

Nehemiah

Part 1

Speaker	Collin Curry
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[00:00:00] I'd like to take you to the Old Testament tonight, and to the book of Nehemiah.

And I'll read the whole of chapter one, and a few verses down into chapter two. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah, and it came to pass in the month Chislew, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, that Hanani, one of my brethren came, he and certain men of Judah, and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

And they said unto me, the remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. [00:01:02] And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.

And I said, I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him, and observe his commandments, let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel, thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee. Both I and my father's house have sinned.

We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandest thy servant Moses, saying, If ye [00:02:03] transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations. But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them, though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.

Now these are thy servants, and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name, and prosper, I pray thee, let thy servant this day grant him mercy in the sight of this man, for I was the king's cup-bearer.

And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. [00:03:02] Now I had not been before time sad in his presence, wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid, and said unto the king,

Let the king live for ever. Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my father's sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?

Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldst send me unto Judah, unto the city of my father's sepulchres, that I may build it.

Now just, if you would turn the page, there are a couple of verses at the end of chapter six, which I think I perhaps ought to read as well. [00:04:07] Chapter six, and verse fifteen, the story of the repairing of the wall and the rebuilding of the wall at Jerusalem comes in between, of course, but here verse fifteen says, So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

And it came to pass that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cut down in their own eyes, for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.

I may, of course, have to ask you just to take note of a few things in those intervening chapters and perhaps also in some of the rather later chapters, but as a start into the book of Nehemiah and as a completion of one phase of the story which is in the book of Nehemiah, [00:05:04] I thought these were the best verses to read to you.

I don't know whether you've ever, sitting down there in the audience, thought of what it's like to be in the shoes of a person that stands up here and speaks to you. Perhaps you've not allowed yourselves to imagine what it must be like to get up here and speak. But, you know, it isn't done all that easily, I will say, and certainly it needs a lot of dependence on the Lord to do it at all in an acceptable way.

And I suppose it's fair to say that my position is slightly more difficult than usual in that I have listened to what Michael has been saying this afternoon, and certainly he has presented some pretty searching, challenging things to us this afternoon. I feel rather glad that I had not felt inclined to take up some totally different type of [00:06:05] passage from this that we have been listening to this afternoon. This that is presented to us in this Old Testament book of Nehemiah, in a sense, has its links with what we have been hearing about this afternoon. There will be points that I might have made that Michael has made already, and there will be some other kind of lines that I would want to press out of this passage that perhaps Michael has not mentioned. But by and large we're on the same sort of realm of teaching, and I feel comforted by that because I very much felt I was dependent on the Lord as to what I should be speaking about here tonight, and I very much felt that this was his guidance, that I should go to the book of Nehemiah and press some of the lessons for us today that come out of this very far away story.

[00:07:01] In one sense it is.

It takes us away into Old Testament times. It takes us away into places very different geographically from our own. It takes us into situations which were not quite our situation in the Christian day, but at the same time the book of Nehemiah and the book of Ezra with it, I would say, the two together, Ezra and Nehemiah, are passages, are books of the Bible, which are not strange and far away, but are very much on the mark as far as help for us in the present day is concerned.

And I want to say this, that when we read a book like that, though it may not be the kind of book that we are referring to every day of our lives, we are reading about something which is absolutely relevant, and there are lessons in it which are absolutely relevant [00:08:01] for us, hearers of the word of God today.

And the relevance of these passages comes out a little bit more clearly, needless to say, if we understand the background of the book. So I would like to say just a little about Nehemiah and Nehemiah's times, and in particular to say just a little at first about the parallelism that seems to exist between the Old Testament story of the children of Israel and the New Testament story of Christianity here on earth.

And one of the things that one can say straight away is the history of the children of Israel under the hand of God had a bright beginning, there were marvellous parts to that story.

