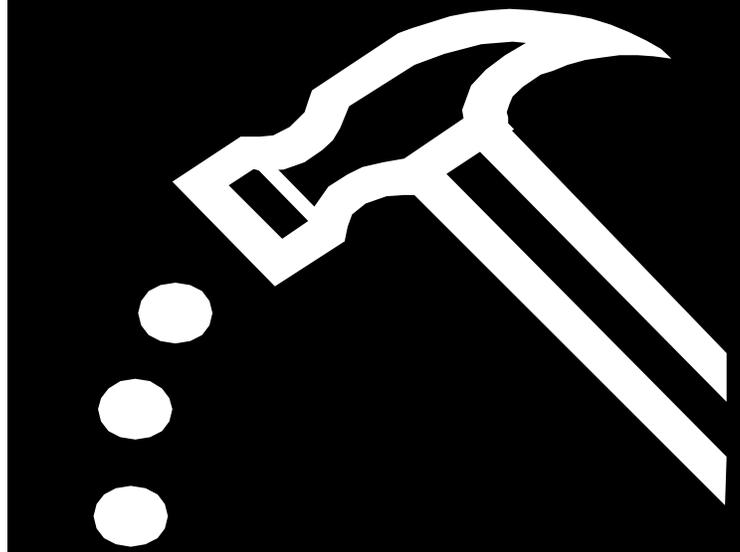


Creating
Teamwork In
God's Work





Introduction

The genesis of this study was a gathering of men seeking the leading and directing of God. Each of the men spent time examining their lives in light of the book of Nehemiah. God began a work among them. This study is a result of their desire to share that experience with others. Following is a spiritual journey through the book of Nehemiah. The idea of behind a spiritual journey is that you will be given the opportunity to work through a book of the Bible in a meditative and contemplative fashion. The study is designed for a four week period. Monday through Saturday you are asked to complete the daily devotional studies. Sunday is a time of celebration and sharing.

Daily, before you begin reading the passage, take time to prepare your heart. Ask God to reveal Himself through what you are reading. You will be directed to read a passage of scripture and then a short devotional paragraph. Read it thoughtfully; allow God to impact your mind. If a particular word or phrase catches your attention make note of it and meditate on it during the day. This may be the voice of God speaking to you about a particular concern He has for your life or for the church.

Following the paragraph, there are questions to ponder. Be honest as you answer them. Finally, there is a short one or two sentence prayer, which is meant to focus the direction of your prayers. Spend some quality time each day praying through what you have read and ask God to speak to you. Take

Week One A Work Begun

Read Nehemiah 1:1-4 (Monday)

There was a problem in the land. The Jewish people returned to Jerusalem nearly a hundred years before the events recorded here. They completed the building of the temple but never completed the wall around the city. As a result, they were open to attack and the work of God at the temple was constantly interrupted. It is not that they did not attempt to build the wall. About thirteen years before, they began the work but opposition brought the work to an end.

Because of their exposure to the attacks and harassment of those that surrounded them, the people were discouraged and troubled. Nehemiah saw a problem, he knew something needed to be done. The struggle of God's people broke his heart. He would weep and fast; motivated by deep concern.

Nehemiah began a project of rebuilding but not simply the rebuilding of the wall. It is interesting to note that the celebration for a completed work does not take place until chapter 12, even though the wall is completed in chapter 7. The work was not complete until the people were also built up.

Contemplation:

God has allowed you to be a part of a community or ministry. Like all communities there are problems. What are the problems that the Lord has laid upon your heart? What is it that breaks your heart in the community of which you are a part?

Prayer

Lord, break my heart with the concern You have for Your people.

No “They”, Only A “We” That Becomes A “Me”.

Read Nehemiah 1:5-7 (Tuesday)

Nehemiah’s response is one of repentance. He understood that he was part of a community. In the process of examining the failures of his community Nehemiah did not ask, How have they failed? Rather, he began by asking, How have we failed, and moved to how have I failed? Nehemiah understood that as a part of the Jewish people he had failed to be all that God called him to be both to that community and for that community. The shortcomings he observed lead him to both corporate and personal examination.

Remember that at the time the report was given, Nehemiah was hundreds of miles away. However, his tremendous sense of community lead him to seek his own personal failure. Often, when we are a part of a community, we will see the failures of that community. We are tempted to pray for *them* and ask God to convict *them*. Nehemiah saw the failure in his community and asked God to convict him.

Contemplation:

When we see that leader who fails to lead properly; do we weep out of brokenness of heart? Have we asked God to show us how our failure may have contributed? Have we prayed? Have we volunteered? Have we encouraged? When we see those who are unwilling to be involved, do we weep out of brokenness, do we seek how we might have failed them.? When we are angry at a fellow brother, do we ask God to show us the selfish demandingness of our heart that contributes to our anger? That is what Nehemiah did in response to the failure of His community.

Prayer:

Lord, break my heart concerning the failures of my people. Show me where I have fallen short; how I have failed to be what you would have me be amongst your people.



