

Nehemiah Overview  
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Brad Bell

Well, welcome to you. Go ahead and find a seat. My name is Brad and I have the privilege of hanging out with you here today, and if you have your Bible—and I hope you do—turn to the book of Nehemiah. We're going to start Nehemiah here today and spend the next 20 or 40 or whatever weeks in it. Truthfully, I'm just encouraged you're here. Many of you were here last week and there were messages that if you are a people pleaser, you'd just skip, and that was last week, because last week was kind of a jab. It didn't hurt real bad, but certainly got your attention Popped a little bit, and you came back.

If you weren't here, we really challenged the body to consider what it means to be a part of a church. What's our calling? What does God want *for* us? What is it He wants *from* us? We recognize the gravitational pull toward absolute apathy, mediocre spirituality, and pathetic Christianity that claims the name of Jesus and lives like crazy the rest of the week, and we challenge that.

If you're here today and you don't know Christ, you need to know we know what you're thinking, because we think like that too. We don't like hypocritical Christians either, and so we just kind of took the shot. I think *in* that, it's been fascinating the responses, and some people are pretty fired up about it, and they're here and excited to be a part of a movement. Some people decided not to, and at the end of the day we hope that for all of you who know Jesus, it might be an opportunity for you to pursue Christ in a special way. So we're kind of going to keep that theme going as we enter into our fall series in the book of Nehemiah.

So hopefully you've turned there. I just want to begin there by kind of an intro question. Let me just to play the scenario out. So a person comes to faith in Christ. They begin to read their Bible, they begin to pray, they learn what it means to worship, they get involved in a Life Group, they find a community of friends. They feel the tug of God to pack up their bags, get their passport ready and head overseas, and so they do that, and they see what God is doing, not just in their community, but across the world. They experience those things, they come back, and they learn what it means to be a steward of their time and a steward of their resources, and they even attend church faithfully. The question I would ask is, "For what?" Like, to what end? What's the purpose of all of that? Why is it that a person would go through those things? What is it that should be stirred in them?

You start reading in your New Testament books like Titus—Paul writing to a young pastor of the city of Crete, and he tells Titus that we have been gathered together by God as a people that are called a people for His own possession that ought to be, what He says, zealous for good deeds. He says of Paul to the church at Ephesus that we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that He prepared beforehand that we would walk in them. There's a sense that when God calls us together and calls us to Himself, He does so for a very specific purpose, and it's the purpose of being used by God.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you would like to be used by God in some way? Like, “I’d like to make a difference for the kingdom.” Go ahead and raise [your hand] really high if you don’t mind. Okay, so everybody, virtually, would want to make a difference for Christ somehow. Chances are, nobody would really say, “Man, my goal in life spiritually is to just kind of be pathetic.” Like, “If I could put my faith in Jesus and never make a difference for the kingdom on this earth, that would be great. I like to go to church, but not very often. I like to read my Bible, but not very much. I’d like to pray, but only for meals, and if I could just die having made zero impact for eternity, that would be great.” See, nobody wants that.

We all come to faith in Christ, we start reading our Bible, and God starts to do something in me, doesn’t He? He starts to mess with your life. He starts to give you this sense of you being called for something bigger than this place. It’s what Solomon called in Ecclesiastes, “God putting eternity on your heart.” There’s a sense that, as Peter says, we are aliens and strangers in a foreign land. This world is not our home. This isn’t where it ends. This isn’t the final destination. There’s a sense that we are created for something bigger than us, but what type of person does God use? Because certainly if you’re like me, you start looking in the mirror, and you’re like, “Lord, obviously you’re not using people based on intelligence, or you’d pick somebody else. God, can you use me even if I’ve got a past? Can you use me if I’ve got things that I don’t like to talk about in public? Can you use me, because I don’t feel really talented, and I don’t feel really gifted. I don’t feel like I’ve got any sort of credentials. There are certainly people that are brighter than I am. God can you use me?”

What kind of person does God use? Have you ever wondered—like really—who is it? As you look at the pages of history and the pages of your Scriptures and you say, “Who is it that God uses?” Is there a pattern? I think there’s a pattern. Interestingly enough, it’s tucked deep within the recesses of a small little book called 2 Chronicles. I’m sure it’s number one on your to-read list. It’s the part of your Bible, by the way, where the pages are stuck together typically, because you start reading 2 Chronicles—“I think I’ve read this before”—and you kind of skip through it.

