

“Holy Discontent, part 1” // Nehemiah 1:1–11 // Nehemiah # 1¹ // Su

Announcement

Summit Church, what you just saw is what happens when the gospel shapes a community ... people from all walks of life coming together. Pastor Bryan Loritts has poured so much of his heart into helping us live that out.

Let me encourage you to check out his devotional, *Grace to Overcome*. It ties stories from Black history to Jesus and reminds us that every story, including yours, is part of God’s bigger plan.

Introduction

Open your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 1. You’ve probably never heard the name “Samuel Langley,” but in 1901 Langley was determined to be the first man in flight.² And all the odds were in his favor—he was a brilliant, credentialed scientist; he’d written a bestselling book called *Experiments in Aerodynamics*; he had generous government funding as well as a bunch of investors who had promised to make him rich if he figured it out. He lived in the nation’s capital and was equipped with an elite production team. For more than a decade, Langley spun out prototype after prototype, but he just couldn’t keep anything in the air and endured a lot of mockery, so when the funding ran out, on December 8, 1903, he declared it to be impossible, gave up, and moved on to other things.

Meanwhile, a few hundred miles to the west, two bike mechanics were pursuing the same dream. Unlike Langley, however, Wilbur and Orville Wright had no formal training and no funding. They worked out of the back of their bike shop on their own dime. They too experienced failure after failure, but unlike Langley, they didn’t give up, because they had an unshakeable conviction that flight was possible. In 1901 Wilbur Wright told someone that it may take man another 1,000 years to figure out how to do it and maybe they themselves would never achieve it, but it could be done and they would never give up. And then, on December 17, 1903, on top of a sand dune in Kitty Hawk, NC, Orville Wright lifted off from the earth, 9 days after Langley, on behalf of the U.S. government, had declared it impossible.

¹ Sources consulted: Eric Mason, *Nehemiah for You*, (London, UK: The Good Book Company, 2022); Andy Stanley, *Visioneering*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1999); Kathy Keller, “[Taking Action in Light of God’s Word](#)”, June 27, 2014, The Gospel Coalition’s National Women’s Conference; Tim Mackie, “[Books of Ezra-Nehemiah Summary: A Complete Animated Overview](#)”, July 17, 2016, The Bible Project; Tim Mackie, “Ezra-Nehemiah”, June 2, 2018, Seattle Area Pastors Network Conference; Trevin Wax, “[An Active Christian Live...Where God Is Unnecessary](#)”, February 6, 2023, Reconstructing Faith Podcast, Season 3, Episode 4. And others as noted throughout.

² The book *Experiments in Aerodynamics* was published in 1891. Congress gave him a \$51,000 grant in 1898 to build a single-person airplane. He gave up on Dec 8, 1903 after several failed attempts and mockery crushed his spirit. The Wrights succeeded 9 days later. See [article](#) at National Museum.

Conviction gives you a resilience that resources and training never will. The Wright brothers weren't the most qualified; they were simply the most convinced. And that's why history remembers their names, not Samuel Langley's.

The book of Nehemiah begins in much the same way. The book of Nehemiah doesn't start with a man with power, position, or a plan; it's the story of a man with a burden—a vision of what could be coupled with a conviction about what should be—which Andy Stanley says is the essence of vision: what COULD be coupled with what SHOULD be. Empowered by this vision, Nehemiah overcame incredible odds and literally changed history.

Let's first discuss Nehemiah's time period and what was going on when he was alive. Nehemiah's story takes place at the end of the exile period, when Israel had been taken captive by Babylon and then Persia because of their persistent sin.

Point of fact: Nehemiah is the last historical book in your OT. It's not the last book in your **OT list**, but it's the last chronological book; the last book that recounts historical events. Some of the minor prophets, like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, were written during this same time period, but the events of Nehemiah mark the close of the Old Testament era. After Nehemiah, we enter a 400-year period of silence; a silence that wouldn't be broken until the coming of Jesus.

