

The Message of Nehemiah: Rebuilding¹

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Assert Yourself

Well, I got it again:

“Dear Mr. Dever,
“Your career isn’t just about money, is it?

“I didn’t think so. It’s about something deeper.

“Something so central to your core, to what makes you tick, that you can’t imagine living without it.

“It’s about leadership. Having your say. Making things happen. Putting your stamp on the future.”

Twice now I have received this letter from the *Harvard Business Review*. I must be scheduled to get it mid-summer every other even-numbered year. Aside from the humor of the fact that they have sent me the same form letter twice, the letter itself is actually quite instructive. The most concise and highly-researched conclusions about where our society is today can often be found in the advertising campaigns that depend on split-second appeals. These appeals give us a peak into how people think. Surely, the *Harvard Business Review* must offer us an accurate reflection of what people today think about leadership. Apparently, we like to think of ourselves as leaders, and a leader is someone who, as they say here, “has your say,” “makes things happens,” “puts *your* stamp on the future.” Leadership is self-assertiveness. It’s self-confidence. Really, it’s self-centeredness.

Is that right? Are these things the core of leadership?

Introducing Nehemiah

In considering the nature of leadership,

few books speak more clearly than the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, which was originally the second half of the book of Ezra. We have reached Nehemiah in our present series of overview sermons on the histories of the Old Testament. In case this is your first, an overview sermon attempts to get at the main message—or the weight—of a whole book of the Bible in one sermon.

Our series began with the book of Joshua, which is set about one thousand years earlier than Nehemiah. Joshua described for us Israel’s conquest and initial settlement of the Promised Land. Judges followed, which recounted three centuries of leaders, some good and some bad. Next was Ruth, a marvelous little cameo of God’s providential care for his people in desperate times. After Ruth came 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, which told and retold the story of God dealing with his people through Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, and all the kings of Israel and Judah until the northern kingdom was destroyed and the southern kingdom was exiled to Babylon in 586 B.C. Then in Ezra, our last study, the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, completing the work in 516 B.C., seventy years after the old temple was destroyed. And now in Nehemiah, the place where Old Testament history ends in about 440 B.C., God’s people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

In Nehemiah, we watch the people of God resettle the land, build Jerusalem’s walls, and prepare to fight. They accom-

plish much, and so many of their names are prominently placed in the lists scattered throughout the book. In the foreground of the unfolding story, however, are the leaders: The priests who work in the temple and teach God's law—chief among whom is Ezra—and the governor himself, Nehemiah.

As we look at the portraits presented in the book of Nehemiah and Ezra, we want to ask an always crucial question: What kind of leadership does the Bible present as exemplary? Even more concisely, what is godly leadership? This question will help guide us through the book of Nehemiah, where we will note *eight* aspects of godly leadership. I pray that through this time, God will give you more understanding of what he calls you to be, as well as how he calls you to use the time, influence, and opportunities that he gives to you.

(1) A Godly Leader Prays

First, we see that a godly leader prays. The book begins in Babylon with Nehemiah getting some bad news. Nehemiah recounts the story:

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.

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 (Neh 1:2-4).²

We do not think much about city walls these days, and so the news Nehemiah hears about the sad state of Jerusalem's walls may not seem like a big deal to

you. But actually, a city's walls were arguably more important than its army. Without walls, a city would be at the mercy of whatever band of marauders came through. It could not control itself. That's why we can make sense of the proverb that says, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control" (Prov 25:28). Such a man is destroyed by any passing temptation or outside influence.

Jerusalem was in such a state. Nehemiah hears about it, is moved, and immediately turns to prayer. His first act is to go to God, who is sovereign over all the empires that might descend upon Jerusalem. He prays,

"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 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 (1:5-11).

It is a beautiful, compact prayer, beginning with praise, moving to confession, then citing God's promises back to God. He reminds God of how his name is tied up with his people's name, and then asks God to move the king of Persia's heart. Adoration, confession, scriptural promise, honoring of God, the request itself—this is not a bad model for a prayer! If you are a leader in any capacity and you want to know how to pray, Nehemiah's brief prayer in chapter 1 is a good model.

