



DO IT

AFRAID

Together

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

WEEK ONE

The Fear of the Task

- **Reconnaissance**
[Nehemiah 2:9-18]

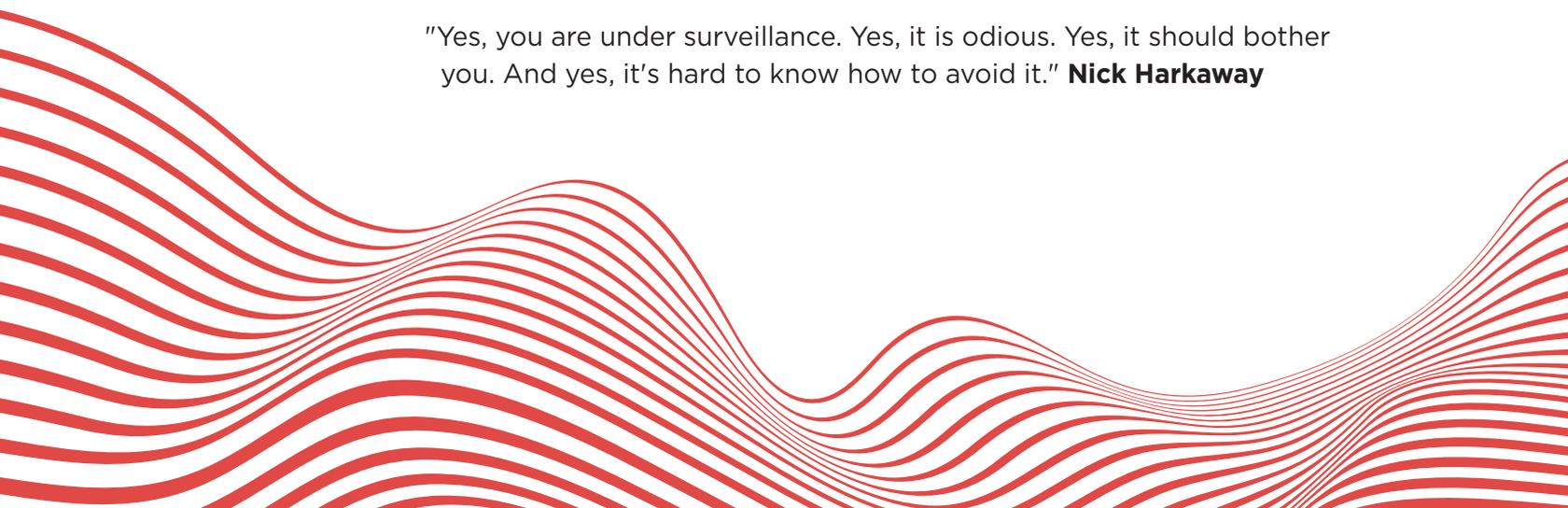
"The concept of surveillance is ingrained in our beings. God was the original surveillance camera." **Hasan M. Elahi**

Don't wish for it, work for it.

"Never start a business just to 'make money.' Start a business to make a difference." **Marie Forleo**

"Facebook is not your friend, it is a surveillance engine." **Richard Stallman**

"Yes, you are under surveillance. Yes, it is odious. Yes, it should bother you. And yes, it's hard to know how to avoid it." **Nick Harkaway**



KEY THOUGHT:

Reconnaissance can be overwhelming, but we can't start the task at hand without it.

So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Then I told them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

[Nehemiah 2:9-18, NIV]

The story of Nehemiah begins in Susa, the capital of ancient Persia (located in western, modern Iran). Nehemiah was born in Persia to a Jewish family and eventually became a personal assistant to King Artaxerxes. While serving the king, Nehemiah received word from his brother, Hanani, that the city of Jerusalem, the capital of their ancestor's nation, is only a shadow of her former glory. Upon hearing the news, Nehemiah sat down and wept (Nehemiah 1:4). He was deeply disturbed by the state of affairs. Eventually, he mustered the courage to ask his boss, the king, for a leave of absence to address this crisis. The king approved his request, giving him the right papers and an armed escort to proceed.

The first stage of Nehemiah's journey reminds us that whenever we feel led or prompted to undertake a major task, we need to do some reconnaissance, some due diligence. This typically requires three assessments: considering unknown risks, confirming verifiable facts and contemplating our spiritual reality.

Consider Unknown Risks

Nehemiah 2:9-10 says Nehemiah went to the governors of the Trans-Euphrates with army officers and some cavalry. He brought these letters because he didn't know how his mission was going to be received. And he, literally, brought the cavalry because he had no idea what kind of threats he would encounter along the way.

Not all fear is unfounded. Some of our fears, like Nehemiah's, are firmly anchored in reality. That said, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't proceed in the face of those fears anyway.

Dr. Susan David, in her book *Emotional Agility* calls courage "fear walking." Nehemiah had an internal list of all the things that could go wrong in this endeavor.

The king could have said no to Nehemiah's request. Why bring it up at all? Even if he says yes, what if he didn't get permission to travel through the empire? Why risk the embarrassment?

Even if he got the right approvals, what if he didn't get any personal protection? Why risk the danger?

Even if he got protection, what if they were outmatched or outgunned along the way? Why risk the danger?

Even if they weren't attacked, there are a thousand things that could go wrong on a 760-mile journey on horseback. Why not stay home and send someone else? What if the locals did not receive him? What if they didn't want to help? What if he met political or military resistance when his escort returns to Susa? What if? What if? What if?

It's not wrong to ask the questions. Often, asking these questions helps us understand what is truly at stake and if the risk really is worth the reward. That said, if we want to bow to fear, we can get stuck in an infinite "What if?" loop. At some point, we have to decide if we're just going to do it, even if we have to do it afraid.

QUESTIONS:

1. Think of a major decision you had to make that had many unknown variables. How did you proceed? What happened?
2. Think of a time where someone asked you to reach beyond your comfort zone, but you talked your way out of it. If you had the opportunity again, how would you respond?
3. Is God prompting you to take a risk in your life right now and you're stuck in a "What if?" loop? What is your core fear? How will you proceed?