But deep within the recesses is this verse, this small, little verse, 2 Chronicles, chapter 16, verse 9. Little itty bitty thing, but I tell you what, if you can grab hold of it, the truths that were true in its day carry to us today in a profound way. Whether you feel like it was just written in the Old Testament times and not applicable to us or not, I’ll guarantee you, if you’ll set yourself to do what this verse says, you will feel what this verse says you will feel. It says that “the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth, that He may strongly support”—strongly support—“those whose heart is completely His.”

What if that were true? What if the eyes of God truly move throughout the earth? What if even in this place, right here, right now, God is searching the crowd? And He’s not looking for the talented, and He’s not looking for the super spiritual, He’s not looking for the person who can quote the most memory verses, or who knows what Greek even means. He’s not looking for the person who’s been overseas and has a passport full of stamps. He’s looking for the person whose heart is completely His.

Every single person that I saw here raise their hand and say they wanted to be used by God, you need to know God *will* use you if your heart is completely His. If you will give yourselves to

Him, He will mess with your life. He will begin to do something in you that you never thought imaginable. He will place inside of you a seed, a seed of something that, when watered, when cultivated, when nurtured, it will germinate into a holy discontent—an issue in your life that you say, “God, that needs to be solved, that needs to be fixed, and I need to do that, and I won’t be able to sleep at night until I’ve been a part of that.”

God will put in your life a holy discontent where you say, “God, if it takes every last breath that I have on this earth, I have *got* to be a part of doing that.” He’ll give you a holy discontent where you say, “God, regardless of what was in my past, this is an issue that to me is an absolute hot button passion issue, that if I don’t lay my life down for that, I will have been disobedient to you.” He’ll give you that.

So in many ways, the book of Nehemiah, 13 chapters, is about a man’s holy discontent, and I’m going to just caution you: if you don’t want to be used by God, if you don’t want God to mess with your life, if you’re really afraid if you actually give your life to Jesus He might require something of you, you might want to just ditch church for the next 20 weeks, because what you’ll find is that this guy is a tremendous example. He’s a normal everyday Joe, just like you and me, but his heart is completely His. He’s given his heart fully to the Lord, and God says, “That’s the kind of guy,” He says, “I don’t want to just support; I want to *strongly* support.” That’s who this Nehemiah is.

In the pages of history, in the pages of Scripture, the people that God uses are people just like us. There’s typically, when you start talking about this, three groups of people. There’s one group—they’re already frothing at the mouth. They’re like, “Bring it! Give me my cause. Give me my holy discontent. I’ll run through that wall if that’s what God wants me to do,” and they’re there. They’re ready to go. They’re the best minority, by the way.

Most of the people are kind of in this middle group. They’re like, “Me? Really? God, do you want to pick again? Is there anybody else other than me? Could God really use me, really?” Because of all these things, and all this stuff, and all this guilt, and all this shame, and all this baggage, and I go, “Yes!” You think God wants the arrogant? God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. God doesn’t want the arrogant. That’s why Jesus looked at the Pharisees and said, “Look, you are a bunch of whitewashed tombs. You’re clean on the outside, but on the inside you’re dead. That’s why Jesus opposed religious people, opposed the people who, on the outside, lived a polished life, but in the inside had no heart for God. God loves the broken. God loves the people with issues. God loves us: normal, everyday, unimpressive, mediocre, borderline pathetic people like us. But if our hearts are completely His, He puts in us a holy discontent and raises us up, and I’ll assure you, you will change the world if you will give your heart to Him.

That’s the kind of book that this is. It’s about a guy who begins to be in that third group, begins to be that type of guy that stirs with some anticipation, that begins to think, “Well, maybe God *can* use me. And yeah, maybe there are smarter people, but I’m all in. Maybe there’s people that are better, but I’m in; more talented, but I’m in. I’ll give God all I’ve got, and I’ve got this little loaf and I’ve got this little fish, but I’ll just bring what little I got to Jesus, my little measly sack lunch,

and if He'll multiply it, I'll do all I can to feed His people. God, if you'll use this, then I'm all in." That's who Nehemiah is.

This book, by the way, speaks to all three of those issues. It's one of the greatest leadership books I found in my Bible. It captures the heart of a reformer, a guy who has a holy discontent, a guy who, though sitting literally in the lap of luxury in Persia, in the capital city—he's literally living in like the "MTV Cribs" world of his day. He's got a pimped-out house in a pimped-out city with a pimped-out wine list, and he's still looking at God's people, and his heart breaks for God's people, and he says, "Even though I'm comfortable, God, the things of God are more important than me, and I have a holy discontent for my people," and not only that, but he'll do something about it.

