

Nehemiah

Part 1

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[00:00:01] For any who haven't been with us, we've been looking in the mornings at 2nd Timothy, ministry for the last days, and in the evenings, by way of balance, we've been looking at various servants of God, striking individuals, who shine as great examples for us to follow indeed. We've used that little scriptural phrase, whose faith follow. It wasn't by any means a declared intent, but it's been obvious to me as I've listened, that one of the things that we have learned, is that in every case, whatever servant of God we've looked at, the conditions have been terribly weak. The background has been dark indeed in every case, which only helps us to be reminded once again, [00:01:01] that the darker the day, the brighter shines the light of the witness of those who are true to God, and so it is with Nehemiah. Nehemiah is one of the great characters of the Bible, a favourite with many of us, including myself. He was responsible for initiating and seeing through one of the great revivals in Bible times. Again, with repeated emphasis, without any human intent, this word revival, this thought of revival, has been coming through again and again, day by day, hasn't it? And so it's not surprising that the Holy Ghost has directed us on the last evening, to consider something of the life and the ways of Nehemiah. Now there isn't time to give you a biography of [00:02:05] Nehemiah. I do hope that what is said will encourage all of us to go back to the Scriptures, back to Nehemiah, and to consider the detail. I have five major points to make, and I want to rely almost exclusively on the internal evidence of the book itself, to demonstrate the validity of the points that I want to make. I'm going to speak about Nehemiah, but in speaking about Nehemiah, it's to focus our attention on things that we need to know, things that we need to learn, things that we need to act upon, things that we need to live, which might then colour and mark and characterise our service for the Lord until he comes. Some of you like to write things down, and I want you to write the first word down, pray. Pray. Nehemiah [00:03:08] was a man of prayer. There would have been no revival in the days of Nehemiah unless there'd been an individual who was so moved by the general condition of things that he was found prostrate in the presence of God, mourning over the general conditions. There's no other way. There hasn't been a revival in history that didn't start in the heart of one individual who was found in the presence of his God, prostrate in prayer. Now I want just to demonstrate that by showing one or two examples. One of the things I love about the book of Nehemiah is this, that as he proceeds through the narrative, again and again, we seem to lose the narrative, and the writer of Nehemiah [00:04:04] just lifts up his heart in the presence of his God and is breathing a prayer. Oh, that we lived lives like that, that whatever the circumstances, that our hearts were constantly lifted up in prayer before our God. Look first of all at chapter 4. I'm turning you to the scriptures, there's no other way. I just want to give you a couple of examples to demonstrate this. Chapter 4, verse 3, he talks about some opposition, some enemies, and then without any warning he bursts into prayer, here O our God, for we are despised. Turn their reproach upon their own head, and so on. Verse 8, he speaks of the conspiracy against them, and then verse 9, nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and

