

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

The Matter at Hand
Survey of Nehemiah



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In his roles as cupbearer, builder, and governor, Nehemiah exemplified the qualities of a wise, godly leader. Regardless the extent of our own realms of leadership or the skills and experiences we bring to the table, we can learn from Nehemiah's example as we examine our own character and God-given place in life. Like the bricks and mortar of a solid, ancient city wall, the bricks of excellent leadership must be placed on a foundation of God's Word and godly character with the mortar of faith and fortitude.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Historical Setting of Nehemiah (2 Chronicles 36:18–23)

In order to fully appreciate Nehemiah's leadership, we need to understand the historical situation during which God called him to his task.

All Jewish history flows down from Abraham, whom God promised to make into a great nation which would bless the world from their own land (Genesis 12:1–3). During Solomon's reign, his moral compromises became so great that God finally judged him (1 Kings 11:11–12). In 931 BC, the ten northern tribes revolted and formed their own nation, Israel. The two remaining tribes in the south bore the name of Judah. The corrupt leadership of the northern kingdom embraced pagan idolatry for the next two centuries, and in 722 BC God removed this corrupt branch of Abraham's offspring, using the Assyrians as His tool of judgment.

In the south, Judah had a number of wise, godly leaders who launched several revivals among the people, rebuilding the crumbling leadership of predecessors and returning the people to the Lord and His Law. However, the kings of Judah eventually turned away from the Lord, and from 606 to 586 BC, God used the Babylonians to discipline His people. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple and the city walls (2 Chronicles 36:17–20).

After an appointed time of seventy years, God shifted the balance of world power from the Babylonians to the Persians and Medes. He then prompted King Cyrus, and later Artaxerxes, to allow the Jews to return home and to pick up the pieces of their ravaged lives and land (2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 7:11–13). The first band of returnees, led by Zerubbabel in 536 BC,



Quotable

*Leaders,
are you building
with the twigs
of worldly
strategies or the
solid rock of
God's Word?*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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The Matter at Hand *Survey of Nehemiah*

focused on rebuilding the temple. The second band, led by Ezra in 457 BC, focused on rebuilding the spiritual lives of the people. Finally, in 444 BC, Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls needed to protect the remnant of Israel from the outside forces bent on destroying them.

2. Nehemiah the Man (Survey of Nehemiah)

Nehemiah's leadership revealed itself in three successive roles he played: cupbearer, builder, and governor. Each position adds an important element of perspective on his leadership qualities and reveals that solid, godly principles of leadership are applicable regardless of one's position.

First, Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia (Nehemiah 1:11). This high office placed Nehemiah in an unparalleled position of continual and personal access to the king. During this time of service, Nehemiah received devastating news concerning Jerusalem's broken walls (1:1–3). Instead of taking advantage of his place in the presence of the king, however, Nehemiah took his heartfelt petition for the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the King of Kings in prayer (1:4–11).

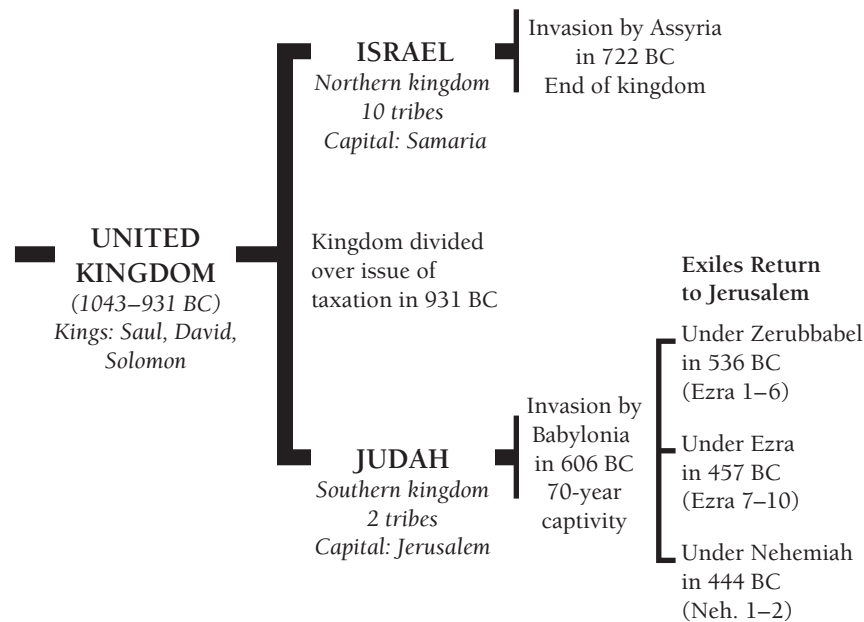
Second, Nehemiah served as a builder. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, he set to work. He inspected the broken-down wall, formed a strategy for reconstruction (2:11–15), and presented his plans to the people (2:17–18). Chapters 3 through 5 describe the work they carried out in spite of great odds, obstacles, and enemies. But eventually the people's prayers, planning, and perseverance resulted in a strong defensive wall.

Third, Nehemiah laid his hard hat aside and took up the keys to the city as its governor (5:14). As his first official task, Nehemiah commissioned spiritual men to occupy places of authority in the city (7:1–2). He also reestablished the practicing of God's laws and purified the people from harmful foreign influences (13:30).



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DOORWAY TO HISTORY

The Cupbearer

In ancient royal palaces, the cupbearer was far more than just a robed servant, butler, or slave. He was entrusted with the responsibility of tasting the king's food and drink to make sure it was not poisoned. In such an important, self-sacrificing role, the cupbearer often enjoyed great trust and confidence in the Near Eastern royal courts. One writer notes that the cupbearer "in ancient oriental courts was always a person of rank and importance. From the confidential nature of his duties and his frequent access to the royal presence, he possessed great influence."¹



LET'S LIVE IT

If your personal walls of spiritual discipline are in need of repair, take a moment now to apply some of the principles Nehemiah's life offers.

