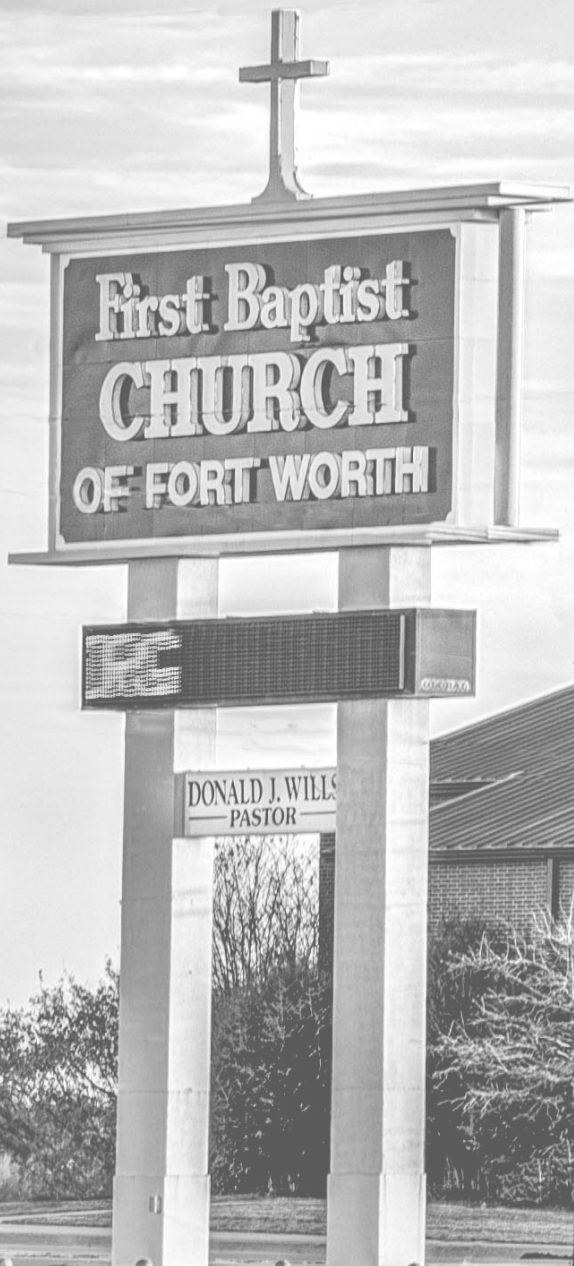
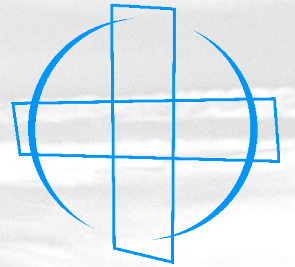


AUGUST
2024

Donald J. Wills
Senior Pastor

CONQUER



The purpose of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth is to **introduce** people into a loving relationship with Jesus, **instruct** them in spiritual growth through God's Word, **inspire** them to serve for God's kingdom, and **incorporate** them in authentic worship to glorify God.

A Note From Our Pastor

Dear FBC family and friends,

There is a saying, “Conquer or be Conquered.” Certainly, the enemy throws many challenging events at us in life to which we could succumb if it were not for our faith in Whom we have believed. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:8: “We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” The pre-text to this statement is that there is a treasure in these earthen vessels that we reside in; that treasure is the indwelling power of God. Through His power at work in us, we are His dwelling presence and, no matter what life may hold for us, we are not destroyed. We are not conquered by the enemy, but we are “more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Rom 8:37).

As a reminder, the layout of this Curriculum begins with a 7-day approach for both the teacher and the members to get the most from each study. We also acknowledge that teachers may have their own methods for preparing the lessons and we encourage them to prepare in the way that makes them most effective in presenting God’s Word and the weekly lesson. We also encourage each teacher and member to use the suggested 7-day approach for their own personal study and encouragement.

As we dive into this study of Daniel, we find that he was faced with all types of adversity. Yet, through it all, he remained faithful and committed to his faith in God. He believed at every challenge God is faithful and will see him through. Our comfort is in knowing He will do the same for us and that we are truly more than conquerors.

Blessings,
Pastor Don Wills



Suggested Plan for Using this Bible Study Guide Effectively

Introduce

Day 1: Read and meditate on the Scripture, asking God to guide you throughout the week as you study His Word and allowing Him to speak to you through the Spirit. Read the **INTRODUCE** portion of the lesson commentary.

Instruct

Day 2: Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and read the **INSTRUCT** portion of the lesson commentary. Concentrate on memorizing the focal verse for that particular week.

Day 3: Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and answer the focal questions in the **INSTRUCT** portion of the lesson commentary.

Inspire

Day 4: Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and begin thinking about tangible ways you can incorporate the principles you learned in your daily life. Read the **INSPIRE** portion of the lesson commentary.

Incorporate

Day 5: Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and apply the theological principle that you learned from this week in a tangible way. Use the **INCORPORATE** portion of the lesson commentary to guide you.

Day 6: Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and in the journal section describe how God allowed you to apply this passage in a real and tangible way this week.

Day 7: Review the Scripture and share with others in your Connect Class on Sunday morning at 9:30am. Be ready to share your experience about how God allowed you to apply the lesson for that week.

Contents
August Lesson Plan

3



August 4, 2024

Conquering

Contempt

[*Daniel 5:1-31*](#)

21



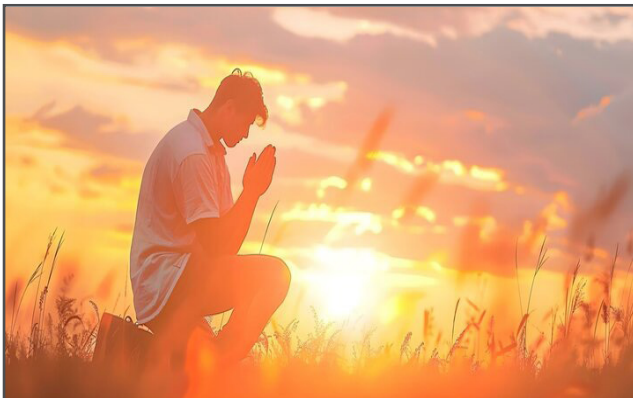
August 11, 2024

Conquering

through Communication (Prayer)

[*Daniel 6:1-28*](#)

41



August 18, 2024

Conquering

through Confession

[*Nehemiah 1:1-11*](#)

59



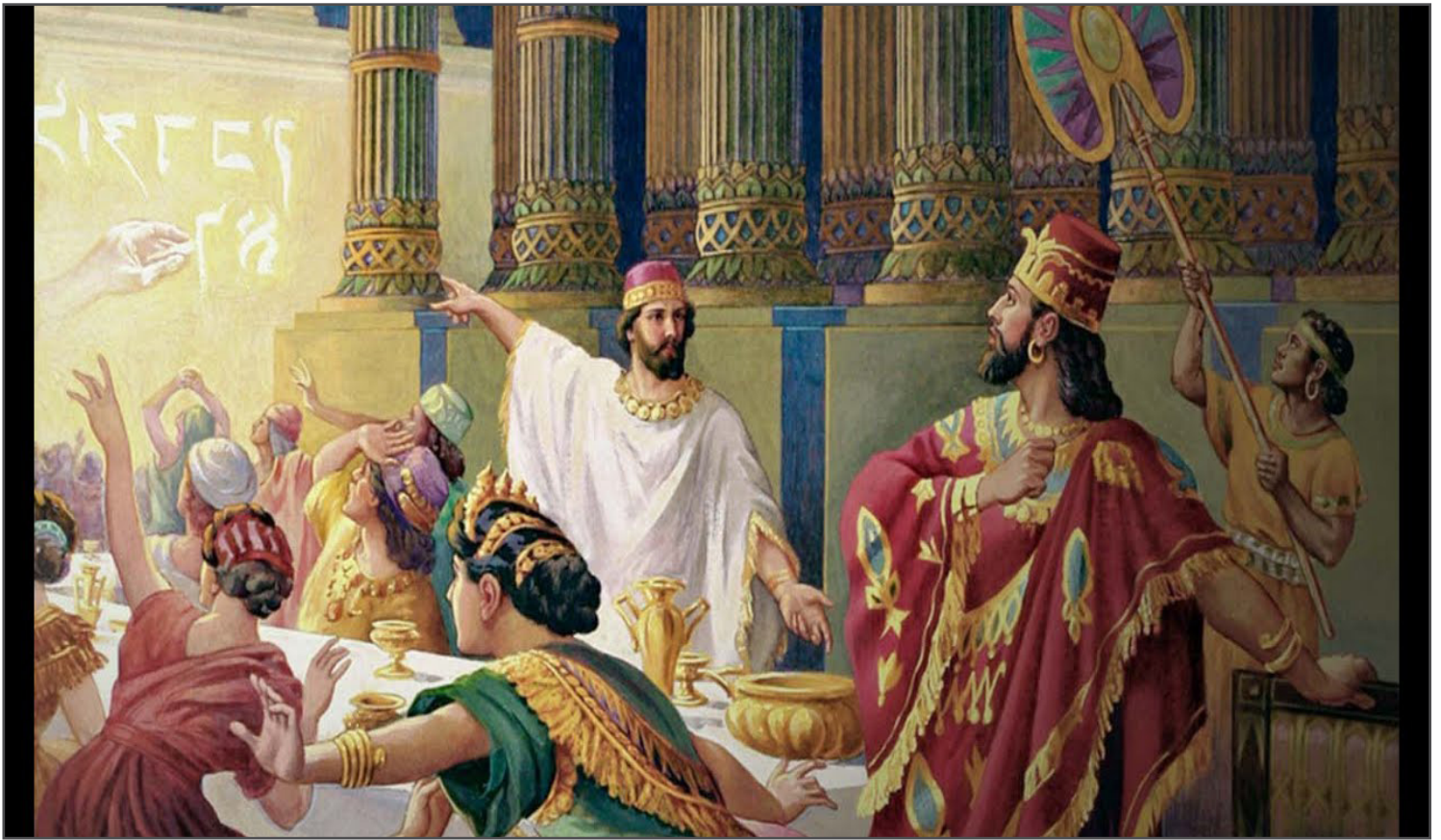
August 25, 2024

Conquering

our Concern

[*Nehemiah 2:1-20*](#)

August 4, 2024



Conquering Contempt Daniel 5:1-31

Focal Verse:

“But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this.”

back to
Table of
Contents

Daniel 5:22

Introduce

In the late 1840s, valuable mineral deposits in the Sierra Nevada Mountains sent people scurrying westward across the Continental Divide to stake their claim in an attempt to make a better life for their families. Throughout the West, people poured into the mountainous regions of the high deserts where settlements sprang up almost overnight and the explosive population boom rivaled some well-established cities in the East. From the remnants of these once-bustling towns now-turned-ghost-towns as well as in the depiction of that era in movies, we see vestiges of this long-forgotten way of life. The buildings which we find in each of these towns tell us much about what they considered most important. Usually, each of these burgeoning settlements prominently featured a saloon and dancehall, a hotel and brothel, and a sheriff's office and jail in an oft-vain attempt to keep the peace.



However, one important building, which every mining community of any size would have, often receives very little attention: the office of the assayer. How many of us actually know what an assayer did and how crucial he was to life in these mining communities? Prospectors wishing to determine the approximate value of their land, based on the content of gold or silver it contained, would drill core samples from various places around their claim and take them to the assayer for evaluation. The assayer would then test the chemical composition and purity of these samples to determine their estimated worth. Based on the findings, a prospector would potentially know whether he had struck it rich. Not only would he know how much gold or silver his claim might hold, but also the areas in which to dig because they held the highest concentration of minerals.

Like any human venture, however, some assayers would act corruptly by falsifying information to bolster or devalue a claim's worth. Some unscrupulous prospectors would misrepresent the value of their claim in order to swindle an eager person looking to strike it rich. They would bribe the assayer to provide a false report, inflating the value of a claim in order to sell it for more money. Others, however, may bribe the assayer to devalue a claim so that they can essentially steal it from an unsuspecting

Introduce

miner, paying a pittance for what it was actually worth. In either case, the hope of riches drove people westward and the desperation to strike it rich sometimes drove them to compromise their integrity and act immorally.

Just as assayers evaluated the purity and worth of mineral deposits, we need to evaluate the purity of our character in comparison to Christ. If these assayers would have evaluated their own character on a perfect scale to determine their moral uprightness, many of them would have found themselves lacking. The truth would have been revealed! First, it would reveal whether they themselves had been honest and accurate in relaying the purity of the minerals on the claim and assigning a value. Second, it would have revealed the truth about others in the community and the actual value of a particular parcel of land.

In Daniel 5, we see the contemptuous character of Belshazzar, the crown prince of Babylon. Like a Master Assayer, God probes the purity of this king and finds him sorely lacking. Part of the inscription written on the wall decries, “You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting” ([Dan 5:27](#)). Apart from our relationship with Christ, we are impure, sinful beings deserving of death—like Belshazzar. But praise be to God who finds us more valuable than any treasure contained in heaven and earth. He found us so valuable that He sent His Son to redeem us through His blood, so that we could be made pure and be in right standing with Him. As a Master Assayer in whom there is no corruption, God evaluates the content of our character with absolute truth and certainty. May we look at ourselves through His eyes so that we might align with His standards and evaluate our character accurately so that we may know what we do well and where we need to improve.

Key
Question

When God weighs the content of your character and actions on the scales measured by Scripture, what does He find?

Daniel 5:1-4

THE MOCKERY OF GOD :

After a brief period of instability in the Babylonian Empire following Nebuchadnezzar's death (562 BC), Nabonidus ascended to the throne for seventeen years (556-539 BC). Historians, both ancient and modern, consider him to be the last king of this great empire. However, Nabonidus spent much of his time outside the city of Babylon in the town of Tema 500 miles to the south. During these extended absences, his son, Belshazzar, would govern the nation—effectively serving as coregent. Thus, Daniel rightly refers to him as **king** even if the official title belonged more directly to his father (v. 1).

From the accounts by the Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon, we can date the events of Daniel chapter 5 with exactness: October 11, 539 BC—the night the Babylonian Empire fell to Cyrus the Great and the Medo-Persian Empire. The Babylonians had endured a series of humiliating defeats and only their capital city



remained free despite Medo-Persian troops having assembled just beyond its walls. Even so, life continued as normal for the citizens in Babylon as they engaged in a traditional festival which Daniel describes as **a great feast for a thousand** officials (i.e., **lords**) who ate sumptuously and **drank wine**. The Medo-Persians timed their attack to coincide precisely with this festival in order to catch the Babylonians off-

guard and celebrating. And it worked! The attackers circumvented the city's defenses by altering the course of the Euphrates River and bypassing its walls. Once past these formidable defenses, they easily defeated the city with its citizens drunk and incapable of putting up much of a fight. While Daniel doesn't provide the details of the attack itself, he does describe the events which led to God's judgment and the fall of this once-mighty empire.

As the king partied among the throng of revelers, he became drunk. The phrase

Instruct

while he tasted the wine doesn't mean sipping as one might think, but rather it refers to him becoming drunk. He had begun to feel the alcohol's effects! In his inebriated state, he lost all inhibition and his true character began to shine through. So, Belshazzar ordered that **the gold and silver vessels taken from the temple** in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC as trophies and spoils of war be brought to him so that he might use them (v. 2). Although the text identifies Nebuchadnezzar as **his father**, the two were not technically related unless secondarily if Nabonidus had married one of Nebuchadnezzar's widows, but this does not have much historical support. **Father**, in this sense, then refers more to the line of succession than lineage. Thus, we would translate **father** in this context as predecessor. In other words, Belshazzar used **the vessels** that his predecessor **had taken from the temple**.

Even though Nebuchadnezzar may have originally taken these religious relics **from the temple** in Jerusalem, he did not show disdain, disrespect, or irreverence toward God or His people. Any ancient citizen—let alone a king—would have known that using sacred relics from another people's religion would have been an affront to their "god" and offensive. Despite his own character flaws, Nebuchadnezzar never intentionally misused these items he **had taken**; he treated them somewhat respectfully. Even though he had kept them as trophies of his conquest, he kept them safely and securely in his own temple's treasury. Belshazzar, on the other hand, showed utter contempt for the Lord and His people. He blasphemously employed these sacred **vessels** in a drunken orgy (v. 3). This **king** had these implements brought to him for the sole purpose of mocking the Lord by using them to praise **the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, and wood and stone** (v. 4).

Question # 1

How does the world show contempt for the Lord today? How have you experienced it personally? How did you react?

We don't serve inanimate **gods** made of metal or **stone**—or even plastic—that cannot see, hear, and respond ([Psalm 115:5-8](#); [1 Cor 12:2](#)). We serve the one and only God who has given us life! We serve a holy God who sent His Son to redeem us from sin. We serve a risen Savior! Therefore, we ought to treat the Lord with the utmost reverence and respect. Unfortunately, some "believers" treat God casually without the respect, reverence, and honor He rightly deserves. In fact, the people who serve these inanimate

objects or man-made idols sometimes treat their “gods” with more reverence and respect than those who profess to have a relationship with the one true God—Yahweh! Even though some people approach their “gods” with meaningless ritual, they do so out of respect. They bow, remove their shoes, and perform certain rituals to honor them. If they do these things for inanimate objects and false gods, how much more respect should we show our God—not through meaningless ritual, but through a relationship predicated on our obedience ([1 Sam 15:22](#); [Micah 6:6-8](#)), our love ([Matt 22:37](#); [John 14:15](#)), our character and the fruit we bear ([Gal 5:22-23](#); [2 Peter 1:3-4](#)), and our complete devotion to Him ([Phil 3:13-14](#); [1 John 2:15-17](#)).