This book got in my face in 1998. I first was exposed to it grad school, and a guy named Professor Howard Hendricks, who's been teaching at Dallas Theological Seminary since Jesus ascended, taught this text. The "Prof" is so well-respected—that's his nickname; everybody calls him Prof. The professors call him Prof. I mean, he's just amazing. And I sat and listened to him teach Nehemiah, and I'll tell you what—he reached inside of me, grabbed this seed of holy discontent, and lit my life ablaze for my passion, which was God's church. And in 1998, he put that seed—God did—of that holy discontent, and Professor Hendricks—Prof—just fanned that flame.

Years later I read a book by a guy named Andy Stanley called *Visioneering*, and there's a plus and a minus to the Bible. The plus is that you never need a new version, like an upgrade, like you buy when you're in college. You bought that \$250 psychology book, and then were fired up to get some cash at the end of the year and try to sell it back, and then, "Oh no, we're getting the new version; you can keep that one for your personal library." You hadn't read it all year, but somehow in a decade you're going to pull that book and read it. The good news is you don't need a new Bible, okay? It's the Word of God, so that's good; you don't need a new upgrade.

The negative to it, of course, is you find that there's guys much smarter than you that read the text and study the text and write books on the text that you end up reading, and so I read a book years ago by a guy named Andy Stanley, who's incredible. He wrote a book called *Visioneering*. The idea of taking vision and engineering, and putting the two together—pretty catchy title and a phenomenal book on Nehemiah. I look back through the book and I can see notes that I had written in the side margin, like, "God I want to be a part of shaping the church for the next generation. God, part of my vision is that I want to teach the Word to those who would come after. I want to build a church that would endure after I'm gone." All these things! That's the holy discontent, the seeds that God put in my life!

A couple things about the book and backstory-wise, historically. The book of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally considered, in your Hebrew Scriptures, one book. If you're reading through the Life Journal with us, you read Ezra and Nehemiah here this month, and so you know historically, very similar situations going down. Ezra and Nehemiah cover about 100 years of history, but they were originally considered one book together. Josephus and Eusebius (early church historians) both agreed it was one book until the third century. A guy named Origen came along and snapped the two books out, so you get Ezra, and he titled the second one Nehemiah,

which are the same titles we have in our Bible. The history of when this book took place comes at a pretty dark time in your “people of God” history, if you will.

God begins His people group with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12, and starts with the patriarchal, family-oriented system with what's called a theocracy; God is their king. They have a theocracy until the people start looking around in the book of Judges at the big, strong, tough guys, kings that are ruling the pagan nations, and they—like us—had a hard time putting faith in what they could not see. They said, “A theocracy is nice, but if we can get a guy who could bench about 300 and wield a good sword, we want him to be our king,” and God said, “Look, if you want that, here's the cost: he's going to take the best of your best, he can have whatever he wants, he's going to be an egocentric maniac, but if you want that, okay.” And they go, “We want that,” as if we know what's better for us than God does, and so they got what they asked for.

They got a guy named Saul. First king of the nation Israel was Saul. Saul was a pretty good dude, pretty handsome guy, bowed up, big, strong, tough guy. The problem is he didn't love God, at least not all the time. He was a spiritual bulimic; he'd binge and he'd purge. And what happened was Saul, of course, and they got what they asked for and got the consequences along with it.

So God finds the opposite and says, “Okay, now you ready?” He says, “I'm going to give you a king after *my* own heart,” and raises up David. David is like a consummate emo kid. He's out in the field, playing his guitar to the sheep, right? He's not even brought in the lineup. When Jesse brings his boys, David's out in the field. God's like, “You don't get it—I don't look at the outside; I look at the inside,” and He takes little David and raises him. He says, “I can love a guy like that.” Why? Because his heart was completely God's.

And so David did okay, with a couple moral failures—oops—passes that on to his son. His son takes his moral issues and expands them to the nth degree, and then after Solomon came his son Rehoboam, and Rehoboam had a contemporary named Jeroboam. It's at that point your Old Testament gets a little bit weird—as if it wasn't already—and the nation of Israel divides into two parts. The northern kingdom is called, from that point forward, Israel. The first king of Israel after the division was a guy named Jeroboam, probably the dumbest man in your whole Bible. He introduces “drive-through” idolatry spots, and really, he's not the sharpest tool in the shed. So he takes over there.

