

40 DAYS OF PRAYER & FASTING

Devotional Guide for Spiritual Revitalization



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Restart: Stepping Out in Faith

40 Days

See the community around you with new eyes. Take this 40-day journey through the book of Nehemiah to discover God's heart for rebuilding broken lives and hopes.

PUBLISHER

We would like to thank the American Bible Society for providing this plan. For more information, please visit: www.EasterRestart.com

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FASTING SCHEDULE

For the entire 40 days we are to be fasting from: Meat, Dairy, Sugar Refined products, i.e. white rice, bread, etc.

Week 1: Jan 1 – Jan 7: Juice only: Fruit juices, vegetable juices, and water

Week 2: Jan 8 – Jan 14: Fruit only: Fresh, organic (no canned), water

Week 3: Jan 15 – Jan 21: Vegetable only: Fresh, organic (no canned), water

Week 4: Jan 22 – Jan 28: Fruits & vegetables, water

Week 5: Jan 29 – Feb 4: Fruits, vegetables, & whole grain bread, water

Week 6: Feb 4 – Feb 9: Fruits, vegetables, soups, whole grains & nuts, water

PRAYER SCHEDULE

For the entire 40 days we will be seeking God for a variety of things.

Week 1: Meeting each night at 7:00 pm

Subsequent weeks: Prayer services on Wednesday evenings & on the prayer line.

Commit to praying at least 30 minutes each day.

You may dial into our daily prayer line at **5:30am, 12pm and 6pm.**

Phone number:(605) 468-8009 Access pin: 594817#.

DAY 1: BAD NEWS! GOOD GRIEF!

Sometimes bad news catches us totally off guard and reduces us to tears. We hurt so badly that we need time to nurse the hurt; we need time away from distractions; we shun even physical sustenance. News about the destruction of Nehemiah's beloved homeland evoked such a response in him. His feelings of patriotism, of concern for the Jews in Jerusalem, made him heartsick. As a royal cupbearer, Nehemiah was living a comfortable life in the palace of the king of Persia, far away from the strife and violence that ripped Jerusalem. Yet, he chose not to ignore the situation. He did not turn a deaf ear nor shrug his shoulders at the news. In his distress he wept bitterly and went to God in prayer for solace.

We don't have to search the media for bad news about our city. It is there, up front and personal, all around us. God expects us to be concerned. He wants our hearts to be broken as we consider those who are less fortunate and are experiencing pain and suffering. God wants us to act, but he desires that we come to him first, in prayer, for guidance and direction.

What is your typical reaction to bad news or news that involves harm or danger to your loved ones? Think about your city. Have you ever felt particularly moved by its conditions? What situations triggered this feeling and how did you respond? Did you pray?

Ask God to direct you to a particular troubling issue in your city. Spend time praying and fasting for its resolution. Pray: Lord, thank you that I can come boldly to your throne of grace. Make me sensitive to the needs of others, and let me seek your loving support through the gift of prayer.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 1:1-4

DAY 2: DON'T JUST STAND THERE...PRAY SOMETHING!

Nehemiah does not seek counsel from outside sources but goes directly to God in prayer. Here, he pours out his heart, acknowledging God as mighty and sovereign and one who is faithful in upholding the covenants he makes. Like a priest atoning for the sins of the people, Nehemiah begs for mercy as he confesses that all of Israel, including him and his family, has willfully disobeyed God's commands.

In similar fashion, our own cities lie in ruins. Some of it is structural decay where buildings are burnt out, vandalized and unoccupied. At other times, it is moral and spiritual bankruptcy where godly living, ethics, morality and civility have morphed into everyone doing what is "right" in his or her own eyes. We have moved far away from the tenets upon which the Founding Fathers established our beloved country. Note, Nehemiah says the people sinned by "choosing to disobey" God's laws. Can you see areas in which the leaders in our cities have chosen to disobey God's laws? Like Nehemiah, we must unequivocally address our sin and disobedience as we come before God.

What responsibility do you take for the shape the city is in? When was the last time you earnestly prayed for the spiritual health of your city? What steps can you take to address some of its concerns?

Consider confessing your own sins, as Nehemiah did, in light of the spiritual decay in your city. Ask friends to join you at a regular time each week to pray for this particular issue. Pray: Lord God, I acknowledge you as supreme ruler over all. My heart bleeds for all of us in our communities. We, too, have ignored your commands. Forgive us, Lord, as only you can, and put us back on the path of righteousness.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 1:5-7

DAY 3: STANDING ON GOD'S PROMISES

God keeps his promises. Nehemiah knew that firsthand, and he was convinced of it. Just as God had promised to punish the people for disobedience (and God followed through by allowing them to be taken captive), Nehemiah knew that godly repentance and obedience would bring the people once again into right standing with God. So, while in the presence of God, Nehemiah reminds God of his promise to bring restoration. The road to restoration is paved with the bricks of confession and repentance of sin. And Nehemiah was willing to start bricklaying.

Quite often we barter with God, trading what we consider righteous deeds in exchange for actually doing what God's Word says we should. When we do that or willfully withhold our obedience, and consequently our obeisance, God considers it sin. However, the corollary is true. When we repent and obey God's laws, God is faithful to his promise to restore us.

Think what would happen if people all over the city would be obedient to God's Word. Think what would happen if Christians in your city would kneel before God and remind God of his promises. Nehemiah acted like a first responder in this crisis. Are there beginning steps you can take?

Search the Scriptures for God's promises that address the troubles that plague your city. Find ways to show people in your community how positive changes in their behavior will help change the state of the city. Pray: Lord, I stand on your promises. They are precious gems to me. You are ever faithful, and so I depend on you alone. I am grateful that you never go back on your Word.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 1:8-9

DAY 4: PLEADING AND INTERCEDING

Nehemiah seeks favor with the king. He reminds God that the people for whom he is praying are those who, in time past, God himself had rescued by his might and power. In essence, Nehemiah is saying, “Do it again, Lord. Do it again for me.” He intercedes not only for the people back in Jerusalem, but also on behalf of his fellow intercessors. What a big heart! He pleads with God to answer their prayer as well because together, as believers, they have a singular aim to see Jerusalem restored.