Confirm Verifiable Facts

Nehemiah didn't say what happened over the course of his journey. Maybe his fear of bandits was completely unfounded. Or maybe that armed escort actually came in handy. He didn't give us those details. We do know that he arrived safely in Jerusalem and took a few days to settle in.

But then, under the cover of night, he began his reconnaissance mission. Without telling anyone outside his immediate circle, he set out. He was the only one on a horse; his associates were on foot. My guess is, it wasn't the kind of mission that was marked by lively conversation, just stealthy movement, and quiet observation. So, even though he had company, Nehemiah must have felt more than a little lonely.

And then he saw the walls for himself. He heard the rumor that the walls were broken down and the gates burned, but now he witnessed this firsthand. It's one thing to be evacuated from a town threatened by fire and hear your home has been destroyed. It's another to go back and sift through the rubble and ashes. His brother was right: Jerusalem was in horrible shape.

The Fountain Gate was so badly damaged, he couldn't even squeeze through on his horse. He had to backtrack and find another way through.

If Nehemiah was speculating in Susa, his recon in Jerusalem allowed him to verify facts firsthand. Yes, he was largely alone in this endeavor. Yes, the walls were broken down, and yes, it was difficult to navigate the terrain. Doing the recon can be frightening; it just might show that things are as bad, or worse than we imagined them to be. Sometimes it's easy not to ask the questions; then we don't have to be disappointed by the real answers.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever undertaken a challenging task and felt like you had to do it alone?
2. Have you ever been demoralized after doing the kind of reconnaissance Nehemiah had to do?
3. Described a time where you tried to do something risky, on faith, and it got harder, not easier, as you progressed.

Contemplate Spiritual Reality

Nehemiah's eyes saw daunting task. Nehemiah's faith saw something different. They beheld a new future for the city and its people. Listen to what he says:

"Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

[Nehemiah 2:17-18].

Our fears are often fueled by the very real facts in front of us.

As a result, we usually fail to ask God to give us a spiritual perspective so that we can see a situation from God's perspective. The facts said the wall was broken; the spiritual reality was that building it back up was going to be a spiritual and emotional gift to the people. The intangible reward outweighed the work required to pull it off.

Without spiritual eyes, we don't discern the favor of God, and we don't appreciate the favor of people.

And the blessing of the people who were needed to help build the wall? They couldn't voice support until the vision was verbal. Nehemiah announced it on faith, and the people followed with theirs.

QUESTIONS:

1.

How is God showing you favor as you tackle an intimidating situation?

2.

Is God using someone to move you forward in faith and obedience?

3.

Is it possible that people are waiting to help you "build your wall," but you haven't asked them for help? If you haven't, what are you waiting for?

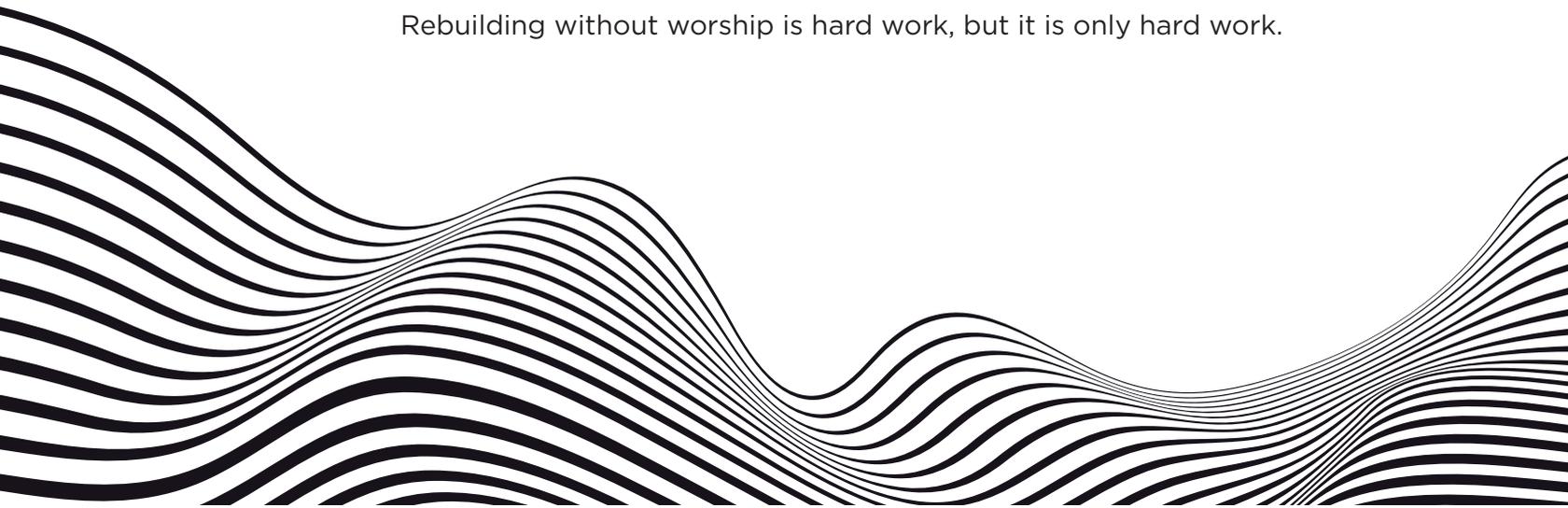
WEEK TWO

The Fear of the Work

- The works and their work
[Nehemiah 3]
- Completion of the work
[Nehemiah 6:15-7:4]

KEY THOUGHT:

Rebuilding without worship is hard work, but it is only hard work.



Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur, son of Imri, built next to them.

[Nehemiah 3:1-2]

Nehemiah 3 is the "work" chapter. It's all about who worked and how they worked. Nehemiah led them, but they all worked with one purpose. Chapter 3 makes mention of several gates. The gates were the areas of entry to the city and therefore the most likely places for an enemy attack. For that reason, the workers began their sections of the wall at the gates and worked out from there. The word "built" is nearly always indicative of construction on the gates, not the walls, and implies considerable construction, not just ordinary repair. In the description of the north wall, we read that both walls and gates were "built." The north section was apparently where the destruction was total. In other passages, the word "repaired" is used.