A Proper Proportion Of Prayer

Read Nehemiah 1:8-11 (Wednesday)

So often our prayers are dominated by request. Lord may we have this, Lord may we have that. Take a look at the prayer of Nehemiah. He begins with repentance. He then focuses on the promises of God. He seeks for those promises to be fulfilled not for his sake but for God's sake. He prays that the Name of God might be proclaimed. Then, Nehemiah focuses upon the relationship that exists between God and his people. Only after there is repentance, worship, and a focus on the relationship, does Nehemiah bring before God his request for grace before the king. This was not a small request or an obligatory prayer. Nehemiah's life was on the line. If Nehemiah spoke to the king and the king was displeased with what he heard, it would mean the death of Nehemiah. Also, Nehemiah did not by himself have the resources to accomplish this task, which God had laid upon his heart. He needed a resource beyond himself. This is not unusual. When God invites us to join His work, it is always larger than our resources. Working with God always requires His provision through some providential means. Nehemiah understood that this was God's work. His requests were for his life and God's people, yet before the requests there was worship.

Contemplation:

What are the proportions of your prayers? Are they dominated by the "give me's" or like Nehemiah do you allow your prayer time to be a time of confession, worship, communion and then request? What is God inviting you to be a part of which will fail apart from His provision? Where are you living life in such a way that if God does not come through, you will fail or perish?

Prayer:

Lord, teach me to pray in ways that reflect Your honor and glory, prayers which are theocentric rather than egocentric. Father, let me hear and accept Your invitation to step out in faith, to be obedient when obedience means complete dependence upon You.

Now That's Chutzpah

Read Nehemiah 2:1-9 (Thursday)

For three or four months Nehemiah prayed and waited for the opportunity to present the needs of his people to the king. The opportunity arrived when the king noticed that his cupbearer was saddened. This was of great concern to the king. The position of cupbearer was one of great responsibility. Not only was Nehemiah responsible to test the wine to be certain that it was safe for the king, he was probably responsible to protect the king from any intrigue within his court. Thus, when Nehemiah appeared before the king with a downtrodden look, the king and queen were concerned. They asked their trusted employee what was troubling him.

This was the opportunity Nehemiah awaited. After a quick prayer, Nehemiah made his request to the king. What strikes me about his request was his willingness to ask for all that was needed. He did not hold back or try to lighten what would be required. He told the king everything that was required. This was an act of faith. Nehemiah did not try to manipulate the conversation to force the outcome. He made his request and allowed God to move the heart of the king.

The result was that God met the need, God moved the king, and God received the glory. In fact, the king went beyond the request and provided a military escort for Nehemiah.

Contemplation

Where have I failed to let another know the whole truth out of a desire to manipulate the outcome? Do I see where manipulation is my attempt to control a situation without dependence upon God? Is it correct that manipulation is always a failure to trust God to do what He said He would do.

Prayer:

Father, show me where I attempt to manipulate situations and others. Show me how this is a failure to trust you. Help me to be bold in asking others to be a part of the work that you are doing.

He Came, He Saw, He Proposed

Read Nehemiah 2:11-18 (Friday)

Nehemiah heard the report of his brother and the others who had come from Jerusalem. He knew the problem, yet before he spoke to others about the problem, he took the time to check things out for himself. It was not just the hearsay from others but it was the result of his own observation, which led to the solution presented by Nehemiah. Not only did Nehemiah observe the problem, he took time to consider a solution. As he inspected the wall, he worked out the plan that is presented in Nehemiah 3. He was not simply observing the problem, he was also making himself part of the solution. It was a plan that involved the people of God. Most importantly, it was a plan that included his own efforts.

When God lays a burden concerning the failures of our community, it is often a call to action not just for others but for ourselves. God is asking us to get involved. God was at work. Nehemiah shared his burden with the people. He also shared how God was at work to provide what was necessary to accomplish the work. All that was needed was God's people to step up and accept the responsibility. Notice again the absence of any coercion or manipulation. Nehemiah trusted in God to move His people to do His work.

Contemplation

As you wrote about the concerns you have for this community, were you aware that God might be calling you to a task? Along with concern, have you asked God to give you wisdom as to how to address this concern? Have you seen God provide what is necessary to accomplish this task? Are you willing to share with God's people what God has laid upon your heart and to wait for Him to move God's people to do His work?

Prayer

Father, allow me to go beyond simply observing the problems. Allow me to be a part of the solution as I seek Your wisdom, guidance and resources. Let me wait upon You to move your people to do Your work.

But It's Such A Good Work

Read Nehemiah 2:10, 19-20 (Saturday)



Nehemiah proclaims that what they are doing is a good work. He is doing the right thing for the right reason and every one will support him, right? Wrong! Too often we believe that when we are serving God and His people that all will go well and that everyone will be thrilled with what we are doing. This is not the case. Often, in fact most of the time when we are doing what is right there will be those who are in opposition. All the way through the project, Nehemiah will face escalating harassment. The more successful the project became, those who were motivated by jealousy, envy, and a desire to maintain control, intensified their attacks. In Ephesians 6:10-12, Paul makes clear that our battle in this world is against spiritual forces. Our enemy does not like it when God's work is accomplished. He will find any means to attack what is taking place. Those attacks may come in the form of mockery and derision, they may come as personal attacks in words and actions, they may come as destructive false rumors, they may come as hateful, suspicious questions about motives. They may come from out side the community but will often come from within. Be assured they will come. Nehemiah shows us how to confront those attacks. He does not attack back. Rather, he focuses upon the work that God gave him, he keeps to the task. He asks God to be his defender. He works in a way that gives nothing for his enemies to use against him. In the end he simply trusts in God to work it out in His time. We will focus more on this next week.

