

Foretold

The Success of Servant Leaders
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November 26, 2006



The Success of Servant Leaders Nehemiah 1

I want to invite you to open with me to the book of Nehemiah. You may need to use your Table of Contents to find that one, but let me encourage you to open to Nehemiah in the Old Testament. Nehemiah 1. While you are turning there, let me encourage you to pull out those notes from your Celebration Guide as well.

Anybody thankful this morning that He paid our debt, and He raised our lives up from the dead? He is gracious. We're coming to the third in a three part series leading up to Christmas just looking at some Old Testament texts that help us to understand Christ, and who Christ is, and what Christ has done. All of Scripture points to Christ. He's the center. The passage we are going to look at this morning doesn't directly point us to Christ, much like Genesis 3 or Ruth have done the last couple of weeks, but I want us to see how everything in Scripture culminates, climaxes in the person of Christ.

We are coming to a pretty significant morning this morning in our faith family, because this morning, we are going to affirm eight men who will serve as elders alongside me for the next two years, some of them for the next four years. This is a pretty big day in our faith family, and this passage, as I was praying about what to study this morning, what we would look at this morning, this is the one that rose to the top as I thought about Christ and who Christ is, as I thought about what we do today to raise up new leaders in the church, and how that culminates in the person of Christ.

I want us to look at Nehemiah 1. Now, before we begin to study it, we've got to understand the background of this book. And if you were at Secret Church, you know a little bit about the history behind the book of Nehemiah, but I want to help us out and show you a map up here on the screen. We are going to step into Old Testament class for a second if you don't mind. And I want to give you a picture of the background that leads up to the book of Nehemiah.

What you've got up here -- in the history of the people of Israel, they had been divided into two groups: The Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. So, you had the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom was called Israel. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah. The capital of Judah was Jerusalem.

Now, in the middle of the city of Jerusalem, the people of God had built, under the direction of God, a temple. You've got the temple in the middle of Jerusalem. Now the temple was not just a church building, not just your average place to go and worship. This was the place where the glory of God dwelled among His people. His name dwelled there. This is where you would come to worship. It was the place of worship. So, that was in the middle of the city. Then, around the city, you had walls that were erected. So, you've got the walls around the city of Jerusalem.

What happened from about 597 to 586 B.C is the Babylonians decided that they weren't

very happy with the people of God and Judah, and so in 586 B.C., the Babylonians get together, and they come over, and, basically, they take out the temple. So, they travel from Babylon. They come over there, and once they get there, they completely destroy the temple and all the walls.

And at this point, it began in the Old Testament what was known as the exile. And the people of God were taken from Jerusalem, and they were scattered out throughout the Babylonian Empire. They were taken, and basically, put in different places. If you can imagine the pain of being separated from each other, from your family, from your friends, from your church, and taken to a land that you don't know, a foreign land, and split up, spread out -- it was a very difficult time amongst the people of God.

Well, later on, about 539 B.C., the Babylonians got their due, and the Persians took over the Babylonian Empire. Now, when the Persians took over the Babylonian Empire, what happened was, the Persian king said, "Anybody who wants to (and not everybody did), but from among the people of Israel, they can go back and travel back to Jerusalem if they want to." And so, the Persians let them go, and many of the Israelites traveled back over to Jerusalem. When they got there, what do you think the first thing they did was? They rebuilt the temple. In 516 B.C., the book of Ezra tells us about how they built the temple.

Now, what's the problem? You've got the temple back, but what do you not have? You've got no walls around the city. As a result, the city is open to attack from all different sides. It's at this point that we come to 444 B.C., and we find this guy named Nehemiah in a place called Susa. Basically today, it's southwestern Iran. And Nehemiah hears about what's going on in Jerusalem, and that's where we pick up in Nehemiah 1. Follow along with me there.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. [So he was asking how things are over there.]

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

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: [This is an incredible prayer in the Old Testament.]