set a watch against them day and night, and so on. And if you skip over to the end of chapter 5, verse 19, think upon me, my God, for good according to all that I have done for thy [00:05:07] people. Verse 9 of chapter 6, now therefore O God, strengthen my hands. Just a tip, if you want to follow through what we are doing tonight, get yourself five colored pencils, select one of them, and scroll through, color in in a Bible, every time there's a reference to prayer, every time that is breathed, every time that there's a reference to anyone praying, or the content of a prayer. You'll be amazed how much of what Nehemiah did is based upon prayer. Now that's the general remark, now turn back to chapter 1 for the particular. Verses 1 to 3 tell us about the terrible conditions in Jerusalem, the walls being broken down, the gates thereof burned with fire. Now look at this, it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and [00:06:07] mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven. For the numerologists of my audience, who like to look for five, things with five, to demonstrate the object, the weakness of things, humanly speaking, you'll notice that he did five things. First of all, he sat down. He considered the matter in the presence of God. That was the first thing he did. He wept. It affected him. If things weren't going well for the Lord's things, he was moved. He was concerned. He wept in the presence of his master. He mourned. Oh, what did the Lord say? Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Nehemiah means that, doesn't it? Comforted of God. And here he was, he sat down, he wept, he mourned, he fasted, it affected his, the way he lived his life, and then he prayed. And if [00:07:07] you look further down at verse 6, he talks about the prayer of thy servant, which I pray thee before thee now, day and night. He was a man of prayer. You've got the one word, pray. About Nehemiah, we know this. He was a man of prayer. Prayer was his habit. We are creatures of habit. Let us have good habits. Let us be habitual prayers. Nehemiah was a habitual prayer. I think in whatever sphere we live, it's true to say that the way we react in an emergency is very much in line with the way we act normally. Don't wait till it's an emergency before you pray. Pray day and night, constantly. Oh, time doesn't permit, but look it up for yourself. The number of examples in scriptures, supremely the Lord. Habitual prayer was [00:08:05] his wont. Daniel and many others, they were used to praying. So that when an emergency came, it was a natural thing. It was according to nature that they were able to lift up their hearts and unburden themselves in the presence of God. Now that is the norm. Now look over to chapter 2, which Chris read for us. As you know, Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, the king's butler. He had an important job, but I think it's good to see that he didn't allow his secular responsibility to make him lose out on fulfilling his spiritual exercises. It was evident in the way that he comported himself before the king that something was wrong. [00:09:01] And the king says, what's wrong, Nehemiah? An emergency. Now look at what he says. I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king. Not a bit of it. He's in difficulties. He's in emergencies. And this is the only possible way to read it. I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king, no time for long prayers. Like Peter, Lord, save me. When he was going down, no time for a lecture, no time to explain what was going on, lifting up the heart before God, and Nehemiah here. He prays to the God of heaven, and he says to the king, that wouldn't have been possible unless he'd been a man of habitual prayer. Your first word, and your first color perhaps when you get home, is pray.

Number two, study. Nehemiah was a man of the word, a man of the Bible, a man who was always promoting the study of the [00:10:14] scriptures. Again, let us look at one or two examples of this. Starting with chapter one, remember I beseech thee, beware that thou commandest thy servant Moses. Verse nine, if ye turn unto me and keep my commandment and do them.

Then we come to chapter eight, don't we? This grand chapter, favorite of many of us. There are others later on where there's a reference to the reading of the scriptures, the promotion of the study of the word of God, but perhaps the climax is in chapter eight. If you look for it, you'll find that there

are, oh, I haven't counted them, about a dozen references in this chapter to all the [00:11:09] people, all the people. The study of the scriptures is not only for one sector or section of the Christian church. It's something that's incumbent upon each of us. We've had it, haven't we? Study, to show thyself approved unto God a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth, all scripture and so on. And here in verse one, they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation and so on. Verse three, he read therein. Now this is something, isn't it? Aren't meetings long? Aren't meetings boring? Fancy having to come to another meeting. How about this? Verse three, he [00:12:03] read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning, presumably dawn, until midday before the men and the women and those that could understand and the ears of all the people were attentive to what was said. Verse five, Ezra opened the book and so on. Verse six, Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, all the people and said, Amen. Verse eight. Perhaps, no not here, at the far end where the preacher can see it. Every time that someone stands up and delivers a message for God, perhaps this should be in huge letters at the back of the hall. They read in the book of the law of God distinctly and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading. Oh to God that all his servants did exactly that. Read distinctly, give the sense, cause to understand those who are listening. And that's exactly what happened on this occasion. We were exhorted last Saturday [00:13:10] night, were we not, to be positive in everything that we do. It's lived out in verse ten. Go thy way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared. Not say oh, that man again, or that line again, or we could hardly even hear him, or I wish I hadn't, I didn't like what he had to say.

Hear the servants, they read distinctly, they gave the sense, they caused to understand those who were listening. And you get a positive, constructive response. They went their way, they enjoyed what there was to enjoy. They shared it with their families and their friends who hadn't been able to be present. [00:14:02] And they finished up with this grand exhortation, the joy of the Lord is your strength. Verse thirteen, on the second day, were gathered together, the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, even to understand the words of the Lord. We all need the scriptures. What Paul said to Timothy applies to each of us. We all need the word of God. If in prayer we speak to him, although in times of prayer he may well speak to us, in the study of the scriptures, God uses the occasion in order that he might reveal to us the sort of people that we should be, and the sort of things that we should be doing. Many other examples, again, get a second coloured pencil and go through everything, every chapter, the thirteen chapters, and scroll through where there's a reference to the word of God. Now then, one more thing. We are not intended to study the scriptures in order that we might be able to develop an encyclopedic style of being able to produce a chapter and a verse for every circumstance. [00:15:17] Of course, it will be good if we are able to give a reason for the hope that is within us. But what is absolutely essential is this, that our minds and our hearts are so saturated in the word of God, that whatever emergency arises, our reflex actions in that emergency are governed by the word of God, and that's why we need to read the scriptures. Pray. Study. Obey. What's the third word? Obey. Nehemiah, he prayed. Nehemiah, he studied the scriptures, and Nehemiah was obedient to the scriptures, and he pressed that same obedience upon those that he led.