Contemplation

Have you ever given up on a work that God has given you because of the opposition? Are you surprised when opposition comes? How do you handle it when people attack you?

Prayer

Father; allow me to be a part of the kind of work that the enemy will resist. Give to me the strength to continue in the work. Give me the trust not to attack back. Give me the wisdom to know how to respond.

A Wayside Rest In The Midst Of The Journey

Sunday

It is time to take stock in the ways God has used His word and our prayers during the last week. On this Sunday I would ask you to be prepared to do four things.

Spend time this morning preparing your heart to worship God in response to His work in your life during the previous week.

Come prepared to be challenged concerning your own life in response to the presentation of the Word.

Come prepared to repent of the shortcomings in your own life

Come prepared on when possible to share with others what God is doing

Beginning tomorrow be prepared to start the second week of our



Week Two

The Opposition Grows

Read Nehemiah 4:1- (Monday)

The results of the work increased and so did the opposition. As we look at the opposition it is important to distinguish between opposition and inquiry. When God's people are expressing their concerns, questions and disagreement, it is not opposition. The outcome of this kind of discussion is constructive. This type of opposition is not an attack. The opposition in Nehemiah is characterized by falsehood, rumors, mockery, sabotage, and lies. When these characteristics are evident, what is present is the attack of the enemy. This type of opposition is meant to be destructive. The first attack in Nehemiah is mockery. Those who stood in opposition to the building of the wall began to hurl insults at the people of God. It is interesting to note how these verbal attacks were handled. Nehemiah does not attack back, he does not attempt to answer their insults, he does not defend himself. Rather, he brings his case before the Lord and asks Him to bring about justice. Nehemiah knew he was being obedient. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, Nehemiah is not concerned about the evaluation of men. What concerns him is the evaluation of God. Nehemiah and the people knew that what they were doing was pleasing to the Lord, they knew that they were doing His will, the attacks were therefore insignificant.

Contemplation

When others attack what I am doing, do I attempt to defend myself or do I allow the Lord to bring about justice? When I lash out in response to the criticism of others, is it because I am uncertain about the correctness of my actions? Is God's evaluation what concerns me most? When I question another's work, do I demonstrate the characteristics of an attack and therefore reveal my real motive?

Prayer

Father; help me to be strong when others revile my obedience. Help me to respond in a way that allows You to be my defender. Help me to make Your opinion all that matters.

From Mockery to Threats of Harm

Read Nehemiah 4:7-14 (Tuesday)

The enemy is no longer simply mocking, they are now threatening harm. It is interesting to note that Nehemiah responds with prudence. He took the actions that were available to him. They used their weapons and stood guard at the most vulnerable positions. As a result the enemy withdrew. As Nehemiah prepares his defense, he clearly understands that the battle is still the Lords. He tells the people to do their part. In verse fourteen, he reminds them to fight, to do that which they are able to do. They are not to cower in fear in the face of the enemy. However, they must always remember that the fight and therefore, the glory is the Lords.

Within our society we are in a cultural war. There are those who have threatened to destroy what is right. It is our responsibility to take up the weapons that God has provided. In this age, it is still a sword, the Word of God. The truths, principles and standards that are found within it pages are to be used by believers to battle the lies and darkness of this age. Like the Jewish people, we must be willing to fight for our sons, our daughters, our wives, and our homes. We must fight in a way that does honor to the Lord, in ways that do not violate His character. Ultimately we must fight knowing that the victory is His. We will be mocked, we will at times be scorned. But it is essential that we be willing to confront the evil that surrounds us. In the midst of the battle remember the Lord who is great and awesome. In His time and in His way, He will prevail.

Contemplation

Where have I willingly taken a stand for God and His people? Where have I failed to be bold in confronting the threats of the evil one? Do I truly believe in the power and absolute truth of God's Word?

Prayer

Father; in response to the threats of the enemy, make me bold to faithfully make a stand for You and Your people. Let me remember always Your power, Your strength, and that the battle is Yours.

All For One And One For All

Read Nehemiah 4:15-21 (Wednesday)

As the enemy continued to threaten, the people of the community chose to stand with one another. If the enemy attacked those on the east wall, an alarm was sounded and those on the other sections dropped what they were doing and came to assist. Three attitudes could have brought about a successful attack by the enemy. The first was an attitude of self-sufficiency. Each section of the wall knew that they could not stand alone, they were willing to let others come and stand with them. The second, was an attitude of indifference. They cared about the needs of one another, and every section of wall was considered equally important. The third was an attitude of business. As important as the task was, the welfare of the people was more important. They didn't allow absorption in their individual activity to prevent them from assisting one another. I am afraid that these deadly attitudes often exist among God's people. Instead, we must allow others to come along side and help us carry the load. We must demonstrate a genuine concern for all who are part of the fellowship. Finally, we must put people and relationships before programs or our busy schedules. The community in Jerusalem was willing to sacrifice their pride and individual concerns in order to stand with one another. The result is, the work continued. By being a community, God's purpose was accomplished.