Do you join others in praying for issues that are close to their heart? The Bible says that when two or more gather in the name of Jesus and petition him concerning their needs, he will be there to bless them. What blessings are you seeking for your city and its people? Are there other groups with whom you are sharing your petitions?

What past victories can you recall? Will you ask God to do it again for you? With whom are you seeking favor? Have you petitioned God for help?

Join a rally that supports a cause that is close to your heart. Pray: Lord, I intercede even now for those who are imprisoned by physical bars. I intercede, too, for those who have become imprisoned by sin. I pray, Lord, for their complete freedom.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 1:10-11

DAY 5: FINDING FAVOR WITH GOD AND MAN

Despite our greatest efforts, our authority, wealth, and power cannot compare with receiving favor at the hand of God. In Nehemiah's case, God's favor multiplied exponentially, resulting in Nehemiah's finding favor with the king who granted him everything he requested. But there's preparation to be done before favor becomes a reality. No doubt Nehemiah planned (and rehearsed) his entire request before he had the opportunity to speak with the king. Note that even when the king asked what he wanted, in an instant, before he responded, Nehemiah sent up a quick silent prayer to God!

What do you want? Sometimes we are afraid to voice our request...out of fear...out of seeming greedy...out of feelings of unworthiness...out of feeling our request is beyond God's capacity to deliver. Never doubt God nor limit his ability to bless you beyond comprehension. The Bible tells us that God's "power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3.20, 21) if we would ask, seek, knock (Matthew 7.7, 8). When you have had your audience kneeling in prayer before God, your king, and have found favor, it becomes much easier to stand in the presence of anyone.

Take the time to evaluate the needs of your city. When you pray, if God were to ask, "What do you want me to do?" are you prepared, as Nehemiah was, to give an answer?

When you receive favor at the hand of God, remember to acknowledge both the gift and the giver. Pray: Lord, thank you for your favor... a priceless gift that can only be obtained from you. Let me be a grateful receiver, and let me seek to share what you have given me with others.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 2:4-8

DAY 6: RECONNAISSANCE MAN

Have you ever been on a reconnaissance mission to assess an upcoming project? If you were prudent, you probably did not divulge any details until you checked and rechecked your findings. Ever wonder why many of our ventures fail? Could it be that we have not taken the time to carefully plan them from stage to stage? Or that we procrastinate? Or that we discuss them openly with everyone with the intention of calling attention to ourselves? An old proverb declares “there is many a slip between the cup and the lip,” meaning plans can fail between the time we conceive them and the time they are executed. Sage advice for us to heed.

Nehemiah was astute; he had a strategic urban plan figured out, but he told no one until he believed the time was right. After secretly assessing the damage for himself at night, he returns home before dawn to put his strategy to work. Nehemiah was assured that God was backing his plan. Nevertheless, there were things he needed to do beforehand in preparation for the work to begin. Assessment was Job #1.

Assess those areas of your city where the marginalized live. Could you and your family live there? What would need to be done to make it habitable for you? Which city agencies would you call in order to get services started or restored?

Form a coalition of concerned citizens. Join hands with churches and local social service and/or civic agencies to improve the quality of life for those who live in depressed areas. Pray: Lord, my plans are in your hand. Help me to be silent when it is necessary so that you may complete your work of restoration through me.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 2:11-12, Nehemiah 2:13, Nehemiah 2:15

DAY 7: NOW IS THE TIME—READY, SET, GO!

It's amazing what prayer set in motion in the life of Nehemiah. Like the iconic leader Martin Luther King Jr., Nehemiah had a dream—that of seeing his beloved city Jerusalem restored, fortified and secure. It was the place where God had chosen to dwell. The fact that the wall and gates of this once great city were in disrepair was a disgrace to Nehemiah's God. It had caused the enemies of the Jewish people to mock them. Nehemiah had a plan and there was no question that he believed it would succeed. "We must rebuild the city wall so that we can again take pride in our city," he asserted. There was no wavering in his tone. As he unfolded the plan he had kept secret, he credits God's favor and the king's benevolence for his success thus far. No wonder he got a unanimous vote of confidence.

We cannot be double-minded in our approach. Success comes when we commit our plans to God and join our heart and hands together.

What dreams lie in their infancy within you? Can you be patient enough to hold them secret until it's time for them to be birthed? How can you tell when it is the right time to unveil your plans?

Consider the senior citizens in your midst. They sometimes procrastinate because of memory lapses or because they have difficulty understanding. Find a social service agency employee who would be willing to explain how various senior programs work, and who would help senior adults become enrolled, engaged and looked after. Pray: Lord, sometimes it seems I am too busy to stop and help someone in need. Slow me down, Lord. Let me not procrastinate, but do it now!

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 2:16-18

DAY 8: FINDING UNITY IN COMMUNITY

Nehemiah devotes a whole chapter in which he lists the names of those who helped to rebuild the wall and the gates of the city. For a project as important as this, he creates a virtual “Memorial Wall of Fame.” While we may not recognize the names or even be able to pronounce them, we get the general idea: each person worked side by side encouraged and motivated by a tireless and charismatic leader.

Nobody was above getting their hands dirty. Not the priests, nor those in business. Not the women who wanted to help out. Not the men who oversaw town matters, nor the others whose titles did not get mentioned. Some, having done a first stint, signed up to do an additional job. They started at Sheep Gate, continued in a circle, and ended at Sheep Gate. Each place the wall looped was a worker, diligently building and repairing—united by a common cause—the fortification of the wall.

According to Nehemiah’s list, the work began with the high priest (the church). What do you see as the church’s role in matters of urban renewal? Economic revival? Social justice?

If your house of worship is not actively engaged in making conditions better for the poor, pray about it, and consider how God might use you to lead an effort, with the blessing of your leadership. Volunteering with a reputable organization in your city is also a viable alternative. Pray: Lord, thank you for giving us different gifts. Let us be mindful that they function best when used in community to benefit others.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 3:1, Nehemiah 3:8, Nehemiah 3:12, Nehemiah 3:17, Nehemiah 3:27, Nehemiah 3:32

DAY 9: DODGING THE STONES OF THE ENEMY

Don't think that your enemies are going to stand back and watch you progress.