Not only was Nehemiah moved to prayer in chapter 1, we find him praying throughout the book. In chapter 2, he shoots up an "arrow prayer," as some call it, when King Artaxerxes asks him a question and he wants to answer well: "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king . . ." (2:4-5a). You can be sure that Nehemiah did not open his mouth and utter a long pastoral prayer like we do in church on Sunday mornings. I assume he prayed silently and briefly. You don't want the king to think you are not paying attention! And these types of prayers seemed to typify Nehemiah's life. He utters brief prayers to God over everything that concerns him throughout the book: "remember me in mercy, O God; frustrate my enemies, O Lord;" and so on.³

I wonder how alone *you* feel when you receive bad news, or when you are enduring a time of tragedy. If you do not believe in the God of the Bible, I expect one of the loneliest feelings in the universe must be experienced when you hear about something of great magnitude—good or bad—and you feel an innate desire to talk to him. To say, "Thank you!" or "Why?" I have seen this happen so many times, and I believe you know what I am talking

about. Perhaps you just thought you were talking to yourself. But I don't think so. I think you were trying to talk to someone else, someone whom you don't even know. And you can!

Friend, God cares about us in ways no one else does. When God's people were in Jerusalem and no one paid attention to them, they were not ultimately at the disposal of their Persian overlords. By God's providence, news came to Nehemiah in Babylon, and Nehemiah was sent! God alone is finally sovereign, and he can always be approached in prayer. That is an amazing thought! That this One who is sovereign over the universe is always approachable to us in prayer! Even those of you who meet with the president of the United States with some regularity may not be able to talk with him at will. But those of us who know God through Christ can always speak with the One who holds the president's heart in his hands. That is the privilege that you and I have in Christ—the privilege of prayer.

My Christian friend, cultivate your prayer life. Cultivate your desire to talk to him. What is your first response to challenges? To bad news? For that matter, what is your first response to good news? What stirs up your heart? When you hear anything of significance, you should respond in prayer. Especially if you would be a leader of God's people!

For those of you who are leaders in the church, I hope you realize that Nehemiah should not encourage us to pray for our nation's armies so much as it pushes us to pray that God's people would be distinct from the surrounding world. *That's* ultimately why Nehemiah was concerned about Jerusalem's walls. Today, we don't need to pray that God would erect a physical boundary between

his people and others; we need to pray that he would preserve the distinction between the people he has redeemed and the people who remain in darkness and rebellion. That is how the world will see the light—through people like us, as we live new lives. And that is what we should pray for as leaders in the church, if we would be godly leaders.

(2) A Godly Leader Acts

If this book is anything, it is a book of action, which brings us to the second characteristic of a godly leader: a godly leader acts.

In large part, the book reads like Nehemiah's own memoirs. By this I don't mean his autobiography, which would be a record of his own internal life. No, they're memoirs because they recount great events and his own part in them. What emerges in these memoirs is a skillful political actor, whose concern for his own people apparently coincided with the desires of his king, Artaxerxes. It is Artaxerxes who commissions Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem:

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; 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, but I said to the king, "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, 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."

Then 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 (2:1-6).

What an interesting account! Nehemiah is "very much afraid" of this absolute monarch's power to deal with him simply for looking sad in his presence, yet he continues with his plea despite his fear. He prays, as we mentioned before, and he acts! He speaks to the king about his troubles! Nehemiah was a man of action. "And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me," he says, "the king granted my requests" (2:8b; cf. 2:18). Before you know it—the next verse, in fact (2:9)—Nehemiah is off with permission letters from the king in hand.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah again takes the initiative by setting out on a fact-finding mission:

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. 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 (2:12-13).

Now, Nehemiah does not wrap up his work after collecting facts. He takes on the challenge of caring for Jerusalem and, in chapter 3, leading the people to re-build the wall.