Contemplation



Where am I unwilling to allow others to know of my struggles and ask them to come along side? Am I willing to sacrifice to help others in the midst of their difficulty? Do I value all who are a part of this body? Where do I allow the business of my own schedule to keep me from obeying God and standing with another in the midst of their need?

Prayer

Father; allow me to humble myself before others. Help me to ask others to stand with me. Help me to value all of Your children. Help me to consider other before myself.

When Passion Saves

Read Nehemiah 6:1-4 (Thursday)

It appears that Nehemiah's enemies are coming to make peace. They request Nehemiah to meet and talk. We learn from the passage, they planned to harm him. There is no indication this was known by Nehemiah when the request to talk first came. What is certain, is Nehemiah was saved from their trap by his passion. Nehemiah had a passion for God's people and God's work. They were the priority in his life. Nothing would distract him from doing what God had called him to do. The possibility of peace with an enemy was a good thing. However, Nehemiah possessed the wisdom to know the difference between that which was good and that which was best. He understood that the central goal in his life was to do the will of God. By keeping his focus upon that which God had called him to do, he did what was best and avoided the snares thrown up by his enemy. It is essential that as God's people we know where God has invited us to join in His work. Some of the invitations are general and found in His word. They are the tasks given to all believers. If I am married, God would have me be the best spouse I can be. If I have children, God would call me to be the best parent I can be. If I am a part of a fellowship, God would call me to serve others in the best way possible. Often, the Father clearly invites us to be a part of a specific area of ministry. It is essential to do the best I can in that task. Too often we serve God with mediocrity instead of with dedication and passion. With a focus on God's will and a passion for the things of God, we will chose what is best and will not be drawn away by the enemy.

Contemplation

Am I aware of the work in which God has invited me to be a part? Do I know God's Word well enough to know His general will? Do I have an intimacy with God in which I can sense His specific invitation? Do I have a passion for the things of God or do I serve Him in mediocrity.?

Prayer

Father; show me where I serve you with less than the best of my time, my resources, and my effort. Give me a passion for You, Your work, and Your people.

Rumors, Lies, And Gossip

Read Nehemiah 6:5-9 (Friday)

There is no defense against it. The tale is told. It spreads from one person to another. No one is willing to check it out. The facts are not true or are warped in such away as to present falsehood. It may be the most vicious attack of the enemy. It is the lie, the false rumor, the tidbit of gossip. If the king believed Nehemiah was planing a rebellion he would be returned to Susa and executed. Nehemiah's response to this potentially lethal situation was two fold. First, he simply denied the accusations. Secondly, and more importantly, Nehemiah lived his life in such a way that the rumor would not be believed. Those around him knew his reputation; the king knew the quality of his work and his character. No defense was necessary, just a clear, simple denial. This principle of a clear conscience is found in 1 Peter 3:16. Peter wants believers to "keep a good conscience so that in the things in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame". When one is the victim of rumors or gossip, human nature often attempts an overwhelming defense. Some out of hidden shame choose to viciously attack back. Either one results in looking even more guilty. At times, even with a good reputation and an outstanding character, people suffer from the false accusations. Scripture calls this "sharing in the suffering of Christ". God will reward those who persevere in such hardship. Nehemiah rested in his character and his God to deliver him. His conscience was clear and he understood that the battle was the Lord's. He maintained faith in God's promises that the truth will become evident, for some that time is now for others it will be when the Lord returns. Justice will reign.

Contemplation

What could people easily believe about me as a result of my character and life style? Is my conscience clear? What is necessary to clear my conscience? How do I respond when I am the victim of slander or gossip?

Prayer

Father; help me to live my life in such a way that others will not believe any falsehood. When I am attacked let met rest in You. Help me to wait for Your deliverance.

Consistent To The End

Read Nehemiah 6:10-19 (Saturday)

It was so subtle. Threats were made directly against Nehemiah. “The enemy is coming to kill you.” The advice was so innocent in appearance. “Come and take refuge in the temple.” Nehemiah saw through the feigned benevolence. He understood that if he cowered in the face of this threat and took refuge in the temple he would violate his commitment to allow God to be his defender. To follow the advice would discredit him in the eyes of the people. Nehemiah saw through the trap because he was committed to integrity. Integrity was of greater value than his own safety. He was committed to a consistency between the words he spoke and the life he lived. He talked the talk and walked the walk. He spoke of dependence upon God. He spoke of God’s strong arm of deliverance. He spoke of standing against the attacks of the enemy. They were not simply words, his actions demonstrated that they were the convictions of his heart. Choices made in difficult situations are always in line with the true beliefs of the heart. When Nehemiah spoke he spoke his heart. He did not say what others wanted to hear. He did not speak for the sake of appearance. He spoke what he truly believed. This is evident in his consistency even in the face of danger. He was a man of integrity. The final attack was defeated. The wall was completed. The enemy was cowering. But, the celebration did not take place. The work is not done. It was not the wall alone that needed to be rebuilt, the people also needed to be built up. In the next section we will see how Nehemiah is an instrument of God bringing revival to His people.