The guy in the south is a guy named Rehoboam. Rehoboam follows after the sins of his father and is kind of a moron as well, and so the whole thing starts going bad. 722 BC, the Assyrians come in and wipe out the northern kingdom. It's a story of awful, and it just keeps getting worse as you read through your Bible. The southern king, at least, had a couple blips of revival along the way until 586, when the Babylonians came in and the Babylonians take them captive.

While they're in captivity, you've got Daniel who writes, you've got Ezekiel who writes, and that's where you pick up on kind of the chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah together. The story of Ezra-Nehemiah really covers three primary returns from captivity back into Jerusalem. The Babylonians had a good run and then went kaput. The Persian Empire came in and took them over, and that's really the chronology now with Ezra-Nehemiah.

In fact, the first return, the first expedition back, is led by a guy named Zerubbabel. Terrible name, but he's a good dude who is going to rebuild the temple of God. He brings with him Jeshua the priest, and they're going to rebuild the house of God, and so under the command of Cyrus the Persian king, they're told to return. The Persians, interestingly enough, had a fascinating way that they related to conquered people. They were very religiously tolerant, and so not only would they take over this said group, but then they would allow the group to continue to worship their God.

So they return now, some of these exiles with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, back to rebuild the temple, and they did okay at first. Like many of us, we get real motivated, and so we're going to read the Bible every day, and that lasts about four days until something happens, and then we feel guilty, and we can't catch up and we feel even worse, so we just quit. That's exactly what happened to them; they got to rebuilding the temple, and opposition came in. Some guys from around their area were a little frustrated that they would try to rebuild the city, and so they said, "Boo," so the people got scared and they quit building.

That's where in Ezra, chapter 5—you'll notice this takes place contextually in Ezra, chapter 1 to chapter 6. In chapter 5 of Ezra, you see the names of two guys, Haggai and Zechariah. If you've ever read Haggai, it's fascinating. Haggai comes along at this time and says, "Why is the house of God lying desolate while you and your people are living in sweet condos that you built for yourself? Why is it that your priority has shifted from doing what God has called you to do, to taking care of yourself?" How many of us struggle and need a "Haggai" in our life? Priorities get so skewed; instead of focusing on what God wants for my life, I end up just taking care of myself.

So Haggai comes along, gives him a good kick in the face, and they end up rebuilding the temple as planned. Here comes 60 years later, now the second expedition back, led by a young stud names Ezra. Ezra was a scribe—has the book of the Bible, of course, bearing his name. Ezra chapter 7 to chapter 10, Ezra is sent back under the command of the second pagan king, Darius, to rebuild the temple. "Go finish what you started," and Darius says, "get people to obey the Word." So you've got Ezra, who comes back like a boss with his Bible, going, "Hey, you all have got to clean up your lives." Right? "This is what the Word says," and he's bringing the people back into alignment of obedience to the Word of God. It's fascinating. He is a man very well-versed in his Bible. In fact, you're going to find in Nehemiah, chapter 8 that Nehemiah is going to defer to Ezra as the primary spiritual leader of these people, because the guy knows his stuff. So you've got Ezra leading this second expedition back again, covered in Ezra 7 through 10.

Now, context for Nehemiah: here comes Nehemiah, third expedition coming back, right? Responsible to rebuild, primarily, the wall of Jerusalem. The wall of the city was your security. If any of you have alarms in your homes, you usually sleep pretty good at night. You shut the doors, lock everything, turn the alarm on; it's like Fort Knox—you sleep great at night. The wall of Jerusalem was like that same security, so for a wall to be as it was in their day, completely torn down, meant that you are vulnerable to anybody. Any group of roughnecks who had an idea of what they wanted to do to you or to your city could literally walk right in and do it. At least

with the wall, you had some protection. So Nehemiah is going to rebuild the wall, and therefore the dignity of the city—God's city—so they're going to come back.