And he does it skillfully! He divides up the work between various groups of people, giving many of them responsibility for the parts of the wall near their own homes, so that they would have an

obvious interest in it.⁴ Throughout chapter 3, we find the people zealously repairing the wall.

By the end of chapter 6, the wall is completed, but Nehemiah continues to be a man of action throughout the book. In chapter 7, he deals with the problems created by a city population that was too small. In chapter 12, he orchestrates the celebrations for dedicating the completed walls. By God's providence, no significant part of Jerusalem's rehabilitation was accomplished apart from the activity of this one leader, Nehemiah! It is a striking story.

Today, Christian, you and I do not need to act by physically separating ourselves from others. God does not call Christians to live in separate gated communities, or to build high walls around their churches. That is *not* how we apply Nehemiah's efforts to ourselves. Rather, we want to be identified as those who are ransomed by the death of Christ for as long as we live in this world. Christ has granted us a newness of life, and we want this change to mark us out. After all, it is our newness of life, more than any wall, that points the world to him!

Therefore, repentance and trust must be our chief actions. As we continually repent of our sins and trust in him, the wonderful fruit of our newness becomes more and more evident. So we must encourage one another toward continual repentance of the sins that make us look like we still belong to this world.

If that is how godly leaders must act, then pray that God would give the elders of his church wisdom to act in ways that bless this church, preserve the witness of the church, and protect God's people from being dissolved into the world around. So a godly leader acts.

(3) A Godly Leader Will Face

Opposition

Third, a godly leader will face opposition. The first stirrings of opposition emerge in chapter 2 when Nehemiah announces his plans to return to Jerusalem (2:10, 19). But the opposition really begins to dominate the story in chapter 4, after Nehemiah has led the people to begin rebuilding the walls.

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—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (4:1-3).

The rebuilding continues amidst mockery and opposition. But then the stakes rise:

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."

Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times

over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

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 brothers, 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 his own work.

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked (4:7-18a).

When the opposition increases, Nehemiah prays and posts a guard. He both invokes God's aid and acts. I hope you realize there is nothing inconsistent about doing these two things together. When his fellow citizens become discouraged, likewise, he exhorts them not to fear these people, to trust in the Lord, and, if need be, to fight them.

The opposition continues into chapter 6, yet here the Jews' opponents begin to focus on slandering and intimidating Nehemiah himself. Nehemiah turns to God in prayer, and God gives him the wisdom he needs to respond to this opposition (6:9-13).

Let me add, facing opposition well is usually more complicated than people imagine. But this is what a leader does! Like Nehemiah, we must not let opposition drive us *from* God, but *to* him. There

is nothing surprising about the fact that Nehemiah's opponents try to intimidate him personally. The adversary of God's people will always go for the leaders. Discredit and manipulate the leaders, and the flock will be disorganized, confused, and ineffectual.

The wall is completed in fifty-two days despite the opposition (6:15)!

Still, his adversaries do not rest. Nehemiah writes,

Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me (6:17-19).

Tobiah continues insidiously to infiltrate the ranks of Nehemiah's helpers and to sow opposition against him and his policies. Thank God that he gave his people a leader as fearless as Nehemiah! How easy it would have been for Nehemiah to be deflected into doing whatever he could to stop all the ill reports. But friend, that is never an option for those who aspire to leadership. Leaders will face opposition.

I wonder if you think of yourself as fearless? Perhaps you laugh at that question and say, "No, of course not!" Or maybe the question does not move you at all because you do. You think of yourself as fearless. Let me ask, when you are having a conversation with yourself, how important do you find other's thoughts of you to be? How much do you care what others think about you? Friend, the only liberation we will ever find from a

debilitating fear of man is a real, true, and correct fear of God. He is the One whose respect we should desire. He is the One whose opinion we should cherish. Everyone from our best friends to our most determined opponents can misunderstand us. But God knows the truth. If you fear him alone, you will not have to fear any opposition he may call you to endure. He is the one we are supposed to ultimately fear. And his opposition is truly fearful. The one being in universe we do *not* want to oppose us is God!