While we can call God our Father and Friend, it does not give us the right to treat Him like a mere human being. To have an intimate relationship with Him is a privilege! God is not a “genie” who grants our every desire; He’s a God who provides for our needs according to His divine plan even when we don’t fully understand how He works. Yet, some people treat God with contempt when they perceive that they have not gotten what they want—which they masquerade as something they need. People become angry at God and blame Him for failing to act in the way they might have expected. People can sometimes show contempt for God when they must deal with an untimely death of a loved one, dysfunction in a relationship, personal health problems, financial problems, persecution, when they don’t get the material possessions they think they ought to have, and a whole host of other situations.



**Question
2**

How do you continue showing God reverence and respect even when you don’t understand why a situation produced the result it did?

Some who profess to follow Christ show more respect and reverence for their material possessions and hobbies than they do for the Lord who saved them. Some devote countless hours to their possessions and hobbies, but they’re too busy to cultivate their relationship with the Lord and to serve Him faithfully. They spend

Instruct

excessive amounts of money to have top-of-the-line products and gear, but they won't invest a dime in the eternal work to which God has called them to participate. They spend hours researching about their passions, but won't pick up the Bible to read a single verse. They will talk non-stop with others about the things that they love, but they won't ever talk about the good news of the gospel to those who need to hear it most. While this does not show contempt to the level of Belshazzar according to our human understanding, it nevertheless still shows contempt! As followers of Christ, we need to conquer contempt and honor Him with every area of our lives.

Daniel 5:5-9

THE MYSTERY TO BE SOLVED :

In the midst of this salacious celebration, the king noticed **the fingers of a man's hand** begin to write a message **on the plaster of the wall in his palace** (v. 5). Being at night, **the fingers** strategically **wrote** the words **opposite the lampstand** to make them more visible in the perhaps dimly lit room. This frightened the king so much that he almost fainted (v. 6)! The text describes how his face **changed, the joints of his hips** began to give way, and **his knees knocked** together. We would describe being overcome with fear much the same way today. In modern terms, we would say that his face turned pale, he shook with fear, and his knees became weak to the point of fainting.

Gripped with fear, Belshazzar called for his trusted "spiritual" advisors to come and interpret the words (v. 7). He even promised to shower the one who could interpret them with gifts. He would clothe him like royalty in **purple** garments, give him **a gold** necklace, and promote him to **the third** highest ruler in the



empire behind only his father and him. So, one cannot "write" this event off as some kind of alcoholic-fueled vision which only **the king** had witnessed while in a drunken stupor. Even if no one else had seen **the fingers** penning the message, everyone could certainly see the inexplicable evidence written plainly **on the plaster!** In fact, **the astrologers** and mediums—who weren't attending the party at all and so likely had

not drunk anything to the point of inebriation—saw the words **on the wall** when they arrived (v. 8)!

Still, none of the mediums could make any sense of this cryptic message. Their inability to **read the writing** does not mean that they could not comprehend the Aramaic as if it were a foreign language. On the contrary, Aramaic was the common language of both trade and the government in the sixth century; it would have been spoken empire-wide and read by the educated, especially these highly trained mystics. In one sense, they could “**read**” the words intelligibly, but in another sense they could not understand what they meant without further context. Without any context, they couldn’t interpret the phrase for the king! Like a cypher or code, the mediums did not have a key to their **interpretation**. To them, they were simply a random series of words that only had a range of meaning. It would be like us seeing the words “dime,” “nickel,” and “quarter” written **on the wall**. We would generally know that they referred to money and accounting, but we would not know why they were written or what message they intended to convey.

When his trusted advisors could not decipher the words’ meaning, Belshazzar became even more visibly upset (v. 9). Once again, his face grew even more pale as the blood rushed from his cheeks and he turned sheepishly white from fear. This alarmed (i.e., **astonished**) his advisors. They had exhausted all their resources. They had run out of options. They didn’t know what to do and likely did not know what the king might do since they could not provide an answer. Today, we would probably pin our hopes on Artificial Intelligence through personal assistants like Siri or Alexa or we would perform a simple Google search to see what others have said. But these methods are just as much a gamble as the Babylonian astrologers! They are flawed just as much as the ones who programmed them with the information in the first place! Only One source can point us to the truth and offer us understanding that never fails—the Lord God.



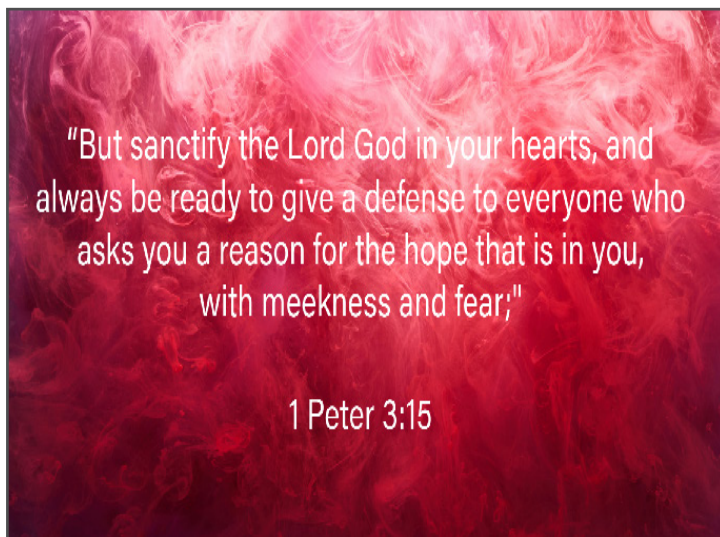
Daniel 5:10-12

THE MAN GUIDED BY GOD:

The **queen** mother heard about the predicament of her son from the officials attending the feast, so she rushed to **the banquet hall** both to console him and offer advice (v. 10). We can deduce that this was Belshazzar's mother because the text makes clear that the king's **wives** were already present at the celebration (see v. 2). Moreover, as the **queen** mother she would have been old enough to recall the events of Nebuchadnezzar's reign clearly and, as Nabonidus' wife, she would have been in a high position in the government which would have allowed her to witness them first-hand. So, unsurprisingly, she proposed a solution to the king's conundrum: Daniel. She had seen first-hand how God had worked through His servant Daniel to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dreams!

With words reminiscent of King Nebuchadnezzar ([Dan 4:8-9, 18](#)), the **queen** described Daniel as a man endowed with **the spirit of the holy gods** who could give the **interpretation** Belshazzar so desperately sought (v. 11). Because Daniel had a reputation for resolving the impossible, she also reminded the king how he had exhibited such superior **understanding and wisdom** that his predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar, had promoted him to be in charge over all the Babylonian mediums. In addition, she further emphasized how Daniel had a special gift (i.e., **an excellent spirit**) through which he could interpret **dreams**, explain **riddles**, and solve mysteries (v. 12). The Aramaic translated **explaining enigmas** literally refers to untying knots. As such, it conveys the idea of solving complex and difficult problems—which we might sometimes call “mysteries” today. In any case, the **queen** identified Daniel as the only **man** who could get the job done!

What implications does this testimonial from the **queen** about Daniel have for us? When we abide by God's **wisdom** and faithfully serve Him, it will be evident in our lives. The world may not know how to quantify or explain it, but they will see a clear difference in us. With the aid of the Lord, we can handle any difficult situation with



grace by offering **wisdom** from His Word; thus, we can do what seems impossible humanly speaking when God works through us. This will give us a platform to talk about the Lord and share the gospel. If we obediently apply the **wisdom** from God as outlined in Scripture, we will never fail. While we may not always have “success” the way the world defines it, we can always navigate life’s challenges fearlessly when led by the Lord. As a result, it will often spur people to ask why we are different. It may even compel some of them to come to us for advice at times! When they do, we must always seize the opportunity to direct them to the Lord ([1 Peter 3:15](#)).

Question
3

What character traits or fruit of righteousness can others see in you that sets you apart as belonging to the Lord?

Daniel 5:13-23

THE MISGUIDED SON:

After restating Daniel’s qualifications, credentials, and glowing recommendation from **the queen** mother, the king gets down to business. He would reward Daniel handsomely for interpreting the **writing**—just as he would have the other mediums, but they had all failed (vv. 13-16). Although Daniel ultimately agrees to tell the king its meaning, he rejects the offer of any **gifts** as if his God-given wisdom were some type of parlor trick from which he could profit (v. 17). Thus, he would interpret the **writing** because God had given him the meaning to communicate—not because the king demanded it or even offered meaningless **gifts**. With godly insight and wisdom, however, Daniel preceded the **interpretation** by giving Belshazzar a history lesson!

Question
4

What should Daniel’s refusal of any gifts reveal about our motivation for service?

Daniel reminded the current monarch that **the Most High God** had graciously given his predecessor his **kingdom and majesty, glory, and honor** (v. 18). Nebuchadnezzar owed all his success to the Lord; he had achieved none of these things on his own! As a result, **because of** these blessings from the Lord, everyone **feared him** and he exercised his authority however he **wished** (v. 19). He could **execute** or pardon (i.e., **keep alive**) **whomever he** wanted; he could promote (i.e., **set up**) or demote (i.e., **put down**) anyone he so chose. According to conventional wisdom, King

Instruct

Nebuchadnezzar could do just about anything that he wanted! In all this, however, he failed to recognize the true source of his power and authority: God. As a result, a **spirit of pride** and arrogance consumed him. So, God **deposed** him from **his throne** and **took** away **his glory** (v. 20). Therefore, **the Most High God** humbled Nebuchadnezzar until he recognized His sovereignty over the affairs of all human governments (v. 21).

Daniel now points his finger squarely in Belshazzar's face, accusing him of doing the very same thing as Nebuchadnezzar, but to an even greater degree! He indicts the king for **not** having **humbled** his **heart although** he **knew all** these things about his predecessor (v. 22)! He continues to explain how the king had shown contempt for the Lord by defiling the sacred vessels from the temple using them in worship of inanimate objects he regarded as gods. Instead of worshipping the God who gives life (literally, **holds your breath**), this foolish king has arrogantly **praised** inanimate objects which cannot **see, hear, or know** (v. 23).

Just as in Daniel's day, the problem of **pride** still plagues our world today. None of us is immune! While some may struggle more than others, every one of us has been prideful in at least one area of our lives if we

take an honest inventory. Although we cannot address every aspect of **pride** in such a brief lesson, we can establish how it can consume us and influence almost every aspect of life if we allow it. By listing broad categories which we may even rarely consider, it can spur us to think about whether or not we've acted pridefully at some point in our lives. Typically, we lambaste people as prideful who engage in self-promotion, tout their accolades and accomplishments, boast in their possessions or money, flaunt their intelligence, or insult and put down others—all things Nebuchadnezzar did when he stood pompously in his palace glorying in "his" achievements (Dan 4:30). We tend to focus on these areas which we can observe outwardly.

But have you ever thought **about** pride beyond these obvious outward displays? Pride tells us we can live independently; we don't need God. Thus, we only turn to God



"Pride goes before destruction,
And a haughty spirit before a fall."

Proverbs 16:18

Pride tells us we can live independently; we don't need God. Thus, we only turn to God when we need something or life spirals completely out of control. Often, this manifests itself when we begin thinking we know better than God. We have it all together and we know what's best for us! But God didn't create us to be completely self-sufficient or autonomous. Although He gave us certain responsibilities and boundaries, He created us to depend upon Him. In addition to independence, selfishness constitutes **pride** because we elevate our preferences and opinions above everything else. We live according to our own beliefs and philosophies regardless of what God has said in Scripture. We value our freedom to live and think the way we want over our relationship with the Lord—Belshazzar did all these things to a greater degree than even Nebuchadnezzar!

This can lead to a whole host of ways that **pride** manifests itself in our lives. **Pride** can lead us to bargain with God to get our way (if you do x, then I'll do y). It may surface in thinking that we have the ability to resist temptation on our own, so we let our guard down or foolishly put ourselves into tempting situations. When we refuse to admit we've made a mistake, when we fail to ask forgiveness for our sin, or we forget to praise God when He acts all exemplify **a spirit of pride**! Entitlement, thinking that we have the right to certain things in life, also exhibits **pride**. While we could list many more actions indicative of **pride** and give specific personal examples, we must understand that **pride** can become so engrained in our lives that we may even fail to notice it just like Belshazzar did!

Question
5

Besides the ways listed here, in what other ways can pride manifest itself in our lives? In what areas of life do you most struggle with the issue of pride?

Daniel 5:24-29

THE MESSAGE OF JUDGEMENT:

While interpreting **the writing**, Daniel makes its origin clear. It comes from **the hand** of the God whom the king mocked by using the sacred vessels from His temple (v. 24). The king's contempt and arrogance precipitated this judgment. He had no one to blame, but himself. He had blasphemed the Lord and the Lord responded swiftly with a message about his sin. The four Aramaic words scrawled on the wall are accounting terms; they generally reflect the process of weighing the metal content of coinage and assigning a monetary value (v. 25). Thus, the three roots came to signify particular denominations of money in the Ancient Near East: mina (**mene**), shekel (**tekel**), and half-cents, whether half-minas or half-shekels (**peres**). Therefore, Daniel concludes that **the writing** bears a message about the king's character and depicts his fate as determined by the Lord. God has assessed the Belshazzar's character according to His holy standard and **found** it worthless!

The first root, **mene**, means "to number" and indicates that God **has numbered** the days of his **kingdom**. King Belshazzar's time is literally up; his judgment has now come (v. 26). **The kingdom** of Babylon will come to an abrupt end that very evening at the hands of the Persians, but by design of



the Lord. This should cause us to pause and contemplate judgment from a biblical perspective in order to understand the implication for us. While God's forgiveness is unlimited and open to anyone who will accept it, we have a finite number of days to repent before incurring His judgment and wrath against sin. God indeed gives us numerous chances to repent from our sin throughout life, but His judgment is ultimately final when He chooses to act. The writer of Hebrews explains it best: "And it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" ([Heb 9:27](#)). One day, at the time of God's choosing, our judgment will come too. From our human perspective, however, we don't know when that day may be. Therefore, we must be prepared when that day comes by turning from our wicked and arrogant ways to a relationship with Christ Jesus.

Second, the root **tekel** means “to weigh” and pictures God weighing the purity of the king’s character on a scale. Belshazzar’s character doesn’t measure up to God’s standard! God has **weighed** him and **found** his character **wanting** or deficient (v. 27). By all indication, the king was not a good man. But even if he were, the king would still not measure up to God’s perfect standard. He would still be lacking! And the same applies to us. To overcome our sin, we need a relationship with Christ based on God’s grace through our repentance in faith. Once we have that relationship with Him, we must allow Him to guide us and walk with Him daily, conforming ourselves to His image ([Rom 12:1-2](#)). Even though we have assurance of eternal life as followers of Christ who have repented and trusted in Him ([1 John 5:12-13](#)), we should perform a spiritual check-up to determine how well we are doing each day. We should ask God to help us evaluate our character to see what He finds when He measures us against the perfect standard of His Word.

From Belshazzar’s predicament, we can learn two principles to help us conquer contempt and walk in purity as God designed. First, we must learn from history—both our own past as well as the past of those around us. Harvard-trained philosopher George Santayana once



said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” No truer words can be spoken of King Belshazzar than these. Daniel rightly blasted him for his failure to learn from his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar. Both eyewitness testimony and written history communicate Nebuchadnezzar’s successes and failures for everyone to see. But Belshazzar ignored the past; he failed to learn from his predecessor’s pride, insolence, and arrogance. While we should not rest on our past accomplishments or become stuck on our past failures, we must learn from them. To do this, we need God to give us the proper perspective, for only He can see the heart and know our true motivations. Therefore, we shouldn’t just look around at others to see what we perceive as success or failure, but we should evaluate it upon God’s Word.

Question
6

Why is it difficult to learn from history? Why do so many people repeat the same mistakes?

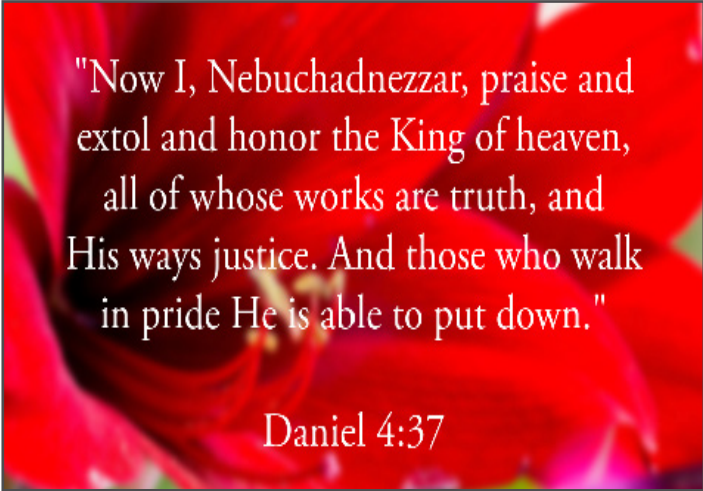
Instruct

Second, we should perform an intense self-examination to see how we measure up to God's standard! By looking at history, we can clearly see how God humbles the proud and exalts the humble—that is those who worship and lovingly serve Him. Some 500 years earlier, during the time of Solomon, God had already warned, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" ([Prov 16:18](#)). In fact, throughout history, God "has shown" us what He expects: "He has shown you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you: but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" ([Micah 6:8](#)). To assess our character, we must truthfully examine ourselves; we must examine our attitudes and motives in everything we do with God-given discernment. We should put our lives under God's microscope and allow Him to remove anything that is unholy or displeasing to Him—whether the sin of **pride** or anything else.

Question
7

How does your character measure against God's standard?

