain it to their Gentile neighbors, employees, employers, even husbands and wives-- but unless the Holy Spirit gives the unbeliever the light to understand the believer's need for separation at times, they will always balk at it...

Nevertheless, these revival-minded Hebrews temporarily suspended whatever relationships they had with unbelievers. It was like,

"Hey--when I'm *really* seeking the Lord, unbeliever, you are just going to have to live with my absence for a little while. I make no apology for needing this time with God. If you cannot see why, I regret that, but there comes a time when God will be alone with His chosen people."

We have very few times like that right now, here at Dartmouth Bible Church. In this age of grace, and an age meant (as I understand the New Testament) to aggressively spread the Gospel, we are doing everything we can to welcome non-Christians into our fold to find the Lord Jesus Christ and to come to know HOW to know Him!

Yet, privately, we must be separated unto the Lord, you and I. The Apostle Paul gives us the mandate,

I urge you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...

Romans 12:1,2a

So, having prepared their hearts with fasting and "set-up" for the next step by getting alone as a covenanted community, what was the next item on the agenda?

General Confession of Sin When I was in high school I listened to a music group called "the Electric Prunes." One of their early albums had a religious flavor, and one of the songs was called "General Confession." I still have the album and I still like the song, although it was not a Christian group. I learned years later that "General Confession" is something done in "high" churches (like the Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopalean Churches) and it is often part of the worship liturgy. It is a communal or joint acknowledgment that the worshippers have been and are sinful.

It seems like believers have found it easier over the centuries to makes this acknowledgment as a recited statement. Confession of sin is pretty hard to do as individuals. But these Hebrews admitted that they, AND THEIR PARENTS had fallen short and disobeyed God. Notice in verse 3 that they DIDN'T RUSH THEIR WORSHIP. At this particular time at least, they confessed and worshipped for three hours!

I like a worship service that moves along. I know many of you don't like getting bored and you want your minds and hearts to be stimulated by what goes on in this room each Sunday. But at the same time, real worship will not be too time-sensitive either. Being pre-occupied with the clock and other things you have scheduled on the Lord's Day, is really an insult to God and the time we spend together should be honored and set aside as special in our minds.

Now "general confession" presupposes private confession. It's easy to slip into the trap, "If I'm in the same room where confession is being recited, that goes for me too." No.

Private confession is a basic, a vital and a necessary part of walking with Christ. Know also that private confession is not salvatory--it doesn't EARN POINTS with God. The blood of Jesus is all that can purchase salvation. But once we have trusted in the work of

Jesus' death, THEN we need to be bringing ourselves back in line regularly with the fact that God has spoken about how to live, and with the fact that Jesus *ALREADY MADE ATONEMENT FOR OUR SINS*.

But confession is at the same time, one of the easiest and one of the hardest things to do as a regular part of the Christian life. It is easy because it's simply admitting that you were wrong--to God, primarily. Confession is to *AGREE WITH GOD* about what He has said. It is to say, "Yes, Lord. Indeed, I have sinned."

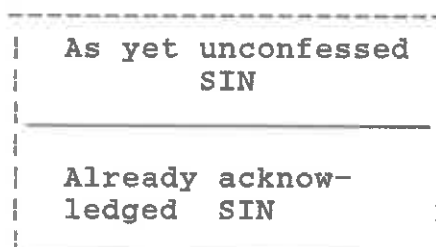
It is interesting the noble vocabulary we can sometimes adopt when we are confessing. We may say things like, "I blew it, Lord," as if that sin was a foul-shot that you missed from the line... Or, "Lord, I know that I failed you." Now, that is subtle. Failure is not always *really* the individual's fault, is it? And we can trap ourselves by using vocabulary that lessens what we are confessing. The Scripture calls sin "sin." It is most always a matter of choice, and when a distinct decision to disobey God wasn't involved (as in a sin of ignorance), the sin is a function of *being* a sinner from birth ("it comes natural").