1. **Concern for Character.** *Develop a genuine concern for the condition of the walls.* The work to restore the walls of Jerusalem didn't start when the people began laying bricks. It began as a burden in one man's heart. Like Nehemiah, we must have a genuine concern for the condition of the walls in our own lives.



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2. **Foundation of Prayer.** *Express direct prayer for guidance and protection.* Before he ever began to rebuild the wall, Nehemiah started working on it from eight hundred miles away—in prayer before the Lord. For many of us, prayer is too often an afterthought. Get in the habit of acting on your burdens only after you have given them a firm foundation of prayer.
3. **Spirit of Determination.** *Face the situation honestly and with determination until the task is finished.* When Nehemiah met with the people of Jerusalem, he didn't attempt to gloss over the true condition of the walls. Likewise, without an honest appraisal of our own spiritual condition, we will always run out of determination and motivation before the gaps are filled.
4. **Attitude of Humility.** *Recognize that we cannot correct the condition by ourselves.* Our natural tendency is to retreat alone into a spiritual wilderness. But only when we are willing to live in dependence upon God and in humility toward others will we have the power to erect the spiritual fortification we need for protection and for fulfilling the roles of leadership God has given to us.

If an enemy were to attack your spiritual walls, which of these four principles would show the most weakness and neglect? Why?

ENDNOTE

1. "Cupbearer," in *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, rev. and updated ed., ed. Merrill F. Unger (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 267.



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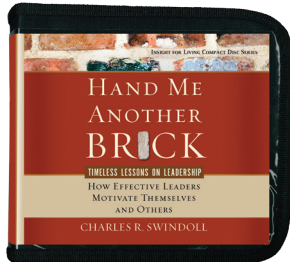
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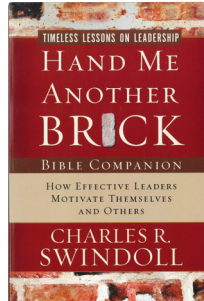
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

A Leader—From the Knees Up!

Nehemiah 1:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Few Old Testament characters surpass Nehemiah in the potency of their *leadership*. God used him to motivate and direct a relatively small group of people in building a wall around the city of Jerusalem and then to establish a godly government. Nehemiah discovered Jerusalem's desperate need and then brought it before God in prayer. It is highly significant that the *first* place we find this great leader is *on his knees*. Leadership requires prayer.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Orientation (Nehemiah 1:1, 11)

Without fanfare, Nehemiah identified himself as the book's author and later as King Artaxerxes' cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:1, 11). In this trusted position, Nehemiah acted as a protective screen between the public and the king. In addition, we are told that the action starts in the month of Chislev, or December, in the "twentieth year" of the king's reign, about 444 BC. We're also told that Nehemiah was in Susa, the capital of Persia as well as much of the civilized ancient world at that time. In this setting, Nehemiah lived out his normal, day-to-day routine. But it was all about to change.

2. Situation (Nehemiah 1:2–3)

Nehemiah may have lived in the Persian capital, but the capital of his heart was Jerusalem. One day, witnesses from Jerusalem relayed that the people in Nehemiah's homeland were in a calamitous, miserable, and depressing situation (Nehemiah 1:2–3). They suffered criticism and harassment from their enemies, lived in constant fear of attack, and—like the crumbled wall that surrounded them—their spiritual lives were in ruins.



Quotable

*Do you have
a problem
with people? It
probably won't
get resolved until
you take it to
God in prayer.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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A Leader—From the Knees Up!

Nehemiah 1:1–11

3. Reaction (Nehemiah 1:4–11)

Nehemiah's reactions were neither negative nor critical. As a great leader, Nehemiah responded to the needs of Jerusalem and its people with clear recognition, personal concern, an appeal to God, and availability.

First, *Nehemiah clearly recognized the need*. The beginnings of this theme are barely audible in the simple opening line: “When I heard these words” (Nehemiah 1:4). Although he worked in a palace, Nehemiah did not allow his heart or mind the luxury of ivory-tower preoccupations. He was not afraid to see the real problems, especially when it came to hearing about the needs of those closest to his heart.

Second, *Nehemiah was personally concerned with the need*. The low, melodious tones of recognition suddenly gave way to the thunderous volume of remorse: “I sat down and wept and mourned for days” (1:4). The rhythm of intense sorrow boomed and a steady shower of intense feelings ensued: “I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (1:4). Nehemiah allowed the anguish and misery of his people to pierce his heart. And from that wound, Nehemiah's mourning for his people along with his passion were poured out in sonorous refrain before the Lord.

Third, *Nehemiah brought the need to God first*. The third theme picks up on the final sweeping crescendo of verse 4: “I was . . . praying before the God of heaven.” His heartfelt petition is recorded in verses 5–11, and here Nehemiah displayed the essence of his leadership. He resisted the normal temptation to pick up the conductor's baton and orchestrate the reparation of the wall himself. Instead, he fell on his knees, beseeching the One whose place it is to conduct all the affairs of humanity and to meld their efforts into one harmonious plan.

Fourth, *Nehemiah was available to meet the need*. With this final theme, the overture of leadership reaches its finale. Amid the climactic strains of Nehemiah's petition (1:11), an essential leadership quality emerges—availability. But in order to be available to meet the need of rebuilding the wall, Nehemiah had to overcome a hurdle: King Artaxerxes. This brings us back to the opening premise of our study—the primary importance of prayer in leadership. For as we will see in the next lesson, only God has the power to mold and move the heart of a king.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

A Leader—From the Knees Up!