Finally, Daniel conveys the consequences for the king's contempt through the meaning of the last word. The root **peres** means "to divide" or "half." Based on its pronunciation in Aramaic which sounds similar to Persia, the word **peres** serves a double function as a play on words here. God's judgment on Belshazzar spells the end of the Babylonian Empire at the hands of **the Medes and Persians** (v. 28). In addition, Belshazzar would also lose his life during the attack. In one night, God's judgment had come upon Babylon and its rulers. Despite the bad news, the king honored his word, giving Daniel the gifts he promises and promoting him to third in charge in the land (v. 29). Although we can't know for certain the king's motivations, perhaps he honored Daniel in order to appease the Lord his God. By honoring Daniel whom he perceived as Yahweh's ambassador, Belshazzar thought he might somehow avert the coming wrath and judgment. But in the end, it was too little, too late. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, this king did not acknowledge God at all ([Dan 4:34-37](#)) and he certainly did not repent of his sin!



"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down."

Daniel 4:37

Daniel 5:30-31

THE MOMENT OF PUNISHMENT:

The last two verses provide a simple and succinct summary of the events that then unfolded. Judgment had come upon Babylon and Belshazzar very quickly. As the Medo-Persian army infiltrated and conquered the city, the king **was** put to death **that very night** (v. 30). Daniel then concludes by reporting that sixty-two-year-old **Darius the Mede received the kingdom** that evening (v. 31). Questions about the identity of **Darius**, however, have arisen over the years because we don't have explicit historical records naming him outside these references in the book of Daniel. Yet, the lack of records doesn't mean **Darius** is an imaginary figure. On the contrary, it just means those specific historical records just have not yet been discovered!

We have plenty of evidence of now-known historical figures, including King David, whom secular scholars thought did not exist historically only later to find ancient historical documentation supporting the biblical account through archaeology. For example, the Tel Dan Stele, found in 1993, refers to the "house of David"—the only extra-biblical record of the king's existence. So, we cannot infer from silence that **Darius** did not exist or that the Bible contains historical inaccuracies. Since we don't have all the archaeological evidence, and Scripture itself contains historical records, the burden of proof truly lies upon those wishing to disparage the Bible! We must stand firm on our faith and defend the inerrancy of Scripture. Next week, we will deal more with the identity of **Darius**. But for now, we can conclude our study by knowing for sure that God will one day judge our lives according to His perfect standard. We must conquer any contempt that we have in our lives in the form of sin by repenting and conforming our lives to Him when He shows us the errors of our ways.

Like an assayer testing the purity of gold and other valuable minerals, God tests the purity of our character against His perfect Word. How does your life measure up? We must be honest with ourselves and evaluate our lives carefully to see what progress we have made. Although we can fool ourselves, we cannot fool God who sees our hearts, knows our thoughts, and discerns our motives. Belshazzar found out the hard way that his character didn't measure up to God's standard. He expressed contempt for the Lord in his actions borne through a spirit of pride and arrogance whereby he continued to refuse to repent. May we not fall into this same pattern, but may we seek God's help in overcoming sin and living a transformed life that truly honors Him.

Incorporate

What specific Scriptures come to mind that you could use like an assayer to test the purity of our character? Which ones do you find easiest to apply and which do you find the most difficult?

When people look at you, what or who do they see? What kind of recommendation would they give such as the one the queen gave about Daniel?

In what ways should we communicate to the world that our (and their) days are numbered? Why is it important for us to do this as a church and not just sit idly in the security of our sanctuary?

August 11, 2024



*Conquering
through Communication (Prayer)
Daniel 6:1-28*

Focal Verse:

"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days."

Daniel 6:10

See
Table of
Contents

Introduce

On June 27, 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States heard arguments in the case between Joseph A. Kennedy and the Bremerton School District in Washington state. In the majority opinion written by Justice Neil Gorsuch, court documents quickly outline the point of contention: “Joseph Kennedy lost his job as a high school football coach because he knelt at midfield after games to offer a quiet prayer of thanks.” To understand the events that transpired leading to this monumental decision, we must journey back in time to 2015. For at least seven years since his educational career began in Bremerton in 2008, Coach Kennedy had engaged in the post-game tradition of reciting a prayer at the fifty-yard line for “what the players had accomplished and for the opportunity to be part of their lives through football.”

During these years, his prayers went uncontested. No one complained and no one sought to impede him from engaging in this practice. Although in full view of the public, Coach Kennedy prayed privately never once coercing students to join him or overtly promoting his own religious views. Over time, however, some student athletes began desiring to participate so they asked if they could join. He consented by saying, “This is a free country. You can do what you want.” At times, nearly the whole football team would voluntarily join him in praying—sometimes even inviting members of the opposition! Coach Kennedy then started offering “short motivational speeches” to those who had gathered voluntarily. Court records indicate that he “never pressured or encouraged any student to join”; they did so of their own volition.

Still, Coach Kennedy became a target of censorship and an attempt to restrict his right to free speech, particularly involving religious matters. In September 2015, “an employee from another school commented positively on the school’s practices to Bremerton’s principal” for allowing the coach to pray. However, these favorable, and seemingly innocuous, remarks set off a firestorm! Although the school district appeared to accommodate Coach Kennedy’s right to pray, they eventually restricted him to activities they defined as “nondemonstrative” and “not outwardly discernible as religious.” This meant that he could no longer bow his head or take a knee on the field after the game—even to pray silently!

Based upon a summation of cases argued in the lower courts, the school district believed any outward expression would constitute an attempt by Coach Kennedy to “coerce students to pray.” Even if he prayed silently and on his own, he would somehow force them to believe and practice the same things he did! Therefore, they forbade

Introduce

him to do anything that a “reasonable observer” would consider the government’s challenged action as an ‘endorsement’ of religion.” In the end, Coach Kennedy was targeted and terminated for his beliefs even though the district admitted he had complied with all their previous demands. Because he still bowed his head and bent his knee, the district feared that he might influence others, so they fired him!

Fortunately, as of 2022, we had a Supreme Court which reversed this wrong and defended Coach Kennedy’s right to pray. Although I personally don’t know about Kennedy’s relationship with Jesus, what I can say is that cultures have a long history of targeting and persecuting those who pray to the one true and living God—the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite the great Constitution we have as a nation, we can expect the same as believers! We will face persecution at times in our lives—Jesus Himself even warned that we would ([John 15:20](#)). How would we react to such a situation in which the government infringes upon our right to practice speaking the truth in love as well as praying in public?

In the Old Testament, Daniel had to face a similar problem. Under manipulation of his advisors, King Darius established himself as the only mediator through whom people could go to make a request. If caught praying to any other god or making a request to any other man without first petitioning the king, that person would be thrown into a den with lions. God, however, delivered His servant, Daniel, who continued to pray faithfully despite the edict that had been passed. Daniel serves as a good example of how we should continue to worship the Lord even when culture demands otherwise; therefore, let us conquer through communication (prayer)!

Key
Question

How would you respond if the government were to pass a law restricting worship of the Lord or forcing us to “accept” some unbiblical (sinful) secular practice?

In Reference



For a complete account of the hearing and the arguments of the court—both for and against—see, “Kennedy v. Bremerton School District,” available from www.supremecourt.gov.

Daniel 6:1-3

DANIEL'S DISTINCTION AMONG LEADERS:

Having just conquered Babylon (539 BC), Darius immediately began to institute and organize the new government to ensure a smooth transition to power under Medo-Persian rule (v. 1). Our study ended last week with a brief discussion of Darius' identity and the lack of external historical documentation apart from the Bible. However, history does record another ruler by the name of Darius I who ruled the Medo-Persian Empire from 522 to 486 BC as distinguished from this Darius here in Daniel chapters 5 and 6. Based on the chronology of the book, these cannot be the same individual because Daniel died in the first year of King Cyrus' reign in 539 BC ([Dan 1:21](#)). While we cannot entertain a full discussion of all the proposals here on the identity of Darius the Mede, I want to highlight the best and most reasonable evidence to support regarding Darius as another name for Cyrus the Great.

Born to a Persian father and Median mother, Cyrus could have had two names or titles based upon his dual ethnicity and the practice of the culture at the time. Thus, Daniel could have used the names Darius and Cyrus interchangeably to refer to the same person. In fact, Daniel 6:28 can actually be translated, "So Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius—that is/namely in the reign of Cyrus the Persian." The conjunction "and" in Aramaic, therefore, does not always indicate a series of two distinct objects, but it can be used to rename or emphasize the identity of the previous word. Although similar, but not quite the same, we see the same practice in the New Testament with Paul who uses his Greco-Roman name when amongst the Gentiles and uses his Jewish name, Saul, when amongst the Jews. Consequently, Daniel may have chosen to refer to Cyrus by his Median name because Scripture attributes the downfall of Babylon to the Medes ([Isa 13:17](#); [Jer 51:11, 28](#)). According to historical data, both Darius and Cyrus would have also been the same age—sixty-two-years-old ([Dan 5:31](#)).* With this background in mind, it seems most likely that the names Darius and Cyrus refer to the same individual.

In Reference



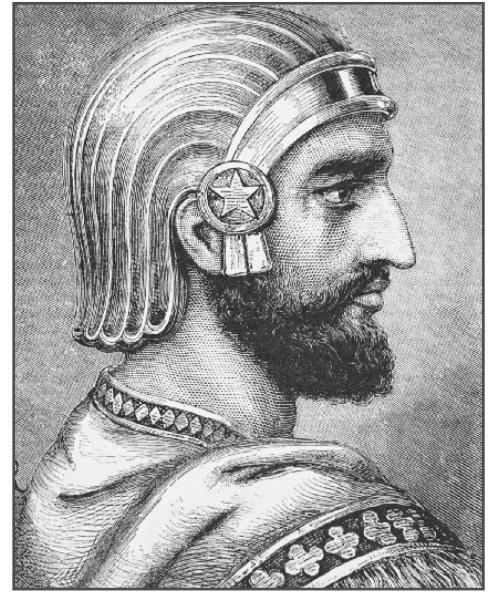
For a comprehensive discussion on the identity of Darius, see Stephen R. Miller, Daniel, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 171-177; D. J. A. Clines, s.v. "Darius," in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. A-D (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 867-868.

Instruct

Nevertheless, Darius divided the newly acquired territory into manageable districts, appointing **120 satraps** to enforce the law, keep the peace, and promote the affairs of the government. These **satraps** would then function somewhat similar to a mayor in our culture overseeing a smaller area within a larger district. Ultimately, these individuals would then report to one of the **three** regional **governors** installed by Darius in order to guarantee their loyalty and ensure that they governed according to the best interests of the empire as a whole (v. 2). Daniel served as one of these regional officials entrusted with overseeing the **satraps**.

As a governor, Daniel **distinguished himself above the others because** he had **an excellent spirit** and found favor with Darius (v. 3). Like the rulers before him, Darius saw something unique in Daniel that set him apart from everyone else. Both Nebuchadnezzar ([Dan 4:8-9, 18](#)) and Belshazzar's mother ([Dan 5:11, 14](#)) recognized Daniel as having "the spirit of the gods" in him because of his knack for doing the seemingly impossible when it came to interpreting dreams. But here Darius doesn't couch it in those terms particularly; it may have been a combination of Daniel's attitude, work ethic, integrity, and wisdom and knowledge that set him apart from all the others ([see Dan 1:20](#)). Regardless of the specific qualities that Darius may have seen in him, Daniel impressed the king so much that he considered promoting him over the affairs of the entire **kingdom!**

In our modern understanding, we could equate Daniel's situation with being a "teacher's pet." Such individuals who catch the eye of a teacher through their exemplary behavior and outstanding work often receive special privileges and garner praise above their other classmates. Consequently, the term often carries with it a negative connotation because other students feel slighted and become jealous. They believe the "favored" student has somehow manipulated or deceived the teacher to attain these special privileges. To put it colloquially and crassly, the other students wrongly believe that "teacher's pets" receive special treatment because they "sucked up" rather than because they actually deserved the recognition by working hard and behaving properly!



Cyrus the Great

This leads other students to question their motives. They assume that such a student only works hard and only behaves in order to get the teacher's attention or even to make them look bad while making themselves look good. In fact, other students may accuse them of behaving and working hard only when the teacher is present. Consequently, other students often give the teacher's pet a hard time. They make fun of them, they talk bad about them, and they may even try to sabotage them. Instead of working harder to elevate themselves, the other students try to bring the teacher's pets down to their level.

Although sometimes teacher's pets can have ulterior and self-serving motives as sinful human beings, many simply work hard and behave because it's the right thing to do and they don't care what other people may think.

Truly what Daniel faced in his day does not differ from our own. While we should not do things to receive special recognition or treatment, we should live with integrity and do the right thing because it honors the Lord and shows our love for Him. Based on what we know about Daniel's character from this book, we can see that he did not have such a self-serving purpose. He did not do these things or behave this way in order to promote himself or advance his cause; he lived this way because he wanted to honor his Lord and glorify Him! Indeed, God has called us to distinguish ourselves from others as His people! This does not mean that we allow others to take advantage of us or that we abuse ourselves by over-working in order to make a name for ourselves. On the contrary, it means that we should bear the fruit of the Spirit in the workplace ([Gal 5:22-23](#)).

Like Daniel, we ought to do our best and distinguish ourselves in whatever task we set out to accomplish. We don't do these things to please men or receive recognition; we don't do these things because of the accolades we may receive or the positions we may achieve. We do these things, serving or working wholeheartedly, to please the Lord. In Ephesians 6:5-7, Paul writes, "Servants be obedient . . . not with eyeservice (i.e., to get noticed), as men pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men." If



Instruct

people happen to recognize our hard work and contributions here on earth, be grateful and give praise to the Lord. If they don't, then know that God still sees and will one day reward us Himself ([Matt 6:1-4](#)).

Question
1

In what ways should we seek to distinguish ourselves from others in the world around us? In what ways have you or have you seen others distinguish themselves to the glory of the Lord?

Whether in our careers, on boards/councils, on sports teams, as volunteers, or in whatever situations God places us, we should distinguish ourselves just as Daniel did. We should maintain a good attitude and work ethic, using the skills and abilities that He has given us to glorify Him. To help us understand how we can distinguish ourselves, let's think of some tangible ways that we can apply what we've learned from Daniel. For example, we should humbly do what is asked of us as long as it meets the moral and ethical standards of the Bible. We shouldn't complain, but offer solutions to what we may perceive as problems. We shouldn't criticize others; we should offer helpful suggestions for the betterment of the company, but not get bent out of shape if others don't employ them. We should work diligently and be productive—not goof off or do a multitude of personal things on company time. We can't list all the possibilities for application of this principle here, but pray to the Lord and ask Him how you can distinguish yourself in our world and He will show you!

Daniel 6:4-9

THE LEADER'S DETERMINATION TO RUIN DANIEL:

The other **governors** and **satraps** became jealous of Daniel's favor with Darius, so they plotted against him (v. 4). At first, they tried to find **fault** in his character whether moral failure or political corruption. They desperately wanted anything they could use against him to defame him in the eyes of the king! But they could not find a single **fault** or **error**; they found Daniel **faithful**. However, this didn't stop **these men** from trying to besmirch Daniel's name and ruin him completely. Continuing to conspire against him, they realized that they could only trap him if they could prove **the law of his God** conflicted with the law of the land (v. 5). Because of Daniel's faithfulness to the Lord, they recognized he would obey God over man and this would put him in direct conflict

with Darius. They now had something with which they could **charge** him!

After deciding what to do, they agreed to approach the king together as a group to present their petition. The word translated **thronged** by the NKJV comes from an Aramaic word meaning “tumult” or “thronging” and can refer to a mob scene in some contexts. But showing up to the king’s court as an unruly mob would not serve their purpose! Such insolence and impropriety would have enraged the king. He would have had them removed from his presence and refused to listen to their proposal had they come in this manner. Therefore, **thronged** indicates how they came to the king as a large group. Perhaps, they thought he would be more apt to listen if they came en masse.



Addressing the king respectfully, the group begins presenting their request. However, they start with a lie! They claim that **all the governors, administrators, counselors, and advisors have consulted together** to create a new law (v. 7). Even if **all** the other officials did participate in this meeting, which is highly unlikely given the vastness of the empire, one governor was notably absent: Daniel. To have more clout, this wily group pretended to speak as one voice. They exaggerated the unanimity of their decision as if everyone agreed! Appealing to the king’s ego, these advisors wanted him to sign a law that **whoever petitions any god or man for thirty days, except him, would be thrown into the den of lions**. The world often uses these two same tactics to persuade us to go along with what it proposes. Like these officials, the world exaggeratedly claims, “Everyone’s doing it! You should too.” Secular culture also tries to manipulate us with the fear of missing out or, even worse, the fear of being ostracized by the group. In addition, the world attempts to stroke our ego, showing us the benefits we can attain or the freedom that it supposedly gives us. In the end, however, sin always leads to addiction and death—never freedom and life.

Question # 2 Like these advisors, what other tactics does the world use to try to get us to go along with what it proposes?

Like many modern laws, the crafters of this ordinance worded it in such a way that it gave them leeway to adapt its interpretation to fit any situation so they could entrap Daniel no matter what. Literally, the first line of the proposed law reads: “**whoever** requests a request of **any god or man for thirty days except you.**” Given the ancients’ propensity to deify a ruler as a god, one could take this statement to mean “praying” to the king as a god. This interpretation could fit the realm of possibilities and Daniel would certainly balk at the notion of praying to the king as a god. And, over the years, most readers have probably understood this statement in this manner. But if the advisors sought to deify the king, why would they not simply say: “**whoever petitions/** prays to **any god but you.**” Instead, they added the words “**or [any] man.**” To phrase it this way seems to suggest that the king would serve as a mediator, like a priest, who would carry their petitions to the gods. Everyone, therefore, had to come through him to make their requests known which seems like the best interpretation of these words in this context.