In its heyday, Israel, at its brightest, as God picked her up and as God made her, the [00:09:04] object of his favour set her up in those early days, if one goes, for instance, to the days of David and Solomon, the brightness of the display of God that took place when God had his way with his people and the testimony to the God of Israel was something that shone out in all its brilliance and in all its certainty in those early days, something that nobody that reads the Old Testament, particularly the parts leading up to and at the time of David and Solomon, God was known, the God of Israel was borne witness to by his earthly people in a way that made an impact on the surrounding nations and there was a bright testimony to what God, in marvellous blessing and marvellous favour, would do for the people of his choice and that is a story that is bright and brilliant and glorious from the [00:10:04] days of Solomon and the days of David leading up to Solomon were days when God, the God of Israel, was in display in a very firm and obvious way and people were attracted to the God of Israel. Think about the Queen of Sheba, for instance. Think about Ruth Morbitus earlier than that. The God that was known in Israel was a God that was known in his attractive qualities to outsiders and the witness to God, the true God, known in Israel was a very plain and open thing in those days but of course though it began so brightly and though it began so wonderfully it deteriorated and after Solomon there was the split in the kingdom and one lot went downhill faster than the other but they both went downhill pretty clearly and read through [00:11:01] the books of Kings, read about the dishonour done to God amongst that people that God had been so favourable towards. God had shown his favour, shown his sovereignty, shown his matchless intentions of blessing to them and in answer they had departed from the God that had blessed them so and the Old Testament story, the story of the children of Israel, is a story of great movements from God at the beginning but it's also a story of great departure from God before the end is reached and there was a great beginning but there was great departure, great distortion of the representation of God that was supposed to be there amongst his earthly people, great dishonour, great breakdown. You know as well as I do, I'm not telling you anything new, that the story went downhill and instead of there being the bright display of God, [00:12:04] God was dishonoured and God was represented in a shameful way amongst his people and it finished up by them going into, they disappeared out of sight, the ten tribes, they were taken captive and they were never seen again. God knows where they are but they went into oblivion as far as you and I are concerned. The other tribes, Judah and Benjamin, lasted a little bit longer but before long they were captive and the very nations around them that might have been on the receiving end of their witness to God, instead of that they were used by God as the disciplining way that he used to correct them and to shame them and to bring them down in repentance before himself. It's a sad story and it's a true story that the people of God [00:13:01] losing sight of the glory of the God whose name they were supposed to represent went downhill and went badly downhill and

were a disgrace to the God that they belonged to and he dealt with them severely but righteously and rightly and they were in captivity to Babylon and the marvel is that anybody came back from that captivity to Babylon. It's a story of great beginnings, great movements from God, sovereignly God acted, but a story of great departure, great dishonor, great distortion of the representation of God which ought to have been there amongst them. And of course what I'm trying to press is that while that is one thing and we read about that in the Old Testament, it's not very different when you move over into the New Testament. In fact it's very much the same and this is why the lessons that come out of these Old Testament passages are still very opposite, very much on the ball so to speak, on the mark [00:14:07] as far as we are concerned. I don't have to tell you that Christianity had a marvelous beginning. God acted again sovereignly and marvelously in grace. God acted in Christ and all those wonderful things that God did off his own initiative so to speak in Christ, what wonderful things were those. And then the Holy Spirit came down from heaven after Christ ascended back to the glory and there were great movements on earth in those early days, Pentecost and afterwards, great movements from God in those days. Christianity had a marvelous start and there was obedience and honor to God, obedience amongst the people of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, testimony to God in those early days in such a marvelous and patent and irresistible [00:15:02] sort of way. God acted and the Holy Spirit was there and the people of God in tune with what God was doing carried the name of Christ with great honor and great effect in those early days.