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

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have

chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed [Recognize that word from last week?] by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king. (Nehemiah 1:1-11)

So, here's the situation: Nehemiah finds himself in this place called Susa. He is living in the Persian palace as cupbearer to the king, which sounds kind of like a butler for the king, but it's a pretty distinguished role that he's playing here. The cupbearer was a confidant of the king. The cupbearer had the privilege of eating everything the king ate and drinking everything the king would drink. Of course, he did it first, so that if there were something wrong with the food or drink, the king would think, "You know, I'm not very hungry for that particular meal right now." And so, that was Nehemiah's job. And it was a great job. Living in the Persian palace, he's living out the Persian dream here. Eating the king's food, drinking the king's drink. Everything is going well for Nehemiah.

What I want us to see is how his life turned upside down here in Nehemiah 1. We are looking today at the success of servant leaders. I've titled that based on the end of that prayer, "Give your servants success today." I want you to know from the very beginning, Nehemiah was a very ordinary guy who God used in an extraordinary way.

In the Old Testament...

In just a few minutes, we are going to spend some time praying over new elders and servant leaders in the church. But I pray, my prayer all week looking at this text and this morning as I prepared to preach, is that God would raise up servant leaders across this room, men and women, who have the same heart that Nehemiah does. I want you to see three characteristics of a servant leader that God raised up here in the Old Testament in this instance, as well as many other times.

Unselfish Concern.

First of all, one characteristic that marked him was unselfish concern; unselfish concern. The first time we see Nehemiah, he asks about the people of Jerusalem. He hears they are in great trouble and disgrace, which we will get to in a second, but immediately, he sits down and what does he do? He starts weeping. So, the first time we get a glimpse of Nehemiah the guy is weeping.

Now does this mean he's a softy? He just cries at anything? Is that the picture of Nehemiah here? Well, it's really not. By the time we get to the end of this book, Nehemiah 13, we see Nehemiah getting so angry at some of the leaders at one point, that he goes up to them, he yells in their faces, and then he literally pulls the hair out of their heads. This dude is intense. You don't want to mess with Nehemiah. And you're glad Nehemiah is not an elder at The Church at Brook Hills for these reasons. This guy is very intense. But the first time we see him, he sits down, and he weeps and he mourns and he fasts and he prays. This is a guy of deep concern.

I want you to think about why he was concerned. I think it was two levels. Number one: He

had an unselfish concern for the good of God's people. He heard they were in great trouble. It literally means in the Old Testament -- "misery". They were going through a very difficult time.

Now, don't miss the context. Here's Nehemiah living out the Persian dream, in the Persian palace. Everything is going well for him. But Nehemiah, from the first glimpse we see of him, is so concerned about the needs of people that are far off, that he's hardly concerned about his own needs. He's gripped with the need of God's people in Jerusalem. There's no room for individualism in the book of Nehemiah. He is concerned about the community of faith, so concerned about their needs, that he almost forgets about his own. Do we reverse that sometimes? Are we so concerned about our own needs that we sometimes forget about everybody else? This is a deep concern for the community of faith, for the good of God's people.

Jeremiah 15:5 talked about what Jeremiah had prophesied and said—and basically, Jeremiah asked, "Who is going to mourn for you, Jerusalem? Who is going to stand up and ask about you?" And Nehemiah has given us the picture of somebody who has deep pity on the people of God there.

But that's not where it stops. Now, I want you to follow me here because if we miss this, we miss the whole point of the book of Nehemiah. As soon as Nehemiah heard that the walls were down, he sits down and weeps. Why was it such a bad thing that those walls were down around Jerusalem? Think about it with me. Why was it such a bad thing? Because they were open to attack from all sides? Well, certainly that was not good. Because they weren't protected? Yeah, that's part of it. Was it because they were open to intermingling with the peoples around them, the polytheistic pagan nations around them, that they would lose their purity and morality? That was part of it too. But I think all of those reasons combined together don't sum up the main reason why Nehemiah was weeping in Nehemiah 1. I don't think the primary reason Nehemiah was weeping was because they were not protected or they were open to intermingling with these other pagan nations.