Contemplation

What beliefs do my actions reveal? Are my actions consistent with my words? Where do I demonstrate integrity? Where do I fail to demonstrate integrity? What do the hard times reveal about my true convictions?

Prayer

Father; allow me to look deeply into my heart. Help me to see where my words, my actions, and my beliefs are inconsistent with each other and with Your Word. Help me to bring my conviction into conformity with Your truth.

A Wayside Rest In The Midst Of The Journey

Sunday

It is again time to take stock in the ways God has used His word and our prayers during the last week. On this Sunday I would ask you to be prepared to do three things.

Spend time this morning preparing your heart to worship God in response to His work in your life during the previous week.

Come prepared to be challenged concerning your own life in response to the presentation of the Word.

Come prepared where appropriate, to share with others what God is doing.

Tomorrow start the third week of our Spiritual Journey.



Week Three

You Thought The Previous Work Was Difficult?

Read Nehemiah 8:1-8 (Monday)

The temple was built, the wall was completed, but Jerusalem was a mess. No one was willing to live there. Those who moved into the city had to abandon their homes and start again. To live in Jerusalem required sacrifice. The suburbs were much more comfortable. An attitude of neglect for the things of God was developing. The people needed a revival. The rebuilding of the wall required stones, lumber, and effort. The rebuilding of God's people required the Word, obedience, repentance, and commitment. The heart of God's people needed to be changed; a work that only God can do. It is God's Word, by means of the work of God's Spirit that changes the heart. The Word is a powerful weapon. It is able to cut to the very core of our being and expose the truth. The Word is a mirror in which we can see ourselves honestly. The Word is powerful. the possibility of being changed by the Word requires exposure to the Word. The people of Judah were assembled together. The Word was read. The passages were explained. God's people were moved. The Word of God was so precious to these people that as the first words were spoken, the people spontaneously stood in order to show their respect. Very few copies of the Scriptures existed. The times of hearing God's Word were few and precious. Today, in a day of the printing presses God's Word has become common place. We fail to understand its power, we fail to comprehend its value. We fail to make the time to read and hear it. There is much in our lives that are esteemed of greater value then time in God's Word.

Contemplation

What is my attitude towards God's Word? Do I make reading and hearing it an absolute necessity in my life? Is my lack of passion concerning the things of God the result of a lack of time in His Word.

Prayer

Father; renew in me a longing for Your Word. Forgive me for my complacency. May I honestly look at my heart, as You reveal it content through the cleansing power of Your Word.

Be Certain To Count The Cost

Read Nehemiah 8:9-18 (Tuesday)

God's Word and the presentation of God's Word often have a deep impact upon the hearts of people. When such reactions takes place it is easy to be swayed into a decision which is the result of the emotionalism of the moment and not the result of careful consideration. Many Christian leaders emphasize this type of response in their ministries. However, such commitments lack depth and often are quickly abandoned. They appear more like the tactics present in a high-pressure sale than a work of the Holy Spirit. There should always be suspicion when appeals are made to the heart only and no time is given for evaluation. When the Lord called for disciples in Luke 14 there was no frenzy. He asked them to count the cost, to think deliberately about the commitment made. They were not moved by guilt, excitement, or pressure but by careful consideration. The people of Judah were deeply moved by the presentation of the Word of God, they were moved to weeping and mourning. Ezra and Nehemiah could have taken advantage of the overwhelming impact of the moment and solicited major commitments from the people. In their excitement, their promises would have been grandiose but they would not be real. Rather than use manipulation to move their people, they sent them away in rejoicing. They waited another twenty-one days to reconvene. Ample time was allotted for the people to contemplate, pray, and reflect upon their response to the challenge of God's Word. They relied upon the convicting work of the Spirit rather than the convincing words of men. It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of the moment. However, God's call always comes with a request to count the cost. It is necessary to make certain that a decision is not in response to the emotions of a service or a sermon but in response to the clear leading of the Spirit and out of a willingness to count the cost.

Contemplation

What commitments do I sense God is calling forth from me? What is the cost?

Prayer

Father; help me to hear Your call. After counting the cost, give to me the wisdom to accept Your invitation to join Your work.