Friend, Jesus Christ faced opposition, and so will we if we follow him. Remember Jesus' words, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Peter, who was present when Jesus uttered these words, later wrote to a group of Christians,

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness (1 Pet 2:21-24a).

My Christian brother or sister, examine yourself. Remind yourself of whom you really serve, so that when you are put to the test, you, like the people of God of old, can face opposition. And pray that we who are leaders in the church will rightly respond when our leadership is opposed. Godly leaders will face opposition.

(4) A Godly Leader Cares

Fourth, a godly leader cares, a lesson that comes to the forefront of the story in chapter 5.

When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, broken walls are not the only problem he finds. A number of the weaker people in the community are being abused. Wealthier citizens are taking economic advantage of the poor, so that the poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer.

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." (Neh 5:1-5)

Once again, Nehemiah acts, and this time to stop the usury. He exhorts the wealthier citizens to fear the Lord and stop extorting money from the poor, to which they respond, "'We will give it back. . . . And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say'" (5:12). Nehemiah then uses a very interesting image to warn the wealthy about the consequences of not keeping their word:

I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised (5:13).

This robe Nehemiah shakes would have had little pockets where personal things could be kept, and he wants these wealthier citizens to know that if they do not keep their pledges, God will shake *them* out of *his* pockets. If they continue to treat God's weaker ones in this fashion, they can expect to be God's special possession no longer.

In short, Nehemiah cares. He is a godly leader who cares enough to act against abuse. More than that, he turns down some of the privileges he could exercise as governor for the sake of feeding the people. He perceives their needs and he pours himself out for them (5:14-15).

Friend, I wonder if your heart goes out to people whom you know are in need. Or do you find yourself cold toward them? At least be honest with yourself in answering this question: Do you find your heart toward others is cold? Do the needs of others have any voice amidst the crowd of desires in your head all clamoring for attention? They did with Nehemiah, because Nehemiah cared. In that sense, he points us to Christ, who *cares* for his church: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

We cannot take the Old Testament as a blueprint for our nation today and use Israel's laws for our laws. But we can see what God values and consider how we might incarnate those values in our country. Clearly, he values caring for the poor. So how do we encourage that concern within our weekly lives? Do we? Or have we mailed in that concern along with our tax payments to the government?

Friend, cultivate a genuine concern for others that leads you to action. For instance: Do you know any older members in the church who have difficulty getting out of their house for church

or shopping or who have other needs? What could you do to establish a relationship with an older member that would encourage and serve them? What about our ministry to the children of prisoners? Have you thought about purchasing a gift for one of these children? Many of them ask for basics, like jeans or school shirts. Also, our congregation has a benevolence fund for helping members in need as well as elderly non-members in the area who cannot afford medicine and other basics. You can quietly act in benevolence with the money you give to the benevolence fund. So many things can be quietly done. But my concern is for you. Do you have a way in which you live out God's concern for others, particularly for those who are poor?

Pray that God will make the leaders of our church—and the church as a whole—marked by a concern for the needy among and around us. Pray that he would make those of us who are leaders especially self-sacrificial in our love. Because godly leaders care.

(5) A Godly Leader Turns People to God's Word

Fifth, a godly leader turns people to God's Word. We see this particularly in chapter 8, where Ezra the priest reads the Law of God.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before

the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion . . .

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah— instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read (Neh 7:73b-8:4a; 8:5-8).

So all the people are gathered at the Water Gate, the gate through which the townspeople would exit to get to their nearest source of water for the city. And they have come to hear Ezra read the Law from daybreak till noon. It's a dramatic scene: Ezra stands on the platform with an open book; the people respond by standing and lifting their hands, then bowing down; and the Levites instruct the people so that they "could understand what was being read."