I want you to think about this. Imagine you're one of those nations around Jerusalem, and you look inside that city, and you see a temple that is built to worship, what they call, the "one true God", Yahweh God -- this temple -- all of these polytheistic nations that worship all kinds of different gods. Israel stands alone as they are worshipping one God, and the temple is the symbol of their worship. When you're those nations outside, and you look inside and you see that temple, and then you see the walls around the city broken down. What do you think of that people's God? That God is weak. "He doesn't take care of His people. Look how He's left his people."

I think the thing that gripped Nehemiah's heart the deepest was the fact that, when he realized the walls were down, he knew the nations around Jerusalem were not giving honor and glory to that God. and he rose up and said, "I'm going to do something about it."

He had an unselfish concern, yes, for the good of God's people, but on a much deeper level, for the glory of God's name. He was deeply concerned. He had a zeal to make the honor and glory of His God known. So two areas of concern: For the good of God's people, and second, for the glory of God's name. Mark this down: God will entrust great tasks to leaders whom He can trust with His glory. God, help your pastor to be a leader who He can trust with His glory. God, raise up leaders at The Church at Brook Hills who God can trust with His glory.

Uncompromising Devotion

Unselfish concern is the first picture we've got of Nehemiah. Second, he's a man of uncompromising devotion; uncompromising devotion. Now, I want us to see how this played out. He sat down and he wept. And then it says in verse 4: "*For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*" Now that "for some days" doesn't really tell us a lot; it just kind of gives us a vague picture. But there are other clues in Scripture that tell us exactly how long he was doing this.

Look at the very beginning. Nehemiah 1:1. All of this started in the month of what? In the month of Kislev. Basically, that's around November/December. Basically, around this time of the year when this happened. You might put a little note next to Kislev—circle it and put "November/December" somewhere in there. So, you've got that in Kislev.

Now, what happens is he begins to pray. For some days, he mourns and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then you get to Nehemiah 2, and things start to happen. We will read it in just a second, but look at the very first verse. "*In the month of Nisan...*" Okay, not the car dealership, but the month of Nisan. Now, you can put a little note to the side there that says "March or April". And so, basically, Nehemiah starts to pray—mourn and fast and pray—around November/December.

And then, when you come to March or April, things really start to happen. In between there, all we've got is "*for some days he mourned and fasted and prayed.*" What you've got is the picture of a man who, when he heard about the need, he didn't immediately go start planning; he didn't do his strategic thinking. He didn't get everybody together and decide what the plan is—how we can help out God's people. What he did is he fell on his face, and he prayed. For four months, all he did was pray and he mourned and he fasted during that time. Maybe not all four months, but he fasted and mourned and prayed unceasingly, over and over again, for God to move before he even acted in Nehemiah 2—four months later.

Now, I want you to see what he is devoted to. First of all, Nehemiah was devoted to seeking God's face. He was devoted to seeking God's face. It says, "*Then I said,*" and we've got this prayer. This is the first of twelve different times in the book of Nehemiah that we see him praying. I wish we had time this morning to go through and look at all of those instances, but over and over and over again, in a book of thirteen chapters—twelve times—in almost every single chapter, we see Nehemiah praying. He is devoted to seeking God's face.

Now, here's the question. This kind of praying is far too uncommon in the church today. I don't know how many of us, average people like Nehemiah, are fasting for God to move in a mighty way in His church and praying unceasingly day after day, month after month. Why was Nehemiah's prayer life so strong? And here's the answer: I think this is what separated Nehemiah from most of us today. His prayer life was so strong because his vision of God was so strong. Because here's the deal -- and I want you to see this unfold. When our vision for God is strong, our ambition for God in prayer will be strong. However, when our vision of God is weak, then our ambition for Him in prayer will be weak.

I want you to see how that unfolds as he begins to pray—four characteristics of God that come out: First of all, he prays because he knows that God is sovereign; He is sovereign. He starts off his prayer, "*O LORD, God of heaven...*" (Nehemiah 1:5) Now, what you need to do is hold your place here, and I want you to turn back with me to 2 Chronicles 36. And I want you to see how the sovereignty of God is summarized in that title of God—God of heaven. Basically, this is a title that other times in the Old Testament is used to describe how God is in control of all things, and He brings everything to happen according to His purpose and His plan. Look at 2 Chronicles 36. You'll turn back just a couple books; go to Ezra, then you'll

come to 2 Chronicles 36. It is the last chapter, and I want you to hear the summation of how Jerusalem had fallen—the history we just looked at—and I want you to see the sovereignty of God all over this thing.