Christianity began well, but I don't have to persuade anybody here, surely I don't have to persuade anybody here that Christianity today is not exactly on the lines of New Testament Christianity. Christianity in the broad so to speak as we look around and see it today, what a different thing it is from New Testament Christianity, how great the distortion, how great the difference is as we look at Christianity as a whole today with all that's gone on, all the honor to God seems to have melted away, everything's smart, everything's disfigured [00:16:06] in the closing days of the church's history on earth, great disunity, great chaos I suppose you might call it. Sometimes we talk about the general thing which is Christendom or Christianity in general, we talk about it being system but it seems to me it's not exactly system but it's chaos and Babylon is not a bad name for Christianity today. Christianity is a great babel of voices and practices and ways of doing things according to men's likes and needless to say you'll have a great deal of difficulty in finding anything that's at all like New Testament Christianity in Christianity in the broad today. So what I'm really pressing is that if it began well in the Old Testament days and went downhill because of men's unfaithfulness and men's departure, [00:17:03] hasn't been different in the Christian day, you know, it began well but the New Testament itself depicts for us the last days and if you were to read in 2nd Timothy for instance, we get guidance for the last days in the Christian picture, in the Christian scene and there is a great deal of need for that guidance in our kind of surroundings, in our kind of day when what was of God has suffered so much change and so much distortion and is so untrue and unfaithful to God so that the story of Israel is paralleled by the story of Christianity. This is the only point that I'm wanting to make. There are differences but there are these similarities and it's out of this similar situation which exists that we are in the end times so to speak [00:18:02] of the Christian era just as Nehemiah was in the end times of the Old Testament era of the people of God and Nehemiah of course is one of the post-exilic books as they're often called, the books which relate what happened after the captivity when the Persian emperor gave permission for them to return to the center around which the Jewish system revolved, where the name of Jehovah was honored, the place where God had put his name and that remnants, only a fraction of all the people of God went back and seemed to try to start again on the lines that had been at the beginning. What they accomplished was only a shadow of what had been there at the beginning but they were doing God's will and they were pleasing God and God honored them for seeking [00:19:07] to be pleasurable to him in the day of departure and the day of

distortion of the truth of God as it was known in that day and God of course will honor those that will make movements which are pleasing to him today and we're not without guidance as to how to please him today and one of the things that will be necessary is to recognize the climate in which we live Christian wise so to speak, see the situation as it really is according to God's word and take the obedient line to his word in a day like ours. So that you see Ezra and Nehemiah tell us about that small fraction of all the people of God that left behind the false position where they were, certainly away in Babylon in captivity they were not in the place where God had intended them to [00:20:04] be but they were in the place where their own misdemeanors and disobedience had landed them but they were in the false position. It was untrue to what they were as the people of God to be in captivity in Babylon and a small fraction got the opportunity and took the opportunity that God provided for them to return. The emperor was favorable to them. The Persian emperor allowed them to return to Jerusalem and to start again so to speak and to return in a small way to what had been at the beginning and so they went and so they went with God's approval for what they were doing. They left the false position. They returned to the center where God's name was honored and what they did was only a shadow of what had been going on in those centuries before but it was [00:21:01] pleasurable to God and of course as they did the will of God in their day it has lessons for us about doing the will of God in our day and that is why a book like Nehemiah has very direct and very apposite lessons for us today. The first six chapters of Ezra, just to put you in the picture very briefly, the first six chapters of Ezra speak about the return from Babylon. Now that was so they say in about 537 BC and as soon as they got there they started rebuilding the temple. The leader, the prime mover in that return, the first return from Babylon was a man called Zerubbabel and the temple took a lot of building. It stopped and started. There were standstills and there were setbacks but the temple was the first thing that was erected and it took a time [00:22:01] and by 516 with certain standstill periods in between the temple was completed and you'll find the first six chapters of Ezra tell about the return, tell about the rebuilding of the temple, tell about the opposition, tell about the difficulties that were faced and overcome in those days. When you get to chapter 7 of Ezra you begin to read about Ezra himself and Ezra in fact did not go at the start to go back to Jerusalem. Ezra followed later and in fact it was nearly a whole lifetime later. It was in 458 BC. Ezra went along and Ezra was the person who was a scribe and he had set in his heart to study and to imbibe the law of God and not only to know it but to do it and to teach it as well and Ezra was one of those [00:23:01] weighty men of God in that day and he went back with the vessels for the temple which was still in Babylon up to that moment and he traveled to Jerusalem and what was most important about Ezra's activities was that he underlined what was God's will, God's revealed will. The law of our God was the thing that he had in mind to press and not only to obey it himself but to exemplify it in his behavior and to press it upon that returned remnant there in Jerusalem. Ezra went along and Ezra pressed the contents of the word of God. It was not the whole word of God as you and I know of course but it was the law that Ezra read to them and insisted on pressing obedience to the law. Nehemiah of course overlapped in time with Ezra at Jerusalem. Nehemiah in fact arrived later [00:24:05] than Ezra. He arrived in 445 BC and that I think is the firmest date of all these dates. The date when Artaxerxes gave the commandment to rebuild the city of Jerusalem is a firm date of history and that's 445 BC and that's what we're reading about here as we have read in these first two chapters of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was concerned about the broken down state of Jerusalem long before he got there but there came a moment when he was able to go and we've read about how it was allowed for him to go and when Nehemiah went to Jerusalem the thing that he was anxious that the temple was already built thing that he was anxious to set up was the the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and in particular the walls and all those early chapters are about the [00:25:02] starting to build the walls and the completing the building of the walls around Jerusalem. So that if you like thinking about the three persons Zerubbabel was the the person that moved first, the leader of those that returned to Jerusalem at all