Nehemiah 1:1–11



A CLOSER LOOK

Acting from Our Knees

The wall around Jerusalem lay in ruins . . . and God wanted that wall rebuilt. Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to a Persian king. Hearing of his city's plight, Nehemiah responded not only in action but also in prayer. All of us who follow God's leading must place a high priority on prayer. Prayer makes us wait and forces us to leave the situation with God. Prayer clears our vision because it helps us view the situation through God's eyes. Prayer quiets our hearts because it is God's method for removing our worries. Prayer replaces angst with peace. Knees don't knock when we kneel on them! Prayer activates our faith, because after spending time with the Father, we are more prone to trust Him. God delights in accomplishing what we cannot pull off alone.



LET'S LIVE IT

Our study of Nehemiah 1 leaves us with at least four reasons why prayer is not only important but vital in leadership.

First, *it makes us wait*. We can't earnestly pray and at the same time rush ahead of God with rash actions. Prayer forces us to take a breath, adjust our attitudes before the Lord, then act.

Second, *prayer clears our vision*. It enables us to see the situation through God's eyes and not our own.

Third, *prayer quiets our hearts*. We cannot continue to worry and pray at the same time. One will snuff out the other, depending on which one we choose.

Fourth, *prayer activates our faith*. And with that faith comes an attitude of hope and peace that replaces the petty and critical attitude that is evident when we haven't spent time in prayer.

Great leadership begins with heartfelt, genuine submission to the headship of the Divine Leader. We express this submission by offering to God in prayer all our worries, concerns, challenges, hopes, and disappointments.

What is the single most pressing concern you are facing today in relation to your realms of leadership and those who follow you? Are you struggling with the temptation to worry about this issue? Why, or why not?



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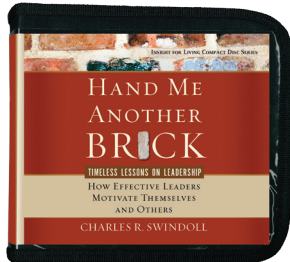
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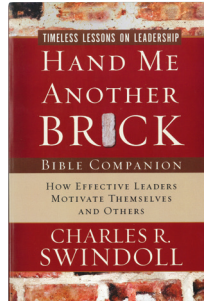
Nehemiah 1:1–11



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MM02

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Preparation for a Tough Job

Nehemiah 2:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

While carrying his great burden for the people and conditions in Jerusalem, Nehemiah began the tough job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem . . . by getting on his knees in prayer. He asked God for compassion and understanding to come to the heart of King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 1:3–4, 11). In the second chapter of Nehemiah, we see God's gracious answer to Nehemiah's prayer, an illustration of Proverbs 21:1, giving us insight into how we should handle a difficult boss or authority figure today.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Principle from Proverbs (Proverbs 21:1)

In the last message, one banner of truth waved high above all others: the banner of *prayer*. Nehemiah learned firsthand the power of prayer to persuade others. When he faced a boss who seemed impossibly immobile, he applied this timeless principle from Scripture.

The first half of Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD.” The word *channels* refers to canals or irrigation ditches that run in various directions from a main source of water. The writer says that the king's heart—the center of his will, intellect, and emotions, the place where all decisions are made—is under God's sovereign control. The second half of this proverb comes in the form of a declaration: “He turns it wherever He wishes.” Whether or not the person in charge is a believer, whether he or she consciously submits to the commands of God or shakes a fist in rebellion against Him, the sovereign God ultimately determines the direction in which the decisions of his or her heart will flow.

This verse from Proverbs 21 forms a perfect prologue to the drama in Nehemiah 2. Nehemiah served as the cupbearer to a dictator infamous for his rigid and stubborn will—a tough boss! The distressing news of Jerusalem's defenseless position raised in Nehemiah an urgent desire to rebuild his city's walls. He knew Artaxerxes was unlikely to give him leave. So he did the only thing he could do. He started praying.



Quotable

*Praying and
waiting go
hand in hand.
You haven't
really learned to
pray until you've
learned to wait.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Preparation for a Tough Job

Nehemiah 2:1–11

2. Nehemiah in Persia (Nehemiah 2:1–8)

Through Nehemiah's personal account, we're given front-row seats in a dramatization of Proverbs 21:1. The events of Nehemiah chapter 1 occurred in December, while the action in chapter 2 took place in the month of Nisan, or April. In between were four anguishing months of praying and waiting.

The first verses of Nehemiah 2 record what is known in narratives as an interchange—the back-and-forth conversation between two characters. Nehemiah supplemented the account of this dialogue by candidly inserting his emotional responses. In doing so, he intensified the pall of sadness hanging over the entire scene. Let's examine how the conversation unfolds.

Nehemiah's distress caught King Artaxerxes' attention. The king's observant question about his cupbearer's obvious sorrow passed through Nehemiah's heart like a dagger. With the knowledge that Artaxerxes had already prevented previous attempts at reconstruction, Nehemiah chose his next words carefully—and prayerfully.

3. Nehemiah en Route to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:9–11)

In a brief interlude before the final scene concludes this message, the setting of Nehemiah's chronicle moves more than eight hundred miles. With the king's letters and a royal escort, Nehemiah had no trouble securing passage through the gates of distant provinces (Nehemiah 2:9). God had provided far more than Nehemiah needed! He had letters from the king, officers and horsemen, resources for his journey, and even the means to procure timber for his own house! What a thrill it must have been for Nehemiah to recognize God at work as he followed God's lead. But verse 10 reveals a hint of opposition in the form of two antagonists, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite.