The point is simple: the task of rebuilding was hard work. In the same way, the task of rebuilding our lives, rebuilding a marriage, rebuilding something broken of any kind is hard work and fraught with challenges. It's such hard work that many of us are living in fear of the amount of work involved.

In this lesson, we'll examine the truth that behind all work for a believer is the concept of worship. Putting the work in to rebuild anything, without the concept of worship, makes the thing we're rebuilding of no eternal value.

Rebuilding Is Work-ship

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed.

[Nehemiah 7:1]

Before the government was established, the worship team was appointed.

As we read about the rebuilding of the wall, consider how much more difficult re-building something is compared to simply building from scratch. To rebuild the wall meant that, first, twisted metal from the old gates, burned timber, shattered masonry and other various types of debris had to be cleared. Then the ground had to be leveled and cleaned off. It takes more time to clean up after a disaster than it does to begin work on fresh ground. The ultimate reason God wants to rebuild in and through you is for His glory. Now, building anything is hard work. Rebuilding without worship is work, but it is ONLY work. It will never be more than work. **At its best, work without worship is a paycheck or a sense of personal gain.** Rebuilding to the glory of God will feel like work, but it is also more than just work. Rebuilding even as a form of worship is work. It is still sweaty, dirty, and exhausting. It is a blending of work and wonder, work and worship. We are to think of it as “work-ship.” The work can be so taxing that some, the nobles of Tekoa, refused to “put their shoulders to the work” (Nehemiah 3:5). Literally, the idea in Hebrew is that they wouldn’t submit—they would not bend their necks to what the Lord wanted them to do. The real idea was submission, or a lack of it, probably to Nehemiah’s leadership.

QUESTIONS:

1. Share of a time in your life when you have messed up. How much time did you need to fix things before you could move on?
2. How does the idea of worship as work and work as worship impact you? Which is the harder truth to accept? Why?
3. The nobles of Tekoa did not work. What excuses have you made for not doing the work God has called you to do?
4. Thinking of the nobles of Tekoa, which one of these realities is harder for you to accept than the other?
 - a. My work for God will move me from anonymity to prominence.
 - b. My faithful service be remembered by God, even though it will not be recognized by people.

Rebuilding Requires Taking Stock

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.

[Lamentations 3:40]

With God's help, anything can be rebuilt from the ashes of disaster.

The first step in rebuilding one's life is prayer; the second is listening to God's direction to develop a plan; the third step is often an inventory of the details you will need to deal with.

Nehemiah undertook just such an inventory. Chapter 3 records a complete circuit of the wall around the city. The description moved counterclockwise, from the Sheep Gate to the Sheep Gate (cf. verses 1-32). The movement describes the progress of the work to its completion with Nehemiah carefully ensuring that no part is missed.

What Nehemiah put into practice with the rebuilding of the walls, is a practice people put into place when rebuilding their lives. In Celebrate Recovery, for example, this practice is known as "Step 4." At Step 4, we admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. Standing behind the principle is the belief that openly examining and confessing our faults to ourselves, to God, and to someone we trust, is a good thing. Saying it's good doesn't make it easy. Taking stock is another example of worship as work-ship. It's the practice that enables us to lift our eyes off of the temporal things and onto the eternal things. It's the practice that enables us to bring God into the everyday things with which we wrestle. Let's not settle for work. Let's bring God into our work so that it becomes "work-ship."

QUESTIONS:

1. What are your fears? How have they caused you difficulty in your life?
2. Describe any person who has helped you to see yourself more clearly and objectively?
3. How should the reality that you are a child of God influence the way you approach rebuilding aspects of your life?

WEEK THREE

The Fear of the Fight

- **Outside opposition**
[Nehemiah 2:19-20; 4:1-23]
- **Inside opposition**
[Nehemiah 5:1-19]
- **Personal attacks**
[Nehemiah 6:1-14]

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?” Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

[Nehemiah 4:1-3]

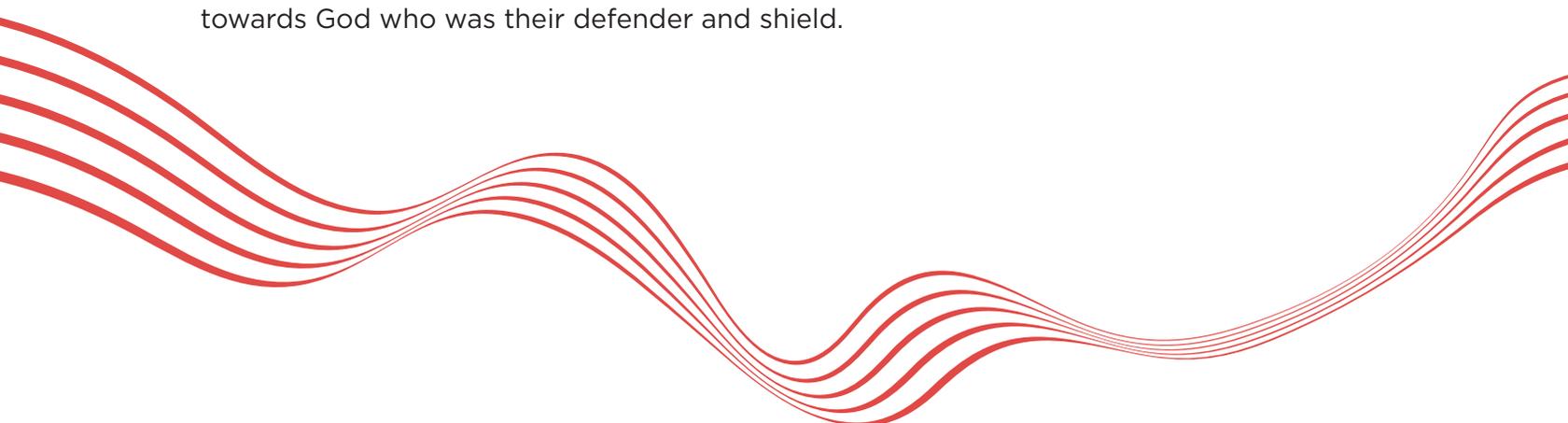
Sanballat means, “thorn in secret.” In other words, he was a real pain—the Old Testament equivalent to Paul’s thorn in the flesh. All of us have encountered a Sanballat in one way or another. At some point in your life or career, you probably got burned by conflict and felt shamed or criticized. The fear of conflict is common among those with social anxiety. They worry about saying something that others will disagree with or have general fears about doing things that will annoy or bother other people.