from Babylon and the man that got going with the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra came later and he was pressing the written word of God, the law of Jehovah and Nehemiah comes along and the thing that he is most concerned about and the thing that he gets going is the rebuilding and the repairing of the wall. First thing that Nehemiah does when he gets to Jerusalem is to have a good look around in private without having told anybody else what it was about. He goes and examines the picture, sees the broken down state of those walls and sees all the places that needed the gaps in the defenses that needed [00:26:02] to be rebuilt. So Nehemiah has a good look around and before long he has the situation in hand, the rebuilding of the walls is afoot and it happens in 52 days. I suppose that's quite remarkable when you think about it, the walls of Jerusalem that had been so desolated and broken down and shattered, decimated by the enemies that had been moving there for so long over the centuries, they were rebuilt in 52 days and that tells me that it must have been a pretty dedicated and efficient operation. Nehemiah got it going and Nehemiah got an awful lot of cooperation from the people of God there in Jerusalem and Nehemiah got the walls rebuilt in 52 days. We have to bear in mind that amongst the people of God the idea of the temple is an important one. The thought that God dwells in his people and that there are standards which are properly representative [00:27:05] of God and there needs to be a character about the people of God which bears witness to him and responds to him, that's one part of what we need to keep always in mind. But the thought that God has expressed his mind in written form and that we have the revealed will of God in our hands more than Ezra had. Ezra had the Pentateuch. I suppose he didn't have terribly much more perhaps but Ezra had a total respect for the written word of God and he could say that obedience to what God expressed as his mind for his people was the absolute paramount thing so to speak and Ezra was one of those that pressed and himself showed obedience to the written word of God and then Nehemiah built the walls. You know we have to think about God amongst us and what that really [00:28:01] means in the way of privilege and what that really means in the way of life but also what it means in the way of testimony and proper response to the God who dwells amongst us. There's a certain character that goes rightly with those amongst whom God dwells and we need to be responsive to him because he has poured out his wealth upon us and revealed himself in such marvelous ways but in our lives and in our assembly lives there needs to be a character which is consistent with a God who dwells amongst us and has revealed himself to us. We need total obedience without any questioning and without any arguing and without any doubting and to the word of God obedience to his word what an important and vital ingredient that is in proper behavior responsive to God in our day [00:29:03] as well in as in Nehemiah's day but on top of those two things which are if you like the temple and the book of the law tell us about there's also this wall building business which Nehemiah was engaged in and I want to say just a little bit about these walls that Nehemiah rebuilt you know from the very word go when God picked up his people Israel the first thing and perhaps the most important thing that you've got to say about God's chosen people is that they were separated to himself and Israel was a separate people and the thought that there is a line of demarcation between God's people and the rest the outside world is one that still carries over into the new testament day as well Israel was a separate people and it was absolutely vital that [00:30:06] there should be a preservation of the pure knowledge of God which they possessed which God had given them of himself a preservation of the purity of their knowledge of God and also a preservation of the the rightness the trueness of their witness to the God that they represented and the fact that they were a separate people was something that God ordained so that the practices of the nations around and the things that went on in the heathendom around didn't invade and didn't make their incursions into the behavior and into the practices of the people of God how quickly the true representation of God would have been swamped and submerged if only the practices of the surrounding nations had got in and had got diluting the behavior of the people of God there were to be a separate people so that they might [00:31:06] represent God aright and might be true to the God