For many people, an encounter with opposition immediately raises doubt about whether or not they're really following God's will. In Nehemiah's case, however, the opposition of those who despised the things of God served as an affirmation that he was doing God's will.

Nehemiah spent four months fervently praying and waiting, risked his life before Artaxerxes, and journeyed more than eight hundred miles through hostile lands. Finally, he passed along the rugged ridge leading up to Jerusalem. There, from a distance, he surveyed the rubble he would use to somehow rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Preparation for a Tough Job

Nehemiah 2:1–11



A CLOSER LOOK

Who's In Control?

God's sovereignty and human responsibility tug at each other in theological tension. Is God sovereign? Yes. Are people responsible to act? Yes. We can stretch to its breaking point this tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, if we try to fully comprehend the power of prayer as it relates to God's predetermined plan.

We know that in His sovereign plan, God works out all things for our good (Romans 8:28), and yet He always responds to our prayers (1 John 5:14–15). How can that be? Scripture presents a great variety of prayers that were answered—often in ways that surprise us. God answered Paul's reasonable prayer for freedom from his “thorn in the flesh” with a clear no (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). He chose to answer the misguided petition of the Israelites for a king “like all the nations” according to their will, even though the answer involved negative consequences (1 Samuel 8:19–22). In the case of Solomon, God answered his prayer for wisdom and then added blessings for which Solomon didn't even ask (2 Chronicles 1:11–12). In short, in concert with our prayers, God works in various ways to bring about His perfect will as well as our ultimate good.

How, exactly, do our own wills, responses, and choices harmonize with God's sovereign will and infinite knowledge? Such a profound mystery we may never understand, but we can still respond to this mystery by obeying Scripture's admonitions to do our part in seeking the Lord in prayer and giving Him the glory for what He accomplishes in, through, and often in spite of us!



LET'S LIVE IT

Nehemiah's preparation for a tough job surfaces four important principles for us today.

First, *changing the heart is God's specialty.*

Second, *prayer and waiting go hand in hand.*

Third, *faith is not an excuse for disorder or failure to plan.*

Fourth, *opposition often reinforces the will of God rather than hinders it.*

As you consider any difficult people in leadership over you, can you identify any manipulative technique you use—the silent treatment, flattery, or sarcasm—that you need to replace with prayer? If so, what is it?



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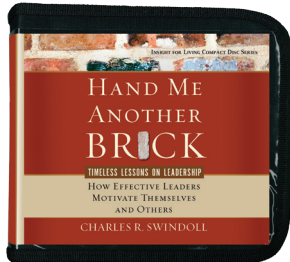
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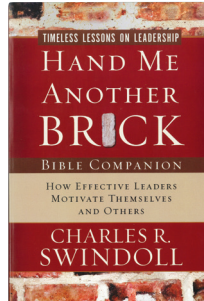
Nehemiah 2:1–11



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Getting off Dead Center
Nehemiah 2:11–20



LET'S BEGIN HERE

When Nehemiah journeyed to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, he faced the immense task of inspiring those around him to pick up bricks and begin a grueling project. Some were young novices with soft, callous-free hands. Others were old and accustomed to living without the wall—perhaps lethargic and disinterested. They all came from different walks of life with diverse expectations. The sands of time had smothered much of the patriotic zeal that had once burned in the hearts of the Jews. It's easy to see that motivating them was one of Nehemiah's first challenges of leadership. Through Nehemiah's example, we can learn how to motivate people to “get off dead center” and to rise up and begin a massive project.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Private Investigation of the Scene (Nehemiah 2:11–16)

Nehemiah described his arrival in Jerusalem in the first half of Nehemiah 2:11: “So I came to Jerusalem.” He then dropped out of sight in the next phrase: “and was there three days.” Three days without a word to anyone. No luncheons with city officials, no press conferences, no guided tours around the wall, no fireworks or parade down Main Street. Only silence.

The reason for Nehemiah's baffling behavior comes to light in verses 12 and 16. While he avoided public attention for three days, Nehemiah was meeting with an important official, the real “Mayor of Jerusalem,” Yahweh. He took a private tour of the walls—at night, without sharing his purpose publicly.

After arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah's first order of business was to seek silence and solitude for the purpose of undisturbed reflection. During those first three quiet days, Nehemiah paused to learn. He purposefully avoided the crowds and the political fanfare that would have undoubtedly accompanied a leader with the authority of King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah concerned himself with the task itself—without the pressure of public opinion. Great leaders exhibit this same character trait of pausing to learn, to gather information, to size up the job with their own eyes.



Quotable

*A leader
doesn't earn
respect in the rush
of public activity
but by what
he does when he's
all alone.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Getting off Dead Center

Nehemiah 2:11–20

2. Open Discussion of the Need (Nehemiah 2:17–19)

With the opening phrase of verse 17, Nehemiah left the harbor of silence and solitude and launched into the sea of the public eye. Now we hear the well-informed speech Nehemiah used for recruiting. In Nehemiah's first address as God's leader for rebuilding the wall, he identified with the people and committed himself to the task of helping to protect their homeland.

Nehemiah removed any doubts about whether he was just a prattling official with papers from Persia or a genuine brother who shared the distress and reproach of the Jews. The people were motivated by Nehemiah's sincere offer of blood, toil, tears, and sweat to rebuild the city's protective wall.