Second point of fact: Nehemiah is actually **part 2 of a 2-part book** called **Ezra-Nehemiah**. In our modern Bibles, Ezra and Nehemiah are separate books, but up until the early medieval period, they were considered one book. When Jerome assembled the first Latin Bible in 405 A.D., he split this book into two. He didn't change any of the contents; he just classified it as 2 separate books.³ It's important to know that they were originally one, however, because **Ezra-Nehemiah contains the stories of 3 reformers** who led in the restoration of Israel after the exile, and they build on each other. *The first reformer was named Zerubbabel...*

((**Ezra-Nehemiah**
(Zerubbabel→Ezra→Nehemiah)))

...and Zerubbabel led a movement to rebuild the Temple. (His story takes up the 1st 6 chapters of Ezra--you parents looking for baby names, let me suggest 'Zerubbabal', it's fun to say, ZERUBBABAL). 60 years after Zub, **Ezra** led in the restoration and renewal of the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Nehemiah came last, and he led in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

OK, this is important: Biblically, this book serves 2 primary purposes:

- **Negatively**, it demonstrates the abject failure of social and political reforms to fix Israel's problems. Spoiler alert: this book does not end well. Nehemiah will be, in some ways, **Taylor Swift's original Anti-Hero**. By the end of the book, he's not an inspiring visionary but an exhausted, frustrated, bitter has-been trying to maintain control through threats, shouting, and pulling out his opponents' hair. Seriously, his last prayer--the last recorded prayer in the Old Testament--is "Remember **ME**, O my God, for good," which is basically him saying, "Look, God, these

³ This happened with a few books. Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were all considered one book, but were split up (around the time of the Septuagint) because they were simply too long to fit on one Greek scroll.

people are terrible; but remember me, at least I tried!” If I were making Nehemiah into a movie, I’d have Taylor Swift’s song play as the final credits roll: “I have this thing where I get older but just never wiser... It’s me, hi, I’m the problem, it’s me. At tea time everybody agrees... It’s exhausting always rooting for the anti-hero.” The problem in Israel is not weak walls or bad leaders--the problem is their hearts, and no human leader can fix *that*, because Israel’s leaders, like Nehemiah, have the same fallen hearts the people do. That’s the negative point of the book.

- **Positively**, the book of Nehemiah shows us how God uses ordinary people to do amazing things by putting his vision into them and calling them to follow him. God’s work in the world rarely starts with people with privilege and position, the Samuel Langleys of the world--it starts with people with a divinely-inspired burden, a **holy discontent that drives them away from comfort toward some problem in the world they feel broken about**. As Kathy Keller (Tim Keller’s wife) says: *Nehemiah is a man whose only qualification is that he’s heard from God*. Through Nehemiah’s story you’ll learn how to discern and pursue the things God is putting on your heart, and how to follow them.

I’ve been eager to study through this book for years, and the last time I preached through this book here at Summit was 2004. How many of you were *NOT* around for that series in 2004? Hmm... that looks like everyone. Maybe a better question: How many of you were 5 years old or less in 2004, raise your hands? OK, so it’s time. **You ready to dive in?**

Here we go. Chapter 1: 1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah: “Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.’

4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

Now, I mentioned before turning Nehemiah into a movie. If I were making the book of Nehemiah into a movie, I’d open with a dark, brooding shot **(by the way--one of our tech geniuses, Rob Laughter, heard me go through this and said, “hey, send me your description” and he plugged it into an AI program and this is what it came up with)** **MOVIE**→ I’d start with a dark, brooding shot, somber music playing in the background, as the camera panned the destroyed walls of Jerusalem. Everywhere you look you see crumbling heaps of stones; the gates of Jerusalem are smoldering piles of firewood. Famous monuments are overturned--as the camera pans through the once-great city, you’d see small clusters of Jewish inhabitants, grieving and weeping over the latest attack. A mother clutches the body of her murdered son. Then we’d zoom in on the charred, fractured remnant of a sign that said, “The House of David,” with a quote on the sign from 2 Samuel 7:16, a promise of God, “I will build you an eternal house and it will never perish.”

Then, I’d do a quick cut to a prosperous, polished, bright city. On the bottom corner of the screen it would say, “Susa, somewhere in Persia,” and “Kislev, 445 BC” (“Kislev” being the month of the year this all takes place in, roughly corresponding to our November.) A man named Hanani rides into the city and dismounts from his horse. Hanani walks briskly into the palace library where he finds his friend Nehemiah, to whom he reports the news about this latest disaster in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah, is sitting at a desk, reading from an ancient scroll. Nehemiah, of course, is played by **Nicolas Cage**. (*Why are you laughing? I think that's actually perfect casting. You're gonna see Nehemiah, when he's tested, respond with extreme (almost cartoonish levels) of emotion! Just like Saint Nic. You'll see. I'll be vindicated!*). Well, as Hanani enters the room, Nic Cage/Nehemiah looks up from the scroll he's reading with that patented, steely look in his eye, and then the camera zooms in on what he's been reading: Isaiah 44:28, which promises that Jerusalem will one day be rebuilt, that God's salvation will again radiate from it to the ends of the earth. Then the camera pans back up to Nehemiah's face, who is looking off in the distance with a tear in his eye. At least, that's how I'd do it. That's my debut as a movie producer. Big thanks to Rob Laughter for that, and Kathy Keller for giving me the idea to think of this as a movie.