Whenever you do anything to further God's kingdom, the devil will be waiting for an opportunity to attack you at the point at which you are most vulnerable. Building a wall for the city of Jerusalem was a formidable task. Nehemiah knew it, the people knew it, and his enemies knew it. As the workers laid stone upon stone, their enemies hurled insults at them. The adage that says, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me," is simply not true. Words hurt. They hurt the shepherd boy David when he heard the giant Goliath taunting God's people. Those words made him spring into action (1 Samuel 17.26-32). Now Sanballat and others used words to hurt Nehemiah and the building crew. It hurt enough to compel Nehemiah to take time out to pray... a curse on them! He didn't retaliate, he didn't render evil for evil, he used the arsenal he had—prayer!

Sanballat and company were threatened by any successes the people achieved. In today's language, such people are called "haters." Are you aware of "haters" in your community? What can you do to deflect their influence? How can you pray for them?

Make a concerted effort to focus on the tasks you have at hand and ask God to let you not become distracted by those who are against the work you do for God's kingdom.

Pray: Lord, guard my lips that I will not become embroiled in petty arguments even though my feelings may be hurt. Keep me steadfast in the work you have called me to do.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:1-5

DAY 10: BUILDING ON A FIRM FOUNDATION

The building materials for the wall were of the finest quality, having been secured directly from the royal forest. But even that was not enough to guarantee security from the attacks of the enemy. Indeed, what Nehemiah and his men were building on was the Word of God. A covenant between God and his people.

If you've managed to avoid the enemy at one juncture, be sure you'll find him waiting for you at yet another. What started off as insulting words by Sanballat and his gang escalated into a plan of attack. The walls were at the halfway mark, a point at which the builders may have been tired and needed encouragement to continue. Yet, they were heckled, insulted, and their enemies tried to pick a fight.

Nehemiah rallied the people to pray. But he also stationed a 24-hour guard watch along the wall. A prudent and ingenious move. Watch out for the landmines! Watch ...and pray!

What can you tell about Nehemiah's leadership from his response to the attacks on his people?

As you contemplate mobilizing community-driven projects, take time to seek divine guidance and to wait on God's response. Pray: Hear, O Lord, when we call on you. Place a shield around us and protect us from our enemies.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:6-9

DAY 11: DON'T GIVE IN TO DISCOURAGEMENT

It's hard to keep your spirits up when you're tired and feeling beaten down. It's even harder when there are death threats swirling above your head. Look carefully at this cameo. The people who were recently filled with enthusiasm about rebuilding the wall are now singing a dirge—a mournful song indicating that not only has the tedium and laboriousness of the work taken its toll, but also that the mind games the enemy has been playing are working.

Is it any different today? Discouragement can quickly soak up oases of enthusiasm leaving us in a desert of despair. But wait! We serve a God of hope. We have God's Word on it. "I will bless you with a future filled with hope—a future of success, not of suffering" (Jeremiah 29.11, CEV). Hold on. Hold out. Don't give up. Don't give in to discouragement. Success is up ahead.

In some countries work songs were used to motivate workers and help them pass the time. What methods do you use to break away from seasons of discouragement? Can you think of promises God has given us that would break the stronghold of discouragement?

Pray for church and community leaders who are running into brick walls while trying to help those who are marginalized. Ask God to keep them from becoming discouraged. Pray: Lord, let my response to disappointment and rejection be one of complete trust in the promise and plans you have carefully laid out for my future.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:10-11

DAY 12: THROUGH MANY DANGERS, TOILS, AND SNARES...

Thank God for people who are willing to thwart the plans of the enemy! Jewish citizens who lived close by the enemy camp warned Nehemiah of the enemy's plan. It was not a one-time occurrence, but these plans of attack were made over and over and over again. It was indeed a clear and present danger. This meant the people always had to be on the alert. Like a military strategist, Nehemiah moves to secure those areas of the wall which were vulnerable and he places armed guards to defend them.

Then, he gives the workers a pep rally and tells them not to be afraid. Nehemiah knows that fear brings timidity. Fear brings discouragement. Fear brings defeat. He reminds them that it is God who is their commander-in-chief; it is God who leads them. Furthermore, he tells them to hold a mental picture of God and use that as an incentive to fight for their families.

The text says the enemy tried at least 10 times to attack the Jews as they worked on the wall in Jerusalem. What does this say about tenacity in warfare? Why was it important for the workers to visualize God leading them? What incentive do you use to keep on "keeping on"?

Bullying has become a national issue. Find out how you can get involved in its prevention. Advocate to counsel both the victims and the abusers. Pray: You, Lord, are a strong tower wherein I can find safety. Keep me close when the enemy launches its attack.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:12-14

DAY 13: TURN YOUR FACE TO THE WALL

It could have become an explosive situation when the enemy discovered that their plans were being leaked. They could have become more volatile or belligerent, but God intervened and prevented the enemy from doing his people harm. Sounds familiar? Remember the case of a young man who was thrown in a den of lions? God shut the mouth of the lions so they would not devour his servant, Daniel. Was it not the psalmist who said, “God is our mighty fortress, always ready to help in times of trouble. And so, we won’t be afraid!” (Psalm 46.1, 2a).

Confidence in God overrides fear. Yes, our circumstances are very real. But so are the promises of our God. Nehemiah was confident in God’s protection. He chose to depend on Jehovah Nissi, the Lord our banner, who goes before us to give us victory. So even in the midst of danger, Nehemiah and the builders chose not to focus on the circumstances but instead turn their face to the wall.

What role does faith play in activating God’s favor? Why is it necessary to demonstrate one’s faith?