The principle behind this lesson from Nehemiah’s life is that being nice was an outdated strategy that hadn’t paid off for God’s people. Nehemiah recognized that some opponents need to be confronted.

Passages like Deuteronomy 10:12-13 and Matthew 10:28 remind us that the person to whom we ascribe the most authority is the person we fear most. We obey the one we fear. When we fear another person more than God, we are immobilized at the precise moment we should be taking action. We are gagged in the very moment we are called to speak up. Proverbs 29:25 says, *Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.*

The Hebrew word for “snare” refers to the traps hunters set to catch animals or birds. Snares are dangerous. If we get caught, we must do whatever it takes to free ourselves.

Sanballat held the people captive, and in this chapter, Nehemiah did what needed to be done to set the people free. Nehemiah achieved this, not by removing the fear of attack and reprisal (Nehemiah 2:19-20) but by helping the people face their fears, turning them towards God who was their defender and shield.



Confirm Verifiable Facts

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

[Nehemiah 4:19-20]

Conflict is Normal, Neutral, and Natural.

Even though the conflict Nehemiah faced opposed the clear will of God, Nehemiah expected it, encouraged people to deal with it, and guided them through it. That's our focus in this section of the lesson.

In one sense, opposition is normal and inevitable because people have different ideas. The more important something is, the more opinionated people become. Whenever people talk about conflict, it is usually the emotional dimension that they describe, wrongly concluding that conflict is negative. In biblical terms, because of a sovereign God who is always in control, conflict is morally neutral. Conflict is neither destructive or constructive in itself—it's what we do with it that counts. While it is true that the probability of conflict increases depending upon the stupidity of our actions; it will nonetheless be constant because we are all imperfect. Life would be impossible if it were not for the imperfections of others.

QUESTIONS:

1.

What are some of the false assumptions about confrontation? How can the truth that conflict is normal, neutral, and natural help someone change their negative views on confrontation?

2.

We won't change our behavior unless we believe our current behavior isn't working. With that in mind, consider the problems associated with avoiding confrontation. What are they?

3.

List what someone might gain by speaking up? What skills can we employ to make our confrontation healthy?

Point Yourself Towards God

I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!”

[Nehemiah 5:13]

Ask God to deal with your opponents.

Notice the content of the prayer. This prayer was neither a prayer for direction nor a prayer of affirmation, but a prayer of petition. “God, you deal with them.” This is not about vengeance, but building something for the Lord’s glory to be seen. This is what pointing yourself towards God means—keeping yourself and others in the right place!

QUESTIONS:

1.

Consider your actions in moments when confrontation may be necessary. Do you fear God more than others?

2.

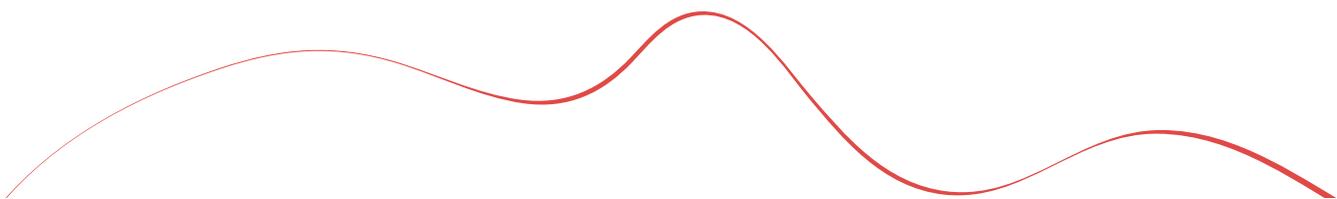
How we respond to conflict reflects our spiritual maturity. Read Matthew 7:5. In conflict, how easy is it for you to be open and honest about your wrongs, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation where necessary?

3.

Read Colossians 3:13 and 1 Peter 4:8. The implication here is that some issues don’t need to be addressed—just forgiven. How do you personally determine whether to address an issue or simply forgive?

4.

Read Proverbs 17:27 and 25:15. How do we develop restraint so that we can wait patiently for the right time to respond? Share a time when you showed restraint, especially while helping someone with a problem.



Pay Diligence to the Threat

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

[Nehemiah 4:9]

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials.

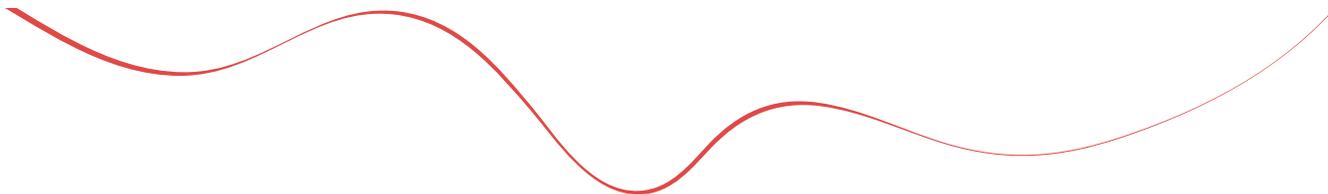
[Nehemiah 5:6-7]

Nehemiah took the threat seriously enough to have the solution ready.