Look at 2 Chronicles 36:15. This is recounting things.

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, [This is talking about sin and prophets of the people of Israel.] because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. [So here's what God did.] He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar. [This is what we just saw played out on the map.] He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. (2 Chronicles 36:15-19)

So, that's recounting things. Now listen to this:

He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah. (2 Chronicles 36:20-21)

Don't miss that. That last verse is telling us that everything that happened—the timing of everything happened because who was in charge? The Lord. The Lord had spoken by Jeremiah after 70 years, then they would be brought back from exile. So, that's what happened.

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing..." (2 Chronicles 36:22) King Cyrus is about to make a proclamation. Who caused him to do that? The Lord did. The Lord moved his heart. "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up.'" (2 Chronicles 36:23)

Remember the whole map? The people of God traveling back from Babylonia back over to Jerusalem? Why were they able to do that? Because King Cyrus said so? Yes, but that's not the ultimate answer. Why were they able to do it? Because who said so? God did. Don't miss this: This is God at the end of 2 Chronicles 36 moving the hearts of King Nebuchadnezzar to go and to discipline His people. And then it's God, directing the heart of King Cyrus to rise up and say Jerusalem can be rebuilt—the temple can be rebuilt. God is sovereign over the kings of the nations in the Old Testament. And that's good news for us today.

Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is in the LORD's hands." Isn't it good to know that our

president—President Bush now and any president that comes in the future—his life is in the hands of a sovereign God? Isn't it good to know that the leaders of Iran and North Korea, Afghanistan, and other places in the Middle East, all the leaders in the world, their hearts are in the hands of a sovereign God? We've got a team that just got back from Sudan on a plane yesterday. It's good news for people in Sudan to know that the dictatorship there that has caused a million of our brothers and sisters to die over the last twenty years -- that that dictator is not able to do anything outside of the providence of a sovereign God. That's good news. He's sovereign.

And so, when Nehemiah comes to pray to God in Nehemiah 1, he says, "O Lord, God of heaven, you are the God who has directed this whole thing. You are the God who is in charge. You are the God who is in control, and I submit to you." That's a very grand picture of who God is. And when we realize that picture of who God is, we will want to pray to Him because we realize He has a purpose. He's going to accomplish it. We need to fall on our face before Him.

Not only is He sovereign, but second, He is awesome. He says, "*O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God...*" (Nehemiah 1:5) This is one of three instances in the book of Nehemiah where Nehemiah talks about how great and awesome God is. His power is limitless and that changes the way you pray. Sometimes we pray—think about it this way—sometimes we pray, and we say, "Well, prayer is just talking to God." And there's some truth behind that. Undoubtedly, we have access to the throne of God through Jesus Christ.

Prayer is talking to God, but we don't need to stop there. We need to realize a two-year-old talks to her parents in a much different way than a twenty-year-old talks to her parents, because there's a greater understanding of that relationship and who those parents are in their lives, and it changes the way they talk. If a twenty-year-old was talking to her parents like a two-year-old talks to her parents, it would definitely be a sign of some form of retardation. Yet, many of us who have walked with Christ for fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years are still talking to God like we did when we were two-years-old.

Now, don't miss this. Please don't hear me wrong on this. We don't have to impress God with our prayers. There's not a right way and wrong way to pray. But if our understanding of God sees His sovereignty and how awesome He is, it changes the way we pray. It changes the way we address Him, and we fall before Him. And we don't come into His presence casually in prayer anymore, because we realize how great and how awesome He is. And this was huge! This fueled Nehemiah's prayers—to know that there was nothing, absolutely nothing that Nehemiah could ask of this God that would outstrip His abilities. There was nothing that He could ask that God, in all of His awesome might and power and sovereignty, would not be able to do.