Whatever difficulties you are currently facing, turn them over to God, and leave him to determine the results. Pray: Lord God, lead me to that place where my faith rests securely in you, knowing you hold all the answers.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:15

DAY 14: A SPEAR, A SHIELD, AND A TROWEL

Nehemiah may not have been a military man, but he certainly was astute concerning the ways of the enemy. His first line of defense was always prayer. But to prayer he added common sense and action. Nehemiah knew full well that his worker-cum-soldier team could not effectively engage in warfare, but he also knew that if he did not show the enemy that he was not intimidated, they would step up their attacks, delay the rebuilding of the wall, and kill his people. By using half of his crew and arming the workers with armors and spears, he was able to make progress on the rebuilding project, stave off the attacks of his enemies, and foster a team-building atmosphere, one of interdependence against outside forces.

The Scripture tells us that as long as we profess God as Savior, we will encounter warfare, but it promises that God will equip us to emerge victoriously. That is why we are cautioned to put on the whole armor of God so we can stand up against the devil's offenses (Ephesians 6.11). Like the crumbling wall, at times our own lives lie in ruins. What might once have been an impregnable fortress is now devoid of mortar. Without the enabling power of God's Word, we are mere dust lying in a heap. It is imperative, then, that we get fully dressed for battle, paying heed to the sound of the trumpet so we will know when the reinforcement of prayer is needed.

What do you think went through the minds of the people building the wall when they had to strap weapons on? Why didn't they quit when the enemy was attacking them while they worked?

Pray for groups in your community who may face ridicule and bias attacks. Pray: God, look out for those who are harassed by those who see themselves as far superior to everyone else. Help the oppressed and downtrodden to know that you love each of us equally.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:16-18

DAY 15: MAINTAINING A CHAIN OF COMMAND

Realizing that the various work on the wall separated the people physically, Nehemiah devised a plan that would allow the workers to form an instant coalition should any one group be attacked. Like a good strategist, the plan was thought out beforehand and the people were apprised they should listen for the sound of the trumpet. Again, Nehemiah gives God total credit for what has transpired so far. He assures the people that God would help them fight.

Would such a word calm their fears? Certainly! They had seen how God had granted Nehemiah favor with the king, how he withstood the taunts and ridicule of the enemy, and how, as a man of prayer he went to God with every difficulty they faced. Now, the sound of the trumpet would be a sign that God would, once more, help them.

In your personal life, who is your first line of defense when you are faced with a problem? Have you ever proved that God comes to your rescue when you call on him? Do you ever doubt that God will come through for you? What erases those doubts?

Nehemiah sees God as commander-in-chief as the people struggle to get the wall built. Why was Nehemiah so confident that God would help them?

Pray for groups in your community who may face ridicule and bias attacks because of race or sexual orientation. Pray for those leaders and lay people in your church who remain determined to uphold God's commands in the face of opposition. Pray: God, let me come to you first in everything I attempt. Secure victory for me, especially when I am trying to help those who are in need of a helping hand.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:19-20

DAY 16: BRICK BY BRICK—A SACRIFICIAL TASK

Doing the same tasks day after day from sunup to sundown can become monotonous. But carrying out those tasks with the threat of death hanging over one's head can be downright dangerous. Why did the people continue? It was a sacrifice of love. Love for their country, love for their families, love for their leader, love for their God!

Employees respect a boss who is willing to jump in the ditch and dig alongside them. A boss who is not afraid to get downright dirty; a boss who will seek to understand the trials of the employee by taking on the job him or herself. Nehemiah was such a leader. Although he was governor, he took on the same guard shifts as his workers and slept in his work clothes to be at the ready should an emergency arise.

More often than not, people learn about us by how we live rather than by our credentials or the things we say. Our willingness to sacrifice on behalf of others can become our real life biography.

As you reflect on the passage above, what traits can you insert into Nehemiah's character profile? Are those traits qualities your associates would add to your résumé? Did you notice that the people's weapons were kept close by as they slept? Do you keep your arsenal—prayer and the Word of God—close by as you sleep?

Be willing to make those sacrifices God is laying upon your heart. Work in such a manner that those to whom you minister are eager to emulate you. Pray: Lord, let me not be high-minded and stand on ceremony with those I serve. Let me kneel and wash their feet—one foot at a time.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 4:21-23

DAY 17: FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS—UNFAIR POLICIES

It was bad enough that Nehemiah had to contend with outside hostility, but in his very own camp the people were complaining that the rich were taking advantage of the poorer Jews by charging them exorbitant interest rates on money they borrowed. Taxes were high and with mounting bills, and the threat of foreclosure, many families were forced to sell their children into slavery just to survive.

Nehemiah's dilemma was not unusual. Today, such practices are still rampant in our society, although they are not as overt. Economists say a huge part of the current economic downturn is attributable to the mortgage crisis in which lenders loaned money to unqualified borrowers at high interest rates. The mortgagees found themselves unable to pay and within a short period of time their homes were foreclosed and they lost the money they had invested in the properties.

How do you define "power"? Why is power so often linked with abuse and injustice?

God requires that "justice and fairness flow like a river that never runs dry" (Amos 5.24). How can we work to accomplish that? Pray: Lord, in all my dealings let me be fair. Let me forgive those who have wronged me so they can see the light of God shining in me.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 5:1-5

DAY 18: A CITY “COUNSEL” MEETING

What do you do when your team appears to be rooting for the opposition? That’s the way it must have seemed to Nehemiah as the rich Jews oppressed the poorer ones until they were so impoverished they were being sold into slavery. It angered Nehemiah that the people who had been united under the common cause of building the wall were now torn apart by internal trouble. So he spoke to the accused privately. But, because it was not something which should be swept under the rug, he held a public hearing. None of the leaders said anything in their own defense.

By calling a meeting where he counsels with them publicly, Nehemiah sends a clear message that usury will not be condoned and that he will not quietly slap the hand of the offending rich with the hope that they will correct themselves.

This very public flap comes as a result of greed on the side of one party. Where in our society do we see this happening? Is it present in houses of worship as well?

Find out if usury is being practiced in your community. What classes of people or ethnic group(s) is it aimed at primarily? What can you do to expose or curtail it? Pray: You, Lord, give me all I need. Keep me from covetousness and greed.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 5:6-8

DAY 19: CONFRONTING WRONGDOING

Nehemiah does not sugarcoat the problem. The rich have become even richer because they have put liens on the property that the poor owned. Now, most of the houses and vineyards belong to the powerful folks. The Bible tells us that it is wrong to act unfairly with the poor, and further, Nehemiah tells them that it gives Judaism a black eye. When the Gentiles look on and see that Jews treat fellow Jews harshly, they will believe that the Jews' religion is of no effect.