Nehemiah took the threat seriously enough to post a guard (also Nehemiah 4:16-18). The word “pondered” means “consulted with myself” or “giving something serious thought.” On both occasions, Nehemiah took the issues seriously, refusing to shy away from conflict. A conflict-shy people often cause more problems long-term than they contribute towards the common good. As afraid as we may be of conflict, we should fear the consequences of not paying diligence to an issue even more.

QUESTIONS:

- 1.** Nehemiah took the threat seriously but refused to retaliate. Read 1 Peter 2:22-23. How can we respond to hostility without retaliating?
- 2.** Read Nehemiah 5:6. In light of Psalm 7:11, how do we discern if our anger is righteous like Nehemiah’s? You may want to look at Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35-36, and 39-40 for help.
- 3.** How do we develop righteous anger towards sin against God and others?
- 4.** Read Proverbs 29:11. How do we start to practice gentleness when personally offended?



Position Others for Greatness

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears, and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." 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 our own work.

[Nehemiah 4:13-15]

Nehemiah positioned the community to win.

A person deals biblically with conflict when they position others for greatness. Nehemiah positioned his people at the lowest points of the wall and the exposed places. In other words, he puts them where the opposition could see them. He did this because he wanted Sanballat and the others to know that they were not going to run from the fight. This is a preemptive measure that probably saved them from further, more deadly opposition (Nehemiah 4:15).

If God is going to build anything through you, you must position yourself and others for greatness. That means stepping up to the conflict and exposing yourself to the opposition, albeit with “family” support. The stronger the family unit, the less likely conflict is to destroy what God is doing.

QUESTION:

1.

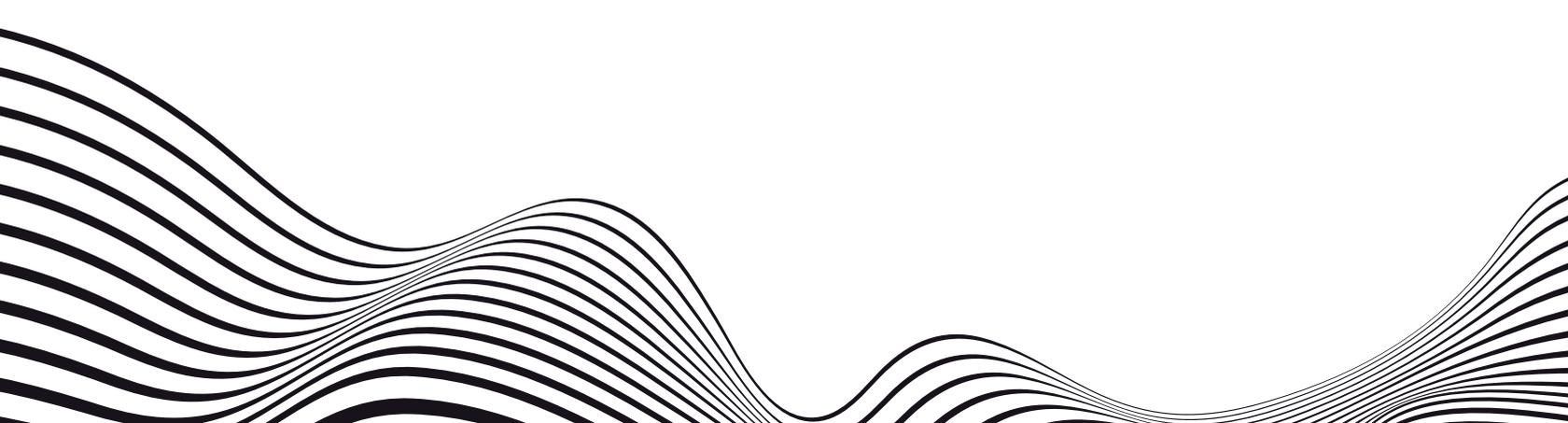
How should the reality that you are a child of God influence the way you deal with conflict?

WEEK FOUR

The Fear of the Cost

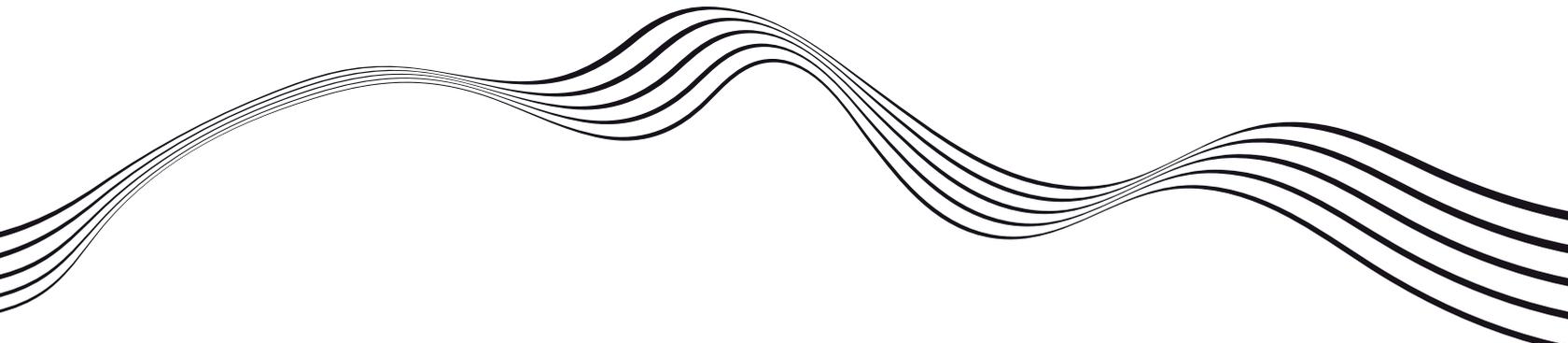
- **Nehemiah's personal resources**
[Nehemiah 5:15-19]
- **Gifts of the people**
[Nehemiah 7:70-72]
- **Commitment of the leaders**
[Nehemiah 10:32-39]

“Legacy is not leaving something for people. It's leaving something in people.” **Peter Strople**



KEY THOUGHT:

We are called to love others and use money - not love money and use others.