I am reading a scary book right now called "People of the Lie." It is scary because it is about evil, and really about evil people. But it is one of the most helpful books I have read in a long time. In it, the author deals with the hesitancy we all have--and the absolute refusal by some--to become displeased with ourselves. The author of this book quotes a French Carmelite writer of a hundred years ago. In a letter to her sister, Teresa of Lisieux wrote,

"If you are willing to serenely bear the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter."

Now I am not endorsing Carmelite doctrine, understand. But there is a real truth in the need to look honestly at ourselves. We shouldn't become obsessed with looking inwardly, and confession should not be a theatrical thing among the saints. But you and I have a deep need to refocus regularly on how God views us. We need His perspective. When we sin, we need to confess it. We need to agree with God about the wrong we have done or contemplated doing. It is not because God enjoys making us miserable. He does not enjoy our displeasure. But to be really happy and to recover the joy of knowing Christ, we need to confess our disobedience regularly!

But it is hard to "be displeasing to yourself." It is hard to look at that part of our lives still out of conformity to God's revealed will. If you could picture it in a diagram--



The bottom half is no trial to acknowledge. But by virtue of the fact that whatever is still in the top half is still "precious" to you, you don't want to admit that it is wrong! If you struggle with being lazy, you still like to be lazy--you don't want anyone coming around and probing that! If you still struggle with hate or prejudice or showing partiality with people, you don't WANT anybody suggesting that you change. If you still like to contemplate sexual sin, you chafe when someone says something about how God looks at it...

So, confession is one of the healthiest and joy-producing activities in the Christian life! When the Hebrews did it, it was a vital step in their revival in serving the Living God. When you and I do it, as James tells us to-- "Confess your sins to one another..." --it has a refreshing and rejuvenating effect on us.

First John 1:9 is a precious verse isn't it? In the Navigators, it is one of the first verses they encourage new Christians to memorize. And I have claimed its truth often. But there is a side to I John 1:9 not often brought out. That is, that it is an invitation to non-Christians as well as Christians. It is a good verse to share with someone you are witnessing to. It is a promise and it applies to them too! Isn't it wonderful that the holy God has made complete payment for our failings, and that He has engineered things so that when we still sin--and sin hurts God--we can be made close to Him again simply through the acknowledgment that, well...He was right after all! When we do that together, it is a real part of what worship should be!

DARTMOUTH BIBLE NOTES

SERMON NOTES
FROM THE
SUNDAY MESSAGES

Dartmouth Bible Church 52 Morton Avenue No. Dartmouth, Mass.

Series: Nehemiah
Lesson 16 (9:4-37)

Neil C. Damgaard, Th.M.
November 29, 1987

LOOKING BACK AND TAKING INVENTORY

Introduction As you look back over the time you have known the Lord, what *main events* do you see? For some of you that time has been relatively brief--you have only known Christ for a year or two or three. For some of you, like myself, your time in the faith has spanned a decade or more. For some, you have walked with Jesus for several decades. But no matter how long you have been a believer, you can think of many "mile markers", I am sure, which have been significant in your spiritual progress.

You may think of a time when you witnessed to someone, and they really responded to Christ. You may remember a time when you were very depressed and the Lord lifted you out of it. You may think of another Christian that became very precious to you. You may recall how the Lord provided a real need that you had, and He did it in a miraculous fashion.

Also, you will no doubt recall times when you sinned. Any honest recollection of the past will courageously face up to those times when you chose to disobey the clearly revealed will of God. I know you recoil at the thought of those times, but they are just as much a part of the "real you" spiritually, as are the times of victory. And, a sign of a spiritually *GROWING* person is the readiness to confess sin; to acknowledge sin to the Lord.