As a leader, Nehemiah not only gives counsel, but he sets the example. He pledges not to ask for payment on loans he and his friends and relatives have made. And, he tells the leaders to return the properties they have taken and the interest they have been paid. The leaders agree, without argument, to Nehemiah's demands.

Why should leaders tackle problems like this head on? Why does Nehemiah speak on behalf of those who are being oppressed? Why do the rich leaders agree to his demands? Why is honoring God so important?

Do you know of a family who is facing foreclosure? Figure out ways to help them take positive steps following this event. Or, talk to their mortgage representative or elected official to determine if there are steps they might take before such action takes effect. Pray: O, Lord, come near and bless those who are facing eviction or foreclosure.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 5:9-12

DAY 20: A PLEA FOR INTEGRITY AND COMMITMENT

People who lack integrity cannot be taken at their word. So although the rich people had already promised to right the wrongs they had committed, Nehemiah still made them stand in front of the priests and promise to give back the properties they had taken away. To further drive his point home, he emptied his pockets and told them that God would do the same to them if they reneged on their word. They agreed to what he said and followed through on their promise.

Living in community requires that we place self interest aside and make a commitment to seek the good of the whole group. Unfortunately, our behavior is oftentimes similar to the rich leaders. And, like Nehemiah, our society has to legislate our actions so that each of us can enjoy the benefits that community living has to offer. God is grieved when we take advantage of one another, and he sends this message: “Warn the rich people of this world not to be proud or to trust in wealth that is easily lost. Tell them to have faith in God, who is rich and blesses us with everything we need to enjoy life” (1Timothy 6.17).

How do you think God responds to oppression today? Do you know anyone who acts like the rich leaders? What can you say or do to effect change?

Have you ever benefited financially at the expense of others? If you have, ask God to forgive you and change your behavior. Find ways of offering restitution. Pray: Lord, make me a person of integrity who can be trusted, not only with financial matters, but also with sharing your glorious gospel.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 5:12-13

DAY 21: ACTING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

While prayer was a huge part of Nehemiah's life, he had several character traits that made him the wise and disciplined leader that he was. The writer of Proverbs says: "Respect and obey the LORD! This is the beginning of wisdom" (9.10a). During Nehemiah's tenure as governor, he had various food, wine, and monetary entitlements which certainly would have made his life easier. He chose, however, to forgo those perks as long as he was governor because he respected God and didn't think it was fair to become a burden to the people.

Nehemiah's decision, no doubt, made an impression on the people. No governor prior to him had given up their food or wine allowance. Yet, it was not about making an impression; it was about doing what was wise and just. Nehemiah's wisdom came from his respect for God. It was the linchpin of his faith; a faith that held up in the most trying circumstances.

The food, wine, and money allotted to the governors were entitlements. In what ways can personal entitlements get in the way of acting judiciously? Are there "perks" you receive that you can use to benefit others?

Sometimes unclaimed funds belong to people who are unaware these funds exist. Help families determine if any such funds belong to them, and show them how to file a claim. Pray: Lord, let me not look solely to my own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 5:14-15

DAY 22: LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Nehemiah worked alongside the people as the wall was being built. Not only did he refuse to benefit from the allowances given to him as governor, but he also did not use any loopholes to purchase property. His goal was to complete the wall, and he kept that task in the forefront of his mind. The people who worked for him saw his steadfastness and emulated him. As Nehemiah prays, he asks God to remember the good that he has done and to bless him for it.

Our knowledge of and our ability to explain God's Word matters little to the world that watches us. What truly matters is how we live our lives. Are we generous? Honest? Compassionate? Humble? Do our lives represent a page of Scripture?

Nehemiah's respect for God's laws would not allow him to request his rightful food allowance and burden the people with that cost. How could business leaders adopt Nehemiah's approach?

Find innovative ways to curtail business or personal expenses. Donate the money saved to a church or charitable organization. Pray: Lord, make me a blessing to someone today.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 5:16-19

DAY 23: FOILING THE ENEMY'S TACTICS

If you think temptation will go away simply because you resisted once, think again! Your enemies are not easily deterred and they will come after you using different forms of deception. Sanballat and the others tried four times to ambush and possibly assassinate Nehemiah, but each time he resisted their overtures.

Nehemiah tells them that the task God has assigned him to do is far too important to allow distractions to interfere with its work. It was not an excuse, it was the truth. When God calls us to service we should be steadfast and single-minded in our approach to undertaking this work. The enemy is crafty and will stop at nothing to undermine the work of the kingdom. We must be on our guard against anything that would sidetrack us and cause us to wander away from the task at hand.

Why do you think the near completion of the wall caused Nehemiah's enemies to come at him once more?

Young people in our community often fall victim to various temptations and addictive behaviors such as underage drinking and smoking. Seek out a civic group that is trying to make a difference in these areas. Volunteer as a mentor or counselor. Pray: Lord, guide our youth as they make decisions that can adversely affect their lives. Give them the wisdom which comes only from you.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 6:1-4

DAY 24: SEEKING STRENGTH FOR THE TASK

It becomes terribly frustrating when you are constantly being dogged by your enemies. In one instance, it is insults. In another, it is petty skirmishes and in yet another, it is lies, deceit and intimidation. Many of us would crack under such relentless personal and physical attack. Nehemiah, however, holds fast. God has given him the gift of discernment and he can spot deception a mile away.

Nehemiah does not fall for the intimidating tactics of his enemies. He recognizes them for what they are, and as is his practice, goes to God in prayer, appealing to God for strength.

Nehemiah needs strength for the physical task of building the wall. What are some other reasons he might need strength?