Vs 4 says that when Nehemiah heard Hanani's words, he was deeply troubled and went into a season of prayer and fasting that lasted **"for days."** We find out in chapter 2 that this prayer time lasted for nearly 16 weeks⁴--which means that the prayer recorded in vv 5--11 is just a summary of his prayer themes, not something he prayed once, from the hip when he first heard about the disaster. Let me read it, because we're going to pull from it the 5 principles in discovering God's call on your life.

5 And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, **the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love** with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 **let your ear be attentive and your eyes open**, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, **confessing the sins of the people of Israel**, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

8 (BUT) **Remember the word** that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, **though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven**, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' 10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and **give success to your servant today**, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." ('This man' being King Artaxerxes, whom Nehemiah serves). And then Nehemiah closes chapter 1 with an important biographical note: (11) Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Now, like I said, we see in his prayer the first 5 elements of discerning the call of God on your life. But before I give you those, note that **there are 3 primary elements to this prayer**: **Adoration of God**; **Acknowledgement of Sin**; and, **an Appeal based on Promise**. (Interestingly, btw, this is the exact same outline as the Lord's prayer--the model prayer--which means this is a good pattern for all your prayers): **Adoration of God**; **Acknowledgement of Sin**; **An Appeal based on God's Promises**. Let's break those down really quickly:

⁴ Based on the month mentioned in 2:1.

(A) Adoration of God (vv 5–6): This is where prayer always begins--A vision of who God is. You'll never pray rightly until you see God rightly. And what does Nehemiah declare specifically about God? **Vs 5**, you are a God who **keeps** his **covenant**, a God who is filled with **steadfast**, unchanging, never-giving up **love**; a God who is **attentive** and aware of what's going on with his people.

- **A.W. Tozer** famously said that what you think when you think about God is the most important thing about you, because it determines everything else in your life--the peace you feel in life, the joy; whether you obey him; how you SEE God determines WHAT you ask for from him, and, just as importantly, how you respond when he doesn't do things exactly as you think he should.
- **So, let me ask you to consider: How do you see God when you are praying to him?** When you close your eyes in prayer, what expression do you imagine on his face? Is it the face of an angry judge? A disappointed father? A God too busy with other things to be bothered by your unimportant life? Jesus gave us a very different picture of the Father. He's a God so attentive to us, he said, that he knows when a single hair falls from our heads; a Father so in love with us that even after we sinned he kept looking our direction with arms open, filled with mercy and love and forgiveness; a God who never stops looking at us that way even when we wander, ready to receive us when we turn to him.
- It was true that Israel had sinned and been driven into exile, but Nehemiah saw a God who was full of compassion and never-changing love; a God full of forgiveness and tenderness, a God who came running to his people with mercy in his eyes.

What you think when you think about God is the most important thing about you because it determines everything else about you, including what you ask for in prayer.

So first, we have **adoration** of God. Second, we have **(B) an Acknowledgement of Sin (vv 6–7)**

- In vs 6, Nehemiah confesses both his sins and the sins of his people and pleads God's mercy.
- I think the important thing to note here is that Nehemiah doesn't come with a list of requirements, demanding that God owes him something.
- I point that out because one of the hardest things for me in prayer has been to learn to give up demands on what I think God owes me. Often my prayers sound like (not the pretty ones I pray up here, but the secret ones, in my heart, my true prayer), *"God, you know, I'm the righteous one here. I did everything right--and now you owe me; it would be wrong of you not to give this to me."* That's not where Nehemiah starts--because it's not true.
 - You see, the truth is, like Nehemiah, we are NOT blameless. Our lives have been filled with sin and selfishness and idolatry and inconsistency and unbelief. Appealing to our own righteousness in prayer is like trying to cash a huge check from an account with insufficient funds.
 - When my kids turned 16, I gave each of them a little credit card tied to my account that they could use for emergency situations. Emphasis on **emergency**--though, I've learned we have different definitions of what constitutes an emergency. Well, we discovered this week that one of my daughters (and I won't mention which one, but it wasn't Kharis or Allie) one of them had accidentally tied her Starbucks app to my credit card (I think I'd put it in there when we set her account up), and somehow it got changed to auto-reload. So she's going to Starbucks 2–3x a week and she's amazed that her account never seems to run dry. So, I'm reviewing my credit card statement and seeing all these Starbucks charges and thinking, "I've really got to talk to Veronica about her caffeine habit." Eventually we figured out the problem and I had to open my daughter's Starbucks app and show her how to remove my card and select her debit card as the source for the reload, which means her Starbucks runs have gotten a lot less frequent, because her account usually hovers around 0.