Immediate Obedience

Read Nehemiah 8:13-18 (Wednesday)

Though the call to sacrificial commitment would be delayed to allow the people to count the cost, the call to obedience was immediate. As they read the law, it was apparent that the time of the Feast of Booths was upon them. Immediately, they went out and gathered the branches to construct the temporary shelters in which they would spend the week. They were exuberant in their obedience. They all obeyed. They did exactly what was written. Their obedience exceeded any previous celebration in the history of the nation. Most of all, in response to their obedience there was great joy. The world teaches that joy is found in the absence of limits. God's Word makes it clear that joy is found by living within the limits established by our Maker. One of the most important foundations of godliness is the commitment demonstrated in these verses. It is a commitment to follow the clear commands and principles revealed in God's Word. Sacrificial commitments mean nothing unless it is founded upon a heart committed to obedience. "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22)." This spiritual journey and any commitments made will mean nothing apart from a willingness to obey God. If like the people of Judah, God has revealed an area of disobedience, now is the time to make it right. Apart from obedience, there is no joy, there is no enjoyment of intimacy with God, there is no clear leading from His Spirit except the leading towards repentance and obedience. If God is stirring your heart about a certain sin or area of disobedience don't wait; deal with it immediately. Come before Him in repentance. Speak to a fellow believer and ask them to keep you accountable. Commit yourself to obey whatever He might call you to do. Like the people of Judah the result will be a very great joy.

Contemplation

Is there an area of disobedience or sin about which God is calling me to deal with? Am I willing to deal with it this moment?

Prayer

Father; forgive me for my unwillingness.

What A Celebration That Must Have Been

Read Nehemiah 9:1-6 (Thursday)

Twenty-one days after the initial impact of God's Word upon the people they gather together for a third time. They have had time to hear God's Word during the Feast of Booths. They have had time to examine their lives. They had time to examine their willingness to be a part of God's work. Now they come together for a twelve-hour service; six hours of preaching and six hours of confession and worship. (I wonder how many roasts burned that day.) They came prepared to do business with God. They prepared their hearts through prayer and fasting. They acted in obedience by their acts of separation. They came willing to mourn, demonstrated by the wearing of sackcloth. They came expecting God to do a work in their hearts and in their midst. God did not disappoint.

The service consisted of three parts. First, they examined the Word of God and allowed it to do its work in their midst. (Oh, the wonder of a six hour sermon) Secondly, they humbled themselves before the Lord. They willingly examined the failures of their hearts and their community and in brokenness made their confession to God. Finally, they worshipped God with shouts of joy and praise. They sang the psalm which follows, a psalm of praise and confession to the Lord. Their worship extends from the very beginning of time as they praise God for His creation and the giving of life. It continues through the life of the patriarchs, through the time of the Exodus, into the time of the kings and up to the very present. It is a time to remember the everlasting faithfulness and unending loving kindness of God.

Contemplation

How do I prepare for the time when I come together with God's people to worship? How do I react at the thought of 12 hours of teaching, prayer, and worship? What does this reflect about me?

Prayer

Father, forgive me for my failure to come prepared and expectant when I come to worship. Grant me a heart that thrills in the gathering of Your people for worship.

“You” And “They”

Read Nehemiah 9:7-31 (Friday)

Go back again to the passage you just read. Circle in your Bible these two words, “you” and “they”. If possible do so in different colored ink. The contrast is startling. The “you” passages speak of the acts of God. “They” speak of His sovereign choice, His hand of deliverance, His self-revelation, His long-suffering compassion, His bountiful gifts, and His loving discipline. The grace of God to His people is abundantly clear. So too is the rebellious nature of his people. The “they” passages reveal the response of God’s people to His overwhelming kindness. Each time He poured out His grace, they spurned it with rebellion, idolatry, and disobedience. God would not tolerate such responses from His children. Like any good father He allowed the consequences of disobedience to fall upon them. Hebrews 12 reminds us that God is still a loving father who disciplines His children. He calls us to obey and to serve Him. We forget that we are not only saved from sin, we are also saved unto a life of obedience and service to God. Paul reminds us that those who have died with Christ are also to live as he lived. Too many believers complacently sit on their blessed assurance unwilling to accept their call to godliness and unwilling to accept responsibility for the tasks to which God has assigned them. When a child acts rebelliously and rejects the responsibilities assigned to him, a loving father must respond; first, with words of encouragement, next with forceful exhortations; finally, love requires an act of discipline. When God’s people respond in similar ways, God lovingly reacts in a similar way. He encourages and warns us in His Word. If we fail to heed, His love requires him to respond with acts of discipline.

Contemplation

Where is God encouraging you to be obedient? Where is God using His Word to warn you concerning your disobedience or your unwillingness to accept the responsibilities assigned by Him? Where is God bringing about His discipline in your life?

Prayer

Father, give me ears that heed Your words. Mold my spirit that I might respond willingly to all You have called me to do.

Poverty In The Midst Of Abundance

Read Nehemiah 9:32-37 (Saturday)

They lived in a spacious and fertile land. The grace of God was poured out upon them. Their response was an unwillingness to serve God and an unwillingness to abandon their wicked ways. God required His people to serve Him and in response to their faithfulness He would allow them to enjoy the bounty of the land. The people reject God. The choice not to serve God did not free the people from servitude. Instead they simply exchanged one form of servitude for another. They came under the dominance of the Gentile kings and lived as slaves in the midst of a foreign land. The Gentile lords required the people to give to them all the wealth of the land. Today we live in a land of abundance. We have more wealth, more leisure, more comfort than any other society in all of history. Like the people of Judah we are unwilling to serve the Lord believing that our rebellion will lead to freedom. Instead we have traded the benevolent kindness of a loving Lord for the destructive plundering of our new masters. Those who will not serve God end up serving such things as prosperity, fame, materialism, sensuality, and power. Like the Gentile kings these task masters simply rob us of our abundance and leave us living in poverty. It becomes evident that the more you have the less you enjoy. Serving God is completely different. Those who obey Him live in abundance. Some will enjoy temporal abundance but all will enjoy eternal abundance. A life lived to serve earthly lords ends in personal bankruptcy. But Jesus said that He came to give abundant life. None of us have a choice as to whether we will be a servant. The only choice is who we will serve.