Nehemiah also laid out the hard facts about the dire situation. He made no effort to motivate the people with external rewards or gimmicks like new chariots, campouts at the Dead Sea, or bricks in the wall with their names on them. Though workers need to be adequately compensated, strictly material incentives produce short-lived enthusiasm and lead to feelings of entitlement. Enduring motivation is that which comes from within—intrinsic motivation that appeals to their immaterial, spiritual desires. Nehemiah appealed to the Jews' desire to do what God wanted them to do—to assume national prominence again as God's holy people.

3. Direct Criticism of the Plan (Nehemiah 2:19–20)

No sooner had Nehemiah convinced the Israelites to stand and rebuild than they encountered some of the same kinds of ridicule and mocking. But Nehemiah stood his ground against the verbal volleys and put on the line the reputation of the promise-keeping God of Israel. Nehemiah had a commitment to do the right thing, which fueled the passions of the righteous to complete the rebuilding project.



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Getting off Dead Center

Nehemiah 2:11–20



LET'S LIVE IT

Nehemiah devoted his iron constitution and inexhaustible energy to the salvation of Israel and to the values Israel stood for in a pagan world. But most importantly, he focused his total concentration on the Lord in every circumstance:

- *Alone*: in deliberate solitude
“I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem.” (Nehemiah 2:12)
- *In public*: among his people with motivational words
“I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me.” (2:18)
- *Under attack*: before his enemies with sharp rebukes
“The God of heaven will give us success.” (2:20)

After observing each of these three elements of a godly leader's spiritual focus, which do you feel is most lacking in your current realms of leadership? Write out a plan for this week that will allow you to take a concrete, credible step toward strengthening this aspect of your leadership.



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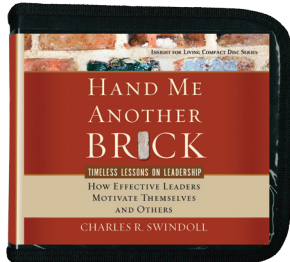
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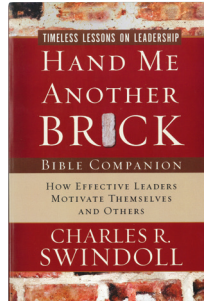
Nehemiah 2:11–20



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out
Nehemiah 4:1–9



LET'S BEGIN HERE

As soon as Nehemiah and his crew began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, opposition and criticism broke out and constantly bombarded them from all sides. Yet through Nehemiah's response, we discover how a leader should handle the inevitable and unavoidable criticism that comes from the outside. Nehemiah's example teaches us that it is possible not only to stay at our task regardless of the opposition but also to do it in a way that deepens our walk with God. Criticism may knock us down, but it doesn't have to knock us out!



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Introduction: New Testament Promise (2 Corinthians 4:7–10)

Of all the New Testament books Paul wrote, 2 Corinthians is one of the most autobiographical. In it Paul provided some honest admissions about ministry. Consider his words in chapter 4: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul admitted his human frailty and recognized that his ministry's power did not come from himself but from the Lord.

Paul reminds us that God loves to use ordinary, humble individuals to display His glory. But at the same time, Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:8–10 contain an implicit promise . . . but not the kind we like to hear: *opposition is inevitable*. And yet to counter the discouragement that follows opposition comes radiant, God-given hope: we may be knocked down, but we're not knocked out!



Quotable

*The first
response to
opposition must
be prayer. It's the
most overlooked
discipline
among leaders.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out

Nehemiah 4:1–9

2. Illustration: Old Testament Example (Nehemiah 4:1–9)

When we left Nehemiah, he was just getting ready to start building the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:20). As we join him now, he is already in the thick of the work (4:1). We've skipped over Nehemiah 3, in which Nehemiah appoints various workmen for different parts of the job.

The rebuilding project got off to a good start. Nehemiah's boss, King Artaxerxes, had not only given him time off to oversee the project but also provided some needed materials and secured Nehemiah's safe passage to Jerusalem. Even the people of Jerusalem willingly came alongside Nehemiah and began working diligently, and they faced only a few hints at opposition (2:10, 19) . . . until now.

Enter again Sanballat and Tobiah: critics extraordinaire. Sanballat and Tobiah's dialogue sounded more like that of junior high kids sitting on the sidelines snickering at another school's football team and less like the words of powerful leaders. Like most habitual critics, they felt threatened by the thought of change and saw it as something to be resisted. Also, like most critics, they looked at the situation from only their human point of view; they didn't consider God's plan.

Every group—including every church or ministry—has its Sanballats and Tobiahs. So how do we handle them? Let's look at Nehemiah's response to negative, destructive criticism.

Often our first reaction to criticism is a quick retort. But Nehemiah kept his cool. *His first response was to talk to God.* Notice a second thing about Nehemiah's response to Sanballat's criticism—*Nehemiah stayed at the task.*

Critics demoralize; leaders encourage. We know from verse 5 that Sanballat's barbs had pricked a hole in the people's enthusiasm, but Nehemiah kept them focused on the task and encouraged them to work with renewed determination. We can imagine him standing up after his time of prayer and shouting, "Keep pouring that mortar! Bring on those stones! Keep going, and God's going to help us build this wall!"

Nothing riles critics more than having their criticism result in further progress. The sight of those Jews slathering on that mortar and hauling in those stones made Sanballat and his cohorts more furious than ever. So instead of backing off, they strengthened their attack.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out
Nehemiah 4:1–9



A CLOSER LOOK

Responding to Criticism

When critics spoke against the Jews' good work, God's people felt demoralized. But Nehemiah urged them to continue—as a result, they made tremendous progress. Intensified opposition against the will of God calls for an intensified response. Nehemiah not only heard the opposition, but he also analyzed available data, prayed, and took decisive, practical action. If we fear that someone might break into our homes, certainly we should trust God. But we should also lock our doors. If we're out of a job, we should pray. But we should also seek opportunities, send out our resumé's, and make contacts. It's easier to steer a moving vehicle than one that is stopped. When opposition grows, we should couple prayer with common sense—and act.