[00:16:14] I will make no spiritual progress at all. I will see nothing fresh in the scriptures if I do not submit to what I already know of the word of God. It is not that God shows me something in the scriptures that I might say, yes, I like that, I'll do it. I make a little bit of progress.

God shows me something else. I say, I'm not very keen on that, but all right, I'll do it. And then a bit

later I'm shown something else, and I say, Lord, not that. I don't like that. There'll be no fresh light for my soul unless I'm true to the light that I have already. [00:17:04] The way to blessing is obedience. Again and again in the scriptures, obedience is better than sacrifice, to hearken than the foot of lambs.

I wonder if I'm perturbed that I'm not making as much progress as I would like to make. I wonder if it's because I am not obedient to what I already know. Many Christians amongst us are genuinely concerned to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. But perhaps we haven't got this far, that submission, obedience, to the simple statements of scripture is the way to make progress, is the way to get fresh light. [00:18:02] I know in my own heart the difficulty is not usually that I don't know what to do. The difficulty usually is that I don't want to do it. That may sound trite, but I am sure there's an answering chord in all our hearts when we say that there are scriptures whose implication and significance we are fully aware of, and yet it doesn't appeal to us. You remember way back in the days of the tabernacle system, there was one group of people whose job it was to look after the practical things. And it's not without significance that they were the morarians, the people who knew something of the bitter waters of mora. Practical ministry is often bitter to our taste. Devotional ministry, how sweet. Doctrinal ministry, how important. But it's when the practical ministry comes to bear upon us and obedience is required of us, it's then that we start backing off, isn't it? [00:19:05] I wonder if, like Nehemiah, we are prepared to pray, to study, and to obey. Of course, this led to some difficulties. It meant that it was not only true that he was a man of prayer and a man of the word, he was a separate man. The people round about were able to see, this man's different, he's a bit peculiar, he's not the same as us. He was ridiculed, he was mocked, he was scorned. He was prepared to accept that, loving the praises of God more than the praises of men. Pray, study, obey. You'll notice he hasn't lifted a hand yet. He hasn't done any work. Now, pause at this point and take note of that.

Now, a very good friend of mine, who happens to be in my audience, when he was a little younger, he had this sort of job where he used to go for a few months here working, then a few months somewhere else, and of course, everywhere he went, he looked up the people of God and had a time of happy fellowship with them. [00:20:20] He moved on from one place and a little while later I met an elderly, mature brother who'd been where this younger one had been resident for a while. And the older man said, when you see so and so, remind him what I told him a hundred times. God has far more to do in him than by him. Now, think about that. God has far more to do in us than he has to do by us. Certainly with Nehemiah, long before he did anything at all, he was a man of prayer. He was a man of the Word. He was a separate man because he submitted to what the Word of God had to say. [00:21:07] I say that particularly because my next word is work. Nehemiah was a worker. I've noticed, I don't want to tread on any tender corns, but I've noticed sociologists, politicians, psychologists, some doctors, I'm sure not those we have here, say something like, we have to get away from the work ethic. People shouldn't feel guilty because they're not doing anything. We should get this old-fashioned, medieval idea out of our systems once and for all. Nehemiah was a worker. He didn't believe we should get rid of the work ethic. [00:22:03] Does it bear examination? I'll just, again, take you through one or two words. I didn't have time to take you through the book on occasions or examples where he submitted to what the Word of God had to say. Look them up for yourself and see the sanctification, the practical sanctification that resulted. But look, first of all, at chapter two. End of verse five, he speaks to the king. He said, things are a terrible state in my home city.