And the good news for us this morning is we pray to the same God Nehemiah did. And there is nothing that we cannot ask Him to do that would outstrip His abilities. There is nothing that we cannot ask Him to do that He doesn't have the power to do in His awesomeness and His sovereignty. And that fuels—that emboldens your prayer, and you begin to ask God for great things when you realize how great He is. God, make us a church that asks God for great things. Make us a church that asks God to do things that only He can get the glory for. God, give us the nations and do it in such a way that only you get the glory. He is able. He is able. He is sovereign. He is awesome.

Third, He is faithful. "*O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love...*" (Nehemiah 1:5) It's really not a very good translation there. It really means, "He keeps His covenant and steadfast love." The reason I point that out is because

that word, "steadfast love", is a word that we looked at last week called "*chesed*", which means loving-kindness. It's the loving-kindness that Boaz showed to Ruth, and Ruth showed to Boaz. It's the loving-kindness that God continually shows to His people. It's a word that the Old Testament uses over and over again to talk about how God is faithful to His people. God had not forgotten about His people. He was going to be faithful to His people. And we're going to see that unfold in just a second even more.

And then fourth -- He is sovereign, He is awesome, He is faithful, and He is holy; He is holy. Don't miss what happens in the middle of verse 6: "*I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you.*" Now let me let you in on why that phrase is so huge. Nehemiah, for all we know, may have never even been to Jerusalem. The people who had gone into exile were paying the price of their forefathers' sins and disobedience. Nehemiah is living in the Persian palace, and if anybody has the right to say, "You know, what's going on in Jerusalem that's their fault. That's what they get.", Nehemiah has the right to say that.

But notice that what he begins to pray, and he begins to confess throughout those couple of verses right there. Over and over again, he says, "I confess the sins we Israelites have sinned against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you." Don't miss this. Servant-leaders in God's plan do not rise up and point fingers at everybody else's sin. Servant-leaders in God's plan rise up, and they see their sin, and they fall on their faces in brokenness and repentance, and they say, "We have sinned against you."

This is one of those areas we miss out on because of our individualism. We find it very easy in the church to come in and to talk about this person's sin and that person's sin, and what they're struggling from, and what they're struggling from, and we rise up, and we begin to point fingers at each other. All along, God is saying, "If you, as a community of faith, would come before me and repent together..." Don't forget, we can spend all day long talking about what's going wrong in the church. You can spend your entire life talking about what's going wrong in the church, and it won't make any bit of difference. However, when you rise up, and you say, "I'm a part of this deal; I'm a part of the church, and I need to repent. We need to repent, and we need to turn to God", then you begin to see God begin to work among His people in mighty ways. And we realize He's holy. And we're all in this deal together, and we don't come in here and point fingers at each other, and we're all in this deal together with the struggles and hurts, and we come before Him honestly.

Now, Nehemiah prayed, seeking God's face, because he knew that everything that would happen in the book of Nehemiah would be dependent on this one thing—seeking His face. He knew that prayer was the non-negotiable. Prayer was not a priority for Nehemiah. Please don't miss this. Prayer was not a priority for Nehemiah; prayer was the non-negotiable. It wasn't first on a list of five. It was, "If I don't pray, and I don't seek God, and I don't seek His face, then nothing is going to happen. Absolutely nothing." It was a non-negotiable for him.

Let me show you how that unfolds. Look at Nehemiah 2. I want to encourage you to underline a couple of verses throughout the book of Nehemiah. I want to show you how Nehemiah, every time something good happens, he talks about how God caused it to happen—how God in his goodness caused it to happen. Look at Nehemiah 2. Underline part of verse 8. Listen to this. In verse 8, he says, "*And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?*" (Nehemiah 2:8) Now listen to this: "*And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.*" Why did the king grant his request? Because why? Because God's hand was

on him.