LET'S LIVE IT

No one has ever been able to completely avoid criticism. Yes, it can be demoralizing, discouraging, and incite us to do or say things we later regret. We've all been there, and we will be again. But what worked in Nehemiah's situation centuries ago can work just as well in our lives today.

First, *realize that it is impossible to lead without facing criticism*. Whether you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the president of the PTA—if you lead, you will hear complaints from jealous and jeering outsiders or competitors. You can count on it. And if you don't actually hear them, you might as well assume somebody is criticizing in private. So refuse to view criticism as a sign of failure; recognize it as a part of the fallen world we live in.

Second, *it is essential that your first response to opposition be prayer*. There's no better place to cool your anger and gain perspective on your actions than on your knees. Once again, Nehemiah illustrated this principle well.

Third, *prayer may not be all that is necessary if opposition intensifies*. If you notice a fire blazing in your kitchen, you need to pray for God to save you—but you also need to start spraying some water! God gave us minds and bodies so that we may take practical action when it's needed. Prayer should always be the preface to action.

If you're being harangued by criticism, take some time to think through the following questions.

How does this particular criticism make you feel—hurt, angry, or frightened? What does the Bible say about how to deal with these emotions?



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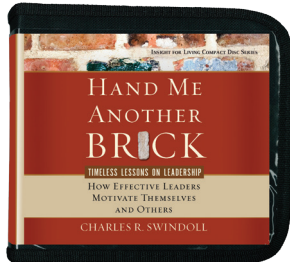
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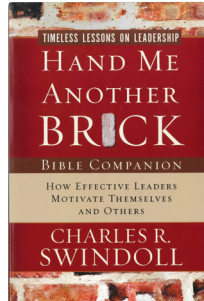
Nehemiah 4:1–9



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Discouragement: Its Causes and Cure *Nehemiah 4:9–23*



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The farther we travel through the pages of Nehemiah, the more we discover the value and relevance of its instruction for every level of leadership. As we turn to Nehemiah 4:9–23, we find Nehemiah's work crew discouraged for the first time since the project of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem began. But what caused the discouragement? How did Nehemiah handle it? The answers to these questions apply directly to the discouragement many leaders face today.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Cause of Discouragement (Nehemiah 4:9–12)

As we observed in the last message, while Nehemiah's workers were building up Jerusalem's broken walls a little more each day, their confidence and faith were being torn down, brick by brick. The repeated threats and criticism from their enemies chiseled away at their resolve and determination (Nehemiah 4:5). And in spite of Nehemiah's efforts to encourage the people, discouragement finally brought their work to a standstill. Let's take a closer look at the problem and see what caused the discouragement and how Nehemiah dealt with it.

The first source of the Israelites' discouragement was a *loss of strength*. The people felt physically burned-out. They stumbled, tottered, and staggered under their loads. Though the workers rebuilt the wall to provide protection for Jerusalem, the people forgot to protect themselves from the enemy within—exhaustion. They started strong but their stamina fizzled.

Another source of discouragement was their *loss of vision*. The people had worked so hard. But instead of feeling encouraged by what they had accomplished, they saw only the huge task before them—all the rubble they still had to clean up. They could no longer see the end goal—a completed wall.

A third source of discouragement was their *loss of confidence*. The erosion of the people's physical reserves and vision also affected their confidence. At one time the people "had a mind to work" (4:6). Now, their motivation had vanished and in its place loomed an overwhelming feeling that they could never finish the task that they had so joyfully begun.



Quotable

*You can't ignore
discouragement.*

*It's like ignoring
a flat tire.*

You've got to fix it!

— Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Discouragement: Its Causes and Cure

Nehemiah 4:9–23

Finally, the Jews felt a *loss of security*. They faced vocal and violent enemies who didn't want to see them succeed (Nehemiah 4:11). The people had to place each brick while looking over their shoulders, not knowing from moment to moment whether they might get attacked and their work destroyed.

2. The Cure for Discouragement (Nehemiah 4:13–23)

Nehemiah must have felt overwhelmed and out of control. The troops wilted with discouragement, and his project crumbled before his eyes. But Nehemiah didn't stand around wringing his hands. Instead, he put five specific steps into action in order to rebuild the people's confidence.

First, *Nehemiah unified the people around the same goal* (Nehemiah 4:13). Nehemiah noticed that the basic unit of encouragement, the family, had been broken because relatives worked at different places on the walls. So he reorganized the work and placed his people into family units centered on common goals.

Second, *Nehemiah directed the people's attention to the Lord* (4:14). Nehemiah saw his people's fear and knew that he must point them back to the Lord. Unless they changed their focus from their obstacles to their goal, they would make very little progress.

Third, *Nehemiah encouraged the people to maintain a balance* (4:15–17). Some workers probably wanted to concentrate on building the protective wall. Others wanted to grab their spears and go to war. Nehemiah brought about balance by directing them to continue the work while also being prepared to fight.

Fourth, *Nehemiah provided a rallying point for the people* (4:18–20). Nehemiah's rallying point involved a place. He knew the enemy could attack at any time, in any place. The people needed to know that if one section of the wall was put under siege, others would drop what they were doing and rally to their aid at that location. The rallying point also involved a principle: mutual encouragement. Nehemiah bolstered his people's faith by reminding them that their fellow Israelites as well as their God would be fighting alongside them.