And then notice how Nehemiah leads the people to respond to God's Word. Nehemiah says,

"Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of

the LORD is your strength" (8:9-10; cf. Isa. 30:15).

Undoubtedly, the people are convicted of their sins, as we saw in Ezra 10. But here, interestingly, Nehemiah forbids them from responding with weeping, because "the joy of the LORD is your strength." So, quite simply, they depart in order "to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy" (8:12). In fact, "From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great" (8:17). Why all the joy? "[B]ecause they now understood the words that had been made known to them" (8:12). Ezra then proceeds to read God's law to God's people for seven straight days (8:18)! A godly leader turns people to God's Word.

If you are a non-Christian, hopefully I can help you understand at least this one thing: We Christians do not believe that ultimate truth is something human beings can figure out through the hard work of the intellect. Nor is the truth something that humans create through cultural discourse or long agreed-upon political conventions. Instead, we believe that God has taken the initiative of revealing himself to us in the Bible, which means the Bible is ultimate truth. God has spoken, and so we will call the Bible God's Word. But not only that: God went a step further and sent his Word in the flesh! Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1,14).

If you are a Christian, consider whether you make God's Word central to your own life. When you hear God's Word read or preached, how do you respond? Does your heart leap? The hearts of the Jews in this passage clearly do. Or does your response depend on the skill of the one

preaching it? On how well the sermon is delivered? If you are bored by God's Words, then whose words excite you? The words of your friends or family members, your teacher or coach? What would need to change in order for God's Word to stir your heart in the same way the words of other people can?

The most important thing we do at church is teach God's Word, because God's Word alone generates life. As the apostle Paul said to the Romans, "faith comes from hearing the message" (Rom. 10:17). People who hear God's Word and believe it have their lives changed.

That is certainly the testimony of our church. I and the other elders serve the congregation best by making sure God's Word is accurately and forcefully presented in everything from the Sunday morning gathering to the Sunday evening devotion; from the music we sing to the prayers we publicly pray; from the church's Wednesday night Bible study to the small groups meeting in homes; from discipling relationships to evangelistic outreaches; from the books on the book-stall to the sermons mailed out to seminarians and shut-ins. God's Word is the seed which gives birth to God's people.

This is how God has always done it. He created the world by his word. He created Abraham by calling him out. And he created his people at Mount Sinai by giving them his commands. In Ezekiel's great vision of the valley of dry bones, God speaks and the bones are clothed with flesh and brought to life. Then, of course, there is the Word of God himself, the Lord Jesus, who came, took on flesh, and died for the sins of all who would ever repent of their sins and believe these words about who he is and what he has done. As we said, "Faith comes from hearing the mes-

sage" (Rom 10:17). A godly leader turns people to God's Word because God's Word brings life!

(6) A Godly Leader Confesses Sins

Sixth, a godly leader confesses sins. As we saw, the people celebrated the reading of God's Word. Two days after the people finished feasting, the leaders turned their attention to the sins of the people and led them in confession. The text does not tell us if the following prayer was prayed by Nehemiah, Ezra, or the Levites. But everyone stood, listened, and—we assume—agreed with this leader's prayer:

"Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.

"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

"You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

"You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light

on the way they were to take.

"You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

"But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, "This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt," or when they committed awful blasphemies.

"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

"You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed

the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.

"But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.

"But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.

"You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

"Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the

kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

“But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress” (Neh 9:5b-37; emphasis added).

So there they stood, confessing their own sins and the sins of their fathers. But notice, this prayer of confession begins with praising God: “Blessed be your glorious name” (9:5). Really, the whole prayer is cast in the form of praise to God: *You saw, you came, you are, you sent*, and so forth. At the same time, the prayer is both a confession and a summary of Old Testament history. It is awful to observe, isn’t it, that your history is well-summarized as a confession of sin? But so it was (cf. Ezra 9).