Look at Nehemiah 2:12. Look at what it says there: *"I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem."* God had told him what to do. Look in the same chapter, Nehemiah 2:18. *"I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me."* Same thing in verse 20. *"I answered them by saying, 'The God of heaven will give us success.'"* (Nehemiah 2:20) Who is going to give us success? The God of heaven. The sovereign God that we've seen him praying to.

Look in Nehemiah 4:15. They start to face opposition. They start to face trials. Look at what happens in Nehemiah 4:15. *"When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work."* Who frustrated the enemy's plot? God did. Look at the same thing in verse 20. He's challenging them to stand up against the opposition, and he says, *"Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"* (Nehemiah 4:20)

Look in two more—Nehemiah 6. Look at Nehemiah 6:16. They finish building the wall. It was a very triumphant day. And listen to what verse 16 says: *"When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of..."* Who? *"...our God."* One more: Nehemiah 7:5. It says, *"So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families."*

What I want you to see is that over and over again in Nehemiah's life is that every success, every move he makes, it comes as a result of seeking God's face. Everything does. And he constantly points to how God had done these things. God is revealing things to Nehemiah's heart; God is leading Nehemiah to do great things. Church, God does not reveal the intimate things of His heart to those who casually come and go; God does not reveal the intimate things of His heart to those who casually come and go. He reveals the intimate things of His heart to those who seek His face. And we begin to see what God puts in our hearts, and we begin to see what God does in the church, and it's all because of the gracious hand of God upon us. He sought God's face. He was devoted to it.

Second, he was devoted to knowing God's Word; devoted to knowing God's Word. Nehemiah 1:8-9, he starts off, and he says, *"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses..."* That word "remember" he uses all kinds of different times, telling God to remember things; not that God didn't know, but what he does, he begins to quote from the Old Testament, saying, *"If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name."* (Nehemiah 1:8-9) You might put a note out to the side there: Deuteronomy 30:1-10. You really see echoes of Deuteronomy all over this prayer, but especially that passage. It's almost verbatim. Nehemiah is quoting before God Deuteronomy 30 verses 1 through 10.

Now, why does Nehemiah do that? Why does Nehemiah feel the need in his prayer to quote Scripture to God? It's not like God didn't know what Deuteronomy 30 said. God wrote it. He knew exactly what Deuteronomy 30 said. But don't miss this: God delights when His people come before Him with His Word and claim His promises. God delights when we come before Him with empty hands, and we say, "I have nothing to bring apart from your Word, and I'm going to stand on your Word. I'm going to take you at your Word, and if I don't, I'm going to fall flat on my face, but I'm going to stand on your Word." And that's exactly what

Nehemiah is doing. That's exactly what we are called to do in prayer.

Notice that, up until this point, Nehemiah has still not asked for one thing. He still hasn't asked for one thing. He's honored God for who He is, he's confessed his need, his sin. He is now bringing God's Word before Him, saying, "I don't have anything apart from God's Word." This is bold faith coming into the presence of God.

I think we're seeing here that, if you want to have bold faith, two things happen. Number one: A deep understanding of who God is, and second, a thorough knowledge of what God has said. You look throughout Scripture, and you will see that those who knew God's Word were used mightily by Him. Stephen stands up and, in the short time we see him in Acts 6 and 7, he quotes, practically, the whole history of the Old Testament, just like that. The Word of God just flowed from him. If we want to be leaders in the church, if we want to rise up and see some of the things that God has done throughout His people in history, then we need to be people with a deep understanding of who He is and have a thorough knowledge of what He has said.

Seeking God's face. He is devoted to knowing God's Word and then, third, he's devoted to asking for God's provision; asking for His provision. Not until the last sentence do we see Nehemiah make a request. It says at the end of verse 11, "*Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.*"

And so, he does come, and I want you to know, the rest of the book is going to show us a picture of Nehemiah's greatness, and it's completely tied to Nehemiah's boldness in asking God for great things. If we walk away from studying the book of Nehemiah, and we say, "What a great man Nehemiah was", then we will have missed the whole point. What Nehemiah did was that he asked great things of a great God, and we see Nehemiah's God direct this whole thing for His glory.