Oh, he said, think of Psalm 48, the city of the great king, beautiful of situation, and so on. What a wonderful place it was, but it's now in ruins.

And at the end of the verse says, please, can I build it? There he had a secure, congenial job, the king's butler, and he said to the king, please, can I give up this secure job? I want to go down and help to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He was a worker. [00:23:18] Verse 16, talks about the various categories of the people, the rulers, the priests, the nobles, and so on, and the rest that do the work. Perhaps this corresponds to the others also in 2 Timothy. The rest, the many, those who are there to do the work. In verse 17, come let us build. Verse 18, I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me. They strengthened their hands for this good work. Two things there. He says, repeatedly, the hand of my God was good upon me. He wants to build. Scripture says, accept the Lord, build the house. May labour in vain that build it. Are we assured in any task that we put our hands to that we have the blessing of the Lord resting upon it? Are we doing it at his charges, at his bidding, rather than merely our own ideas? [00:24:16] But the enthusiasm of Nehemiah is catching. It says, not only that he wanted to build, but it says they strengthened their hands for this good work. Chapter 3, in verse 5, there were some exceptions. Their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord. And yet, if you look further down, at verse 27, you'll find that the people of that same sector, the Techoites, repaired another piece.

Where there was something lacking in one, God saw to it that the work didn't suffer. Someone else did an extra bit. Truth of the body, isn't it? God arranges things, that his work goes on. We have the opportunity of being identified with it, associated with it, and if we decline that wonderful opportunity, the work of God will not suffer, but we might well. [00:25:18] God will see to it that the work is done. Let us ensure that we are those who are involved in the work of God. I wonder, do any of us pine for the great work that we see going on in a remote place, and would love to do something about it? And yet, at the same time, we have no intention of getting on with the necessary job that's ready to our hands. There's a work for Jesus, ready to your hand, so the hymn writer says. Nehemiah was in the spirit, and in the goodness of that. Let us take the mark from Nehemiah. I enjoyed the thought this week of loyalty. The phrase that I use is, let us be sure where our spiritual home is. Once we've made our mind up that this is my spiritual home, let us throw ourselves into the work, in for a penny, in for a pound, hook, line, and sinker. [00:26:22] And let us get on with the job that needs to be done locally, rather than casting envious eyes at something that might be done in the far part of another country. It may well be, if the Lord wants us to do some great thing for him in some other land, an early indication of that is that we are prepared to put our shoulder to the wheel at and near our spiritual home, and get on with the job that needs doing there. Try not to get into the frame of mind of shopping round for the biggest church, or the biggest meeting that's within travelling distance, so that you can go there, take a back seat, and watch everyone else do the work, and carry you as a passenger. [00:27:04] Involve yourself. If it's good enough for you to think, that's where you should remember the Lord, that's where you should be working. Elsewhere too, if you have the time and the energy. But locally, where the Lord has placed you, you and your small corner, that's where the work has to start. Nehemiah said to the king, my place is there where there's a lot of rubbish. Oh again, how many of us? When I first came to conference, I'm sure it's true to say, that I was many of those who were young, and keen, and knew everything, and went around shaking my head, seeing verses like this, chapter 4 verse 10 is it, the bearers of burdens is diminished, and there is much rubbish. Oh if that was true then, it's much more true now. But there's a lot of rubbish to clear away, there's a lot of building to do, and it's those who've prayed, who've studied, who've submitted themselves to the word of God, who are going to be equipped, qualified, to be involved in the mighty work that God is anxious to do. [00:28:14] Now I would be so bold to say, that we should take account of these simple features of Nehemiah. One of the great leaders of the Bible. One of the great revivalists.

And yet, when we think of these servants, and the others we've had this week, we may be inclined to