These conniving officials worded this law somewhat ambiguously, giving them the flexibility to make it fit either situation. In either case, they could **charge** Daniel with defying the king’s **decree** whether for refusing to pray to him as a god or by failing to present his requests before him. They now thought they



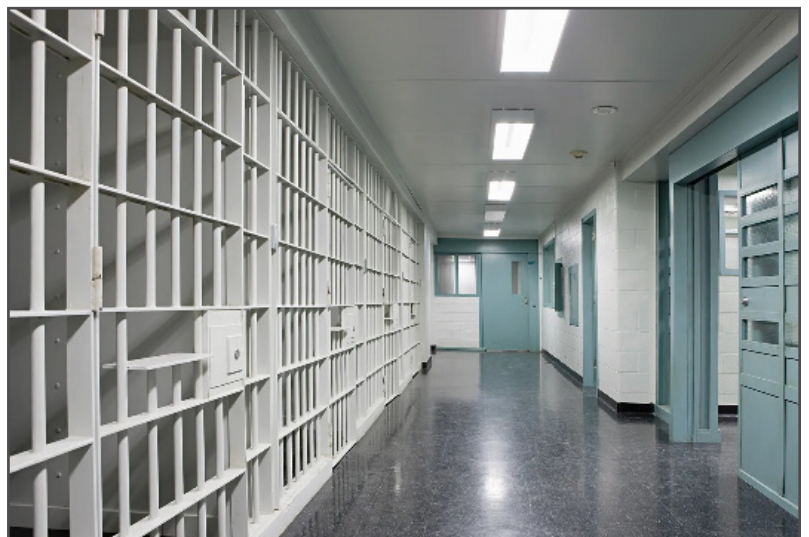
had Daniel right where they wanted him! Daniel openly lived his faith so all could see—not in a pious or braggadocious way, but with a humble and genuine spirit. Yet, they knew that Daniel would never compromise his faith. All they had to do was watch and wait for Daniel to pray to the Lord. So, they hurriedly urged the king to sign the **decree** into law, knowing that it could not be changed once it went into effect. The king would have no recourse and would be bound to carry it out; hence, the expression “**the law of the Medes and Persians**” used to describe something permanent and unalterable originates from this text. They could now permanently rid themselves of their perceived problem. Daniel wouldn’t merely be imprisoned, but mauled to death by a pride of ravenous **lions**.

What happened to Daniel in the sixth century BC on account of his faithfulness to the Lord still happens to believers in the United States in the twenty-first century. Like these ancient officials, groups and people today also start by looking for moral failure in prominent churches or in leaders/people who call themselves Christian so they can defame and discredit God in the eyes of the public. Unlike Daniel, people can often find **fault** and **error** in many prominent people today and we have likely heard about some of them in the news in recent months. Such failure gives our opponents more ammunition to call Scripture a “fairytale” and promote their secular worldview above the Bible because they claim “religion” doesn’t work. For us as believers, however, this makes it all the more important for us to guard our hearts in Christ and live with integrity so they can find no **fault**. Even so, our society doesn’t stop there!

If they can’t find any moral failure or **fault**, our culture still attempts to target believers through the legal system! Despite the protections afforded to us by the Constitution, some within the government as well as powerfully connected groups attempt to intimidate and silence believers just like they did Daniel. Although we may not yet face the death penalty and sometimes judges do uphold the rights of believers, it doesn’t stop some people from trying to use the law to impose fines, seek imprisonment, or coerce under threat believers who stand on their convictions that differ from what society may generally deem acceptable. They drag believers into court because they want someone to affirm and accept their view—not just tolerate it. They also want to inflict financial harm and ruination upon believers, putting them out of business or blacklisting them so they cannot get employment. Finally, they want to make an example out of believers so that it might scare others from standing on their convictions and cause them to fall in line with the culture.

In the introduction, we’ve already seen an example of a school district trying to silence a coach, whom they eventually terminated, from praying on the football field.

Cases have also made it to the Supreme Court where homosexual and transgender



Instruct

individuals have sued bakers or wedding planners for discrimination based on existing laws for refusing to cater their events. With the legalization of homosexual marriage (2015), the push for transgendered rights, and the growing popularity of godless socialism in some circles, cases like these against Christians will continue to rise. Although our nation was founded upon Judeo-Christian principles, recent years have sought to promote the government as “god.” Under the direction of culture, the government has sought to become the moral compass which has the ultimate authority to determine right and wrong—effectively trying to undermine God’s supreme moral authority. We cannot let our guard down, but we must be ready like Daniel to stand firm in our faith no matter what the opposition may try to do.

Question
3

What examples can you give or may have personally happened to you that reflect our society’s attempt to silence or intimidate Christians?

In these verses, we find two character traits which helped Daniel respond appropriately to this challenge with unwavering faith. First, Daniel exhibited integrity in everything he did. None of his accusers could find any **fault** in him except that he was **faithful** to his God! He lived consistently. He honored his word and kept his commitments to the Lord as well as man. Daniel didn’t play the role of a hypocrite, but he lived authentically as God’s representative no matter the circumstance. Despite all the enormous opportunities afforded him and the accolades he received, Daniel never lived selfishly—ambitiously seeking personal gain. On the contrary, he selflessly served the Lord, using his wisdom and talents to glorify and point others to Him. We ought to strive for the same in our lives. When we fully surrender our lives to Christ, His Holy Spirit enables us to live without **fault** if we walk with Him daily. Therefore, may it also be said of us, like Daniel, that no one can find any **fault** or **error** except that we serve the Lord faithfully with all our hearts!

Question
4

If others sought to bring charges against you like Daniel, what would they say? What does that reflect about your relationship with Christ?

Second, Daniel lived out his faith publicly for all to see. To some extent, this public

display of faith exacerbated the situation by increasing the opportunity for persecution because no one had any question about where Daniel stood. But, at the same time, his public faith helped him to endure and overcome this situation because he trusted God and continued to rely upon Him as he always had. Daniel lived his faith openly and boldly. He didn't hide it, worrying about what others may think or who he might offend. He didn't operate as a covert or secret believer when around people who didn't share his belief. He persisted in doing what he knew to be right in the eyes of the Lord. We ought to follow Daniel's lead in living out our faith publicly for all to see—not in an arrogant or self-serving way, but rather as a testimony to the grace of God in our lives. Therefore, we shouldn't fear letting others know where we stand when it comes to the practices God clearly outlines in Scripture for us to follow. We need to continue to trust God to give us the wisdom and strength to endure and, in the end, He will help us overcome!

Question
5

In what ways do you live your faith publicly for all to see? When have you taken a clear stand based on God's Word that may have conflicted what society deems acceptable?

Daniel 6:10-15

DANIEL'S DEFIANCE OF THE DECREE:

Daniel **knew** that the king had **signed** the bill into law and nothing now could change it (v. 10). But this didn't faze him at all. **He went home** into the upper part of his house and began to pray. He didn't alter any part of his routine. He continued to pray as he always had **with his windows open toward Jerusalem** and kneeling **on his knees**. Likely, Daniel knew that his accusers would be watching. For fear, he could have changed his routine; he could have tried to conceal the fact that he was praying, but he didn't. He lived consistently according to **his custom since** he was young. **Three times** daily **he prayed and gave thanks to his God!**

Indeed, these unscrupulous officials were lying in wait (v. 11). The men overheard him **making supplication before his God**. To make **supplication** comes from the word meaning to help or show mercy—the basis for the name Hananiah (Shadrach). Through prayer, Daniel sought God's help. From the text, we don't know exactly what or how Daniel prayed, but we do know the results. God helped Daniel endure this trial! Through prayer, God certainly grants us wisdom and gives us guidance when we ask, but prayer

Instruct

also strengthens us to remain consistent in the face of worldly opposition and endure the battle with integrity. It keeps us connected to the Lord who fights our battles for us if we cede control to Him instead of relying on our own power (2 Chron 32:8). If we want to navigate life successfully and face challenges with uncompromising integrity, we must find our source of strength and power through unceasing prayer ([1 Thess 5:17](#)).



Question # 6

How does prayer give you strength to navigate life with integrity and endure trials without compromise?

Immediately, this group **went** to the king to inform him that Daniel had violated the law (v. 12). Before highlighting his infraction, however, these prosecutors referred the court to the specific law in contention by repeating its content in the form of a question in order to help the king to recall exactly what he had **signed**. This technique of introducing the law also reinforced how the king must now act accordingly because the **decree** could not be altered in any way. The king would have no choice but to sentence Daniel to death by throwing him into a pit of **lions** if they could prove that he broke the **statute**. Having cited the law, they could now introduce the specific charges against the defendant. Daniel, they claim, had shown great disrespect for the king by disregarding the law; he continued praying **three times** daily to the Lord (v. 13). They had seen it with their eyes and heard it with their ears.

Yet, these men probably did not expect the king to react the way that he did. Instead of flying into a fit of rage at Daniel, the king became furious **with himself** because he realized that these men had tricked him (v. 14). He held Daniel in high regard and, like others, could find no **fault** in him whatsoever. So, the king determined

to **deliver** Daniel from this fate. He spent the rest of the day contemplating how he could save him from this ordeal. Still, he could think of nothing that would save Daniel. Ignoring the law would create political instability and perhaps even civil unrest among the governors and satraps who had assembled to accuse him—the same kind of conundrum Pilate faced when an unruly mob of Jesus’ accusers brought Him before the governor ([Matt 27:11-26](#)). These diabolical men had forced the king’s hand—once again emphatically reminding him that **no decree or statute** he signed **may be changed** (v. 15).



From Daniel’s response to this newly passed law, we can discern two principles that would serve us well to apply in our own lives. While God has sovereignly established human governments ([Rom 13:1](#)) and commanded us to obey them ([Rom 13:2-7](#); [1 Peter 2:13-17](#)), He has given them freewill and sometimes they sinfully choose to transgress His Word. As long as any law aligns with Scripture, we can and must obey it. If a government promotes laws and participates in activities that go against Scripture, however, we must follow what God says because we are subject to His higher authority just like Daniel. To be clear, this does not mean that we can ignore laws or regulations simply because we don’t like them or because we have a differing opinion. Rather, it means that when man’s laws conflict with God’s laws, then we must obey God. Addressing the Sanhedrin after Jewish leaders threatened them to stop teaching about Jesus, Peter and John rightly respond, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” ([Acts 4:19-20](#)).

Question
7

On what issues must we stand firm today here in the United States that clearly conflict with Scripture?

Instruct

Second, if we choose to obey God rather than the civil authorities, we can expect to face their consequences for our actions. God doesn't always deliver us from the human penalties imposed. As we will see, for example, He did not spare Daniel from the lions' **den** nor did He spare the three friends from the fiery furnace. In the New Testament, God did not spare believers from imprisonment, persecution, or even death. Today, we could face litigation in the courts, fines, and even imprisonment imposed by secular authorities for living righteously in the sight of the Lord. We can also face mounting public pressure to conform to culture through threats on social media, being blacklisted by employers, or suffering broken relationships. Despite having to endure such obstacles, we must continue to serve the Lord faithfully. God will deliver us through these trials—even if He chooses not to do it here on earth.

If we obey God, we have nothing to fear, for He has already won the battle and given us victory. We need to look beyond what man can do to us to what God has already done and what He has promised He will do! As we persist in our obedience to the Lord, we must prepare ourselves to face any human-ordained consequences for our actions, knowing that they only last temporarily. Therefore, we must willingly accept whatever penalties human governments may impose upon God's incomparable truth and continue to act with integrity to bring honor to the Lord who will ultimately reward our faithfulness in the end. This does not mean that we cannot use the appropriate biblical or legal means to defend ourselves, but that we should not compromise our faith or stoop to the same sinful level as the world to avoid suffering any adverse consequences for our faith. We must willingly endure whatever may occur, trusting God throughout the process to help us overcome.

Question
8

How have you prepared yourself to face the consequences of a secular government that may sinfully transgress Scripture?

Daniel 6:16-22

DANIEL'S DELIVERANCE BY THE LORD:

Reluctantly, the king commanded Daniel to be **cast into the den of lions** (v. 16). As his command was being carried out, he earnestly wished the best—hoping that **the God whom** Daniel **continually** served might **deliver** him. The verb translated **He will deliver you** by the NKJV can also be interpreted as “may **the God whom you continually serve deliver you.**” Since Darius did not have a relationship with the Lord which would naturally lead to some skepticism on his part, the second option seems best here. Although we as believers know that God will indeed **deliver** Daniel, the king expressed genuine concern for him and hoped that his God might somehow rescue him from these **lions**. Daniel's fate was now sealed and rested squarely in the Lord's hands. The entrance to the **den** was sealed with **a stone** to prevent either man or beast from escaping (v. 17). And the king certified the sentence by stamping the **stone** with **his signet ring** to alert anyone under penalty of law against tampering or intervening.

Darius then returned to **his palace** where he spent a sleepless night fasting and worrying about Daniel (v. 18). He refused any entertainment, perhaps music, that might put his mind at ease and give him rest. After a restless night, He rose **early** the next day and quickly made his way to the lions' **den** to check on Daniel (v. 19). Anxiously (i.e., **a lamenting voice**), the king shouted to him to see whether his God **had** indeed **been able to deliver** him (v. 20). It must have greatly relieved Darius to hear Daniel's voice call from inside the **den**. Daniel confirmed that **God** had **sent His angel to shut the lions' mouths** and prevented any harm from coming to him whatsoever (vv. 21-22).

We must notice two things about these events. First, Daniel's consistency in his worship of the Lord made a profoundly positive impact upon the king. Twice in a short span the king referenced **the God whom** Daniel **continually** served (vv. 16, 20).



Instruct

Darius could see Daniel's consistency even in the face of imminent danger. Daniel trusted his God to **deliver** him and never once compromised his faith in an attempt to extricate himself from potential trouble. May we also **continually** bear this same visible consistency in our lives as a testimony to the greatness of our God!

Second, it was God who delivered Daniel (v. 22). Our world tends to over-emphasize and over-spiritualize the role of angels as agents of God's plan ([see Col 2:18](#)). We may often hear people talk about their "guardian" **angel** or how some **angel** "rescued" them from peril. Unfortunately, this takes the glory rightly ascribed to the Lord and misapplies it. In this passage, the **angel** plays a minor—albeit important—role. Yet, he only serves as God's agent. God alone is the source of our deliverance—not some created being! God alone is the source of life and death; He holds the events of this world squarely in His hands. Therefore, we must acknowledge the Lord as our Savior and Deliverer! Like Daniel, may we point others to the work of "**my/our**" God so they can know from whence true deliverance comes!

Question
9

In what ways have you wrongly seen people emphasize the role of angels when describing the work of the Lord? How should we address that problem?

Daniel 6:23-27

DARIUS' DECLARATION ABOUT GOD:

Darius responded with great joy and had Daniel promptly removed from the **den** (v. 23). As Daniel ascended from the pit, everyone could now clearly see that no harm had come to him at all. Enraged against the **men** who tricked him, the king summoned the accusers and had them **cast** into the lions' **den** along with their families (v. 24). To offer proof of the miracle that had truly just occurred, Daniel showed that these were not old, well-fed, and harmless **lions** who were perhaps familiar people. They were ravenous wild beasts, for they pounced on their victims even before they reached the bottom of the **den**!

With this Darius called all the people in the empire to **tremble and fear before the God of Daniel** (vv. 25-26). In this decree, he praised God as **the living God** whose **kingdom** and **dominion** will last forever. The king then described Him as the God who **delivers** and **rescues**, performing miracles **in heaven and on earth**—namely how He

delivered Daniel from the ferocious power of the lions (v. 27). Like Nebuchadnezzar years earlier, Darius recognized the awesome power of the Lord because he had seen it with his own eyes. But he stopped short of repenting of his sins and devoting himself completely to the Lord. Notice how the decree bids people to respect Daniel's God—the king still did not have a personal relationship with Yahweh. If he had, he would have referred to Him as "our" God. While we cannot force people into a relationship with the Lord through repentance, we still must set a good example by living righteously with integrity so that others can visibly see Him at work in our lives. Yet, what they do with that testimony remains wholly up to them. May we conquer through our communication (prayer) like Daniel so that God may strengthen us to stand firm and give us the courage to be His witnesses no matter what we may face in life.

Inspire

In the introduction, we saw one obvious challenge to our faith that made its way to the Supreme Court. Fortunately, in this case, the Supreme Court did the right thing. In the intervening years since that decision, new challenges to our faith have arisen. As the secular world strays farther from God's truth, such challenges will undoubtedly increase regardless of the protections afforded us by the Constitution. And we are likely much closer to that time than we may hope and think. We must prepare ourselves. We must stand firm like Daniel, living our faith consistently for all to see so that others may have no doubt concerning our convictions based upon Scripture. Like Daniel, we must prepare ourselves to conquer these challenges through communication with our Creator who gives us the wisdom and strength to serve Him without compromise.