Thus far, opposition to the rebuilding project had come externally from people who had a vested interest in a weak Jerusalem. Nehemiah's external opponents feared not just the loss of influence, but also the loss of income. In chapter 5, the opposition came from inside the walls and was triggered by financial greed. From Nehemiah's response in chapter 5, but later in chapters 7 and 10, we learn that Christians share not just spiritually connected lives, but financially connected lives too. Put simply, Nehemiah challenges us to understand that those with wealth and power must be careful to steward that wealth wisely.

Passion Not Privilege, People Not Profit

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God, I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall.

[Nehemiah 5:14-16a]

We either worship our wealth, or we worship with our wealth.

Nehemiah 5:14-19 discusses Nehemiah's personal use of his privileges and fortunes during this period of governmental service. He had the "right" to draw income as the governor but did not do so out of reverence for the Lord. As governor, he was required to entertain officials from other provinces and leaders from Judah. When he was required to do so, he did not partake of the food allotted. Verse 18 tells us why. First, the taxation was heavy; and second, he wanted to please God.

The opulence of the previous governors had burdened the people, but Nehemiah put loving obedience before opulence. He put his passion for the people before the privilege of the position. He put people before profit. He prioritized love of others over any fear of loss of income.

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you think of a time when you or someone you know declined a right to assume a responsibility? What motivated you to do that?
2. What impact has someone else's generosity had on your life?
3. Someone has said, "You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Example Not Excess

Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 darics of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests.

[Nehemiah 7:70]

Your example with your “what” triggers God’s blessing on your “how much.”

We are either using our what as an example or for excess. Nehemiah contributes 1000 gold darics which equate to over \$300,000 today. Only some of the heads of the families contribute. As a leader, Nehemiah didn’t ask the people to do something he wasn’t doing himself.

Nehemiah 7:66 tells us that the numbers of people swelled to almost 50,000. We see the same picture being drawn in Acts where people set an example with their generosity and the result being that God built His church and enabled it to be a city within a city. That’s what happens when people live as examples of righteousness worshipping God, loving people, and using their wealth to show it.

QUESTIONS:

1. One of the fears that often stunts generosity is the fear of not having enough. What enables a person to overcome such fear? In your answer, you may want to consider how you’ve helped someone, maybe a child, overcome a fear of some kind.
2. From reading, what was it that enabled Nehemiah to be generous with his wealth?
3. In your opinion, is generosity caught or taught?

Stewardship, Not Selfishness, Distribution Not Destination

We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God.

[Nehemiah 10:32]

Ministry suffers when commitments aren't honored.

In the first 31 verses of Nehemiah 10, the people make three key commitments:

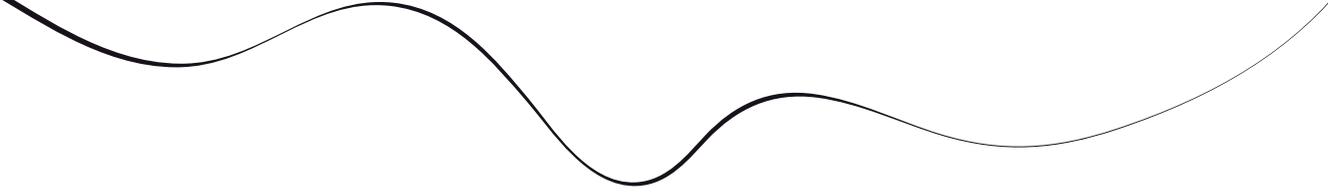
1. to obey Scripture,
2. to lead their families, and
3. to worship God.

In Nehemiah 10:32, a commitment is made to give regularly and generously to the on-going needs of the ministry. Verse 33 shows that the money would be spent on the “work of the house of our God.”

There is history to this commitment. Exodus 30:11-16 asked for the collection of a half shekel tax to be used to support the ministry of the house of God. The tax was a reminder to the people that God had redeemed them and paid the price to set them free. Their giving was an indicator of a desire to behave like people who belonged to God. Matthew 17:24-27 indicates that Jesus paid this too.

One of the big issues today is where a Christian's giving should go. While we may not live in a theocracy where giving is a form of taxation, it is abundantly clear that giving in both testaments went into the storehouse first.





We may want to argue on how much is given, but no one can reasonably argue where the money went! The fact that Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, charges the people with robbing God is a sad indicator that God's people never honored the commitment they made. Consequently, the ministry suffered, the city suffered and the glory of God that shone so brightly through the people in Nehemiah chapter 10 faded.

QUESTIONS:

- 1.** What are the predominant factors that influence people not to keep a commitment?
- 2.** Why are financial commitments so hard to commit to?
- 3.** At the heart of all godly leadership is generosity. In what ways does Nehemiah model generosity in his treatment of others?
- 4.** How should the reality that you are a child of God influence the way you steward your resources?



WEEK FIVE

The Fear of Change

- **Relocate priests to various cities**
[Nehemiah 7:63-73]
- **Recommit to observance of the Law**
[Nehemiah 10:28-30]
- **Renew observance of the Sabbath**
[Nehemiah 10:31]
- **Affirmation of Jewish lineage and specific responsibilities**
[Nehemiah 12:1-26]

It's not always about trying to fix something broken. Sometimes it's about starting over and creating something better.



KEY THOUGHT:

Be careful what you wish for. Nehemiah's reorganization exposed the people to a mountain of challenges and great personal risk.

Chapter 7 begins to outline the wide-ranging social and spiritual reorganization of God's city.

Besides restoring the economic status and prosperity to the city, Nehemiah sought to reorganize the spiritual life of the Lord's people (Nehemiah 7:1-2). His goal was more than the simple rebuilding of a city; it was the rebuilding of the hearts of the people for God Himself. In chapters 8-9, there are warnings to not allow a rebuilt city to fall again because of neglect or disinterest. The interrelation between the organizational reforms on one hand and the spiritual reforms on the other should be noted. Nehemiah's reorganization was holistic: He clearly understood the impact of the spiritual world on the temporal world. The truth is this: Spiritual and structural reorganization go hand in hand.