Deceit is pandemic in our society. Speak out against it when it occurs, knowing that God's power will back you up. Pray: Lord, let me be prudent in my response to those who attack my credibility.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 6:5-9

DAY 25: DISCERNING DECEIT

Nehemiah is offered a plan of escape from his enemies, but it involves hiding in the most sacred place in the temple, a place where only the high priest was allowed to enter on special ceremonial days. While the plan seemed innocent enough, God revealed its treachery. God had protected Nehemiah so far, so there was no reason he should cower and hide from the enemy. Besides, doing the wrong thing even to achieve a good purpose is sin. God's people should never be willfully caught up in illicit behavior.

We can trust God to keep his promises—they have no expiration date. They are good forever! We can be confident when we are told in God's Word, "The Lord will keep you safe from secret traps and deadly diseases" (Psalm 91.3). He has promised, and he will do it.

Is it ever appropriate to do the wrong thing for the right reason? How did Nehemiah come to the realization that Tobiah and Sanballat were behind the plot to ruin his reputation?

Based on the way Nehemiah handled this problem, what are some other character traits you recognize? Emulate him when you find yourself in similar situations. Pray: Teach me, Lord, to discern your will even among the traps that have been set to ensnare me.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 6:10-13

DAY 26: SUCCESS—AGAINST ALL ODDS

Sometimes success seems to be protracted. There are physical and spiritual battles to be fought, enemies to be routed and fears to be conquered. Yet, when the people of God put their trust in him, God proves faithful and grants them success in their endeavors. In the midst of ridicule, bitter attacks by the enemy, back-breaking work to clear the rubble and restore the wall of the city, Nehemiah and the people have finally finished the task God put on his heart. Their enemies hurled taunts that insulted their faith, but still the wall builders pressed on. Now, against all odds, the wall was completed—a monumental task accomplished by many with the help of one—God. No one could have imagined that the work could be done, much less in 52 days! It was a God moment. And even their enemies knew it!

What lessons are hidden in the fact that we are told that Nehemiah's enemies "felt helpless"?

Re-read Nehemiah 4.14. In what ways can Nehemiah's rallying charge to the people contribute to our success today? Pray: Lord, remind us that every victory we achieve comes from your gracious hand. Make us grateful and humble as we celebrate our successes.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 6:15-16

DAY 27: TAKES ALL OF US TO MAKE IT WORK

Today, many people shy away from giving large sums of money to the church because they are skeptical as to how the funds are being used. In Nehemiah's account, we see that the people joyfully gave to help pay for the rebuilding of the temple. It started off with a gift from Nehemiah himself. The people watched their leader give and pitched in to contribute as well. The idea was to make the temple a place worthy for God to dwell. If there were major donors or if some of the gifts were sacrificial, we will never know. We do know, however, that many people gave to rebuild and refurbish their place of worship. What is important is not how much they gave, but rather that it was a communal effort to do something special for God. Every gift helped. Every gift was appreciated. It took everyone's effort to achieve the desired result.

What gift can you offer up to God? Would you give your time? Your talent? Your financial resources? How can you encourage others to give in support of the work of the church?

The people brought gifts that included gold and silver for the temple, as well as robes for the priests. What does that say about how they valued those who taught them God's Word? What significance might it hold for us today?

In what tangible ways can you help clergy who serve in impoverished areas or cities? Pray: Lord God, bless those who impart your Word to us, and enlighten those of us who receive it.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 7:70-72

DAY 28: LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD

When people hunger for God's Word, they will seek after it until it is revealed to them.

Here, the people ask Ezra, the priest and teacher, to read God's Word to them.

Everyone, including those children who were old enough to understand, stood for at least half a day to hear the Word of God being read. In our communities, many worship services are carefully timed to include a few minutes of devotion, homily, and singing.

Are we like the people of Nehemiah's day, listening carefully to God's Word? How would our lives be transformed if we were to spend more time listening to God speak to us through his Word?

The Scriptures tell us that we are blessed if we hunger and thirst for God's Word (Matthew 5.6). We are fortunate that modern technology has given us myriad ways to access God's Word—from MP3 players to the Internet to iPhones. All this, so God's people can enter into God's presence.

Could we stand before God for such a long period of time and yet be attentive to his Word? What distractions do you think we may fall victim to and how could we minimize their effect?

Have you ever experienced hunger for God's Word? What action did you take? How will you respond when you discover that those in your own neighborhood are hungry for God's truth? Pray: Lord God, we listen for your voice in your Word. Help us to feed hungry people with daily bread, and to feed hungry hearts with your Word—the bread of life.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 8:1-4

DAY 29: SEEKING TO KNOW GOD'S WORD

God had given the people success in restoring the wall of the city. This physical restoration was a great and mighty feat—one that would be talked about for years to come. Now the people were ready and willing for spiritual restoration. They were eager to know God in a more intimate way, eager to hear how he cared for and nurtured their ancestors. When Ezra praised God, the people were moved to respond. And, as Ezra opened the book of the Law, they stood up, and in reverence, bowed low to worship God.

Sometimes people can read or hear the Word of God but not truly understand it (cf. Acts 8.29-31). In the case of the wall builders, it was necessary for the Levites to go among the people to explain God's Word because the scrolls were recorded in Hebrew and the people spoke Aramaic. Today, sometimes it is necessary for believers to go among those who are hungry for God's Word and introduce them to God's teachings so they can gain a knowledge and understanding of who God is.

Translation sources say one-third of all languages today still don't have a Scripture translation, and only 6 percent have the entire Bible. Why do you think it is important for people to be able to read the Scriptures in their own language?

Would you consider praying that God would use you to go among the unbelievers in your city to explain God's Word to them? Pray: Lord Jesus, here am I, send me. Let me be one who would open your Word to those who have never heard it. Let me uncover the sweet blessings of God so they will be filled.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 8:5-8

DAY 30: FINDING JOY AND STRENGTH IN GOD'S WORD

When the light of God's Word shines upon our hearts, we cannot help but weep at our own unworthiness when confronted with God's grace and mercy. Sometimes our tears are tears of understanding...knowing that God has chosen to love us...and at other times, they are tears of disbelief...wondering why God loves us so much. It boggles our minds ...it seems too good to be true. But it is true. God loves us immensely. And, it is not because of anything we have done. We are only required to reach out and accept God's unconditional love. It is here that we experience joy. An inexplicable bubbling of well-being...of wholeness...of intimacy with God who sits high on his throne in heaven, but who is still Abba...our Father...who stoops down to hold our hand.