who had blessed them and favored them in such a marvelous way Israel was a separate people they carried the revelation of God in the old testament day and on their shoulders so to speak there was that right representation of God which was to be maintained and any mixing any dilution with the practices and the idolatry and the heathen ways around the worldly ways around would have been so much cancellation of the truth of God that they stood for and so Israel was a separate people and it was absolutely essential that they should be consistent in character with him the God who had blessed them and separated them to himself it's true of course and I must say this I suppose to keep the picture clear [00:32:05] that the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has gone in Christianity in the church in the body of Christ Jew and Gentile and people of other kinds of differences as well are all subsumed into one body you read in the epistle of Ephesians those that are blessed Christian wise in Christ the barriers between nations the barriers between Jew and Gentile the barriers between bond and free male and female all those things have gone there's a sense that in Christ all the barriers are down as far as testimony to the world is concerned there are no limits to the world wideness so to speak of God's intentions of grace in the Christian day more so than in the Old Testament day there are no barriers at all as far as the [00:33:05] outflow of God's grace to the world are concerned but nevertheless this idea of the walls which is in this Old Testament picture something that is just as important to stress and to get the lesson from today in the Christian day as it ever was and we cannot be slapped and I say this deriving it from the Old Testament picture we cannot be slapped about incursions from outside which would spoil our Christian character make us untrue to the God that has blessed us we need to be guarding all that God has revealed of himself to us we need to be resisting all those influences from outside that would creep in and that would invade and spoil and dilute our right representation of the God who in his marvelous grace has blessed us we need to be discerning [00:34:07] we need to be on the alert about influences that would creep in and spoil and destroy our true Christian character one of the things that is so marvelously true about this man Nehemiah is that he seems to be in such dependence on God and that's where he got the wisdom from he was totally dependent on God and he was totally loyal to the God who he depended on and as a result of being dependent on God he discerned troubles in advance and he forestalled the things that might have blown up and was able to meet them in advance because he was a wide awake character discerning with guidance from God the things which would have spoiled their reality in the position to which they had been recovered Nehemiah he discerned these things and we need such a clear [00:35:10] sight and would God that we could have a clearer sight of our weaknesses and the ease with which the enemy can creep in the ease with which the enemy can get a hold on us so to speak the gaps in our defenses we need to be wide awake to their existence we need not to pretend we need to we must not pretend that we are not weak we must not pretend that we have no weaknesses we need to be alert to the places that need rebuilding and the gaps in the defenses that need to be fortified again the wiles of the devil are so very real and our weakness is so very real as well and how dependent on God and how under the guidance of God we need to be to see to it [00:36:06] that we are alert to what is needed and to keep out the things which will spoil and destroy our true Christian character and our true Christian representation of God this of course was a return to God's center to the place where his name was paramount now there had been those that didn't return of course I suppose it is true that the number that returned from Babylon to Jerusalem was quite a minority as compared with the whole Jewish population dispersed abroad in those Middle East areas they tell me that there was a Jewish population in Alexandria in those days lots and lots of Jews the few that went back to Jerusalem were literally a few as compared with the total number and of course I suppose those in the post-exilic period that didn't return from to Jerusalem had the most comfortable life of it if we want to opt for [00:37:06] the easiest life well being God might not be the easiest thing to do of the many options but the thing is that God was honored by their action and we have to ask the question whether we put what honors God before other things and these few at least