And consider this admission: “In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong” (9:33). Just imagine some individual or group stating that publicly today! “In everything that has happened, O Sovereign God, you have acted faithfully. We got what we asked for. Our sins deserved it.” Surely such an admission demonstrates an amazing understanding of who God is and of who we are. It assumes that God is sovereign and that God is good. And surely such faith is

difficult to sustain when life is not going well. Yet that is what the people said: All of this happened “because of our sins” (9:37). They did not shift the responsibility at all.

What a day it was! They spent one-quarter of the day reading God’s Word and one-quarter confessing their sins and worshipping (9:3). Do you see the pattern? By reading God’s Word and perceiving his holy character, they became more and more aware of their sins and the *need* to confess them. Yet by reading God’s Word and perceiving his patient love, they became more and more aware of their *ability* to confess these sins. Scripture reminded them that God is from everlasting to everlasting, and that they could rely on his ancient promises of love.

Oh friend, if we will only hear it, Scripture will stir our hearts, too, and move us to confession and worship of this magnificent God. He is perfect. He is holy. He is just. He is loving. He is merciful. He will not let us saunter into his presence, unaware of our sin. But nor will he let our sin keep us from him—if we will only look to his Son—because he is a God of persistent love.

We, too, are guilty of sinning against this good God. The Jew’s confession of sin is no mere historical record, unrelated to your experience or mine! Just think for a second: What sins of yours have weighed on your conscience this week? Now consider, if they weigh on your conscience at the moment, as filthy, corrupted, and deadened as your conscience has become through repeated compromise with sin, becoming accustomed and learning to even accommodate that sin, can you imagine how your sins will appear when they are brought out of the stygian darkness of our present state and into the bright and

piercing radiance of God's purity?

And yet (!) we can still come with those darkened consciences into his presence to be forgiven of our blackest sins. Friend, if you are separated from God by your sins, the most important business you can conduct is to find out how your sins will be forgiven. The Puritan William Gurnall was right when he said plainly, "Better die in a prison, die in a ditch, than die in [your] sins."⁵

How can you be forgiven of your sins? You must look to Jesus Christ. In Christ, God became a man, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, taking the penalty deserved by all of us who would ever repent of our sins and turn to him in faith. Christ is the answer to our sins. He himself was without sin, but he was made sin for us.⁶

If you are a Christian, you are not surprised at this connection between reading God's Word, worshipping him, and confessing your sins. Yet some Christians have been taught that we confess our sins only once—when you become a Christian—and never again. But in Scripture, from Psalm 32 to James 5:16, we watch as believers confess their sins again and again. They repeatedly go to God and find their forgiveness in him. My basic rule of thumb is this: As soon as you stop sinning against God, you can stop confessing your sins to him.

A godly leader confesses his sins and leads his people to confess their sins.

(7) A Godly Leader Leads People in Making Specific Commitments

Seventh, a godly leader leads people in making specific commitments. Right after chapter 9's Scripture reading and prayer of confession, the people take an oath to keep God's law: "In view of all this, we

are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it" (9:38). The content of this pledge is then found in chapter 10:

"The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts" (10:28-31).

And the pledges continue through the end of the chapter, all of them promising, basically, to follow the laws God gave to Moses (10:32-39). These pledges do not negate the authority of God's Word, but they helpfully summarize God's law. Really, their pledges act like a church covenant. Church covenants should not be used to supplant Scripture, but they can helpfully summarize the things that Scripture requires of our churches. Anyhow, Nehemiah leads the people in making these public promises to God.

Have you ever made any promises to God? Have you ever resolved to repent of your sins, and to believe in Christ? If you have not, that is the most important commitment you can make today. As Jesus himself said, "The time has come.

The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

For you, Christian, take note of how these people make specific resolutions to God and to one another. Are you reluctant to make such specific promises? Is there something in you that wants to avoid committing to a particular group of God's people with whom you say "we"? If so, you deprive *them* of something God intends for them through you, and you deprive *yourself* of what God intends for you through them. But you are thinking more highly of your own abilities than you should; you deceive yourself. So commit yourself to a particular local church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached. Embrace its covenant. And engage with the work of God in that local place.