say, well of course it was alright for these great men, and great women, that we read about in the scriptures. Others nearer our times, where we can point to them as examples to follow, and then we shake our heads and we say, of course, I could never be like that. The basic features that motivated, that strengthened them, that empowered them in what they did, were these basic features that were true of Nehemiah. He prayed, he studied, he submitted himself to what the word had to say, and he was a worker. [00:29:16] I love that lovely little phrase. The people had a mind to work. Philippians is the great epistle for the mind. Something about the mind in every chapter. That's another story. Here, the people were work-minded. Are we work-minded? See the balance. It's possible to say, well of course, I'm a worker, but because of that, I have rough hands, I have a dull mind, and because of that, it's really not my scene to go in for the study of the scriptures. Or it might be, well, you know, I'm the kind of person that likes to contemplate. I like to meditate, and I like to sift these through in my mind, but really, I can't use a hammer, a screwdriver, or any mechanical implement. I can't even vacuum the carpet, and so on. [00:30:06] There is the balance between that time spent in the presence of the Lord, in prayer and meditation, and the willingness, the mind to work, to be associated with God has a mind for you and for me. Pray, study, submit, and work. And I would say again, there's nothing about any of those features that couldn't and shouldn't be true of you and me. The same thing should mark us. But there's another matter that was true of Nehemiah, and for completeness, it's my fifth word. He was a leader. He was a leader.

A good friend of mine used to say to me, well, of course, the Bible says, not many masters, not many bosses, not many leaders. I'm prepared to take the back seat.

[00:31:09] And in my normal, discreet way, I used to say, don't be lazy. Don't use the Bible as an excuse for being lazy. There's room for us all to work. And if we get on with the little job in our corner of the vineyard, it will soon become evident whether or not we are fit to take responsibility. The mighty servants of God, the great leaders in history, were not those who mushroomed overnight. They were those who were willing. On seeing a job to be done, they were willing to get on with it. I like that scripture where the man says, you just tell me what has to be done and I'll get on with it. He said, I work. Now this is the scripture, I am a man under authority. As I read that, I operate under an authoritative system where one gives the command and the other gets on with the job. [00:32:09] And that man said, because I understand the system, even though normally I'm one of the leaders, the centurion, you tell me what has to be done and I will get on with it. And it may well be that the way you do your job and I do mine may bring to light in the goodness of God whether or not we are fit to take any responsibility in the things of God. Let us see to it that we work conscientiously, diligently, and I use that word carefully. Pharaoh said to Joseph, seek ye out diligent men that they might be leaders. I think that's a universal truth. Not a question of sitting back and telling everybody else what to do. Seek ye out diligent people and they will give evidence that they are in a position to give guidance out of their mature experience to those who follow on behind. [00:33:06] Now I'll just give a couple of examples of that to show how the work progressed. And let's see whether or not there are things about the features of leadership which in a small degree may well be true of us. He was the leader, the governor, the tershatha. He was the king's cupbearer. Don't be surprised if Christians, because of their diligence, make progress in their jobs. And in saying that, let me remind each of us that sad though the economic conditions may be in this country, there's no need for unemployment in the things of God. There's something that each of us can do. And again it's when we pray, when we study, when we submit, that God gives us the answer to a question again we had earlier in the week. Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? [00:34:06] But there he was, he was leading, he was guiding. Verse 10 of chapter 2, a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. Have you a heart that feels for the Lord's people. It's absolutely essential in those who are to take the lead. And I'll have to leave

that with you. Look up, get another coloured pencil and go through every occasion where he gave an instruction. He saw the need and he said let's get on with it and see how he took his coat off, rolled up his sleeves and got on with the job. I really think I should leave it there. I've given us all five words. I'll say them again. In the light of our studies of 2 Timothy, let us be men and women of prayer, those who pray.

[00:35:01] Let us be men and women who study the scriptures, meditate upon them day and night, eat the fat, drink the sweet and share out with others the good things that we've enjoyed.

Let us submit to the clear statements of scripture. The difficulties are not caused by the abstruse, by the things that we cannot really understand. The difficulties are caused where the word is plain and we know it and we are not prepared to submit it. Having lived that sort of life in the presence of the Lord, let us get on with the job. Let us, having studied, let us show ourselves workmen that need it not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the work of truth. Let us be prepared to be vessels unto honour, sanctified, meet for the Master's use. Let us be prepared to follow the lead of godly saints of God. Let us be prepared to take upon ourselves whatever responsibilities the Lord brings upon us.

[00:36:18] And let us, having done that, where God permits us to be associated with the work, let us, like Nehemiah and his people in his day, when the work has been done, let us realise and accept and praise God that he is the initiator, the glory is his, the blessing is ours, and that the witness will be seen and be effective of those who observe the service. May it be so, for his name's sake.