Fifth, *Nehemiah occupied the people with service to others* (4:21–23). Nehemiah created a protective “buddy system.” He knew that if the people were involved in serving one another regularly and consistently, strong relationships would form, and their confidence and morale about the work at hand would increase.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Discouragement: Its Causes and Cure
Nehemiah 4:9–23



LET'S LIVE IT

In the seasons of leadership, you'll experience times when those you lead feel discouraged. The result? Bad morale that spreads like a disease, low productivity that affects the bottom line, a lack of creativity and new ideas, and ultimately a high turnover rate. If you've been through these periods of discouragement recently, chances are your heart is pounding at the thought.

But you can resolve—and even prevent—discouragement from overtaking you and those under your leadership. Nehemiah put an end to discouragement among his workers by employing these five principles. As you read, consider your current realms of leadership and the presence or absence of these principles within them.

First, *unify people around the same goal*. Remind people of the major purpose of the organization, ministry, or family and of each person's or group's role in achieving that purpose. This may require strategic reorganization to help move people in a common, unified direction.

What is the primary goal of each of your realms of leadership? Are those who serve with you focused on that goal? If not, how could you create a renewed focus on the goal?

Second, *direct their attention to the Lord*. During times of discouragement, it's important for us to refocus our attention on the Lord. Meditate on His promises, memorize His Word, and reflect on His character.

Do you spend time in prayer, Bible study, or reading Scripture with those under your leadership? How might you incorporate those things into your time together?

Third, *encourage them to maintain a balance*. When we're discouraged, it's easy to see only one perspective at a time, never the whole picture. Maintaining balance helps keep people focused on the Lord and on the overall goal of the organization, group, or project.

Consider the competing issues that vie for attention in your realm of leadership—finances, deadlines, and so on. Do you feel that these issues are handled in a balanced manner?



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Discouragement: Its Causes and Cure

Nehemiah 4:9–23

Fourth, *provide a rallying point*. Designing an “encouragement plan” in case of crisis will help leaders deal with potential discouragement quickly and effectively. Incorporate a physical place, mental focus, and emotional emphasis to facilitate interaction and encouragement.

Take a few moments to sketch out an “encouragement plan” for your realms of leadership. What physical, mental, and emotional elements might you include?

Fifth, *occupy them with serving each other*. If our investment in each other’s lives comes only during times of crisis, our interpersonal relationships will not withstand the storms of discouragement. However, when people consistently show they value each other beyond their tasks by actively serving one another, morale will be high, relationships will be strong, and discouragement will be rare. When the storms of discouragement move in on such strong relationships, they will often break like waves against rocks.

How might you encourage those in your realm of leadership to serve one another? Think of several specific tasks you might assign, emphases you might make, or opportunities you might provide. Then, commit to following through with at least one of your ideas.



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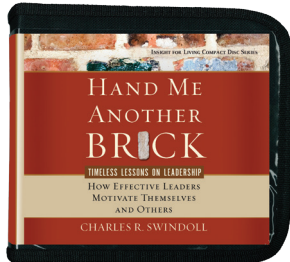
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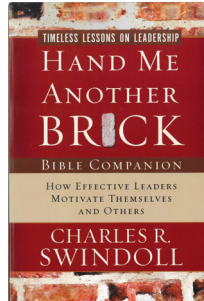
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Love, Loans . . . and the Money Crunch

Nehemiah 5:1–13



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Every worthy task contains its share of challenges, and Nehemiah's God-given work was no exception. The first thirteen verses of Nehemiah 5 shine a spotlight on a dismal financial fiasco involving the workers. This problem caused the project to grind to a temporary halt while their leader guided them to a godly solution. Though our own tasks today are different, problems and difficulties will surely find us, and wise leaders will need to know how to handle them.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Historical Situation (Nehemiah 5:1–5)

For many years the Jews of Nehemiah's time had been gradually returning from exile to live again in Jerusalem. But, though her people were free, Jerusalem's economy had not recovered since being destroyed by the Babylonians in 606 BC. All business, trade, and farming had been either ruined or disrupted by that catastrophe. Now, the struggling economy opened a fragile fault line that ran right through the center of Israel's economic structure into the people's pocketbooks. Such a fissure could easily split open if the wrong kinds of pressures were applied. And as those pressures began to build, Israel's families began to crumble. Their cooperative will was breaking apart, and people began to blame one another in a potentially disastrous upheaval.

In Nehemiah's day, financial issues caused a fault line to form, causing the Jewish people to separate from each other. The complaints of Nehemiah's people reveal three seismic slips that caused Israel's economy to quake, the people to grumble, and the wall-building project to teeter.

The first slip was famine (Nehemiah 5:3). Lack of food forced the people to mortgage their property in order to eat. The second slip was the heavy tax exacted by King Artaxerxes (5:4). The people had to borrow money just to meet the brutal tax burden. The third slip is implied: some of the wealthier Jews were charging exorbitant interest rates (5:5). The problem was compounded when a borrower couldn't repay because the lender then began repossessing the land and crops, even taking people's children as slaves in lieu of payment.



Quotable

*Let's be willing
to seek God's
forgiveness—and
the release that
comes when we
know we have it.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Love, Loans . . . and the Money Crunch

Nehemiah 5:1–13

The pressure of these three slips put an unbearable strain on the people's finances as well as their emotions. Their groaning represented the rumblings of an entire society about to break apart. Nehemiah had to act quickly to avert a disaster.