A good local church will help you not to be a person who picks and chooses which of God's commands to obey. This is one of the reasons that our church uses a covenant. It is a useful summary of our Christian obligations to God and to each other. Yes, it takes humility to submit to one another—and to leaders.

Which raises the flip side of the coin. Should church elders commit themselves to giving the time, trouble, and effort *to leading* well when the other members do not commit themselves to giving the time, trouble, and trust *to following* well? There's as much art in the one as the other. The late historian Stephen Ambrose said several years ago,

I used to tell my students that President Harry Truman was wrong to use the atomic bombs against the Japanese. I believed the Japanese were already ready, even eager, to surrender, as long as they could keep their emperor. I was wrong. New documents reveal that the Japanese intended to fight to the

death. I realized that Truman was exactly right and that his decision saved uncounted American and Japanese lives.⁷

Regardless of your assessment of Truman's decision, hopefully you can see what Ambrose was saying. Truman, as the president, had a number of facts at his disposal that others (even professional historians) did not have, and so he made the decision he did. As someone who has been in leadership, I can simply tell you how often leadership works this way. There are often considerations and information that only the leadership has, and that may not be widely understood or known. So in our churches, we should follow God by following those God has placed in leadership. Do not follow them into sin and error—that is where congregational responsibility kicks in (as in 2 Tim 4:3; Gal 1:6-9). But follow as they lead according to Scripture.

A godly leader leads God's people into making specific commitments.

(8) A Godly Leader Keeps Leading

Finally, a godly leader keeps leading. What do I mean by that? Well, let's remember a couple of things about our place in the storyline. First, we are at the end of Old Testament history. Chronologically, Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls in Jerusalem is the last bit of Old Testament history we have, which brings us to a second thing worth remembering. Throughout this entire series, we have seen God underscore the fact that his people are to be distinct from the nations around them. This has been the main theme of all of these histories, from Joshua to Nehemiah. God pulled a nation out of Egypt to be a distinct people and to display his character to the nations. How

appropriate then for the histories to conclude with the rebuilding of the walls that are supposed to set the people apart.

Now consider: Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem for a time—probably not months, but years. We read in chapter 13, “I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem” (13:6). Then he returns to this place into which he has poured so much of his life, and what does he find? The temple is being used for non-religious purposes (13:6-9). The singers, priests, and other temple servants have gone back to farming because they were not being paid (13:10-11). The Sabbath is being forgotten and desecrated (13:15-22). What’s worse, look at verses 23 and following. Here is the last chapter of Nehemiah. Here is the end of Old Testament history.

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. 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?” (13:23-27).

Oh, friend, when you read this, do you not want to scream?! You have *one thousand years of God’s faithfulness*, and look at what happens! Nehemiah has been gone for maybe a few years; he comes back, and what are they doing? The same thing that Solomon did, which eventually led the people into worshipping other gods! You read this and think to yourself, what’s the point of all this history?! What else can be done?! These people are hopeless! Quite contrary to the many utopian visions of the world, the Old Testament paints a picture of mankind that, on one level, is profoundly pessimistic and—we must admit—realistic. The sins they struggled with in Joshua’s day were the same sins they struggled with in Nehemiah’s day—one thousand years later!

What would God do with such a constantly misled and misleading people?!

In fact, God had told them what he would do decades earlier. While the people were still in exile, the Word of the Lord came to the prophet Ezekiel, who was in Babylon at the time. Through Ezekiel, God criticized the leaders of Israel—whom he refers to as “shepherds”—for the way most of them (unlike Ezra and Nehemiah) misled God’s people. And here is what God promised he would do:

“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shep-

herd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep” (Ezek 34:2-12a).

God himself would come as the good shepherd. And he would come in the fullness of divinity and humanity together in the Lord Jesus Christ. This was necessary because no prophet from Samuel to Malachi and no ruler from Saul to Zedekiah was able to lead God’s people in such a way that the peoples’ hearts actually changed—not even Ezra or Nehemiah. This could only be done when God’s Word himself, Jesus Christ, went to work within them.