Interestingly enough, Nehemiah, the name itself, means, “Yahweh has comforted.” The word *Yahweh*, if you're new to the things of God—Moses, in the book of the Exodus, has an interaction at a burning bush. You all remember that story? And God speaks to Moses through this bush. It says, “Go tell Pharaoh,” the most powerful man in the world, “to let his slave labor go so that they might worship.” And he says, “Well, who am I going to say is sending me?” as he kind of stuttered his way through it, and He says, “You tell them that ‘I AM’ sent you.” The word *I AM* or “I will be what I will be” was the formal name of God, and was pronounced Yahweh. They wouldn't even speak it in the Hebrew tongue; they wouldn't even mention it. So His name means “Yahweh has comforted.”

Now, there's irony in that if you've read through the book, in fact at the end of the book, this Nehemiah is a strong leader. He's going to come back from Persia at one point, see the people indulging in all kinds of sins as they were before, and it says in the text that he's angry with the people. He confronts the people, he curses the people, he beats the people and he pulls out their hair; that's this “Yahweh has comforted.” So you don't want Nehemiah on your care team, okay? It's not who he is.

So he rebuilds this wall, and it's fascinating—this book has got so many different types of literature in it. You're going to have everything in these 13 chapters, from a general's diary to a governor's report. You're going to have a civil record, a management handbook, and even his personal memoirs, because he's leading God's people, which if you've ever had the privilege of leading God's people, you can kind of expect a couple “Dear diary” entries. “Dear diary, I don't even like these people. I don't know why you put me in charge of these people.” He's experiencing a very odd relationship with these folks, and you've got it captured with extreme candor in this book, and that's of course covering the entire span, chapters 1 to 13.

At the end of the book, there's a contemporary prophet who comes along, a guy by the name of Malachi. We know that Malachi happens at this time, even though Malachi doesn't have a date to his book, because Malachi has to deal with four sin issues that were happening in his day—the same four issues that are happening in Nehemiah's day. Here's the four, and what's creepy about these four is the ability the Bible has to speak in its day, and have legs enough to be convicting as all get-out for us today.

Here are the four issues that they had. One is they had a corruption of the priesthood. We would translate that as they've got shady pastors ripping off money or whatnot from God's church. Two is they've got marriages where a godly man or woman would marry an idol-worshipping man or woman, and mingle with those nations and learn their ways, and they would have idolatry in their marriage. Third is they had abuse of the disadvantaged. The poor and the needy were taken advantage of. They were overlooked while the rich got richer. And the final one is they failed to pay tithes to the temple of God.

You talk about convicting! We could do a lot of preaching on those four issues, because we've got shady pastors in our day, hopefully not in our church, but we have them around, right?

We've got all kinds of marriage issues, we've got all kinds of abuse of the poor issues, we've got all kinds of tithing issues, and by the way, you want to talk about convicting subjects? You should talk about praying, evangelism and tithing, because nobody prays enough, gives enough or shares their faith enough, so we'll just keep moving. We'll move to another subject.

The book now, 13 chapters. There's two divisions: 1 through 6 is one portion, 7 through 13 is the other portion. The first portion, or first division, focuses on Nehemiah 1-6. In 13, you're going to see a shift of the main character from Nehemiah to Ezra, the scribe. The first portion, 1-6 focuses on the wall—they're to build this wall in 52 days at about a two-and-a-half mile wall—52 days. Absolute engineering miracle that this guy, this cupbearer, can lead a contracting crew to do what he did is amazing. But in 7 through 13, it's not working on the wall, it's now working on the people. It's going to be an issue of the people, not just construction, but consolidation; once the wall is built, now they've got to clean up their lives. They're going to work on obedience to the Word.

The first part is a physical job. Literally, Nehemiah is going to be an incredible leader. He's going to have dirt under his fingernails. He's going to work and labor with the people, where 7 through 13 is not physical, but spiritual. Ezra's going to come along and read, literally, the Old Testament beginning in the Torah. In Chapter 8, the people stand in ovation, weep at the simple hearing of the Word of God being read. It's fascinating. What's interesting too about Nehemiah is he's a spiritual leader. The book begins with a problem that he prays about; the book ends with a problem that he prays about. In fact, you're going to find that Nehemiah, in 13 chapters, prays 11 times. Why? Because that's what a leader does. A leader seeks the heart of God, because the person God uses is not the talented, but someone whose heart is completely His.

A couple leadership issues that you're going find with him. And again, you know the more you study a book like this—I was reading a book the other day on Nehemiah called *Holy Ambition*, and the guy who wrote it is a guy named Chip Ingram. Chip is a fantastic communicator of the Word of God, and I'm reading this book, and I think, "I've heard this before. Where was this?" And I read the foreword, and the foreword of the book is by a guy named Professor Howard Hendricks, affectionately called Prof. So I pull out my notes; I start looking at my notes. Sure enough, same exact thing. So let me give you a couple of things that you're going to see in the first six chapters of the book.