Contemplation

What have I committed my life to serve? If I look at my checkbook or my day timer what does it indicate about the identity of my lord? Do I find myself with more of what this earth provides and less of the real contentment and peace for which I long?

Prayer

Father, help me to be honest about what master I serve. I know I will love one and hate the other. Show me where I have failed to make You Lord of my life.

A Wayside Rest In The Midst Of The Journey

Sunday,

It is again time to take stock in the ways God has used His Word and our prayers during the last week. On this Sunday I would ask you to be prepared to do four things.

Spend time this morning preparing you heart to worship God in response to His work in your life during the previous week.

Come prepared both Sunday morning and Evening to be challenged concerning your own life in response to the presentation of the Word.

Come prepared to hear God's invitation to commit to His work.

Come prepared on Sunday evening to share with others what God is doing.



Week Four A Time To Commit

Read Nehemiah 9:38, 10:28-29 (Monday)

The wall was built but few were willing to make the sacrifice necessary to live in Jerusalem and carry on the work of the temple. The rebuilding of the wall took 52 days. The rebuilding of God's people took 22. After the reading of the Word, the commitment to obedience, the confession and worship, then the time for commitment came. God prepared their hearts. They had time to count the cost and seek the Lord's guidance. Now the people were called upon to commit to a binding agreement to make the sacrifices necessary to populate Jerusalem and to maintain the temple. Lethargy disappeared. Complacency vanished. Serious commitment was made. They were even willing to take an oath and call down cursing upon themselves if they failed to fulfill their promises. Though I do not advocate the use of a covenant ceremony, nor do I recommend the calling down of curses in response to disobedience to the covenant., I do recommend the serious attitude shown in the OT. As they reviewed God's work and God's character their apathy was broken and they responded willingly to the responsibilities He placed upon them. As they remembered the abundance promised to those who are faithful they were willing to pay the cost. What was true then is still true today. His promise of abundance is still valid. His desire for His people to willingly and gladly commit to carry out His work still exists. As I read this passage I am struck by its inclusiveness. It is not just the leaders, it is not just the priest or clergy, it is not just the adults but all were willing to commit themselves to serving God. The statistic remains consistent in nearly every church. 80% of the people do 20% of the work. This is not a failure by God to extend an invitation to join the work. It is a failure of God's people to make the adjustments and commitments necessary to join Him.

Contemplation

What is the commitment God is calling me to make? How serious will my commitment be.

Prayer

Father, break my complacency and lethargy. Renew in me a willing heart seriously committed to obedience and service.

A Commitment To Obedience

Read Nehemiah 10:30-31 (Tuesday)

In this chapter there are two areas of commitment. The first is a commitment to obedience. The second is a commitment to support God's work. Just as people have sins that so easily beset them, so do communities. For the people of Israel, there were three sins that continually drew them away from God. The first was idolatry. The second was marrying unbelievers thus leading to the corruption of the people. The third was neglecting the Sabbath both the weekly Sabbath and the seventh year rest of the land. Through the Babylonian captivity, God disciplined His people for their idolatry. After their return, idolatry was not a serious temptation. The other two sins were a constant struggle. As the people took seriously their commitment to God they examined their lives to identify the sins of the community. The people committed themselves to avoiding these two areas of disobedience. They promise they will not intermarry and they will not break the Sabbath. As I thought about the sin struggles of the people of Judah, I wondered, what are the sins of our culture and our time? I thought of greed, materialism and envy. I thought of sensuality and immorality. I thought of selfishness, self-love, and self-centeredness. I wonder if these are the besetting sins of this time. I thought about how easily God's people are pulled towards them. I thought about how easily I am pulled towards them. As I take a look at my own life and the characteristic of my community, I think it is essential that there be a commitment, individually and corporately, to avoid the struggles of our day. A commitment to avoid the gross levels of consumption, which are never satisfied but always covets the biggest and best. A commitment to be willing to do without. It must involve a commitment to live pure in this immoral world. It involves a commitment to think of others before ourselves.

Contemplation

God what are the sins of my time? What commitments would You have me make to avoid being pulled into them? What commitments would You have my faith community make?

Prayer

Father, give me eyes to see and a heart that is willing.