God's Word had now become a lamp to the feet of the people and a light for their path. His grace had bypassed their shortcomings, and his mercy had blotted out their sins. It was a time when he had washed their eyes with tears so they could "see" and appreciate his Word even more. It was this Word that would bring them strength when difficulty came into their lives; it was this Word that brought them joy; it was this Word that would make them know that nothing would be able to separate them from the love of God.

Why do you think Nehemiah tells the people not to be sad? Why was it important for them to share their food with others? What precept is at the heart of the Word of God?

Think of ways to share your resources with others. Purchase or prepare a meal for someone who is unemployed, ill, or is having a hard time making ends meet. Think of other ways to show love. Pray: Lord, I rejoice at each opportunity to share your Word. Help me to be a beacon of light to those who still remain in darkness, unaware of the power of your Word.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 8:9-10, Nehemiah 8:12

DAY 31: SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER

The Scriptures say that the Word of God is “useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live” (2 Timothy 3.16). As the people of Israel heard the Word of God, it convicted them; in response, they fasted and confessed not only their sins, but also the sins of their ancestors. How this reminds us of their leader, Nehemiah, who when he first heard the news of Jerusalem’s destruction, offered prayers of confession for himself and his ancestors!

When our hearts are being cleansed by God’s Word, time does not seem to matter. Hours pass, but an audience with God, through prayer, transcends the form and function we are often exposed to during our regular worship experience. Such a fellowship allows us to bare our souls before God; to lay prostrate before him until repentance gives way to a renewed relationship and the pursuit of holiness.

Confession often precedes repentance. Describe what a national day of repentance would look like. How does the text say the people expressed themselves after confession? Do you follow this pattern?

Identify an area of your life that needs to be addressed spiritually. Plan a time of fasting and confession. End your time with a period of worship. Pray: Search me, O Lord, and know my heart. Cleanse me from any hidden sins and set me free.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 9:1-3

DAY 32: CELEBRATE GOD!

Overwhelmed by the awesome and inexplicable power of God's love, the people were encouraged by the priests to praise God. It is highly possible that their hymns of praise, like Charles Wesley, writing on the first anniversary of his conversion, echoed this thought: "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise; the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!"

What freedom believers experience when their sins are forgiven and their hearts are clear! Total praise demonstrates God's presence in the life of the believer who then seeks ways to have the experience replicated in others. The psalmist understood this well as he extols God's goodness and proclaims, "All of you faithful people, praise our glorious Lord! Celebrate and worship. Praise God with songs on your lips" (Psalm 149.5, 6).

What are some of the reasons the people's hearts are turned toward God?

In what ways are you celebrating the awesome power of God's Word? How would you express your feelings in words? Consider participating in the devotion this week in your place of worship or in a small group. Pray: With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior. God has done great things for me. I will praise his holy name.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 9:5

DAY 33: GLORY BE TO THE LORD, OUR GOD!

Effervescent. Indescribable. Unadulterated. That's praise! The people begin at the beginning— deifying God—acknowledging him as the one true God, the Creator of all God's handiwork. They proclaim God as the source of all life. Wherever they look, God is there. His imprint is on everything. From the one-celled amoeba to the complex human body, God created it all. He arranged the stars in groups, and made laws that govern the heavens and the earth. God, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, is worthy of all praise.

Standing in awe in the presence of God, it's hard to contain praise. Like an overflowing dam, it breaks open, anointing those who come within range of its healing flow. In essence, the people were echoing David, the psalmist, when he said: "I will always praise the LORD. With all my heart I will praise the LORD...Honor the LORD with me! Celebrate his great name" (Psalm 34.1-3).

Why is praise a hallmark of worship? Why does the Bible put so much emphasis on it?

What is your definition of praise? Think of ways to incorporate praise in your daily life.

Pray: Lord, let others see you through my worship. Let my praise overflow its banks.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 9:6-7

DAY 34: A HISTORY LESSON—GOD IS EVER FAITHFUL

Ezra recounts Israel's history and her struggle to remain obedient to God. He tells how through grace and mercy, God constantly provides for the people of Israel, how God forgives them, and how he is longsuffering. God would sometimes turn them over to their enemies in response to their disobedience and rebellion. Yet, despite their sinfulness, God has been faithful in rescuing them when they call out to him.

Turning the pages of history is not always a pleasant task. In the case of the children of Israel, they have a checkered past, littered with seeds of disobedience and abject misery. Other pages show them living in the light of God's grace and forgiveness. But these pages ultimately revert to the ones showing rebellion. As the people listened, how they must have cringed to realize that their ancestors were largely responsible for the difficult situations they often found themselves in. Yet, the one constant in this history lesson was the central figure—God. He was ever faithful, waiting for his people—wayward men and women—to turn back to him.

Why do you think God remained faithful to the people even after they had sinned? Have you experienced God's faithfulness in that way?

In what ways can you demonstrate faithfulness and commitment as a member of your community? Pray: God, help me to let my word be my bond. Let me be faithful to uphold that which I have promised.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 9:9, Nehemiah 9:15, Nehemiah 9:26-27

DAY 35: MAKING A COVENANT WITH GOD

A covenant is a binding agreement which should not be entered into lightly. All the people, from the priests to the youngest child, declared before God that they would keep God's commandments: they would obey his laws as recorded in the book of Moses; they would separate themselves from the unbelievers; they would give a tithe of grain harvest, and would contribute to the upkeep of the temple. The people understood that this was a sacred undertaking and vowed a curse on themselves if they reneged on their promise.

It is difficult to accuse someone of wrongdoing if they are ignorant of the rules. Here, the people, acting as one body, make a sworn deposition that they "enter into an agreement with a complete understanding of what [they] are doing." They state they are not ignorant, nor are they coerced into making this decision. They made this covenant with God with a clear conscience and a free will. Yet, although it was made with solemnity of heart, we learn in chapter 13 that as time passed, the people broke their covenant with God.