Incorporate

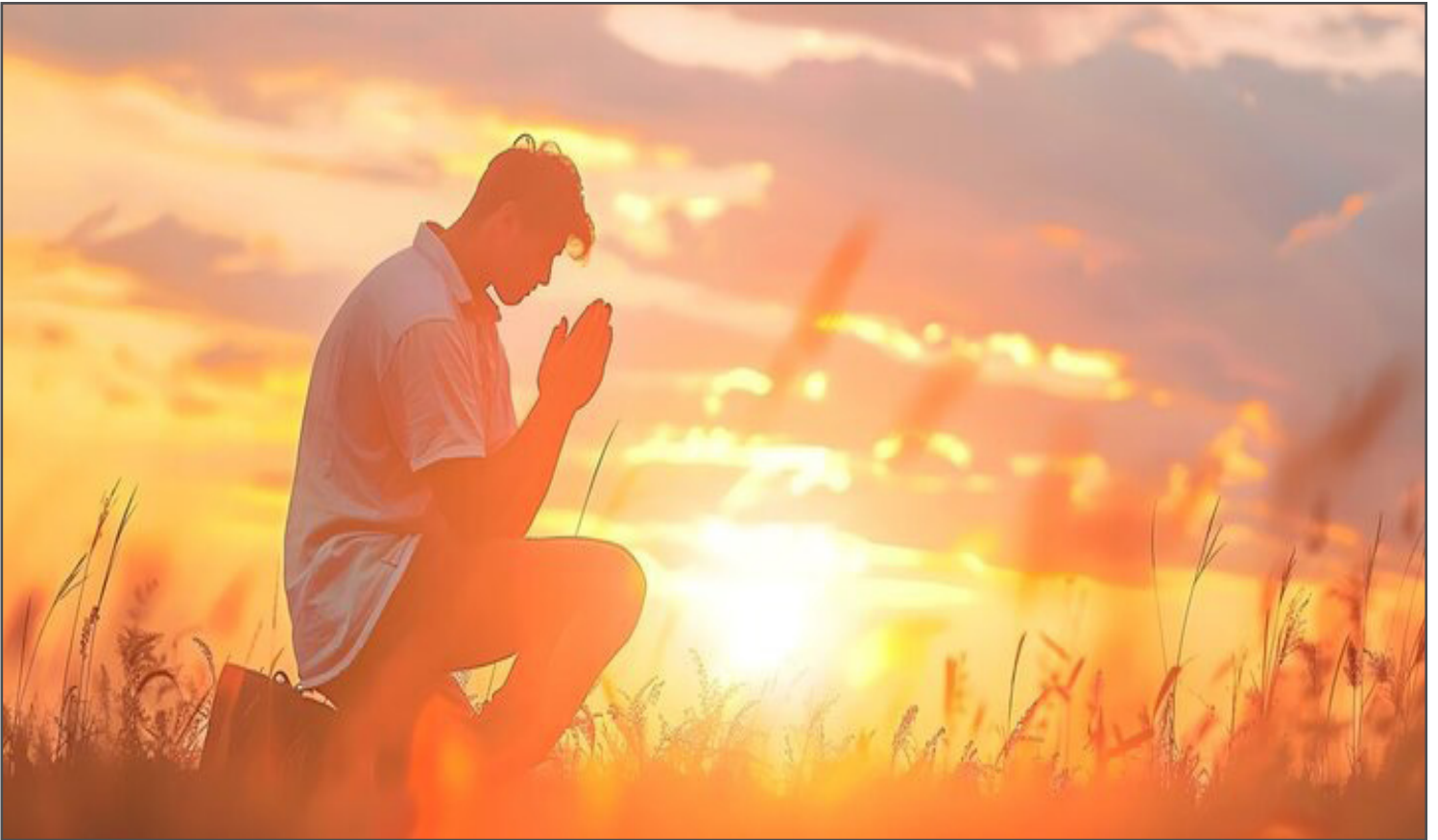
What makes you distinct from the secular world around you? Ask God if there's anything you need to change and write it here as a reminder.

How has prayer given you the proper perspective when someone has perhaps treated you undeservedly or unfairly?

In what circumstances at work in society have you been called to take a stand against something clearly in contradiction to God's Word? How did prayer help you to respond?

Journal: Document God's Work

August 18, 2024



Conquering Through Confession Nehemiah 1:1-11

Focal Verse:

"Please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned."

Nehemiah 1:6

back to
Table of
Contents

Introduce

Most average citizens probably pay little attention to our country's legislative process whether on the state or national level, save in a few instances where a proposed bill may impact them directly. Even then, most never ponder parliamentary procedures, including the pomp and circumstance surrounding the opening of a legislative session. Perhaps, many don't even realize that most legislatures in this country still begin with a prayer! In 1996, however, Reverend Joe Wright of Wichita Central Christian Church thrust prayer into the national spotlight when he gave an invocation to convene the Kansas

State Legislature that year. Invited by a member of his congregation who served in the legislature at the time, Wright began the session with a sincere, heartfelt prayer that enraged many, but drew the support of countless more.* *The Washington Post* reported that his



brief prayer sparked "angry walkouts in two state legislatures, an unprecedented two readings on Paul Harvey's ABC Radio newscast, more than 6,500 phone calls to Wright's church and so many boxes of mail that the church staff doesn't know where to put them anymore."*

What did Reverend Wright utter in this prayer that caused such a stir? Be the judge for yourself. The following is his prayer in its entirety as transcribed from Paul Harvey's original broadcast in 1996: "Heavenly Father, we come before You today to ask Your forgiveness, and to seek Your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says, 'Woe to those who call evil good!' And that's exactly what we've done. We've lost our spiritual equilibrium. We've inverted our values. We confess that we've ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word in the name of moral pluralism. We've worshiped other gods and called it 'multiculturalism.' We've endorsed perversion and called it 'alternative lifestyle.' We've exploited the poor and called it a 'lottery.' We've neglected the needy and called it 'self-preservation.' We've rewarded laziness and called it 'welfare.'"

In his prayer, he continues, "Father, in the name of 'choice,' we have killed our unborn, and then in the name of 'right to life,' we've killed abortionists. We've neglected to discipline our children and called it 'building esteem.' We have abused power and

Introduce

called it 'political savvy.' We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it 'taxes.' We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it 'freedom of expression.' We've ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it 'enlightenment.' Search us, O God, know our hearts today, try us and show us any wickedness in us. And then cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent here by the people of Kansas and who have been ordained by You to govern this great state. Grant them Your wisdom to rule and may their decisions direct us to the center of Your will. I ask it in the name of Your Son, the living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen."**

Regardless of what you may personally think of a prayer like this, it has a biblical precedent. The book of Nehemiah begins with such a prayer as God's servant hears about the deplorable condition of Jerusalem with its dilapidated walls and its people in peril. In light of God's faithfulness to His Word, Nehemiah acknowledges that they have brought this calamity upon themselves, for they have "not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances which [God] commanded" ([Neh 1:7](#)). They have acted sinfully in rebellion. Therefore, Nehemiah leads his fellow countrymen to confess and repent of their sins so that they might be restored in a right relationship with the Lord.

Notice how both Nehemiah and Reverend Wright speak collectively in the first-person plural. They include themselves—"we have sinned" ([Neh 1:6](#)). Each of us must examine our own lives according to God's standard in Scripture. We must take the appropriate actions to align ourselves with His will. If we have confessed our sins and are obediently following Christ, may we then continue to serve Him faithfully in every area of our lives. If we have rebelled against Him, however, may we conquer our sin through confession so that He can restore us and utilize us according to His plan and purpose as His people whom He has called.

Key
Question

If God had given you the task of opening a legislative session with prayer, how would you pray for our country?

In Reference



* Marc Fisher, "Stark Prayer Sparks an Absolute Political Furor," *The Washington Post* (May 20, 1996), available from www.washingtonpost.com; **Paul Harvey, s.v. "Joe Wright Invocation," (Feb 13, 2013), available from www.youtube.com.

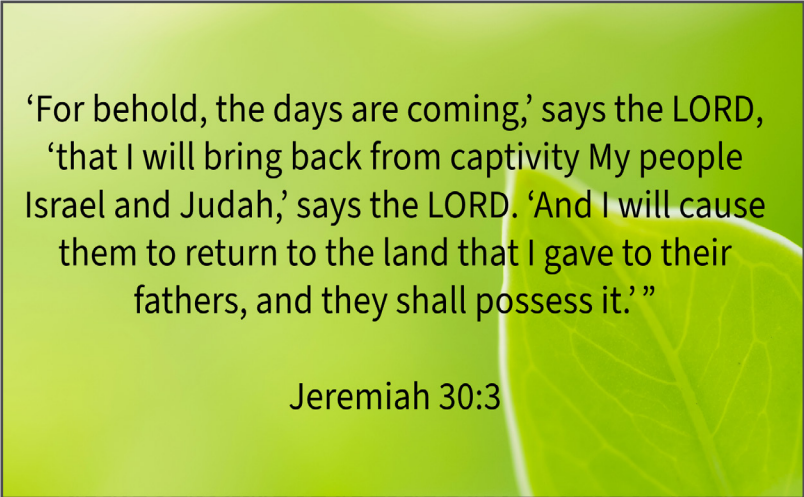
Nehemiah 1:1-3

THE PROBLEM:

Fast-forward nearly a century from the events which concluded the book of Daniel (536 BC), and we find a man named Nehemiah whom God had tasked with overseeing the rebuilding of Jerusalem along with Ezra. By proclamation of Cyrus the Great (539 BC), Jewish citizens exiled from their homeland by the Babylonians received permission to begin returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding their lives in Judah ([Ezra 1:1-4](#)). While some decided to remain in Babylon, many began making that arduous journey westward across the desert to the Promised Land (516-515 BC). Upon their arrival, they found the city still in shambles—its walls battered, broken, and burned and the temple a heap of rubble. Even though some work had already commenced on the rebuilding of private residences and the clearing of fields for planting, construction on the public areas of the city was hampered at times by the neglect and apathy of the people ([Haggai 1:2-11](#)) as well as by external opposition from conniving local authorities who wished to retain their regional dominance ([Ezra 4:7-23](#)). In fact, at the request of some of these jealous local officials, Artaxerxes I halted efforts to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls altogether!

With this background in mind, Nehemiah recalls how God had used him to oversee the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls—a monumental undertaking with no shortage of obstacles, setbacks, and problems! Written somewhat like a personal journal or diary, this Old Testament book documents God’s work in Nehemiah’s life from a first-person point of view, detailing his raw emotions as he encounters both troubles and triumphs along the way.

The account begins with Nehemiah residing in the well-fortified city of Susa (**Shushan**)—one of the four administrative capitals of the Persian Empire. There he served as one of the king’s most-trusted servants. As a **cupbearer**, he would taste all the king’s drinks to ensure that no one had poisoned them (1:11). Although we may pay little attention to Nehemiah’s job, it



‘For behold, the days are coming,’ says the LORD, ‘that I will bring back from captivity My people Israel and Judah,’ says the LORD. ‘And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it.’”

Jeremiah 30:3

Instruct

actually demonstrates the sovereign work of the Lord. God had positioned him right where He needed him! Nehemiah had daily interaction with the king through which God could continue to work to restore a remnant of His people ([Jer 30](#)).

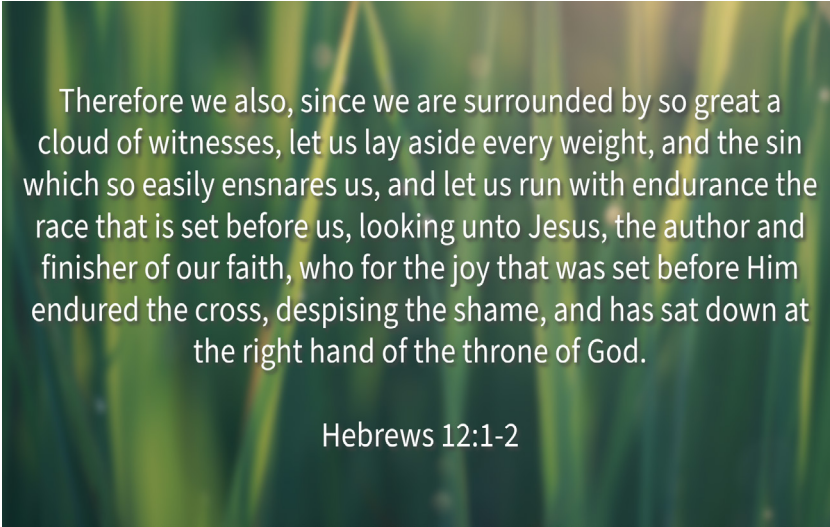
During **the month of Chislev**, which corresponds to parts of November and December in our calendar, around 446-445 BC, Nehemiah notes that he had received some unsettling news from his homeland. His **brother, Hanani**, accompanied by a group of **men from Judah**, had apparently just returned to Susa from Jerusalem, so Nehemiah eagerly wanted to hear about the progress of the recovery there (v. 2). Although the word **brother** can mean a fellow countryman in some contexts, here it likely refers to a sibling since Nehemiah distinguishes him from the other Jews and later makes special reference to their relationship when installing him as a leader over Jerusalem ([see Neh 7:2](#)). Nonetheless, Nehemiah **asked** this group headed by his **brother** specifically about the welfare of the people in Judah who had returned after the exile to resettle the land as well as about the status of the city itself.

However, the way Nehemiah frames the question emphasizes the work of the Lord in the lives of the people more than their mere welfare or happiness. In fact, the Hebrew word translated **escaped** by the NKJV implies the idea of deliverance. Thus, the Jews didn't merely "escape" their **captivity** in Babylon as one would break out of a prison and flee his captors. On the contrary, God had delivered them and set them free just as He had promised ([Isa 44:24-28](#)). Paired with the word **survived**, which literally means to remain or leave behind, it demonstrates God's faithfulness to the "remnant" of His people whom He had delivered from exile—for He had always promised to rescue those who would commit wholeheartedly to follow Him ([Ezek 11:14-25](#)). Indeed, those who had returned to Jerusalem had reason to rejoice because they had seen God fulfill His promise. They had been the recipients of His grace. Similarly, if we have a relationship with Christ, we have reason to rejoice because we can see the faithful and gracious work of God daily in our lives as well!

Question
1

How does knowing God is sovereignly in control despite life's difficulties give you comfort and reassurance?

Seeing God at work in our lives should always bring much joy, hope, and optimism in anticipation of what life can become through Him. Yet, despite the optimism we may have and the confidence we can have when trusting in the Lord, sometimes things don't go according to "our" plan. Things don't progress as quickly or in the ways that we think they should. So, we become despondent, disheartened, and discouraged. Unless we continually seek the Lord, patiently wait on His timing, and focus wholly on serving Him ([Heb 12:1-2](#)), hope and optimism will fade when problems multiply and pressures mount. Those who had already returned to Jerusalem found themselves facing such a situation. Things hadn't progressed as quickly and easily as they perhaps had thought. The report given by **Hanani** and these **men** certainly captures this defeated spirit among the Jews, stating how they suffered in great distress and reproach (v. 3). Furthermore, the **wall of the city remained broken down** and **its gates burned**. Life was difficult and it would require a long, hard journey to recover fully. The question then becomes: how would they respond?



Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

The way we respond to adversity ultimately says much about the way we view God and how we allow Him to work in our lives. In some difficult circumstances such as those faced by the citizens of Jerusalem, we can sometimes become apathetic, critical, and even cynical, constantly complaining about unfairness in life. Israel indeed took this approach many times throughout the Old Testament—often refusing to accept responsibility for their own actions that caused the predicament in the first place. They never got to the root of their problem. They always blamed someone else; at times, they even blamed God ([Isa 49:14-26](#))! Rather than complain or do nothing, we ought to ask God to help us identify the source or the root of our problem. Even though we may try to treat the symptoms and successfully mask them, the actual problem remains. Treating the symptoms may offer temporary relief, but the problem itself will fester and continue doing even more harm down the road.

To help us better understand Israel's situation, think about a person experiencing

Instruct

a chronic health problem—such as frequent headaches. While an occasional headache may only result from stress or tension and not indicate a serious medical problem, frequent headaches could potentially signify another underlying health issue: high blood pressure or high blood sugar. We could generally respond in one of two ways. We could ignore the issue and keep treating only the symptoms by taking medicine to alleviate the pain to get through the day. But this poses an even greater risk! The underlying issue that has caused the headache remains and now has the potential to continue doing major damage to our bodies since we left it untreated. It won't simply go away if we ignore it; it will grow worse as time advances!

Therefore, the best solution is to pinpoint the exact cause of the problem so we can eliminate it altogether. We would need to undergo tests in order to determine the root cause because we would treat high blood pressure and high blood sugar in two vastly different ways! Although we would tackle each of the two conditions a little differently, one thing remains the same for both; the treatment would require some type of change in our lives. For example, we would need to alter our diet whether to reduce our salt or carbohydrate and sugar intake. We may also need to add more exercise to our routines. These types of lifestyle changes can help us to avoid further complications from these two chronic diseases. As we will learn, Israel had not truly dealt with the root of their problem during Nehemiah's day. As a result, life continued to get worse for them and the people became more disillusioned even though they had seen God fulfill His promise to restore a remnant to their homeland.



On the surface, Israel's problems seemed clear-cut; they lived in a destroyed and destitute city; their enemies surrounded them on all sides, seeking to sabotage them at every turn. But the root of their problem wasn't primarily the physical condition of Jerusalem or even the persistence of their enemies; those things were merely the symptoms of a larger problem. The problem was the spiritual condition of the people themselves! They found themselves in this predicament because of their sin. They had forsaken the Lord and rebelled against Him! They had refused to live by the boundaries

which He had given them. Even though some seventy years had elapsed since the first Jews had begun to return home to Judah, they still had not dealt with the root of their problem before attempting to rebuild the city and their lives. To overcome this problem, they need a change in lifestyle; they needed to repent and place God first. This need for change will become evident as we examine Nehemiah's prayer.

Nehemiah 1:4-11

THE PRAYER:

Having heard this report about Jerusalem, Nehemiah became overwhelmed with grief to the point that he **sat** and **wept** (v. 4). Without the context of his prayer that follows, we may think that he **mourned** solely over the squalid conditions of the city and the plight of the residents. Even though heart-wrenching, Nehemiah didn't weep solely over the physical decay. He **wept** because of the people's spiritual decay; they had sinned against the Lord! Although physical needs can overwhelm us at times, we have an even greater spiritual need. Nehemiah, and others throughout Scripture, recognized the significance of the spiritual need above any temporal physical need that we could ever have. Daniel, for example, **mourned** three full weeks—not because of Judah's destruction or captivity, but because the people had sinned against the Lord ([Dan 9:9-19](#); [10:2](#)). In the New Testament, Jesus **wept** over Jerusalem for the very same reason—spiritual darkness from sin prevented the people from understanding their true condition ([Luke 13:34-35](#); [19:41-44](#)).

Question
2

How often do you pray for spiritual needs (repentance, wisdom, knowledge, etc.) for others versus the time you spend praying for the physical?