Too many people ask God to reorganize the public world without due care and attention being given to their private world. When it comes to biblical reorganization, it's not about fixing something that's broken, but starting over and creating something much better.

Today we spend some time unpacking the three practices that form the basis of Nehemiah's reorganization and should be considered in ours.



Be Careful What You Wish For

Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

[Nehemiah 11:1-2]

How many of you would like to win the lottery? Nehemiah 11:1-2 talks about a lottery many did not want to win because moving into a new house did not minimize the risk attached to moving to the big city of Jerusalem. Even though security had been restored to the city (7:1-3), there was still considerable risk in being a city-dweller. Moving into Jerusalem was a big risk. The reality of that risk is the reason verse 2 talks about those who volunteered. Some volunteered, but many did not. As goes sacrificial giving so, it seems, goes sacrificial moving! Since it was risky to move to the city, Nehemiah maximized the resources at his disposal.

Nehemiah avoided unnecessary duplication and eradicated waste.

We see the eradication of waste during the wall building with the wise reusing of existing resources. We witness the avoidance of duplication as Nehemiah placed people strategically along the wall. Thinking strategically requires us to avoid duplication and eliminate waste. It is sometimes easier to pray for more resources than it is to use what we have. Using what we have demands dependence upon God to wisely use what we've already been given. This kind of reorganizing isn't easy.

QUESTIONS:

1. God calls us to wise stewardship of what we have while asking Him for more. Part of that process involves evaluating where we've been wasteful or duplicating energy unnecessarily. In what areas of your life are you wasting time and energy?
2. Moving to Jerusalem was a big risk that only a few were willing to take. When was the last time you took a risk for God?
3. What stops you from taking a risk for the cause of Christ in your family and place of employment?

Be Wise about the Company You Keep

I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

[Nehemiah 6:12-13]

Nehemiah marginalized the impact of non-contributing people (Nehemiah 6:10-14, especially verse 12).

At numerous points, we read of meetings with ungodly people determined to hold Nehemiah back. At other times we read of personal journal entries that speak of people of integrity. The lesson is simple: The company you keep will either fuel your fear or fire up your faith. When reorganizing our life, we all need people around us that are going to challenge us to step out. We must be wary of limiting the influence of those who constantly hold us back.

QUESTIONS:

1.

Nehemiah was wise about the company he kept! Share a time when someone's company made a positive impact on your life.

2.

Does the company you keep fuel your fear or fire up your faith?

Blessing Follows Obedience

I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do.

[Nehemiah 7:2]

Nehemiah filled openings with those who demonstrated an ability to carry out critical tasks under pressure as well as “fearing God.”

Nehemiah appointed gatekeepers because safety was a valid concern ... BUT ... the emphasis was clearly on the centrality of worshipping God and appointing leaders to make that as effective as possible. Nehemiah filled the critical position of commander of the citadel with a man who had both the practical and spiritual skills to do the job. It's like Nehemiah's “community renewal project” speech went like this: *“Give me strong leaders and a central place to worship, and I will give you a city worth living in and fighting for.”*

Earlier we read of the group commending all those who volunteered. The word “commended” means “to bless.” The people who volunteered were blessed. Whereas Nehemiah 11:1 addresses a risk not everyone was willing to take, 11:2 outlines a blessing everyone wanted to receive. There's something attractive about doing something that will make an eternal difference, yes, but there's also a blessing for those who reorganize their life so that they can use their practical gifts to an eternal end.

QUESTIONS:

1. Read 1 Timothy 3. These verses talk about qualifications for elders and deacons in a church. Read these through. Which of these qualities are you asking God to birth in you right now?
2. What difference does it make to a public office that someone fears God? What difference should it make?
3. Share an example of when God blessed you for your willingness to obey.
4. How should the reality that you are a child of God influence the way you deal with change?

WEEK SIX

The Fear of Surrender

- **The Wall**
[Nehemiah 12:27-47]
- **The Heart**
 - The word read [Nehemiah 8:1-8]
 - The people respond [Nehemiah 8:9-9:38]
- **The Radical Rededication**
 - Exclusion of foreigners [Nehemiah 12:1-3]
 - Expulsion of Tobiah [Nehemiah 13:4-9]
 - Revival of tithing [Nehemiah 13:10-14]
 - Reinstitution of the Sabbath [Nehemiah 13:15-22]
 - Rebuke of mixed marriages [Nehemiah 13:23-29]
 - Summary of reforms [Nehemiah 13:30-31]

KEY THOUGHT:

Surrender is scary; it requires reordering our world to align with God's character.





Nehemiah's story concludes with the dedication of the completed wall. It was a moment of great joy.

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests.... The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

[Nehemiah 12:40-43]

But this newfound joy wasn't simply something the residents of Jerusalem stumbled across; it was the result of their newfound obedience.

The city of Jerusalem was leveled generations before Nehemiah's story takes place. With the temple gone and the priest and Levites scattered, there was no formal worship for the Jews who were left behind. With no one to teach them the things of God for generations, they drifted into disbelief, nonbelief and wrong belief. When Ezra, the leading priest, gathered the people to read the Book of Moses (Nehemiah 8:1-8), these were words they heard for the first time.

The people were so distraught when they heard the words of the Law, they began to weep. They were heartbroken with the realization of how far they veered from God's intent for their lives and their community. In a spirit of gentle compassion, both Nehemiah (the political leader) and the Levites (the spiritual leaders) kept telling the people "Don't grieve. Just listen."

This public reading of Scripture goes on for six more days, and eventually, the people began to celebrate. Nehemiah 8:17 says their joy was very great because they finally understood who God was and who God was calling them to be. When the festival was over, the people took time to reflect individually and as families on what they had learned.

Sixteen days later, they met again. This time they spent hours reading the scripture again and a full quarter of a day confessed their wrongdoing and worshiped God together. The Levites closed out this repentance service with a prayer of confession.