that did go from Babylon to Jerusalem they had honored God and in these books Ezra and Nehemiah you'll find lists of names God seems to take care to put in his roles of honor the names of those that went and those that obeyed and those that honored him in the day when so many others were not honoring him it was a return to God's center and of course in the history of the church there have been these kind of things as well we have behind us of course in the 20th century looking back over church history the church has known dark times there have been times in the middle ages I suppose [00:38:08] when all Christian life was virtually out of sight doubtless there were real people but the true character of the church was completely blotted out so to speak by and large I'm speaking in general now there have been times when over the history of the church there has been disobedience to scripture untruthfulness to God and there have been dark dark times over many of those centuries that are now behind us there have also been recoveries and bright recoveries which God has sent along and it has been the work of God when it's happened we had mention of the reformation this afternoon and what a bright time that was and what bright light shone out again it was there already but it was recovered and uncovered again in the days of the reformation and what a great [00:39:01] work of God went on in those days and of course you and I I suppose we can look back in a rather special way to things that happened in last century times there were great movements of the spirit of God in the previous century to our century over a hundred years back now when men of God and you know who I'm talking about the early brethren if you want me to define it that's what I'm talking about in those days at the beginning of the 1800s men of God searching their bibles found anew the truth of the church and found anew the guidance for the last days of church times which is found in scripture and you know those early brethren were men of God that found in the word of God instructions for the very day in which they lived and they acted [00:40:03] in obedience to the word of God and though it cost them a lot and though they they had to act in their own initiative so to speak though with God behind them they did act in obedience to God's word they saw the general state of the church they saw the chaos that was there they saw the Babylon-like features that were there and they found the truth for the last days and the kind of behavior for the last days there and they acted on it and they saw that the right line was to be disassociated with this great bubble of voices babel of voices which was all around they saw that their right course was to be disassociated with the systems of Christianity and to be obedient to the scriptural guidelines for the present day the last days of the Christian [00:41:04] era and they saw that it was right to get back rather as the people away in Babylon saw that it was right to get back to Jerusalem they saw that it was right according to scripture to get back to behavior in continuity with the new testament the new testament pattern of assembly behavior and not only did they see that it was right to do this but they've set it going they did it themselves they were obedient themselves to the things and the guidance from God that came to them in those days and of course we of course are the inheritors of the guidance that their example provides for us and we need help not only to be in the position which we say to be scriptural but to be have the reality about us that goes with it you know you know I find it very searching I suppose you must do so too to remember uh that they'd come back from Babylon [00:42:08] almost a century before certainly a lifetime before these people that were around when Nehemiah went out to them were people that had been in the right place because their predecessors had moved there a century beforehand now they were in the right place but they needed an awful lot of help to be true to it and you know not much use being in the right place if we're not being true to it and this is something that I want to get just a little bit here tonight we need help to be alive and true to what is supposedly true of us we need humble conviction that we are where we are because it is according to God and pleasing to God and doing his will to be where we are and we need to far from the attitude of shallow irresponsibility about our christian assembly behavior we need to [00:43:03] be deeply serious about this and needless to say we need also to be very much guarded about high-mindedness about this that's an awful trap isn't it you know people that claim to be more than they are are more likely to sin