I Assume The Responsibility

Read Nehemiah 10:32-39 (Wednesday)

One of the children and I had a long discussion the other day about taking responsibility for their actions. It is the tendency of children to either deny responsibility or to shift the responsibility to some one else. The second response usually sounds something like this, "That's not my job". There is a reason why the Bible calls God's people the children of Israel. Often they acted like children. One of those areas involves dealing with the responsibility of supporting the work of the house of God. Through tithes and offerings the work of the temple was supported. When God's people failed to provided the resources, God's work suffered. Sometimes the support of God's house came in the form of service. After the people returned to the land, the temple remained in ruins because of an unwillingness to take responsibility to make certain that the work was done. The people in Nehemiah's day made a commitment to support the work of the house of God. In verse 32 you find the phrase "we assume the responsibility" and again in verse 35. In both cases it involves a willingness to fulfill their responsibility to the house of God. Finally in verse 32, the people declare that they will not neglect the house of God. Everyone was willing to do their share of the work.

Everyone who is a part of a faith community was placed there by the Father. Each one is given an area of responsibility. God asks each one to assume the responsibility for... What is the area that God is asking you to assume the responsibility for. Let us all commit like the people of Judah to not neglect the spiritual community of which we are a part. Let each of us commit to seeking and doing the job which God has given to us.

Contemplation

What is the task that God would have me do? Am I willing to assume the responsibility for it? How have I failed to fulfill my responsibility?

Prayer

Father; show me where I have neglected Your house. I long to join Your work in the area in which You would have me work.

Its Rejoicing Time

Read Nehemiah 12:40-47 (Thursday)

Now it is time to celebrate. The wall is complete. The people are renewed. The work of God is maintained. It is time to give thanks to God for all that He has accomplished. Earlier in the book, we saw worship that was characterized by solemnity and confession. There are also times when worship involves happiness and rejoicing. God enjoys when His people rejoice in His work and in His goodness.

Along with the worship came continued service. The people were faithful to the commitments they made. The storehouses were full; those who performed service in the temple were many. God blessed His people. The community was functioning according to God's design.

The journey is completed. The people were exposed to the revealing Word of God. They humbled themselves before God in repentance. They committed themselves to obedience. They accepted the responsibility given to them by God. The result was a well functioning community able to accomplish God's will. That is the hope for any community of faith.

This journey was meant to help restore our passion for the things of God and the people of God. By tracing the process evident in Nehemiah it is hoped that God will again renew His people and send a revival in our midst.

Contemplation

For what can I rejoice before the Lord? What are the way I will show God my thanksgiving and praise?

Prayer

Father; let me rejoice in Your goodness. Let me continue to serve You faithfully.



Why Couldn't It Stop At Chapter Twelve?

Read Nehemiah 13:6-12, 15-22, 23-27 (Friday)

Nehemiah was called back to Susa. About a year later, he returned. Remember the sins that were so difficult for the nation? Within that year the people were drawn away from their commitment and were again involved in exactly the same patterns of disobedience. Sin works in our lives like gravity on an airplane. As long as the plane is moving forward it is able to overcome the power of gravity due to the lift created by its wings. If it stops moving forward gravity takes over and the plane begins to drop. When a believer fails to maintain his movement toward the Father the pull of sin begins its relentless work. Spiritual momentum is sustained by staying in the Word and fellowshiping with others who hold us accountable. We maintain momentum by examining our hearts for disobedience and increasing our intimacy with God through prayer. We maintain our momentum by faithfully fulfilling the tasks God has given. When that momentum is lost, sin quickly pulls us down. Nehemiah returned and immediately confronted the sin. It is not kindness to ignore the destructive behavior of others. Nehemiah demonstrated his love for God earlier in this book through his acts of service and leadership. Here, Nehemiah demonstrates his love for God's people by confronting them with their sins. He confronted on the basis of the standards of God's law. Today, his actions might be called intolerant or judgmental. He understood the absolutes of God's Word and held God's people to that standard. He continues to show that he is a man of integrity. Loving God's people does not only involve serving them comfort and encouragement; at times it involves confrontation, when the clear teachings of God's Word is violated.

Contemplation

Am I involved in those spiritual disciplines that God uses in my life to maintain my spiritual momentum? Am I moving forward or is sin pulling me down? Am I willing to lovingly confront another who is violating the clear standards of God?

Prayer

Father; keep me ever moving towards you. Keep me faithful in my commitments. Provide the kind of love that is willing to confront.

Put It In Writing

Read Again Nehemiah 9:38 (Saturday)

This is your opportunity to follow the example of the people of Jerusalem. They responded to the work of God by putting their commitments in writing, proclaiming their commitments before others and then affixing their seal. There is a power in the writing of a commitment. A written statement can be reviewed. Those written words function as a reminder of the content of the commitment. It is an unchanging reminder of the specifics. The writing in Nehemiah also involved the witnessing of others. The promises that were contained in the writing were made in the presence of those who could hold them accountable to their commitments.

Now is the time for you to think through the impact of this spiritual journey. What are the commitments that God has led you to make? Take time to write them out. Take time to show them to others and ask them to keep you accountable.

God, I commit, through Your strength to:

My signature

The signature of one to hold me accountable

Prayer

Father; keep me faithful to these promises I have made. Remind me of them when I fail. Help me be honest with those who will hold me accountable. Lift me up when I fall.

Reminders, Thought and Requests

Reminders, Thought and Requests