The chapter before us is a PRAYER. It was voiced by the Levites on behalf of everyone, and demonstrates for us an attitude of confession. You and I need to learn more about confession, and this prayer is a good model. The central feature of this prayer is its *FOCUS ON GOD*. As the Levites prayed this long prayer, they reviewed some of the highlights of how GOD intervened in the lives of His people. The emphasis is on the *EXCELLENCE OF THE TRUE GOD*. Yes, God's people are in the picture too. And I am afraid the Levites don't say too much about the Jews nobility or faithfulness through the centuries. The "camera keeps swinging back" to how kind and merciful Jehovah has been!

Already I see an application: even in this prayer of confession, there is not an unhealthy introspection. Sometimes believers can grow too consumed with self, even in a time of humbling and confession. "Oh Lord I have done this and that--let me tell you about it; and by the way, please forgive me." The FOCUS for us should be on the Lord--NOT on constantly going over the details of a defeat...

This section is full of praise to the Lord for His love! In five places, God is praised for His compassion and His lovingkindness. Do you believe that? Often the world would have us think that the God of the Old Testament is a one dimensional deity, who loves nothing better than to go around executing random judgement on people. I think it's neat to read this chapter nine of Nehemiah and see that it is really the whole O.T. story in outline form! It's like the Levites are reviewing all of Israel's history from creation up to their present, and at the bottom-line they keep seeing the same thing: God has been faithful, even when Israel has not...

So, when you look back on your experience in knowing God, can you see the gracious hand of God, guiding you, teaching you how to live for Christ, providing your needs, protecting you, being faithful to His promises?

Let's look at some of the things that the Levites felt were significant as they led Israel through this prayer...

Praising the God of Creation (Neh.9:4-6) The neat thing about verses 4 and 5 is that the Lord wanted these names remembered. Precious in the sight of the Lord are the lives of His people. Wouldn't you feel good if the Lord worked it out that believers centuries from now remembered way, way back in 1987 there were these servants of Christ in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, named Bob and Mike and Barry and Joe and Linda and Judy and Nancy...

Verse six teaches clearly that God created not only the earth, but also heaven and all the heavenly inhabitants. How far modern society has come from the days of Nehemiah. Today, the God of "random chance" gets the glory for creation. But we believe, just as these Levites of 2,400 years ago, that Jehovah God created the universe. I am comforted knowing that. I'm not sure I always believed that... There was a day when I was fascinated at the notion that the universe is a big, non-religious machine, somehow bigger and independent than Mankind's petty religions. But what a lonely, purposeless universe that was. Praise God, it is not so!

Notice at the end of verse 6 that they say that "the heavenly host bows down before Thee." This expression "the heavenly host" refers to all kinds of creatures who live in heaven--angels, cherubim, seraphim, principalities, powers, etc. These are creatures who are vastly intelligent, some very powerful from the standpoint that they are not bound by the physics of our universe. But intelligent or powerful, they are not above bowing down before the Living God. His holiness is bright and He is called a consuming fire elsewhere in Scripture! Dear ones, our lives should be lived in worship of Him too! And when we gather for worship--**EVEN THOUGH MANY OF US HAVE BEEN LIBERATED FROM ONE FORM OF DEAD RELIGION OR ANOTHER--**let us not be flippant or careless in how we approach the worship of God! The heavenly host no doubt has little problem with HOW to worship God. In His presence, probably no one is confused about what to do--they fall before Him, ascribe glory and praise to Him, and enjoy His beauty. Christians sometimes can get so consumed with a lot of OTHER things than simply His excellent nature!

Praising the God of Abraham (vss.7 & 8) Often the individual people we read about that God worked with, were not always sterling examples of piety. The Old Testament is not a gallery of bigger-than-life super heroes who never made mistakes. But the emphasis is on the wonder of God, and HOW loving He acts towards the people in the Old Testament. What comes through in the O.T. is not Jewish culture. It is not just a history of changing national boundaries. It is not (as some liberal theologians teach) an evolution in thought about God. It is the saga of God shedding His sovereign love on His people whom He has called.