- Now, I'm trying to be a responsible parent there, but God actually invites you to do the opposite. Your "worthiness" account hovers around 0, but Jesus' grace is an infinite supply, and God says, "Switch the cards on your payment plan to mine. Appeal to my grace, not your goodness." Because that's a neverending supply. So, I say, "God, I don't have any right to demand anything of you. But you're a good Father, and your grace toward me is of infinite supply, so I'm asking because of that." You'll find that's an account where there's always sufficient funds. The Old Testament commentator Derek Kidner says, "After adoring God's infinite highness and confessing our smallness, we realize God owes us nothing and therefore we come empty-handed." (But our God is a God, you see, who loves to fill empty hands.)

Finally, we have **An Appeal based on God's Promises (v 8–9):**

- In **vs 8** Nehemiah quotes directly from Deut 9:29: God, you said through Moses, *"...though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there."* Then, **Vs 8**, **"(God,) Remember your word..."**
- The prayers that start in heaven are heard by heaven. I can't emphasize this enough: *Don't just read your way through your Bible, pray your way through it.* They say that the Bible contains about 3,000 promises; don't leave one promise unclaimed. **When you're praying through 'Daily Revival' on the Summit App**, do what I do: Note whatever promises you see in the Scripture and pray that over yourself, your family, your church. Listen, EVERY DAY, there is something in my Bible reading I will turn into a prayer for my family. God, you said... REMEMBER YOUR WORD. In fact, I wear around my wrist this little bracelet I had made, and on it is a verse reference, **Jeremiah 32:40**, which is a promise: "And I will make with your children an everlasting covenant, and I will NEVER stop doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me." And on dark days, when I'm worried, or I'm discouraged, I say, "God, YOU SAID... **REMEMBER** your Word!"

This is the shape of Nehemiah's prayer--**Adoration; Acknowledgement** of Sin; an **Appeal** based on God's promises. It's the shape of the Lord's prayer, and should be the shape of all of yours.

Now, like I said, we see in this prayer **5 Principles of Discovering God's Call on Your Life**

1. Find Your Personal Calling in God's Bigger Purposes (1:8–11)

Nehemiah discerns God's will for him through God's stated purposes in the Bible. Nehemiah starts by rehearsing God's promises and what God had said he wanted to do.

You see, the story of Nehemiah is not about him self-actualizing or achieving his personal dreams, even though I've heard a lot of people teach this book that way. Frankly, when it comes to the will of God, many of us often **function like narcissists**--it's all about **me and my life** and reaching my potential and actualizing my gifts.

- We're all into **Enneagrams**, and strengths-finders and whatever. I'm special; I'm unique; I'm a snowflake, a skittle."
- Now, can those tools be useful? I think so. I know I'm an **Enneagram 8, ENTJ, type D**. I know I thrive on words of affirmation, that the sorting hat would put me in Gryffindor, and that if I were a character on the *Friends* show I'd be Ross. I've taken all the tests.

- The point is that *before* any of those things are relevant, we have to understand what God is doing in the world and seek to conform our lives to that. The OT scholar Christopher J.H. Wright says, “We often ask, ‘Where does God fit into the story of my life?’ when the real question is, ‘Where does my little life fit into the great story of God’s mission?’”

God has a global mission of having his glory cover the earth like the waters cover the sea bed and bringing his gospel to every nation on earth, and your life has a part in that. Somewhere, somehow, your gifts, your callings, are part of God’s global mission to make his name famous and extend his salvation to the ends of the earth--and you’ll never really understand your gifts and your role until you understand God’s greater purposes.