One is you're going to see a leader who develops a dislocated heart, a man who's going to weep for the things of God, where his concern is not his personal comfort, but the greater glory and movement of God. Second thing you're going see is an experience with a broken spirit. He's going to sit in luxury and see the people in desolation, and he's going to say, "I have sinned. We and my brothers have sinned." Well, he didn't have anything to do with it. The easy thing to do would be to look at that and say, "Boy, that's a shame, those people over there. Somebody really ought to help them." Instead he goes, "I have sinned. It's my issue."

Third thing you'll see is a radical faith. He's willing to stand before the king with a sad face, which sounds kind of odd, but if you stood before a king and were grumpy, the king could literally take your life. There wouldn't be a single person in this church if that were the case, if you came to church grumpy and we just killed you, just took you out behind the woodshed and



killed you. There would be nobody here to turn off the lights, because that's what happens sometimes. You know, this guy goes before the king and he says, "How can I not be sad when my people are in desolation?" So he's got a radical faith.

Next thing: he's got a plan. He's got a strategic plan, in fact. A lot of folks will say, "No, no, the right thing to do is pray." Well, yeah pray, but make a plan! Have an idea of what you want to do, for goodness sake. And this guy does. So the king goes, "Well, what is it you want?" "So glad you asked!" And he lays out his plan.

Next thing is he exercises personal commitment. He goes with them; he builds with them. It's hard to have respect for a leader who is not willing to grunt a little bit with you, not willing to sweat a little bit with you, and this guy's right there every step of the way. Interestingly enough, you're going to find when they build the wall, he's going to put people with no idea how to build a wall in charge of building, which you would think, "Well that's going to be a terrible wall, like that thing won't even stand up." In fact his opposers even joke—they're, like, sitting around the bar, talking about it like, "Yeah, even if a fox jumped on the wall, it would fall over, you know, just total morons, and they're making fun of the quality of this work. Well, you know what Nehemiah did? It was brilliant; he had each joker build the wall in his own backyard. Look, you go to Visalia to build a wall—you don't care. You go to your backyard to build that wall, and you know that if you don't build it right and you don't build it strong enough, those guys out there are going to come in and get you, and get your wife and get your kids—you're going to put that brick just right and get that thing perfect. That's what he does.

The final thing is he had a courageous soul. He's going to get shot as a leader multiple times. You're going to read through the book, and you're going to be so reminiscent of elementary school, it'll make you feel awkward again because it's like being out on recess. Remember in elementary school, being out on recess, and there was always that joker who's talking smack, just talking smack, talking smack, just constantly running you over; that's what Nehemiah experiences. And boy, he sets his sights on what God has placed in his heart, and he does not move to the left or the right. He didn't care what they wrote in the paper, he didn't care what people are putting up on their Facebook; he just follows Christ and what God put in his heart. It's amazing.

The other thing about this guy Nehemiah is he had a profound ability to adapt as a leader. You're going to see him as a faithful cupbearer to the king. You're going to see him as a faithful and brilliant general contractor, and he's going to serve as the governor of these people for 12 years. The idea is he blooms where he's planted. He doesn't say, "God, if you just get me there, then I'll be faithful to you," or "God, if you just do this, then I'll do whatever you want." No! He says, "God, where do you have me right here, right now? Then I'll be faithful right here, right now, whether it's a cupbearer, a contractor or a governor." Sound familiar? I mean, it's just like Joseph in your Old Testament: faithful as a shepherd, faithful in Potiphar's house, faithful in prison, faithful second-in-command of Egypt. Just bloom where you're planted. We're going to see that theme throughout.

The other thing that's interesting, and you'll find it in chapter 4, verses 9 and 14, I like the balance that Nehemiah has. Nehemiah has a balance of practical leadership and spiritual

leadership, and he blends them together. See, I get a little nervous of a person who just plans but never prays. Yeah, how do you know that's what God wants? The Bible says, "Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand." The Bible says that "There's a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death." How do you know if you just plan but never pray, that what you're planning is God's will? I get just as nervous, honestly, with the other side—people who just pray and never plan. I mean, they may sit around and pray forever as if God hadn't told you to get to work. They sit around, leaning on a shovel, praying for a hole. How about pray, and then go get some calluses on your hands? How about plan, but plan with bent knees? How about take those two and put them together? And that's what Nehemiah does in a pretty profound way.