When we look at our city, what do we see? When we hear reports from our family, friends, and neighbors, what do they tell us about the actual condition of the world around us? Typically, we focus on our community's physical needs above the spiritual. As we look at our city, we may see urban blight and decay in some places with dilapidated buildings, graffiti, and litter. We may encounter a plethora of socio-economic needs where impoverished people lack food, clothing, or shelter. We may hear statistics which tell of high unemployment, a high percentage of people below

Instruct

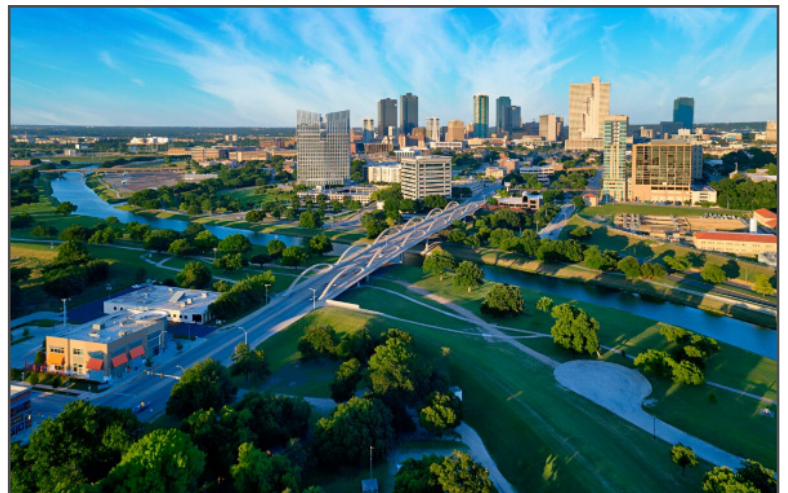
the poverty line, a lack of affordable housing, a high cost of goods and services, and an inability of consumers to afford basic commodities. We may experience out of control debt—both among individuals and governmental institutions. We may notice rampant crime, a general lack of respect toward others, isolated individuals, widespread use of controlled substances (drugs or alcohol), a failing education system, or a dysfunctional government.

Question # 3

When you look at our city what do you see? What causes you to grieve?

While all the things mentioned above exist on some level throughout our entire region, most of us live in neighborhoods where we don't see such harsh physical conditions visibly. Even though we may not have what we consider "excess" money, we and our neighbors can still afford the basic necessities in life when we budget and live within our means. Although we certainly must deal with inflation and other issues, we have a nice house, a car that typically works, access to healthcare, and food. We live in relative safety in quiet neighborhoods where we need not fear going out. Outwardly, we don't experience life-threatening problems or physical decay in our community. Yet, whether we live in relative peace or face the harsh reality of life, we all have the same basic need. We can't allow ourselves to become fooled by outward appearance or by what we perceive we might need. We must get to the heart of the matter. We all need Christ because we all have sinned and need a Savior!

Nehemiah's grief over sin teaches us a valuable lesson. We ought to look beyond mere external physical needs to see the true spiritual need of the community. To do this, we need the Lord to give us discerning eyes because we tend to prioritize the physical over the spiritual. In life, we often try to alleviate our hardships, discomfort, and suffering immediately through physical means that promise to bring immediate satisfaction. But these physical solutions only offer temporary relief and do nothing to resolve the even greater problem. When we see things from God's perspective,



however, we will begin to understand what we truly need. Even though people require life's basic necessities to survive, they need a relationship with Christ even much more. While we should show compassion by meeting people's physical needs when possible as God allows, we must cut through superficial external issues to get to the heart of the matter: people need the Lord!

Question
4

How do you maintain focus on spiritual needs while you show compassion by meeting physical ones? How did Jesus do that?

Once Nehemiah looked past the physical condition of the city to see the true spiritual need of the people, it compelled him to act. Ultimately, God would use him to rebuild the city, but first he had to lead the nation to repent of their wickedness. Therefore, for several days, Nehemiah prayed and fasted (v. 4). Fasting, usually accompanied by prayer in Scripture, is not simply self-denial for the sake of appearing pious or righteous ([see Matt 6:6-18](#)), but rather it helps us to depend upon the Lord and seek Him. In essence, fasting removes the worry of providing, preparing, and eating a meal and thus teaches us to rely upon the Lord for that provision ([Matt 4:2-4](#)). Consequently, the time that we would normally spend doing these things we can then devote to cultivating our relationship with Him. This allowed Nehemiah to spend time in concerted prayer to ensure he was in right standing with the Lord whereby he confessed and repented of his sin. Rather than resigning himself to remaining "broken" or allowing himself to become depressed over the condition of the city, Nehemiah took action. He got to the root of the problem—sin—and sought to correct it through prayer!

Question
5

When you see a spiritual need, how does it compel you to take action?

THE REMORSE EXPRESSED:

Not only did Nehemiah express sorrow over the physical condition of Jerusalem based on the eyewitness report he has just heard, but he also expressed remorse over sin—both his own and that of his people. We can infer Nehemiah’s remorse is genuine and heartfelt because it led him to an action: he confessed his sin and repented. We then saw the transformation in his life through which God used him as an instrumental leader to motivate the people to seek Him and rebuild the city. Sin—the willful defiance and rebellion against the Lord—should always spur us to remorse or, as many today will refer to it, “brokenness.” True remorse, therefore, signifies a deep sorrow over offending the Lord and transgressing His boundaries.

For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Unfortunately, sometimes people display faux remorse as a type of defense mechanism. They aren’t truly sorry for their actions; they are only sorry they got caught! They hope a “show” of remorse will lessen their punishment or get them out of trouble altogether. Repentance and transformation, however, always accompany true remorse ([2 Cor 7:10-11](#)). We can’t have one without the others. Although only the person him or herself and the Lord will know if he or she is genuine, we can still have a pretty good idea because we will see evidence in his or her life. We will see the fruit of righteousness displayed, giving evidence of the transformative work of Christ. Nehemiah truly exhibits such remorse!

We must make such a distinction about true repentance and remorse because it has become popular today to emphasize living in a perpetual state of “brokenness” over sin. Indeed, sin should grieve us when we commit it or see it committed. In fact, it should grieve us so much that we act by confessing our own sin, repenting, and learning from our mistakes. It should spur us to act by pointing people to the gospel of Christ which leads them to do the same. However, we shouldn’t live in a continual state of brokenness as if we have no hope or forgiveness. Such an outlook actually robs us of joy and can distract us from God’s purpose.

On the contrary, we have life in Christ. Christ hasn't saved us to live in brokenness perpetually; He has restored us into right standing! He saved us to live an abundant life ([John 10:10](#)). God will not leave us in a state of "brokenness" if we confess our sins; He will forgive us and get us back on the right track. If we endure a constant state of brokenness in our lives, we must ask whether we have sincerely repented and allowed God to restore us.

Question
6

How is guilt or even the idea of continual "brokenness" over sin a tactic of the enemy to distract us?

v.5-7

THE REQUEST UTTERED:

Nehemiah starts the body of his prayer by praising God for His faithfulness. Even though Israel had been unfaithful to God, He remained faithful to His Word ([2 Tim 2:13](#))! For this reason, Nehemiah describes God as a **great and awesome God who keeps His covenant** and shows **mercy** to **those who love** Him and keep His **commandments** (v. 5). The meaning of the word translated **mercy** is difficult to capture with a single English word. The Hebrew actually points to God's faithfulness in keeping His covenant. As such, it indicates that God demonstrates His **love** for us by acting faithfully in accordance with His Word. So, some translations interpret it as lovingkindness (NASB), steadfast love (ESB) or covenant of love (NIV). Since God wants us to imitate Him ([Lev 19:2](#); [Eph 5:1](#)), He expects us to show our **love** for Him in this exact same way. He has set the standard for us to follow. If we **love** Him, we will keep His **commandments** ([John 14:15](#)).



As a general rule, we should follow the way Nehemiah structures his prayer. This doesn't mean that we pray this way every time or use the exact same words as some type of ritual. But rather, no matter how pressing our needs may seem, we should begin

Instruct

our prayers with praise. We should praise God for who He is and what He has done. We should spend time praising the Lord before petitioning Him for our requests. In fact, the model prayer Jesus teaches His disciples begins with a similar proclamation of praise ([Matt 6:9](#)). Certainly, some situations may require that we immediately call to God for help, but we can never forget to praise Him. As you pray this week, ask God to help you evaluate your prayers to see if you balance your praise and thanksgiving with your petitions and requests.

After opening with praise, Nehemiah begins to present his request to the Lord. We can hear both the earnestness and urgency of his prayer when he reveals that he prays **day and night** (v. 6). Along the line of many of the psalms, Nehemiah respectfully asks God to **be attentive** so that He might **hear the prayer of His servant**. While we should never engage in meaningless repetition in our prayers ([Matt 6:7](#)), we should spend quality time praying about pressing matters. Prayer, therefore, requires persistence; we should pray until the Lord gives us clear direction on the matter at hand ([Luke 11:5-13](#)). Once we hear from Him, we must act. Regardless of how He may choose to respond (i.e., yes, no, or wait), we should thank Him for His answer and not attempt to argue with Him as if we could somehow change His mind.

Question # 7

When you pray, how do you express the earnestness and sincerity of your requests to the Lord?

As part of his urgent request, Nehemiah confesses **the sins of the children of Israel** (v. 6) But he doesn't just point out the **sins** of others, he includes himself among those who **have sinned**. Therefore, Nehemiah further reveals that they have **acted very corruptly against** the Lord, failing to abide by the **commandments, statutes, and ordinances** He had established for their benefit (v. 7). From this confession, we learn a valuable theological application which we must apply to our situation today: we must approach sin, whether in our lives or in the lives of others with a sense of seriousness. While we may have sinned against others in the sense of offending, mistreating, or wronging them, we ultimately sin against God Himself who has the power to judge—making our sin much more serious ([Luke 12:15](#)). Before we can attempt to correct and restore someone who has **sinned**, therefore, we must first examine our own lives to ensure we are in right standing with the Lord. We must first **confess** any sin in our own

lives. We should never exhibit a critical spirit; we should resist the habit of only pointing out sin in others without first examining our own lives. We must realize that we are all in the same situation because we all have the propensity to sin and, consequently, we too need grace and forgiveness from the Lord. Hence, we must approach any situation in which others have sinned with a spirit of humility.

vv.8-9

THE REPENTANCE OFFERED:

Having confessed their sin to God, Nehemiah asks Him to **remember** what He has said in His Word. Not that God has somehow forgotten or needs reminding, but Nehemiah appeals to Scripture more to reassure and remind himself that God will remain faithful despite our unfaithfulness when we repent or **return** to Him! Like Nehemiah, we can receive comfort and consolation in Scripture when we practice what it says. In this way, Scripture offers us hope by telling us what we must do when we stray from the Lord. Forgiveness isn't received automatically. We must humble ourselves and ask for it in addition to turning our lives in the opposite direction from rebellion to obedience. Linking two passages from Leviticus 26:33 and Deuteronomy 30:2-5, therefore, Nehemiah reminds God of His faithfulness to His promises (vv. 8-9).

This particular Scripture outlines the condition of God's promise—that is our responsibility—as well as the penalty for disobedience, the grace God offers in forgiveness, and the restoration given when repentance occurs. Toward the end of Deuteronomy, God establishes the clear boundaries by which Israel should live as well as the consequences for abandoning them. If Israel abided by the boundaries codified in the law, God will bless them. If they did not, then God would punish them. Thus, Nehemiah recalls, **if** the people were **unfaithful**, God would **scatter** them in exile **among the nations**. But if they returned to Him by means of repenting of their sins and following His **commandments**, then God would forgive them and restore them to



Instruct

the Promised Land even though **some of** them had been **cast out**.

Question
8

How does using Scripture in prayer encourage you? How does it both remind and reassure you of God's faithfulness to His promises?

God affords us the opportunity in His Word when we put it into practice. We can appeal to His promises when we pray so that we might keep our eyes focused on Christ, remembering He is faithful to do what He has promised. Even more importantly, it serves as a reminder of the responsibilities that we have and the things that we must do. Like Israel, we have all sinned, so we need forgiveness. Whereas we have forgiveness through what Christ did on the cross, it still requires that we place our faith and trust in Him. When we turn from our sins, God will forgive and restore us just like He did Israel many centuries ago! In fact, we can hold securely onto His promise in 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

vv. 10-11

THE REDEMPTION RECEIVED:

Finally, we see the redemption received. God did not abandon Israel even though they had literally abandoned Him through their idolatry and sin. On the contrary, God **redeemed** His people by His **great power** and with His **strong hand** (v. 10). The word **redeemed** has its origins in being set free from bondage. Throughout the Old Testament, it frequently describes Israel being set free from enslavement to other nations, particularly Egypt. Yet, like Israel, we find ourselves in an even greater realm of bondage. We have willingly enslaved ourselves to sin. In His grace and **mercy**, however, God has set us free. He paid the price to ransom us from our sin so that we might become His children. With this, Nehemiah closes his prayer. So, he prays once again for **mercy** to be released from their enslavement to sin so they might serve the Lord — and particularly that Artaxerxes would have mercy to allow the rebuilding of the city (v. 11).

Question
9

When has God shown you mercy, not just by forgiving you of your sin, but by giving you favor when you had to approach a certain individual?

In the introduction, I asked the question: If God had given you the task of opening a legislative session with prayer, how would you pray for our country? Unfortunately, our prayer may mimic Reverend Wright's prayer. While much has indeed changed in our country, it has primarily changed for the worst. Sin seems to have become even more pronounced. People still engage in the very same things for which Wright prayed nearly twenty-eight years ago to an even greater degree. As a people, we all need to deal with the root of the problem: sin. We cannot effectively overcome sin on our own; we need Christ. Christ paid the penalty for our sin on the cross. We must receive the grace and forgiveness He offers by faith expressed through genuine repentance. Like Nehemiah, may we do something about it. May we first examine our own lives, confess any sins that we may have, and then share the good news of the gospel with the world around us—for only through Christ can we receive forgiveness and be restored into a relationship with Him whereby we see true life-change which can overcome our temporary struggles in this world.

Incorporate

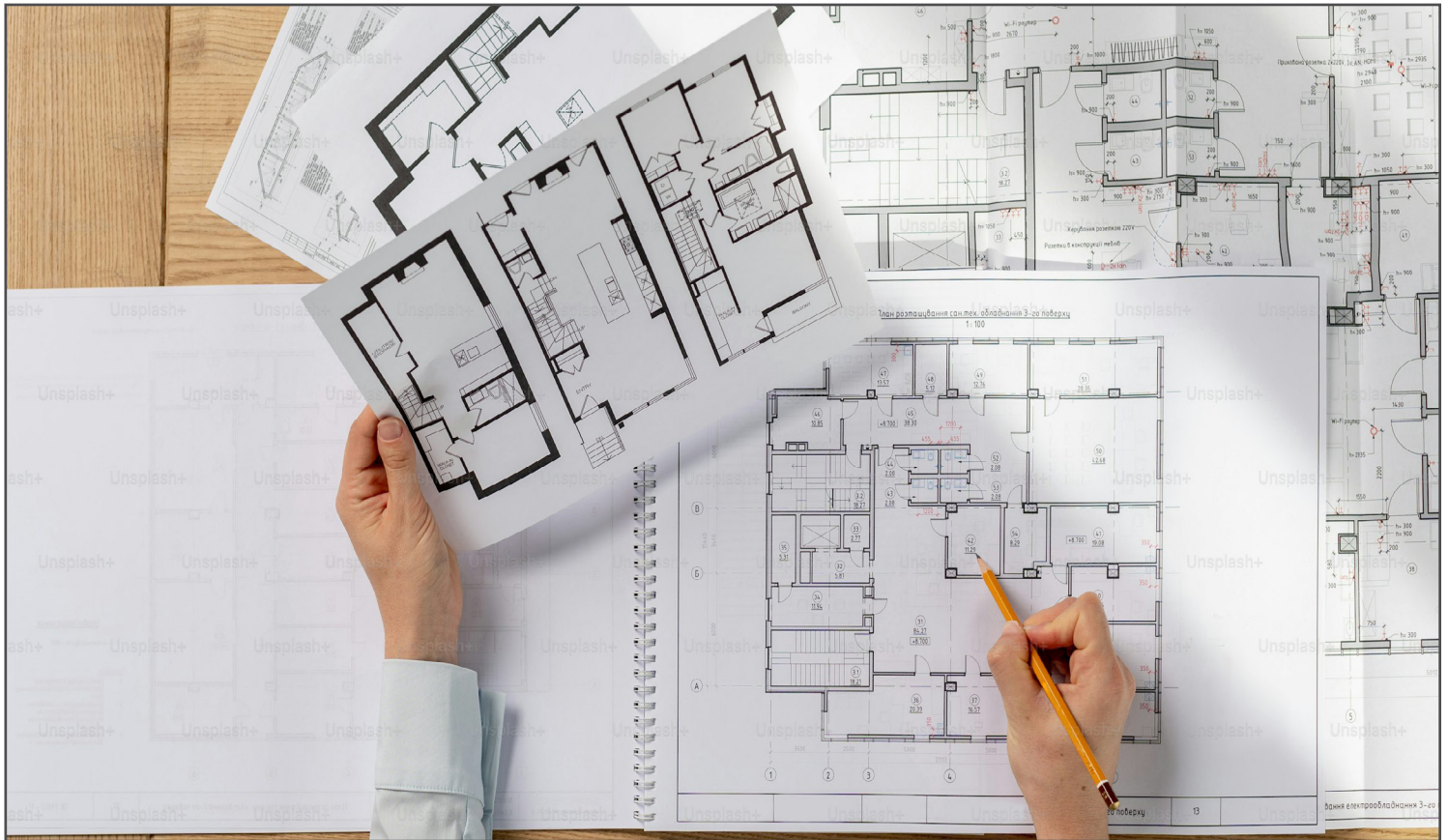
When life presents you with challenging situations, how do you respond in prayer? What has God taught you about yourself and the nature of your prayers during such trying times?

How often do you pray to seek forgiveness for your sins and the sins of our country? In what specific ways do you pray like Nehemiah or even Reverend Wright?