Years ago I did an illustration on this. Toward the end of a message I called five unsuspecting people onstage. I told them they were going to act out the various jobs of firemen on a fire truck. I made one the driver, another the supervisor, two to operate the hose, and one to drive the back of the truck (the tiller). Then after giving each one their assignment and having them start to act it out, I went back and asked each what their primary role was on the truck? Each one dutifully repeated back the job I had assigned them. I then told each of them they were wrong. Their *primary* role, I told them? To put out fires. Now, it wasn’t a fair question. I had set them up. Which is why I have a hard time getting volunteers for sermon illustrations, because they know I am setting them up. But it illustrated an important point about our personal calling. Whatever your more narrow assignment, you have to know how it fits into God’s great purpose, to see his name glorified and his salvation extend to every corner of the earth.

Many of us don’t know how to discern the call of God because we’ve never really been gripped by God’s overriding purpose in the Bible. You’ve got to study the Bible. And not just in little soundbits. To take in all of it. That’s why I’m committed to teaching it to you each week; it’s why you need to devote yourself to knowing it and not just some pithy one liners or hot takes from TikTok.

2. Join God Where He is Already at Work!

Unbeknownst to Nehemiah, plans for this operation had gone into effect years before Nehemiah was even born. Nearly 100 years before Nehemiah, when Zerubbabel had started rebuilding the temple, some Persian governors in the region objected, and official memos started flying back and forth between Persia and Jerusalem at the speed of camel. And Persian King Cyrus made it clear in no uncertain terms that he wanted this to happen and established it as a firm, irrevocable decree. The point is that all the plans had been established, long before Nehemiah got there, and Nehemiah stepped into something God was already doing.

BTW, it’s interesting--the *reason* Cyrus authorized this is that he was paranoid about losing his power, and he wanted to get on the good sides of all the gods out there, so he authorized the rebuilding of all these temples so that whichever God was the true one would be favorable toward him. So, his motives were mixed at best, but God uses all kinds of things.

The important thing for you and me here is that Nehemiah not only discerned God’s will from his Word, he discerned it through God’s activity in history. **The same will be true for you.** It’s not going to happen for you, of course, the same way it happened for Nehemiah, but when God calls you

to something, you'll see evidence of his activity around you. That can take the shape of a recurring burden in your heart--that's what happens with Nehemiah, I'll show you that in the next chapter--but there's some burden that grips your heart and won't let you go. It might occur through divinely open doors; it might be through God bringing other people in your life who share the same Spirit-prompted vision he's put into your heart.

Let me give you an example from our church--I consider this our 'Nehemiah moment'. **Years ago God gripped my heart with the conviction that we were supposed to plant 1,000 churches all over the world in our generation.** It was a conviction that gripped me that I couldn't let go, and it kept resurfacing in my own prayer life.

But here's where it really went into overdrive. In 2012, our church was preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary and so I went back and did a little research into the founding of our church which occurred in 1962. And I found out the original founder of our church, Sam James, was still alive-- he was 86 years old--and he was living in Richmond, VA. So I called him up and asked him to tell me the story.

He told me that in 1961, he'd applied to the International Mission Board to serve as a missionary to Vietnam, but they'd discovered his newborn son had a hole in his heart that required serious medical attention before they would send him. So, they moved to Durham to put their son in Duke Hospital. It was going to be at least a year, and Sam and his wife were pretty discouraged at the delay. When he got here, he started to attend Grace Baptist Church in downtown Durham, and some laymen approached him about starting a new church on the north side of Durham. Sam James worked with the core group for 8 months, and they set a launch date for March of 1962. Well, just a few weeks before the official launch, Sam's son got medical release and they were cleared to go to Vietnam.

Sam was scheduled to leave America on the day the church was supposed to launch. So he preached that morning--the only sermon he'd ever preach at this church--the Homestead Heights Baptist Church--and then he and his wife and his son got on a plane to go to Vietnam where they would spend the next 40 years. The text that the Spirit led him to that morning was Isaiah 54:2, which was William Carey's famous "missionary text" in which God commands his people to expand their vision to include the ends of the earth. He told this small, new group of believers that he believed God was calling them to be a place that reached the nations. And then he got on a plane and left for the next 40 years.