So the Word would come. And he would come to convict God’s people of sin and give them new life through the preaching of his good news. Yes, he would have people who would be ruled well, and who would rule well. For we finally see, in the book of Revelation, the completion

of the story, when the great figures surrounding God’s throne praise the Lamb upon the throne, saying, “with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Rev 5:10). Then Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem, will come down out of heaven and God himself will reign. And this new Jerusalem will not need a temple “because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” And this new Jerusalem will not need the sun because “the glory of God gives its light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21:22-23). That is the hope the Bible holds out for us. That is the hope that the Old Testament points to as its history ends. And that is how a leader must continue to lead—by pointing to this hope!

Christian, what implications does this have for how we live? Simply, you must be prepared to continue to battle against sin throughout this life. The warfare that we are called to wage against sin in our lives is short in view of eternity, even if it sometimes feels very long in this world.

For those who are elders in the church, take note of Nehemiah’s experience here: The work of leading a church never ends. This church is not *reformed*, in the sense that its work is now done. Rather, it must continually *be reformed* by the Word of God! As an elder, our work is never done. Neither we, nor the church as a whole, have arrived. We have not learned everything God has to tell us. We still draw breath. We still read the Bible. God’s Spirit still works in our hearts. And God’s Word still refashions us.

For those of you who are not elders in the church, I plead with you to realize that God has given those who lead the church

a great task, and it is our joy to accept that task. Don't ever think that you should not bother the elders. Serving the church is the greatest privilege that God has given us in this life! And please forgive us if we ever appear to forget that privilege. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thess 5:13).

And as Paul wrote to Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim 4:2). A godly leader keeps leading.

Conclusion

So is godly leadership about putting your stamp on the future? Is it about self-confidence and self-assertion? Not according to Nehemiah.

In this book, you get a very different picture of leadership. In chapter 1, Nehemiah asks God to hear "those who delight in revering your name" (1:11). In chapter 5, Nehemiah says that he has not taken advantage of the poor—he has not fleeced the sheep!—"out of reverence for God" (5:15). And in chapter 7, Nehemiah appoints one person to a position of leadership "because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do" (7:2). Here we get to the core of godly leadership in the Bible. Leadership is about fearing God more than others do. Leadership is about revering God's name. Leadership is about taking pleasure in

who God is and what he is like. Leadership is about making the chief end of your life helping, instructing, and challenging others to revere and delight in God's name as well.

Do you delight in doing that? Does that give you more joy than any combination of irritations that comes with leadership? Do you take pleasure in seeing others revere and honor God? Then you, my friend, have the basic components of being a good influence in the lives of others. You will lead well.

Your life isn't just about money, is it? I hope it's about something deeper. Something so central to your core, to what makes you tick, that you can't imagine living without it. I hope it's about leadership. About learning and proclaiming *God's Word*. About praying to *God*. About delighting in seeing *God's name* revered.

Let's pray together

Lord God, we pray that you make us godly leaders and followers as we see depicted in the book of Nehemiah. And give us such persevering love and grace. We pray that we would be like those in the book of Isaiah, who themselves pray, "Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts" (Isa 26:8). O God, we pray that you would make the desire of our hearts the lifting up of your name. Bring glory to yourself though our lives, our church, and all our opportunities for exercising leadership for you. We pray this all so that people will revere your name through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹This sermon is excerpted by permission from Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL:

Crossway, forthcoming, 2006). It was originally preached on November 24, 2002, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

²Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

³4:4-5; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.

⁴3:23, 28-30; cf. 7:3.

⁵William Gurnall, *Christian in Complete Armour* (repr.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964; Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1864; first published 1662), 169.

⁶Heb 4:15; 2 Cor 5:21.

⁷Stephen Ambrose, "Old Soldiers Never Die," in *Forbes ASAP* (Oct. 2, 2000): 110.