Ultimately, you're going to find this book is about God, which sounds trite. You go, "The whole Bible is about God—you're supposed to say that." No, it *is* in many respects, because it shows, one, the sovereignty of God over kings and circumstances. You think about it—God allows the Babylonians to wipe out the nation of Israel, at least the southern portion, takes them captive. You've got Daniel, who was in captivity, reading the book of Jeremiah, doing the math on captivity, realizes they're going to be let go. You've got them now rebuilding the temple under the reign of the Persians who allowed for religious tolerance. They're literally given, by the king's order, the king's checkbook, the provisions needed to rebuild the temple *and* the wall. They now establish their place of worship again as a group of people born in captivity and raised in captivity, and yet God raises them up yet again. You'll see Nehemiah say multiple times that the strong hand of God was upon him, the good hand of God was upon him, the God of heaven gave him success, and God would be his help.

This book is about God. We could dodge the issue all we want; at the end of the day, all of life is about God. You can think that God doesn't exist and that's okay; He does. You can also think gravity doesn't exist, but truthfully it does. And from beginning to end, this book is about God, who cared for Nehemiah's life and the people of God enough to birth in him a holy discontent. And I'll encourage you again, or caution you again: if you read this book, God will birth in you a holy discontent. So if you like comfort, if you like same, if you don't want to be stretched or challenged, do not read this book. But if you're open as someone whose heart could be completely His, if you're open to God messing with your life, go ahead, but be careful, because once God puts something in your heart, it is nigh unto impossible to get away from Him.

You all remember the story of Jonah? I like Jonah. I think Jonah had guts, and I think he was honest, because God said, "Go to Nineveh," and he went, "Uh-uh. I don't want to go to Nineveh. Those people are crazy in Nineveh. I'm not going there. In fact, I'm going to go the opposite direction." You all know the story if you've been around church forever. It's a great Sunday School story. He gets swallowed by this fish and burped up on the shores of Nineveh, right where God wanted him.

If you start reading your Bible, especially this book, and you have the courage to say, "God, my heart is completely yours," God will begin to strongly support you, and God will implant in your life a holy discontent. In so doing, He will water that thing and foster that thing, and it'll grow to be a bur in your saddle. It'll be a thorn in your side. It'll be the splinter in your mind that drives you mad, and you will not be able to get away from Him. Why would you want to?

Why not say, “God, I’ve been bought with a price, so I’m going to follow you. I’ve been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who lives but Christ lives in me. And God, you’ve called me to yourself to be zealous for good deeds. You’ve got a good work that you want for me. I may not know what it is, so I’m crazy enough to pray that you’d show me what it is,” and as He births that thing in your heart and you begin to spend the rest of your life pursuing whatever it is God has put there, it’ll set your life aflame for the things of God.

We’ve talked about it before—most Christians are bored to death, because you just come and listen to jokers like me and call that the church. I say, “Really, that’s it?” I don’t want to come listen to me. I’d rather come, hear something, pray about it, let God put something in my life, and I’d rather go play than sit in the stands and watch somebody else. What if that verse in 2 Chronicles is true? What if the eyes of the Lord really do move throughout the earth, that He might finally find those whose hearts are completely His, and in so doing, strongly support them? Can you imagine what would happen if you found your holy discontent? How much fun could that be, to be a part of the body of Christ?

Well, that’s where we’re going in Nehemiah, 20 or so weeks of that. If that’s not what you’re up for, you might want to find someplace else to go, because Nehemiah is going to mess with us a little bit. But I think in the process, I think it’s going to be encouraging, because by the show of hands that came up earlier, if that’s really true, if you really do want to be used by God, boy, I’d sure like to show you what God can do through you. Let’s pray.

Father, I thank you for your Word and for the privilege to teach it. I thank you for what it communicates, for what it challenges, for what it raises up in us. Father, we want to be those that are used by you, those whose hearts are completely yours, that you might strongly support us. God, we know there are some who are more talented, more spiritual, more intellectual, but yet Father, you, like David of old, do not see in us that which is external, but internal. You see our heart, so fill us, Father, in such a way that we would see your purpose for us and pursue our holy discontent for the glory and honor and grandeur of our King whom we serve, and we’ll thank you in His name, amen.