I became pastor of this church in 2002--it was 3-400 people big at the time, and we changed the name to The Summit Church. Sam confided to me that he kept tabs on the church while in Vietnam, and had gotten pretty discouraged about it, because like many churches, it turned inward and focused a lot on its own needs and didn't think that much about the nations. But then he told me, with tears in his eyes, "Now, seeing this church with a vision of planting 1,000 churches in 40 years, having sent out 700 people overseas to plant churches, I see that God has fulfilled what he told me 50 years ago." But what I realized in this moment was that this vision of OURS was something that God had set into motion long before us--we were stepping into something God had started years before us. And it's given me incredible confidence in what we're doing. This is not our vision, Summit, or my vision--it is God's vision and we're joining him in it. We're not making waves for God in ministry; we are riding a wave that he created.

By the way, you younger people, these are the stories I want you to know. These are the deeds of our God; this is the God calling you to serve him. He's inviting you to step into what he's already doing!

Listen: one of the most important aspects of discerning the call of God is distinguishing between good ideas and God ideas. You don't want to give your life to pursuing a good idea; you want a God-idea. And the way you do that is by joining in something God is already doing.

3. Dream Big (1:9)

I love the audacity of Nehemiah's prayer in vs 9, "...though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, (you've said) from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there."

"**Uttermost**" means, "God, I don't even know where to find these people! They're literally scattered all over creation, and I don't even know how to get to them... and you have promised to gather them into a city, a city that radiates your glory. I'm not even sure how much building a city like that costs, but I know I don't have that kind of money--but none of that is my problem. It's yours. What you originate, you orchestrate."

Nehemiah asks for the world! In fact, if you'll let me cheat up to chapter 2 real quick, when God eventually opens the door for Nehemiah to talk with Artaxerxes [2:4] Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. (IOW, I said a quick little prayer) [5] And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king... and then Nehemiah asks for permission to return personally, to be allowed to rebuild the city he asks for letters of approval with the royal seal and carte blanche to access timber in the royal forest. I mean, it's audacious. Not the kind of thing a slave asks of a king. But the king says, "Yes," and then gives him all that he asks.⁵

Hear me: Many dreams fail not because they are too big, but because they are too small. Listen, I want to encourage you, Summit family--our missionaries and church planters around the world--*don't settle*. Don't give up asking for the ends of the earth. Parents, don't stop asking for miracles in the lives of your kids. Don't stop asking for miracles in unreached people groups. Miracles on your college campuses. Miracles and open doors among the homeless, orphan, prisoner, unwed mother, and high school dropout here. Don't settle. History is changed by people who perceive God's great love for the world and ask him for great things because of it. I've told you that one of my fears is that **Matthew 13:58** will in some way be true of me, "**Many mighty works he did not in Nazareth because of their unbelief.**"

- **Nazareth was where he was from. He loved the people there...** but there were a lot of miracles he *didn't* do not because he didn't want to but because they just never believed him for them or asked him for them.
- Don't ever settle or give up.

Dream big, but then,

⁵ (Historians tell us that part of Artaxerxes' motivation was that he was paranoid about losing his empire, and he figured the more people he had praying to their god for him, the more likely he was to succeed. So, he encouraged the rebuilding of a lot of temples in places he'd conquered so he could get that god on his side. IOW, his motives were mixed at best, but God was in control of them. Who knows what God will use?) God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, Scripture says, and the heart of the king is like a river in his hand, and he turns it whatever way he chooses. Psalm 50:10; Prov 21:1

4. Serve Small (1:11)

The last verse of the chapter is not just an incidental detail: **"I was cupbearer to the king."** This detail is integral to the story, and it also teaches an important lesson.

You see, in one sense, "cupbearer" was not that important of a job. He was a servant; a table waiter. You had to taste the food and drink the wine before the king did, to show it wasn't poisoned, because that was one of the primary ways political leaders got assassinated back in those days. Nobody at the royal dinner cared anything about you, but for 30 seconds at the beginning of each meal all eyes were on you as you drank a swig of the wine to see if your eyes crossed and you started gagging. It was the job of a slave.

In another sense, however, to get the job of cupbearer you had to be extremely trustworthy. You were the only one allowed to handle the king's dishes.

I was in London a couple of years ago visiting our church plant over there, and I had a guy take me on a [Christian Heritage Tour of London](#). In the British Museum, which has to be the greatest museum on earth, they have one of the cups Artaxerxes drank from. And my tour guide, Ben Virgo, [look him up if you're there](#), said, "This is very likely one of the cups Nehemiah held up to his lips. Nehemiah's faithfulness with this cup was the means God used to open the door for him to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And then Ben made these two points:

- The first is that your job, or your assignment, however small it is, is significant to God. To cupbearers everywhere, God is saying, "I see you!"
- Second, he said: Be faithful with your cup, because faithfulness in the small is how you prove yourself to God, and you have no idea what God is doing through it.