Isn't that a picture of what we want to be a part of? Not that people would walk away and say, "What a great group of people", but that people would look at The Church at Brook Hills and say, "They are pretty ordinary people who have asked great things of a great God, and He has shown His glory all through them." God, may it be so.

Unyielding Desire

Uncompromising devotion, seeking God's face, knowing God's Word and asking for God's provision. We have seen his concern and his devotion, and I want to show you the last part of this portrait of Nehemiah: Unyielding desire; unyielding desire. Look at how this prayer ends in verse 10: "*They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.*" (Nehemiah 1:10-11) Then, he says he was cupbearer to the king.

Now, don't miss the contrast there. Here's a guy who has got everything the world has to offer. He lives in the Persian palace. He eats and drinks everything the world has to bring him. And he says, "My deepest delight is in," What? "In revering your name. Our deepest delight, our deepest desire is in revering your name."

So, first of all, our desire is to revere His person; to revere His person. This is the characteristic I'm praying that God will raise up all across our church—that God would raise up elders and RBF teachers, Bible study teachers for children, and servants all across this room whose deepest delight is in seeing God's name honored and glorified. I pray that that is more delightful to us than a bigger paycheck. That that would be more delightful to us

than a promotion at work. That seeing His name honored and glorified through us would be more delightful than all the success this world could ever offer us. That the heartbeat of our lives across this room would be to delight in revering Him.

God, raise up leaders like that, who spurn the things of this world, and who say they don't compare to what it means to walk in a way that honors and glorifies my God. What does that look like in your home? What does that look like at your workplace, to delight in revering Him? And look how it changes the perspective.

It comes to the end, and he says, "*Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.*" (Nehemiah 1:11) Now, that's kind of funny because this man he's talking about is King Artaxerxes—the king for which he works, the king who has the power to say at any moment, "Nehemiah, off with your head" and that's the case. But Nehemiah has seen the sovereignty, the awesomeness, the faithfulness, and the holiness of his God, and once he sees that and says, "I delight in revering your name", even the greatest king in the known world, at that point, looks like a mere man. It pales in comparison. This guy over here, "Just give me success today in his presence—this random guy, this man." It changed his perspective.

In fact, when you look back in Ezra in Ezra 4:7-23, basically what had unfolded was, the king of Persia, this same king, had seen what was going on when they were rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, and he said, "I'm going to stop the work. They can't have too much power." So, this king before now had stopped this thing from happening. Now Nehemiah is about to go into his presence and ask him for permission to go and rebuild the walls when, years before that, this king of Persia had said, "I can't even do this." Nehemiah has got a holy boldness now though, a holy boldness that causes him to rise up.

And look at what happens in Nehemiah 2:1. "*In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before...*" Let me pause right there just to let you know that there are records from Old Testament times of cupbearers being solemn or gloomy in the presence of the king and having their heads cut off for it. You went into the king's presence and everything was great. You didn't complain about anything to the king. You were around the king all the time so you keep the king happy.

"*I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, 'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.' I was very much afraid...*" (Nehemiah 2:1-2) Don't miss the intensity here. Nehemiah is about to step out. "*I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever!'"* (Nehemiah 2:2-3) Isn't that great? Kind of like buttering up the king before you ask him.

We've all done this. You know, "Mom, I'd really like to go out this weekend, just before I ask you for twenty dollars though, I want you to know what an incredible Mom you are and how much you mean to me and how many sacrifices you make for me." So that's like, "May the king live forever!"

"*Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven...*" (Nehemiah 2:3-4) Isn't that a great picture? "Okay, Lord, here goes!" Kind of a flash prayer. Don't miss it though: The flash prayer is based on four months of praying, not just a flash prayer for Nehemiah. He's walking in constant communion with God.

"Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.'" (Nehemiah 2:4-5) So, he puts it out there and "the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, 'How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?' It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time." (Nehemiah 2:6)

Nehemiah walks into the king's presence, makes a bold request, and the king not only says, "I will be happy to send you," but the king even gives him all of the supplies he needs to go there. And Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem and in fifty-two days, he rebuilds what the people of God had waited for for over a hundred years in just fifty-two days. The God of the universe does amazing, unexplainable things through a people who revere His name when they live for His glory.