Why is it important to pray and seek forgiveness even if the culture around us seems clueless and lost? Like Nehemiah, what does such a prayer motivate you to do?

Journal: Document God's Work

August 25, 2024



Conquering our Concerns Nehemiah 2:1-20

Focal Verse:

“So I answered them, and said to them, “The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.”

Nehemiah 2:20

back to
Table of
Contents

Introduce

We've all most likely experienced a time in our lives where we've felt defeated. Nothing has seemed to have gone right. We can only look around and see one problem after another. It appears as if the odds are stacked against us and we have no way of breaking free from the circumstances that have surrounded us. Even though we may have a relationship with Christ, we feel like we have no hope because we can't see how things may turn out positively in the end. We need a godly person in our lives to remind us that the Lord is still in control and He will prevail. We need someone to remind us that we can find comfort and hope in Him when we join in His work.

While not historically accurate, one particular scene in the movie *Pearl Harbor* (2001) serves as a good example of the overwhelming sense of defeat we may sometimes experience in our lives.

Assembled with his cabinet after Japan's surprise attack, President Roosevelt (Jon Voight) listens intently as the Joint Chiefs give reports on the casualties incurred during the attack and begin to offer their proposals on how the US should respond. Unimpressed with any of the suggested responses against this foreign aggression, Roosevelt demands that his cabinet formulate a plan to strike the heart of Japan directly in order to send a strong message.



In the ensuing discussion, the Joint Chiefs hint that such an attack on Japan's mainland would be nearly impossible. So, they begin proposing less risky alternative solutions. Suddenly, President Roosevelt interrupts and tells those assembled that he often wonders why God had allowed him to suffer from polio which took the use of his legs—leading him to challenge them with these words: "But when I see defeat in the eyes of my countrymen—in your eyes right now. I start to think that maybe He [God] brought me down for times like these when we all need to be reminded who we truly are. That we will not give up or give in."

One of the Joint Chiefs then promptly exclaims, "Mr. President, with all respect, sir, what you're asking can't be done." This statement infuriates Roosevelt who then

Introduce

proceeds to rise from his wheelchair at the head of the table. As the President struggles to stand, members of the cabinet and White House staff rush to offer their assistance, but he refuses. Using the edge of the table as a springboard to give him buoyance to stand, President Roosevelt uprights himself on his two polio-stricken legs to look squarely at his cabinet saying, "Do not tell me: 'It can't be done.'" In that moment, he expresses his resolve to do whatever it takes to inspire his fellow countrymen and propel them to victory.

Centuries before this heinous attack on the United States, another man felt the enormous pressure of inspiring his countrymen who saw themselves as defeated. The people living in Jerusalem during Nehemiah's day found themselves hopeless and despondent as they looked around their broken city and suffered tremendous opposition from political outsiders as they sought to rebuild it! They needed someone to point them to hope in the Lord. On their own, they could not overcome the challenges set before them. Sheer human willpower and ingenuity would do nothing to rectify their situation. They needed someone to remind them that their strength and resolve come from the Lord when they serve Him.

Rather than being "reminded *who* we truly are," as Roosevelt indicated in this fictional speech from *Pearl Harbor*, we need to be reminded *whose* we truly are. Knowing that we belong to the Lord and that He is in control should give us comfort and hope. It should turn our defeat into confidence. May we never trust in ourselves to conquer our own concerns, depending on our own wisdom, power, and fortitude. Let us trust in the Lord to conquer our concerns for us. For only when we truly submit ourselves to Him and follow His plan can we overcome the concerns that weigh us down in this world.

Key
Question

What concerns or cares affect you the most in life?

Nehemiah 2:1-3

THE CONCERN FOR THE CITY:

After recording an intercessory prayer on behalf of himself and his fellow countrymen to confess their sins and seek forgiveness ([Neh 1:5-11](#)), a little more than four months has passed as chapter 2 begins. The calendar has now turned to the early Spring of 445 BC—**the month of Nisan**, March and April for us, but the first **month** of the year for the ancients (v. 1). During these four months, Nehemiah likely remained in constant prayer over the condition of his hometown. Although burdened for Jerusalem and for his fellow countrymen, he still faithfully fulfilled his duties in King Artaxerxes' court as chief cupbearer. But as this particular journal entry opens, he now notes how the king has begun to notice his great distress. He even points out how the king could easily observe a change in his demeanor because he **had never been sad in his presence before**.

As Nehemiah served the king his **wine** on this particular occasion, Artaxerxes inquires why his trusted servant looks so **sad** since he's **not sick** (v. 2). The Hebrew word translated **sad** literally means "bad." Even in our own culture, sometimes we might use a similar expression with family or close friends to describe their haggard appearance when the stresses of life obviously weigh heavily upon them: "You look bad." The king immediately recognizes that Nehemiah looks "bad" as one of his closest confidants! As hard as we may try to hide it, stress and pain can show on our faces and through our actions. It may look as if we've had a restless night of sleep. Our posture slumps. We don't smile. Wrinkles may begin to form. Our body language by all indications suggests great distress and worry. It can also show prominently in our mental state and attitude. We may seem preoccupied. We may appear withdrawn or disengaged. We may become irritable, cranky, or short with people. In whatever way Nehemiah appeared before the king, Artaxerxes could plainly see it on his **face**. Nehemiah looked "bad" and the king knew it!

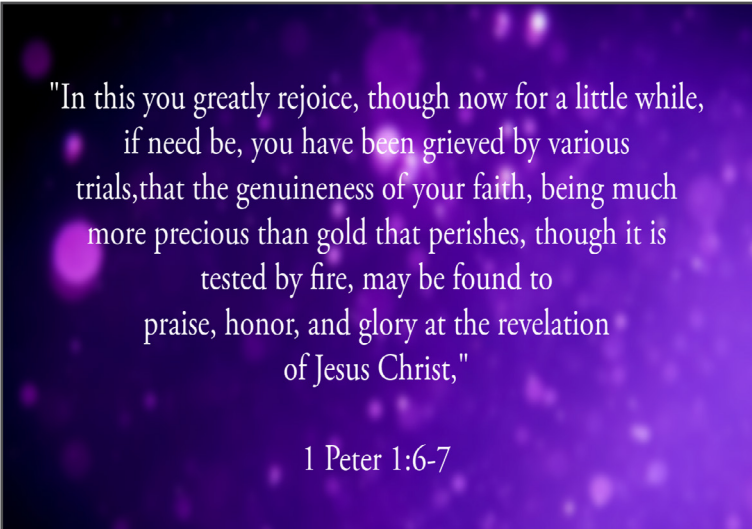


Instruct

The king also rightly concludes that some deeply personal matter, which he describes as **nothing but sorrow of heart**, has troubled Nehemiah. The king's honest assessment terrifies the cupbearer even more. He doesn't know what the king may think and, more importantly, what he may do if he reveals the true source of his anguish, for Artaxerxes had stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem four years prior ([Ezra 4:21](#)). Nevertheless, Nehemiah starts telling the king everything. Respectfully, he asks **why he shouldn't be sad when** his ancestral home **lies** in ruins (v. 3). Nehemiah broaches the subject delicately by referring to Jerusalem indirectly as **the place of his fathers' tombs**. He didn't want to anger the king by directly challenging the command he had given four years ago to halt building. Furthermore, Nehemiah plays upon the king's sympathies by describing the abhorrent conditions of the **tombs** since such improper, disrespectful burial practices would bring great dishonor culturally to the family. Armed with this information, the king now knows exactly **why** Nehemiah outwardly appears so distressed.

Yet, we must realize that stress can have either a negative (distress) or positive (eustress) effect on our lives depending upon how we choose to deal with it. For example, certain stressful situations can have a positive effect when they motivate us to act and help us to refine our character according to God's expectations ([Mal 3:1-7](#)). In fact, Scripture reveals that God allows us to experience temporary trials or stress to strengthen our faith and cultivate our relationship with Him ([1 Pet 1:6-8](#)). In this way, trials teach us we must depend upon Him; we must trust Him implicitly even when we may not fully understand and cannot see how the situation may turn out in the end. When we persevere through such trials, it helps us mature, growing in godly wisdom and ability as He leads. Based on the details he relates in this chapter, Nehemiah shows signs of having both types of stress in his life simultaneously.

On one hand, Nehemiah experienced positive stress or eustress. His burden that his fellow countrymen honor the Lord by rebuilding both their lives and their city compelled him to act at the right time when God gave him the



"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,"

1 Peter 1:6-7

opportunity to present his case before the king. We can see how God orchestrated all these events that culminated in the king asking Nehemiah what troubled him so much. Despite his great fear and trepidation, Nehemiah seized the opportunity to request permission to travel to and start rebuilding his ancestral home in Judah. Consequently, God then used this trial to prepare Nehemiah to lead His people. Nehemiah had to learn both to wait and to rely upon the Lord—especially because he would encounter intense opposition from every side as he began reconstruction of the city. On the other hand, we can also see that Nehemiah experienced distress which negatively impacted his life; it affected him physically, and perhaps even mentally, so much that the king could see it on his **face**. Nehemiah’s joy had turned to depression and the effects could be visibly seen upon his body.

Question
1

How have some stressful situations in the past helped to strengthen your faith?

At times in our lives, we may find ourselves overloaded with concern like Nehemiah. Even though we may spend time in prayer and be in right standing with the Lord, the worries of this world can still cause anguish and distress if we allow them. Nehemiah found himself in this very situation. He had confessed his sins and repented ([Neh 1:7, 9](#)), so he was in right standing with the Lord. Yet, he still became overwhelmed with stress because he allowed himself to become burdened by the external pressures of this world. We certainly ought to show concern and have a burden for the things of the Lord, especially His people. We ought to have compassion when we see people in need that compels us to act ([Gal 6:2](#)). But we should never allow those needs or burdens to weigh us down. And they won’t if we let go and turn them over to the Lord completely. After all, Peter reminds his readers who faced severe persecution in the first century, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” ([1 Peter 5:6-7](#)).

Question
2

In what areas do you have difficulty turning loose and giving control completely to the Lord?

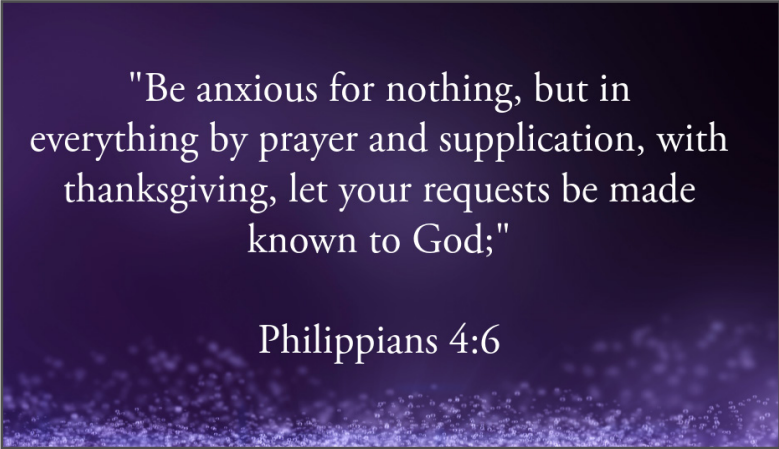
Instruct

Why then did Nehemiah allow himself to become so anxious despite his relationship with the Lord? Even though the text doesn't tell us explicitly, we still can have a pretty good idea. Nehemiah's stress likely results from the fact that he had not yet fully let go and given it to the Lord. After all, he fears the king's response concerning the source of his distress—the rebuilding of Jerusalem (v. 2). Although he trusts God and knows that He will fulfill His promises, Nehemiah still fears what others may do. Such fear seems to stem from the fact that he may have still looked at things from the perspective of what he himself could do rather than what the Lord would do. And Nehemiah quickly learns that he truly had nothing to fear when he hears the king's reply.

We often fall into a similar trap as Nehemiah. Even though we trust the Lord, we don't truly surrender everything about the matter to Him. We know assuredly that He will fulfill all He has promised, but as we wait on His timing we continually re-hash the

situation in our minds. We go over every detail from every angle. We evaluate how other people may respond and contemplate how we will counter. We think about all the possibilities and hypothetical what-ifs. We faithfully pray about the issue day after day with unwavering faith. But, as the months and perhaps years pass, we wonder when God will choose to act. It all begins to weigh heavily upon us; our joy can then turn to despair if we allow it. But we must constantly remind ourselves that God is still in control; the battle has been won. We must continue trusting Him even when we can't yet see the final result.

In all, God worked through Nehemiah's stress to accomplish His purpose and prepare His servant for the big task that lied ahead of him. He used Nehemiah's stress to alert the king to a problem which then gave the cupbearer the opportunity to make his request known. Fortunately, Nehemiah did not allow this burden to preoccupy him to the point that he could not see what God wanted to do through him; he intuitively seized the moment, realizing that God is in complete control. Thus, we can learn a valuable lesson. If we allow ourselves to become completely overwhelmed by stress, depression, or any other emotion, we can easily miss what God wants to do; we can



"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;"

Philippians 4:6

we can miss the opportunities which He has prepared for us to participate in His work. When we allow God to take control of our lives and guide us—giving Him the time and access to work through us—we will endure stressful situations with grace having no harmful physical effects upon our bodies. After all, Jesus tells us, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” ([Matt 11:29-30](#)).

Question
3

As you wait upon the Lord, what generally causes you to have the most anxiety or stress? How can you seek to turn that anxiety into anticipation?

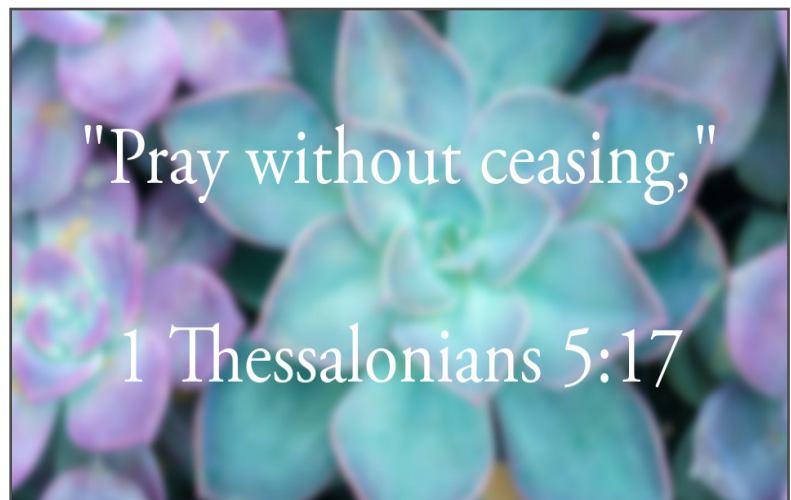
Nehemiah 2:4-10

THE COMMUNICATION OF A NEED:

After Nehemiah reveals the source of his distress, Artaxerxes immediately asks, “**What do you request**” (v. 4)? The king wants to know how he can help! The generosity expressed by the king perhaps catches Nehemiah off guard. Even though we anticipate and expect God to answer our prayers according to His will, sometimes His responses occur in a most unusual way at the most unexpected time. However, Nehemiah still knows exactly what to do. He prays **to the God of heaven**.

Although he doesn't transcribe the content of the prayer here, we can assume that he **prayed** in one of two ways. First, he could have offered a prayer of thanksgiving because such a generous offer from the king to help would have undoubtedly given him great joy.

Second, he could have paused to seek guidance from the Lord in what he should **request** from the king and ask for the boldness to say it. While the second option seems more probable in these circumstances, Nehemiah could have potentially done both! He



could have said, “Thank you Lord for this opportunity; guide me in what I should now say. Please, give me the courage and strength to say it.” At times like these, we need to remind ourselves that the Lord is right there to guide and help us!

We often primarily focus on the importance of an extended time of prayer during our quiet time. Just as important, however, are those short prayers throughout the day that keep us connected with the Lord. They keep us on the right track because they serve as a constant reminder of our dependence upon Him. In these spontaneous prayers, we can praise Him in the moment for what He has done or ask for guidance. We frequently need specific direction and counsel from the Lord, but we don’t have the luxury of contemplating the decision for a long time. Therefore, these need not be long, drawn-out prayers; and most often they cannot be such because we cannot extricate ourselves from our duties right then. Yet, we still need the Lord’s help.

As such, these prayers require our relationship with the Lord to be in right standing so that we can tune out the noise of life around us as well as our own potentially selfish desires to hear Him speak. To some extent, we must prepare ourselves beforehand even if we had no way of anticipating the circumstances in which we may now find ourselves. For this reason, our quiet time becomes so crucial. There we spend in-depth time studying God’s Word so we can know how to live consistently with it and praying so we can know how discern His will and be ready to act when the moment arises. Nehemiah likely already had a good idea **what** he could **request** of the king, but he rightly consulted the Lord before he spoke to ensure that he did not stray from His will. He also needed the courage to say it before a king who had abruptly stopped the work in that city. Like Nehemiah, we must maintain an attitude of prayer throughout the day as we go about our business ([1 Thess 5:17](#)). We need to develop the habit of taking everything to the Lord in prayer—no matter how small or insignificant it may seem to us. The hymn “What a Friend We have in Jesus” may summarize this point best: “What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

Question
4

In what ways has maintaining a spirit of prayer throughout the day with short, quick prayers helped you in your walk?

With a renewed sense of boldness, Nehemiah politely begins to present his **request** (v. 5). If he has served the king well and **found favor** with him, he wants to return to his ancestral home to **rebuild it**. The way Artaxerxes phrases his only two questions implies that he will consent to this **request**. While he laments being separated for an extended period of time from such a trusted servant who has served him so faithfully, the king only wants to know **how long** his **journey** would take and **when** he would **return** (v. 6). Artaxerxes then quickly agrees. The text notes that **it pleased the king to send him**. **It pleased** literally means "it was good." So, we could say it this way today: "It sounded good to the king," so they agreed upon a time for Nehemiah to go.