God cared more about their heart, than their hardware.

A spirit of surrender leads to confession.

Honest confession leads to heartfelt obedience.

Heartfelt obedience results in unrestrained joy.

Yes, the people celebrated when the wall was done. It was a noble collective achievement. But they were celebrating before the wall was officially dedicated. They understood that a wall wasn't worth celebrating if it didn't encircle spiritually surrendered people. How do we know the people were fully surrendered? They took specific steps to reorder their relationships, their resources, and their rest.

They Reordered Their Relationships

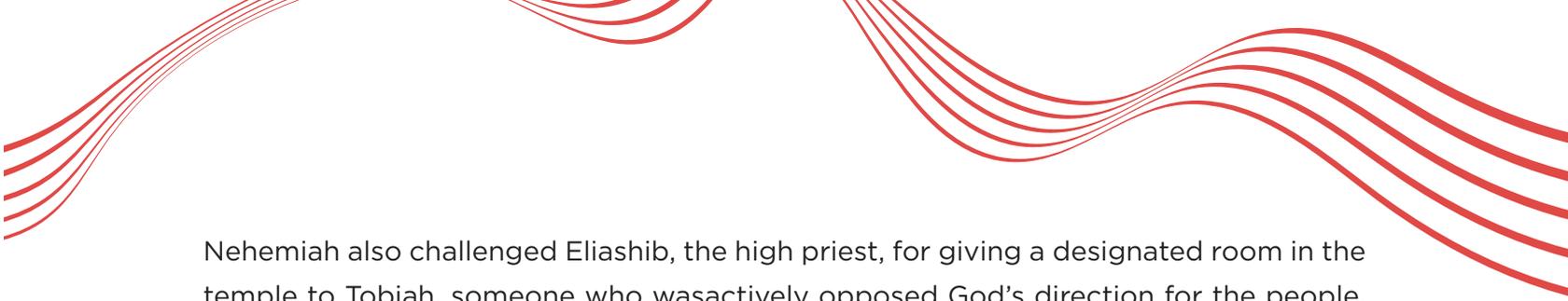
When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

[Nehemiah 13:3]

Make no mistake. The message of God is for all people, and the family of God is multi-racial, multi-national and multi-ethnic. An irresponsible reading of Nehemiah 13 can result in nationalism, racism, and ethnocentrism. As in understanding all of scripture, context is everything. When Moses first commanded the Israelites coming out of Egypt to avoid association with foreigners like the Moabites and Ammonites, his first concern was that these newly liberated people weren't swayed to worship their neighbors' gods and idols. It could be that Nehemiah was thinking like Moses; the people he was leading were fragile in their faith, the stakes for their fledgling community were high and, at this time in the national history, they needed to circle their wagons to relearn whom God wanted them to be.

Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room.

[Nehemiah 13:6b-8]



Nehemiah also challenged Eliashib, the high priest, for giving a designated room in the temple to Tobiah, someone who was actively opposed God's direction for the people. Nehemiah reminded Eliashib, Tobiah and everyone watching this public display that the things of God are not to be misused for personal use or gain.

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?"

[Nehemiah 13:23, 26-27]

Again, the Mosaic law indicates that any outsider or "God-fearing" Gentile was welcome to join the Jewish community through conversion. Nehemiah's concern with the marriages in this instance was that they were blending paganism with orthodox belief. They weren't unions between people with different ethnic backgrounds who shared the same beliefs; they were marriages between people with diametrically opposed worldviews. The people of Jerusalem weren't expanding the kingdom through their relationships; they were elevating them at the expense of their beliefs.

QUESTIONS:

1.

Are there relationships in your life that actively threaten your desire and ability to live a surrendered life?

2.

Have you given some people influence in or access to your life they shouldn't have?

3.

Are you pursuing a long-term romantic relationship or business partnership with someone who doesn't ultimately share your values? Is it possible this arrangement is diminishing your capacity to advance the Kingdom in this season of your life?

They Reordered Their Resources

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine, and olive oil into the storerooms. I put Shelemiah, the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zakkur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites.

Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.

[Nehemiah 13:10-14]

Back in the day, the Levites worked in the temple, to represent the people before God and instruct the people in the ways of God. If their fellow Jews didn't tithe, the Levites couldn't do their job. And when the Levites were working in the fields, instead of the temple, the worship system broke down.

It was everyone's job to order their resources in such a way that a tenth of what they generated in income went to the temple. (In an agrarian society, olive oil, new wine, and grain were currency). Nehemiah was wise enough to bring a team of four people with different backgrounds and tasks to distribute the resources with integrity so the work of the temple could continue uninterrupted.

QUESTIONS:

1.

How is the tithe an important part of our worship today?

2.

How is regular financial giving a sign of surrender?

3.

How was accountability exercised in Nehemiah's system? How is it applied to ours?

They Reordered Their Rest

In those days I saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. People from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn’t your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

[Nehemiah 13:15-18, 22]

The goal of Sabbath is not escapism; the aim is not to flee the hurts, responsibilities or challenges of life. In truth, all of us, in some form, are looking to mask our pain and numb our hurts. It can lead us to abuse gifts God has given (food, work, sex, relationships) to run away from whom God calls us to be and what God calls us to do.

The aim of Sabbath is to actively recharge, by instituting regular rhythms that help us connect more deeply with God and others. The Sabbath was intended to be a gift for Jerusalem’s well-being and Nehemiah took dramatic steps to remind people to break their unhealthy cycles to receive the rest that’s only found in God.

QUESTIONS:

1.

What patterns are currently pulling life out of you? Do you feed any habits to help you avoid current or past hurts? What’s the result of those choices? What fear is tempting you to continue on this path?

2.

What practices and relationships might God be calling you to start pursuing for your own well-being? When could you begin to incorporate these into your life? How often will you do these? Who can help you start and continue?

“You can’t go back and change the beginning,
but you can start where you are and change the ending.” **C.S. Lewis**

We can’t tell you that it will be easy, but we can tell you that it will be worth it.