than philadelphian people that are proud of what they are and say we've got the right light on things as they are today well they're in danger of not having the humble spirit that goes with philadelphia we need to be humble minded we need to be low in our thoughts of ourselves but we need to be anxious to be obedient to God and to be honoring him and we want to be where we are not because it is the most comfortable life for us but because it is the God-honoring life that we wish to be pursuing well then we need to be free from shallow shallowness and we need to be free from haughtiness but when all that's been said [00:44:03] there are other things that would drag us down and i must be finishing in five minutes but you know i find in these passages a lot of things that are helpful because one of the things that is absolutely pertinent as you read through these chapters between chapter one and chapter six is that the enemy has certain tactics and he's not going to sit down and watch he's going to be active and he's going to intervene to try to divert us from the course nehemiah sets up the walls and he's anxious to have them as a distinctive people separate true to the god that they belong to and those enemies that are around are anxious to destroy the whole thing and to swamp it and to bring it to nothing and they're pretty well bent on it and nehemiah needs to be dependent on god and very alert to what is happening and you and i will need to be dependent on god and very alert to what is happening as well the first thing that they did was to ridicule these people that had suddenly arrived and started to rebuild the walls and rebuild the city well nehemiah had a way of [00:45:08] uh uniting them uh i suppose it was his own faith and his own confidence in god he took the initiative and they told them what to do and he managed to get them all together their morale was high because his faith was so true to god and ridicule didn't seem to hurt them very much they stood it and withstood it it didn't destroy their activity they went on with what they knew to be god's will you'll find the ridicule in chapter four verses one to six then you'll find that they tried a pretty head-on opposition and it seemed pretty threatening and it seemed pretty frightening uh to those that were going to feel the brunt of it but you know they were confident that the great god who was with them was more than equal to all the opposition and the threat of opposition but made them more dependent on god and more conscious of the great [00:46:04] god who was with them and people might want to kill our loyalty to god but let us be dependent on him and let us be conscious of the great god for whom we are placed in for whom we can to whom we can bring honor in our conduct here in our day and so the head-on opposition you know what they did they had a sword and they had a trowel and they got on with the wall building and they had the sword there in case the enemy was there as well and of course the work went on and the defense was there if needs be the sword of the spirit how good a weapon that is for us to meet the enemy opposing the attacks but let us not only be waiting for attacks but let us be doing the work which pleases god as well and there was a bit of internal dissent in chapter five the head-on opposition comes at the end of chapter four there was the seeds of internal [00:47:06] dissent amongst the very people who were all supposed to be acting together some of them were gaining advantage at the expense of others and they were rather pleased to be doing that it was a pretty shameful thing to be doing when they all were supposedly supposed to be facing the enemy but nehemiah has some words to them and nehemiah lets them see how shameful this self-seeking self-advantaging attitude was and somehow or other they all got pretty quickly into the frame of mind that was repentant for that bit of dissension that arose amongst them what a danger that is dissension amongst those that supposedly the people of god standing for him in a difficult day well it blew over rather quickly and nehemiah seemed to have the means of presenting his own example to them in a way that made them a bit shame-faced about what they had [00:48:02] been doing and they repented for what they would have got on with the work and then there was the compromise that was suggested to them in chapter six the first four verses the enemy comes along with a proposition he said they proposed that they go and have a conference about it and it was fairly obvious that there was going to be a give-and-take so to speak and nehemiah didn't want anything to do with the confessions to the enemy wasn't going to be a man that would compromise