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Even though he once feared the king's response, Nehemiah now wasn't finished making his **request**. He had clearly come to the point of recognizing God's hand in all these events! So, he wisely makes two more specific requests. First, he asks for letters to local leaders **in the region beyond the Euphrates River** granting him safe passage (v. 7). Second, he asks for **a letter to Asaph** who oversaw **the king's forest** so he could secure **timber** for the rebuilding project (v. 8). The Hebrew name of the official in charge, **Asaph**, might perhaps suggest that the king allowed Nehemiah to use **timber** from an area called Solomon's Garden rather than importing it all the way from the cedars of Lebanon. Nonetheless, Nehemiah would need a significant amount of lumber to re-construct a structure or fortress to guard **the temple, the city wall**, and his personal residence where he would live while there. Once again, the king readily agrees to everything that Nehemiah proposes.


Question
5

In what specific ways has prayer given you the courage to act in accordance with God's will?

At last, Nehemiah states explicitly what we have already come to know implicitly: **the good hand** of his **God** has compelled the king to comply with all his requests!

Instruct

Certainly, we shouldn't impugn the generosity of the king. But we, along with Nehemiah, know the true reason all these things worked the way they did. God orchestrated them! From this interaction between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, we see two important principles. First, God uses people to accomplish His will. Sometimes they do so unknowingly by the voluntary choices they make even though they do not have a relationship with Him. With His foreknowledge, God has tailored His plan to take into account the choices of those who act according to their own volition, but whose actions ultimately fulfill His plan according to His will. We see this principle clearly illustrated here in the life of Artaxerxes who on his own volition chooses to support his trusted cupbearer. But in the end, through this act of kindness, he unknowingly fulfills God's purpose. As Paul explains, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" ([Rom 8:28](#)).



"And we know that all things
work together for good to
those who love God, to those
who are the called according to
His purpose."

Romans 8:28

Yet, God also uses people, like Nehemiah, who knowingly participate in His plan because they have a personal relationship with Him and want to join Him in His work. Whereas God ultimately supplies Nehemiah's needs through the kindness of a secular king, He also supplies the needs of the people living in Jerusalem through Nehemiah who had prayed earnestly for God's restoration. With God's help, Nehemiah secures the needed resources to make the city safe, functional, and great again. The Lord also uses Nehemiah to inspire the Jewish people to overcome their laziness and complacency along with any fears that they may have had in rebuilding their city. Not only do the people need physical resources for the project, but they also need a reminder that they could conquer any opposition they might face with God's help. Thus, God provides both of these things through Nehemiah who actively sought to participate in His plan!

As believers, we should follow Nehemiah's example. While God ultimately brings His plan to fruition, we serve as His hands and feet whom He uses to accomplish it. Therefore, we should willingly seek to join in the work He has set before us. As much as God wants to use us to supply the needs of others according to His plan, He also wants to supply our own needs so that we can effectively participate in His work.

Consequently, we must have balance in this area! For example, we cannot sit idly doing nothing as if waiting for God to act; nor can we hoard all the blessings and resources for ourselves. On the contrary, we should seek opportunities to participate—to join God in His work. After all, God wants to use us to accomplish His plan!

Question
6

How does God want to use you specifically as His hands and feet in this church?

At the same time, however, we must allow God to supply our own needs. We cannot continually “give” of ourselves to meet the needs of others without allowing God to replenish the things we ourselves need. Nehemiah discovers this when stress overwhelms him to the point of depression at the beginning of this chapter. God has not called us to bear such a responsibility alone! For this reason, we must cultivate a daily relationship with Him and pray continually like Nehemiah did. God supplied what Nehemiah needed (i.e., courage, a gracious king, and safe passage to Jerusalem) so that He could then in turn supply what the citizens of Jerusalem needed (i.e., resources and motivation) through Nehemiah. If we unduly burden ourselves with the needs of others without also allowing God to care for our own, we will become overwhelmed, stressed, and burned out. We need balance when it comes to serving the Lord! We must trust Him to supply our own needs so that we can in turn surrender ourselves fully to His plan by serving others as He leads.

Question
7

How would you assess the balance in your life between participating in service to God and allowing Him to supply your own needs so you can serve effectively?

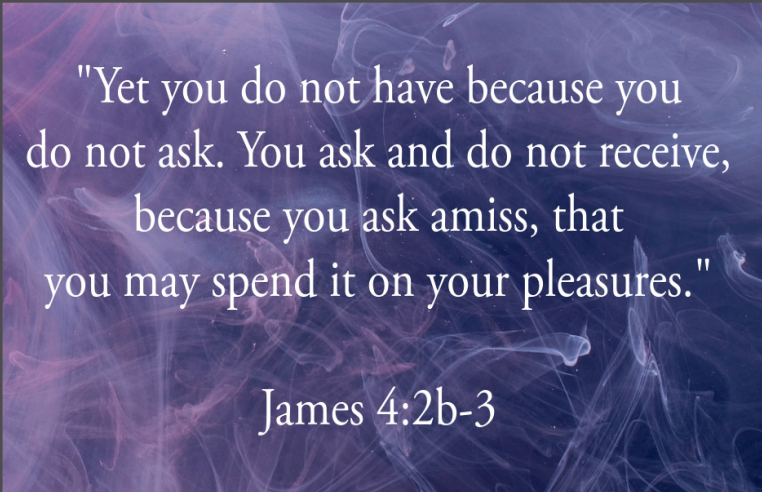
Second, God wants us to communicate our basic needs. He wants us to communicate them so He can meet them! Therefore, we communicate them first and foremost to Him through prayer—which Nehemiah had done four months earlier ([Neh 1:5-11](#)). Even though God already knows what we need before we even ask, He still teaches us to pray for our daily provisions ([Matt 6:8, 11](#)). He wants us to learn to depend upon Him and such a prayer serves as a daily reminder from where our provision truly comes. But at other times God also wants us to share our needs with others, so that

Instruct

He can use them to help. God provided the platform through the king for Nehemiah to communicate his request. If we remain silent, how will people know what we need unless we communicate it verbally ([Jas 4:2b-3](#))? God has not called us to bear our burdens alone in isolation, but to work together as a community. God wants to use others to meet our needs and to use us reciprocally to meet the needs of others.

Like Nehemiah did, we must lay aside any pride and not fear what others may think. Thus, we should communicate the concerns that God has laid on our hearts. The key to successful communication that bears repeating is "what God has laid on our hearts." Because we live in an affluent society, many have confused their basic needs for their own personal (selfish) desires. Therefore, we should not regard this as a call to abuse the generosity and kindness of others, but to understand how our lives fit into God's overarching plan.

As a part of God's plan, He wants to meet our needs collectively to advance His kingdom. Consequently, we must always communicate our needs in a way consistent with His Word and His will. To communicate effectively without selfish motives, we need to spend time in prayer. It can even be a short prayer like Nehemiah utters here in the heat of the moment, seeking direction, wisdom, and courage in how he should respond to the king's invitation to present his request! Above all, we should share the concerns that God has laid on our hearts with others and watch how He will work. But we must also be ready to join in His work as He supplies our needs!



"Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."

James 4:2b-3

Question
8

How do you communicate your needs with others? How has God used others to meet the needs that He has laid on your heart?

Taking the official letters that granted him safe passage, Nehemiah sets out on his journey (v. 9). But we now find out that the king had given Nehemiah even more than he had asked! He has also sent a detachment of soldiers and cavalry (i.e., **horsemen**) to escort him. Through Artaxerxes' generosity, God has gone beyond what Nehemiah

could have even expected. When we trust God and surrender ourselves completely to His plan, God will provide even more than we could ever imagine (see [Eph 3:20](#))! However, Nehemiah's journey did not come without obstacles. After arriving in the land, he experienced tremendous opposition from the local leaders, namely **Sanballat the Horonite** and **Tobiah the Ammonite** (v. 10). Upon receiving the news, these two officials became **deeply disturbed** that someone had come seeking **the well-being of the children** of Israel. The phrase translated they **were deeply disturbed** literally means "evil to them great evil." In other words, they **were** more than just **disturbed**! They felt as if Nehemiah had wronged or harmed them. We could even say that they became indignant or incensed because of that perceived wrong. But Nehemiah had done absolutely nothing wrong; he simply threatened the balance of power in the region. **Sanballat** and **Tobiah** perceived Nehemiah as a threat to their authority and control over the region, so they would do everything within their power to stop him.

Nehemiah 2:11-15

THE CONCEPTION OF A PLAN:

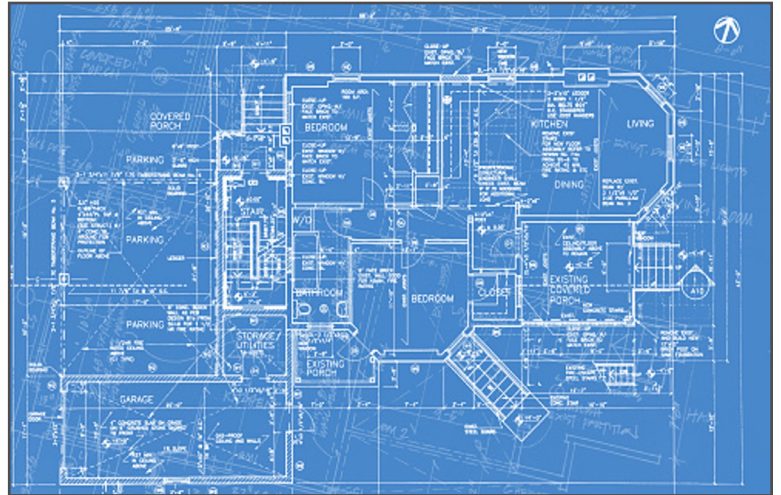
Before involving the citizens of Jerusalem, Nehemiah takes time to formulate a plan by personally surveying the damage. On the third day after arriving, he assembles a team of **a few men** for the scouting expedition who then arise during **the night** to begin their reconnaissance (v. 11-12). Nehemiah emphasizes that he has not yet told any of the residents **what God had put on his heart to do**. He wants to conduct the survey covertly without arousing any suspicions so he only takes these **few men** whom he trusts and **one animal**—presumably a horse—upon which he himself **rode**. Nehemiah needs to operate in secrecy because he does not yet know whom he can trust, especially since he is technically a political outsider from Babylon unfamiliar with the region and two local leaders, Sanballat and Tobiah, already became greatly upset when they learned of his plan to rebuild.

The party starts their exploration by exiting the city through the **Valley Gate** commonly associated with the main gate in the Western Wall that gave access to the Tyropoeon Valley (v. 13). From there, they



seem to travel south and west as they head toward the **Serpent's** (Dragon's) **Well** and the **Refuse Gate**. Although the exact location of the **Serpent's Well** remains unknown through archeology, the **Refuse** or Dung **Gate** likely led to the Valley of Hinnom where the people had once offered child sacrifices ([2 Chron 28:3](#)) but now used as the city's garbage dump. There they find complete destruction with the **walls** in ruins and **the gates burned**.

As they continued their counterclockwise trek around the city, they pass by the **Fountain Gate** and **King's Pool** on the southeast side (v. 14). There they encountered so much rubble that Nehemiah's **animal** could



not continue. The southeastern side of the city was constructed on a series of terraces which often required major repairs ([2 Kings 9:15, 24](#)). Any damage to the pillars or retaining walls providing support could have caused the entire hillside to give way, explaining the excessive amount of debris. **So**, Nehemiah must back track into the valley to find a vantage point from which he could view the wall (v. 15). Finally, he has seen enough to formulate a workable plan, so he concludes the fact-finding expedition and returns to the city to make plans to address the local leadership.

Question # 9

Before developing a plan, how thoroughly do you research the problem?

Nehemiah, in this instance, operated in the right way that God has ordained for us. He took time to survey the wall and come up with a plan before communicating it to all the citizens. We, however, live in an impatient culture that seeks immediate gratification. As a result, we create so much stress in our lives when we try to fly by the seat of our pants and fail to plan. It may seem like researching, planning, and finally implementing the plan takes too long, but in reality it will save us from stress and anguish. In addition, Nehemiah developed this plan with men he could trust. He didn't have a large group of people offering all kinds of suggestions and coming up with a consensus. He surrounds himself with a small group of trusted advisors he knew would

be able to get the job done!

Question
10

How would you evaluate both your level of stress as well as effectiveness during times you've planned versus times when you have not?

Nehemiah 2:16-20

THE CHARGE TO BUILD:

Once again, Nehemiah reiterates that he had not yet told any of the local **officials** about his survey of the area or plan to rebuild **the wall** (v. 16). But all this is about to change as he gathers regional leadership to reveal his plan in full detail. He bids them to look around the city. Using descriptive language to elicit an emotional response, Nehemiah describes how the citizens incur great **distress** as the city **lies in waste and its walls burned** (v. 17). So, he urges them to **build the wall** so that they **may no longer be a reproach**. Rather than stressing the vulnerability of the citizens to attack because of the lack of protection, he stresses the disgrace that living in such conditions brings not only upon the people, but the Lord Himself. His desire is that the people honor the Lord by repenting of their sin and taking pride in their city. They must overcome their complacency and apathy. They must band together, taking the initiative to rebuild their city and overcome their shame.

If Nehemiah had only appealed to their civic pride, however, he would have likely not experienced much success in motivating the people to act. They would have focused on the challenges that lied before them, particularly the political opposition. They have already experienced tremendous external opposition from leaders, like Artaxerxes who had halted building as well as local leaders in Judah. They can also look around and see the lethargy of the people. Those who have returned have not yet come together as a group, but instead they have become consumed with their own personal lives. Once they had cleared their farmland and rebuilt their homes, they became satisfied and felt no need to participate in public projects to rebuild the city.

Question
11

How do our own personal affairs sometimes distract us from what God wants us to do collectively as a group?

To address this attitude among the people and alleviate their fears, Nehemiah tells the leaders assembled how **the hand of his God had been good to him** (v. 18). The people have nothing to worry about because God has made this project possible! God has, and will continue to, overcome the opposition to the project; He has also graciously supplied all their needs. Thus, Nehemiah relates how God had given him the opportunity to speak to the king who consented to the construction of the wall and even provided the necessary resources to do it. Apart from God, none of this would have been possible! Since God has graciously provided everything they need, the people must now take ownership. They are responsible for pulling together and finishing the task. With this, the leadership agrees unanimously to **rise up and build**, and so they **set their hands to this good work**. In other words, they are collectively determined to finish the project no matter what may happen.

But a test of their newfound determination would arise almost immediately. **Sanballat, Tobiah**, and **Geshem**, about whom we will hear more in future lessons, mock the project and express their opposition. Nehemiah notes how they **laughed at** them and **despised** them (v. 19). In an attempt to frighten the people, they asked if they would **rebel against the king** to rebuild the wall that he had stopped. Whether Nehemiah has shown them the official letters from the king, we cannot be sure, but likely as the regional leaders they were privy to those orders. If not, they would have certainly understood the official nature of the visit by the entourage sent with him from the Persian capital. Yet, they try to plant doubt in the people's mind that Nehemiah has actually come in an official capacity with blessings from the king. They engage in a campaign to attack Nehemiah's character and present disinformation, calling into question the legitimacy of the cupbearer's testimony about the events!

If someone had attacked us like this, most of us would probably begin by defending our character and honor. We would likely respond to their "disinformation" and false charges by attempting to discredit them in return, thereby entering into a never-ending series of personal attacks. While Nehemiah doesn't completely ignore them, he still doesn't respond in kind. On the contrary, he appeals to the Lord. He reminds the people that **the God of heaven will prosper them**; therefore, **His servants** who trust in Him **will rise and build** the wall (v. 20). Rather than argue with these outside agitators who **have no heritage, right, or memorial in Jerusalem**, Nehemiah simply dismisses their criticism by appealing to the divine will of the Lord.

He won't stoop to their level of petty insults and anger, but rather he will let God fight the battle for him because he has already seen God work in a marvelous way. Therefore, Nehemiah's confidence rests squarely in the Lord—not his own ability as a leader, orator, or problem-solver. In order to conquer our concerns, our complete confidence must also rest squarely in the Lord who—when we follow His plan—will fight our battles for us.

Inspire

At times in life, we may experience depression or sadness over concerns that we have as we look around our dysfunctional world. This is a normal reaction to devastating news that we may receive. Yet, we cannot allow ourselves to become consumed with grief, disillusionment, or any other emotion. Instead, we must remind ourselves that we are not fighting this battle alone. We must remind ourselves that God has our best interests at heart. We may not see His plan fully at the time; we may not understand His timing; we may not even understand why He chooses to act in specific ways. But we should realize that He loves us more than we can even fathom and wants us to bring all our cares and concerns to Him so He can act. Similar to the fictional speech that Roosevelt gave his cabinet in the 2001 movie *Pearl Harbor*, may we remember not “*who we truly are,*” but *whose we truly*. When we remember *whose* we are, we can be confident that He will conquer our cares and concerns through His gracious plan!

Incorporate:

When have you become overwhelmed with your personal cares and concerns to the point it began to show outwardly? How did God eventually help you to overcome them?

Like Nehemiah, who do you have as trusted friends or confidants with whom you can discuss a godly plan to resolve a problem and who will hold you accountable?

When opposition arises to something that God has clearly directed you to do, how do you respond: 1) to the situation, 2) to the opposition, and 3) to their circumstances?

Journal: Document God's Work

August 25, 2024

Written and Published by
First Baptist Church of Fort Worth

For more information
or for questions
please contact
mikeneal@fbcfw.org

Interactive PDF available online at
curriculum.fbcfw.org

Visit us on the web
www.fbcfw.org



@FirstBaptistFortWorth



@FBCFW



@FBC_FortWorth

First Baptist Church of Fort Worth
A place to belong!

5001 NE Loop 820 • Fort Worth, TX • 76137
(817) 485-7711 • info@fbcfw.org