What oaths or covenants have you made with God? How easy has it been to keep your word? What distractions get in your way? Why is it not advisable to hastily make a vow before God?

Gather a group of believers and pledge your efforts to a mission or goal such as mentoring adolescent girls and boys or feeding the homeless. Pray: Lord, I seek to do your will, and in doing so, let me draw others to you. Help me to keep the vows that I have made.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 10:28-29, Nehemiah 10:37, Nehemiah 10:39

DAY 36: SETTLING IN

It's never easy being a pioneer. But for progress to ensue, someone has to do it. Nehemiah and the people had restored the city wall. Now, what was needed was people who would live in that city and defend it, if necessary. Jerusalem, despite its new fortification, was still a dangerous place to live, one that was still prone to attack from neighboring factions. Nehemiah had decided the nation's leaders and their families would live there, and the remaining spaces were to be given to people who volunteered or those who drew lots. The people cheered those who stepped up to the plate to voluntarily reside there, knowing that they were taking on a task that requires much courage.

Serving God takes much courage. Yet, we do so because as Christians we know the cause is just and that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek to serve him.

People generally fall in two groups: the ones who volunteer to attempt the difficult tasks for God and the ones who applaud those who do. To which group do you belong?

Most people believe actions speak louder than words. Would you be willing to move to the poorest part of town, if it would be a witness to others that God provides for and protects his people wherever they are? Pray: Lord, let me be willing to demonstrate my faith by moving out of my comfort zone and into the fray of life that others may see your hand of provision.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 11:1-3

DAY 37: DEDICATING THE CITY TO GOD

When we dedicate something to God, we give it all to him. We hold nothing back. It is given in full and joyful surrender. It is all for God's pleasure, all for his use, all for his glory. In the case of the city wall, the Levites not only purified the gates and the wall itself, but they also purified themselves and the people. Similarly, when we dedicate our lives to God, we need to step away from anything and everything that would prevent us from being holy.

God's desire is for us to be like him...holy! (1 Peter 1.14-16). If we want to restore our city, we must first ask God to help us walk in holiness. Then, we will become "living stones being used to build a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2.5).

What does it say about the nature of the celebration when we're told in v.27, "Levites from everywhere in Judah were invited to join in the celebration with songs of praise...."?

How would you plan a dedication of your city to God? What elements would be included? What would such a celebration look like? Pray: God, we want to uplift your name among the people. Help us to dedicate ourselves and our city for your glory. Give us the encouragement we need, and remind us that you are always with us.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 12:27-30

DAY 38: A MARCH OF THANKSGIVING—A CONCERT OF PRAISE

We usher in God's presence when we worship God in abandon, forgetting about ourselves and lifting our eyes, hands and voices to our Creator. In a large, carefully orchestrated thanksgiving march, Nehemiah, the priests and the people pay homage to God with songs, music and shouts of praise. The Scriptures say, "Shout praises to the LORD, everyone on this earth. Be joyful and sing as you come in to worship the LORD!" (Psalm 100.1, 2) The people of Jerusalem offered God a concert of praise!

Were these the wall builders, the brick layers, the plasterers, the sanders, the tilers...? Yes, they were. Whoever we are, God can use us. Is there anything we can offer God? Let's give him praise!

Why do you think it was fitting that the people went to the top of the city wall and stood in a circle? Why was it important for them to praise God in community rather than each person offering praise in their individual homes?

Work with local churches and para-churches to pray about and plan a campaign that would revitalize neighboring communities. Pray: Lord, you are the one who unites us in ways we cannot comprehend. Make us a community of believers whose aim is to show others the way to you, so together, we can give you praise.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 12:31, Nehemiah 12:38-40

DAY 39: THE JOY OF RESTORATION

God's restoration of the ruined walls of the city and God's restoration of the hearts of his people brought an indescribable joy. The people showed a renewed interest in the Word of God and his commands, and the desire to follow God's Word. Their celebratory worship was truly a fellowship between God and man. In this patriarchal society, this overflow of joy was not limited to the men, but the women and children were allowed to join in. It was indeed a family affair. It began with the prayer of one man, Nehemiah, and ended with the prayers of hundreds of families.

When we have been restored to right standing with God and seek fellowship with him, everything changes and joy enters our lives. Such expression of wholeness can permeate entire communities.

Attempting great things for God often starts with a small step of faith and the knowledge that God is with you always. The text says God made the people happy. Can you recall instances in which God made people around you happy? What was their response to God?

Think of the people in your community who desperately need restoration. How can you contribute to the restoration of their lives? Pray: Lord, I rejoice in my salvation. Give me the desire to see others experience the joy you have given me.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 12:43

DAY 40: UPHOLDING GOD'S LAWS

Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem roughly 12 years after the restoration of the wall. He finds that the citizens have broken their vows and have fallen back into sinful practices that would surely displease God. In this passage, the Sabbath is being desecrated as merchants, including fishmongers, from other towns peddled their wares in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Even when told this is wrong, some merchants arrived on the Sabbath with their goods, and stayed outside the city gates all night, waiting for the Sabbath to be over to begin selling.

In addition, the high priest has allowed Tobiah, one of their enemies, to live in a portion of the temple where the tithes were to be stored; the people were no longer faithful in bringing their tithes, so the Levites who should have been serving full-time in the temple had to find regular jobs. Furthermore, the people were intermarrying and the Hebrew language and culture was being lost because the children could no longer speak their native language. Nehemiah responded harshly and quickly to these infractions. He threw out Tobiah and all his furniture from the temple and ordered it to be cleansed, he reinstated the tithes, he put an end to intermarriage, and he threatened the merchants with arrest and put guards along the city gates to guarantee enforcement that the Sabbath would indeed be kept holy.

Examine each of the four infractions Nehemiah corrected on his return. Can you see how disobeying God's laws, even in the simplest ways, will eventually lead to committing a full-blown offense?

Get involved by checking out Congressional Bills which, if passed, would have a negative impact on what the church believes. Write letters to your elected officials and voice your dissent. Get others to join you. Pray: Lord, let us not be lukewarm in our worship and obedience to you. Set our hearts on fire that we might follow your precepts with zeal.

Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah 13:19-22