anything when god's standards need to be maintained and compromise is a proposition that comes from the enemy and it's better taken no notice of the work is more important to get on with so nehemiah thought and nehemiah was right in this we can be pretty sure he said i'm doing a great work it wasn't a proud statement but it was the truth i'm doing a great work and i can't come down i'm not going to be diverted into conferences talk with you folk about compromise [00:49:07] i'm getting the work done it's far more important that i should be getting on with a positive work for god and then in the next verses chapter six verses five to nine they come along with another bit of propaganda as it seems to me they misrepresent what they're doing and they make sure that this untruth about what they are doing in jerusalem gets to the right ears and they think to spoil the work of god by misrepresenting it and nehemiah says no such thing as what you are saying really happening the truth is sufficient defense if it's pure misrepresentation of what we are doing we can stand misrepresentation if we know that it's not true but at the same time we have to be a little bit careful about being lured into ways which will be dishonoring to god and nehemiah was trapped almost he wasn't quite of course he was alert to it but there was a trap [00:50:07] laid for him in chapter 6 verse 10 they said your life's at risk let's have a discussion in the security of the temple and so they proposed that they should go into a quiet place in the temple and have a good talk about it nehemiah and the enemies of the people of god of course it was true really that nehemiah was not allowed to go into the temple he wasn't one of those that could go into the temple according to the law of god and so they were putting disobedience to the law of god to him as a means of saving his own skin so to speak and getting on with a discussion about the problem that was facing them all nehemiah wouldn't go nehemiah wouldn't be trapped into disobedience to god you and i have to be awfully careful because the enemy is pretty astute you know pretty clever he will lure us [00:51:10] into false moves rather easily and we have to be awfully careful whether what we allow ourselves to do is not false to the god whom we have to obey and nehemiah was one of those that knew that lesson well didn't fall into that trap could have provided a lot of ammunition for them against him if he had disobeyed the law in that point but he didn't do it i would say the enemy was fairly wily wasn't he in suggesting that to nehemiah so we have to be careful about the things that lure into false moves when it's all boiled down you know it amounts to whether we are ready to spare ourselves first or whether obedience to scripture comes first and this is what i find just rather [00:52:01] searching about this whole story you know um the heart of the matter really is where our loyalties lie and nehemiah was loyal to his god even though it might mean risky things that might be done dangerous things that might be done um the heart of the matter is where our loyalties really are is sparing of ourselves the first thing that we think about or is obedience to scripture the first thing that we think about uh i read a little book i don't know whether any of you will have seen this book it's a little bit of a uh hard-hitting book to read it but it's a book called the sacred cow i don't know if anybody has read that and the sacred cow that's enshrined in the title is money and the author of that book i've just written out just a little bit of what he said in one sentence he said we today we christians today too are so imbued with the value system of this world we're like sponges soaked [00:53:06] like sponges soaked with the value levels and the value system of this world and one of the sad things and it's what michael was saying already is that we don't recognize worldliness when it's with us we can see it in other people as well but a lot of our makeup a lot of our ways of doing things or worldly ways of doing things and the kind of general outlook uh that marks the world self-comfort self-satisfaction self-pleasing even in the church that we go to even in the place where we worship people say i don't like it there we'll go here pleasing themselves as to what they are doing that's worldliness that's a habit that belongs to this world to look after number one first and even in our christianity that is something that invades [00:54:04] always of doing things well we're fairly close to defeat on the score of worldliness and we need to see ourselves as pretty close to defeat on the score of worldliness be not conformed to this world john paul says to the romans but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may

prove what is that good and acceptable perfect will of god the stamp of this world has such a shape about it that it so easily stamped itself on us as well and we're so like the world uh and the renewing of our mind to be true to our god and to be obedient to our god and to be loyal to his word and obedient to his word to be after the things that are honoring to him to be so taken up by the splendor of the glory that he has revealed to us in the person of christ and the [00:55:04] richness of the grace that he has presented to us to be so moved by the rich things which god has revealed to us that our character may be stumped by that and not by the world as it is around us well may it be that we can be like that you know there's a lot that can't be said about nehemiah the man and there are various things that one could go on to talk about about the forthright way in which nehemiah did everything in his faith and in his outrightness and his closeness to the god that he sought to serve but perhaps what we have said will be sufficient and it is my prayer that the lessons that come out of this old testament book might be well learned and well obeyed by those of us who have been listening to this these things here this afternoon