And not only a desire to revere His person, but don't miss this: A desire to risk everything for His purpose. Martin Luther said, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace." Are we a living, daring people who are confident in God's grace?

So, Nehemiah goes, and he rebuilds the wall in fifty-two days. Throughout that time, he received all kinds of opposition from within and from without. Nehemiah 4 through 6 -- those three chapters are just full of opposition that comes to Nehemiah. Don't miss it: Talking about risking everything for His purpose, Nehemiah went into the king's presence risking his life, but not only risking his life. Even if he was able to live, he would be giving up the Persian palace to go live in a broken down city with a bunch of people who ended up -- some of them wanted him to be there, some of them did not want him to be there.

When you stand up as a leader in God's church, guaranteed there will be difficulties, opposition, slander. Those leaders who have been serving our church as lay pastors and vocational pastors since this church's inception have made sacrifices, have faced different types of opposition throughout. It's what happens, but it's through those times of weakness and trial and struggle that God shows His glory the clearest. He shows His strength in amazing ways, and that's exactly what He did with Nehemiah.

People in Nehemiah 4 through 6 said, "Once you build these walls, a cat couldn't even be able to walk—a small animal could not even be able to walk around these walls, on top of it, without it collapsing." So, here's what they do after they rebuild the walls. They get to Nehemiah 12, and they've got the walls rebuilt. All the nations had said, "Not even a small animal could walk around these walls once they finish." So, what they do is they all climb up on top the walls, and they march around the city and they sing praise music. Isn't that a great picture? And the Bible says all the nations looked in awe and said, "Only God could have done that."

In the New Testament...

God preserves His people, so they could stand and show the nations how great He is. It's the message of the book of Nehemiah. The problem is though, that's not the end of the story. Yes, the walls are rebuilt and the temple is rebuilt, but this chronologically comes at the very end of the Old Testament. I know it's in the middle of the Old Testament in our Bibles, but it's at the very end chronologically. What happens is we've got about 400 years of silence where we don't know much about what happens among God's people. But about 400 years later, something comes about in the New Testament, and it's not God carrying

out His plan by raising up your average servant leader.

In the New Testament, God accomplishes His plan by raising up the ultimate servant leader, whose concern leads to a cross. Do you remember that in Luke 19:41? When Jesus comes up over the hill, and He sees the city with its walls and the temple in the middle? And Luke 19:41 says Jesus did what? He wept. Just like Nehemiah had. Unselfish concern for the good of God's people and the glory of God's name—the people that were about to crucify Him whose concern leads to a cross, whose devotion leads to His death. Do you remember Him praying outside of Jerusalem? Seeking God's face, knowing God's Word, asking for God's provision. "Not my will, but yours be done." And He walks into the city, and there He is crucified right outside the city gates and He has the desire to revere His Father and to risk everything for that purpose. His desire leads to our salvation.

Today...

It's the plan of God throughout to raise up the ultimate servant leader who has these characteristics. And it's why, when we look at Scripture today, our ultimate prayer is not, "God, make us like Nehemiah." Our prayer is, "God, make us like Christ." And it leads to us today, because the good news is God is continuing His plan by raising up servant leaders who will demonstrate unselfish concern, uncompromising devotion, and unyielding desire for the glory of Christ in the church. Please don't miss this. Nehemiah pointed forward to the glory of Christ. God is raising up leaders in the church today who will reflect that glory in the 21st century.

Now, in light of that, I want us to have a time where we take this Word, and we put it into practice in light of what God has been teaching us as a church family. You remember this summer, if you were here, we began to look at leadership in the New Testament church, and we began to see the role of elders, pastors, overseers and what they did. I would encourage you, if you're new to the church, to go back and listen to that message when we talked about elders, because we talked about how elders lead under the authority of Christ, and they teach the body of Christ and these are men who cared for the body of Christ and who model the character of Christ, and they lead us in the mission of Christ. And so, I want us to come to a time now where we bring those men before our faith family, and we pray over them.

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