Jesus said it this way in **Luke 16:10**, **"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."**

- Now, I want to be careful here. I'm not saying that every faithful person right now is given some kind of important job on earth. I'm not saying to you high school students, "Do well on your computer science quiz now and God promises one day to make you CEO of Apple." No, a lot of faithful servants of Jesus die as cupbearers. But, you see, a lot of Scriptural promises are not fully fulfilled until eternity. Jesus consistently connects our faithfulness in the small things here with the responsibility we are given there.
- I'm just saying that this time of tedium--when you're a student, or when you feel like you're stuck in a dead-end job; or when you spend most of your days changing diapers--it's more than that, it's a time of testing and training for God's kingdom. God takes all his servants through a cupbearer phase. Don't rush through it!
- Even in *The Empire Strikes Back*: When Luke didn't complete his training with Yoda before rushing off to save his friends, it didn't turn out well. It led to Luke losing his arm and Han Solo getting frozen in a block of carbonite. I know that all took place in a galaxy far, far away, but even in this galaxy, "Action without preparation usually spells disaster."

Dream big, serve small. Last one,

5. Let Brokenness Drive You from the Comfortable (1:11)

Nehemiah walked away from a lot. He had a comfortable job for a slave--he served in the palace. He was good at it. Everybody liked him. But then, he became broken over Jerusalem.

Some of the greatest works that God does on earth is when he takes people from somewhere they're comfortable, something they're competent in, and he breaks their heart for something and leads them to step out in faith to make a difference.

Our young adults pastor here, Dustin Wells--when we approached Dustin about taking on the role of reaching young adults, because there were so many in this area to reach, well, Dustin was the Blue Ridge campus pastor, which is one of our biggest campuses. It was a comfortable job, he was good at it. So Dustin told us he wasn't interested, but out of respect for us, he would at least pray about it--which is often how Christians kill things and blame God for it. This week he showed me something he'd written in his journal during that time: He said, "God, I'm broken for the young adults of our city, but why would I leave a job that I'm competent in, that I love, that provides for my family, to pursue an unknown?" And he told me that God brought him to this story of Nehemiah. God used brokenness over the state of Jerusalem to drive him from the comfortable.

I think this is happening with some of you. Listen to the Holy Spirit. I know, it will be scary. I asked Dustin this week how he felt about his decision now. He said, "Well, this next weekend we're doing our Young Adults retreat and we have more than 200 signed up to go." That ministry is really growing and flourishing. So, no regrets. Who knows what kind of life God will bring through your obedience?

Let me give you one parting bonus thought:

Keep it about Jesus!

You're going to learn a lot about Nehemiah, but like I said at the beginning, Nehemiah is in the Bible, in part, to show us that no human salvation, no reform, can bring the ultimate redemption we need.

To use Nehemiah *primarily* as a template for career change or social activism misses the point. The point is that there was a Reformer coming who would bring far greater reforms than Nehemiah could. He was greater than Nehemiah in every way.

Think about it: Nehemiah was a servant who left a palace for dangerous, hard labor. Jesus was a Son who left the Heavenly Palace to come into a world with the certainty of death.

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king--he tasted wine to make sure it wasn't poisonous. Jesus intentionally drank from a cup of poisonous wine, the wrath of God for our sin.

Jesus prayed and wept for his people, like Nehemiah did—but not as one sinner among many, like Nehemiah; he did it as a sinless substitute who would die in their place.

"Nehemiah" means literally, in Hebrew, "the Lord comforts," but Nehemiah's book doesn't end with comfort, it ends with strife, and despair. Jesus was the great Comforter, because when his story ends, our sins are paid for, the curse of death was broken, he'd sat down the right hand of the throne of God and he'd promised to wipe away every tear from our eyes.

For whatever God is calling you to, the point is not **self-actualization** or **becoming the best version of you**. That may happen, but the point is putting Jesus on display. He's the truer and greater Nehemiah, and his glory on earth is the ultimate point of all our ambitions.

Invitation:

- Ask God for a vision, a renewal of your calling (Moody)
- Is your yes on the table? (Tell story!)

End with **COMMUNION**

- Jesus, given for us
- Two-way street