The first Hebrew saint that God called was Abram, the book of Genesis tells us, and the book of Nehemiah confirms. "Abram" means "exalted Father" which looked back to his royal lineage *before* God called him OUT OF HIS OWN COUNTRY, Ur. The end of verse 7 reviews the fact that God Himself changed Abram's name from "Abram" to "Abraham". "Abraham" probably means "*Father of a multitude*"--implying a look ahead to his descendents. It was not what Abram brought with him to the faith that was significant--it was what Jehovah was going to do WITH him that was exciting.

It's like that with you and me too, isn't it? Wouldn't you rather share the things God has done for you and with you since you became a believer--than to speak of what you DID or WHO YOU WERE in the flesh before you trusted Christ? I would much rather you see the Lord working in and through my life, now...than to tell you about the "Neil of B.C. days."

I never thought about this before I heard a preacher teach it, but you and I are really MORE Jewish than a lot of Jews! We trust and depend on Jehovah and on the Hebrew Scriptures entirely!

In verse 7 the Levites say that "the Lord God chose Abram." The word chose is an exciting word. In Hebrew it is the word "bahar" and it is used almost 200 times in the O.T., nearly always theologically. It means to elect, to choose or to decide for. It is an often-used word in the Old Testament, for the doctrine of sovereign election is a common theme. The Levites refer to Abram's election because to them, it is a wonderful testimony of God's love! Moses said to the Jews that followed him, hundreds of years after Abraham's time, that "*The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers [Abram, etc.] the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt*" (Deut.7:7,8). See also I Samuel 10:24; I Kings 8:16; I Chron.28:5; Psalm 135:4; Isaiah 41:8,9, etc.

It is vital to see, when studying the doctrine of election, that God has NOT elected people *arbitrarily*. No where does the Bible even imply that God is ever arbitrary, random in His dealings with men. His choice is related to His sovereign purpose--so, He chose Israel TO BE holy, and to serve as His witness to the nations. The Bible settles for no lower a view of God than absolute sovereignty.

But His sovereignty does NOT necessitate a cold randomness, or an arbitrary selection.

Well, the Levites were reminding the Hebrews who were standing listening to them teach, that their God IS GOD. Abram is the first example they remind the people of.

In verse 8 the Levites say some other things about Abram's personal relationship with God--these things relate to you and me too!

1. God found Abram's heart faithful towards God--even to the point of trusting God with the life of his own precious son! God elected Abram, and yet there IS a kind of wonderful "give-and-take" in the relationship. God does not ONLY REACT to Abram; God is CAUSE, not just effect. And yet TO THE LORD, Abram's faith--his dependence--his deep trust moves God deeply. The Bible tells us that his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." It was the machinery and the tool by which he was saved, and would go to heaven!
2. God made a promise to Abram. It wasn't just a pie-in-the-sky promise--it involved real estate! Now the how's and when's of taking title to this real estate has provided much material for discussion for theologians--but to me, the practical thing of it all, is that God keeps His promises! The covenant made with Abraham (called the Abrahamic Covenant) is exciting! (Note Hebrews 11:8-12; 17-19)

These Jews were AGAIN living in the land that God had promised to Abraham many years earlier. It must have been an incredible feeling! Even though a lot of water had passed under Israel's bridge, God was still there, He hadn't changed; He was still honoring His promises to them. Is a God like that worthy of honor and love?

Has He made any tangible promises to you? Are you depending on Him for anything? As you look back on your history with the Lord, can you see any evidences that God has been good to you?

The biggest proof you have of His love for you is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Next week we will have the Lord's Table. I encourage you to prepare your hearts beginning on Saturday night--and to use the time we spend together Sunday morning, to reflect on God's love and mercy for you.

Aren't you glad the Lord loves you? You know, many religions and even some so-called "Christian" religions don't have a theology where God is motivated by compassion, or even cares much at all! But the God of the Bible cared so much that He dispatched His only Son, God also, to die, to redeem all who would simply trust utterly in that! Let's be a people in love with a God like that!