2. The Leader's Reaction (Nehemiah 5:6–7)

How did Nehemiah respond when he heard about Israel's pernicious financial problems? The people's complaints sparked an angry response in Nehemiah that, according to the Hebrew word *charah*, "burned down inside him." He sizzled with anger. That isn't the compassionate response we might expect from Nehemiah or any other leader! But in this situation, it was both appropriate and effective. To understand why, consider Israel's legal guide and practical policy manual for running a building project: the Law of Moses, found primarily in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

An examination of the Old Testament Law reveals that though it was not wrong to lend money or charge interest to non-Jews, Jews were not to charge interest when lending money to each other. Also, it was acceptable for a Jew to render services to a lender in payment of a debt, but slavery was absolutely prohibited between Jews. And even if a Jew sold himself to another Jew as a hired worker, the Law of Moses declared that workers must be released in the Year of Jubilee.

Failure to follow these simple rules would result in economic and social consequences such as the problems detailed in Nehemiah 5. Given this background, we can understand why Nehemiah responded with righteous anger. If the people would have followed the Law of Moses in the area of finances, these problems would never have erupted. After all, God established those rules and regulations to set apart the Israelites as a witness of Himself.

Nehemiah didn't react by spewing out his anger indiscriminately. Nehemiah 5:7 says he first consulted with himself. He sorted out the issues and channeled the flow of his red-hot convictions directly at the problems.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Love, Loans . . . and the Money Crunch

Nehemiah 5:1–13

3. The Practical Solution and People's Response (Nehemiah 5:7–13)

In Nehemiah 5:7–13, Nehemiah chose to address the people's financial pressures by skillfully realigning their practices to conform to the Law of Moses.

Nehemiah leveled three accusations at the nobles and the rulers—those responsible for taking financial advantage of the people. First, he indicted them for charging outrageous interest to fellow Jews (Nehemiah 5:7). Next, he charged them with allowing permanent slavery of Jewish debtors (5:8). Finally, he accused them of losing their distinction in the eyes of the surrounding nations (5:9). Their willful disobedience brought reproach on the Lord from the pagan world around them. Nehemiah brought their illegal practices before the standard of God's Law, and the accused were convicted on all three counts. Their reaction indicates that Nehemiah presented an airtight case: "They were silent and could not find a word to say" (5:8).

As a godly leader, Nehemiah didn't simply hurl a few rebukes and then walk away. He also proposed constructive changes that apply to all situations in which wrong has been done.

1. *Determine to stop the wrong* (5:10).
2. *Make specific plans to correct the wrong immediately, regardless of the sacrifice involved* (5:11).
3. *Declare your plans for correction in a promise before God as the nobles and the rulers did before the priests* (5:12).
4. *Realize the seriousness of your promise* (5:13).

In Nehemiah 5:13 the people responded with a resounding "Amen" to Nehemiah's proposals and began walking on the firm ground of God's Word.



A CLOSER LOOK

The Importance of Integrity

At the core of the crisis that Nehemiah faced was the issue of integrity. The leaders in Jerusalem took advantage of the people in order to get rich. The psalmist's prayer in Proverbs 30:7-9 can help us understand how to maintain personal character when it comes to money. The psalmist asked God to give him the right amount of financial provision that would not tempt him to dishonor the Lord through either vanity or robbery. Many of us today pray that God would give us prosperity. But the psalmist's humble petition models the necessity of praying with our frailty in mind, asking that if riches would ever cause us to abandon God, He might be gracious enough to withhold them from us.



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Love, Loans . . . and the Money Crunch

Nehemiah 5:1–13



LET'S LIVE IT

Finances cause tremors in many people's lives. Consider these four solid insights as you build a financial foundation that won't buckle under pressure.

1. God is pleased with our wise handling of money.
2. Prolonged, personal sin takes a heavy toll on the public work of God.
3. Correcting wrong in our lives begins with facing it head on.
4. Correction is carried out most effectively when a promise is made to God.

Are you allowing any sinful attitudes about money to go unchecked? What systems of financial accountability do you have in place to protect yourself from making unwise decisions?



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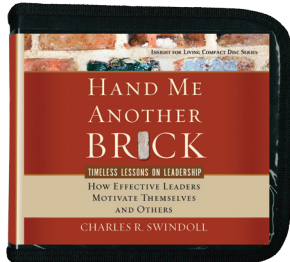
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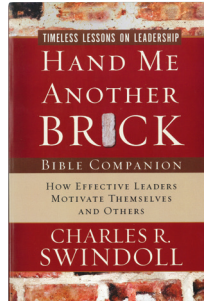
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

How to Handle a Promotion

Nehemiah 5:14–19



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We've all experienced or witnessed demotions, cutbacks, downsizing, or layoffs—dreadful realities that prompt a run on self-help books. Occasionally, God promotes His people in a marked fashion, but we seldom hear messages or read books about what God says to those who have experienced a promotion. Using Nehemiah's own experience as the basis of our study, we learn how to pass the test of integrity that comes with a promotion.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Promotion: An Axiom to Remember (Psalm 75:5–7)

In describing the much-coveted process of promotion, the psalmist forged a timeless truth: the promotion of every child of God comes by God's sovereign grace, not because a person is in the right place at the right time, morally good, more gifted, well-educated, or highly trained.

Good examples fill the pages of Scripture. God promoted Joseph from prisoner in Egypt to preeminent ruler over Pharaoh's empire. God exalted Daniel, a Hebrew exile taken to Babylon, to serve as King Nebuchadnezzar's right-hand man. God even promoted Amos, a rugged country farmer with fig-stained hands, to go before the polished priest Amaziah and announce God's judgment. These leaders kept their heads and maintained their integrity in spite of their promotions. And they refused to demote God from His position as Lord of their lives.

Nehemiah provides perhaps the best illustration of someone who responsibly handles a promotion. Even though he was born and reared in a time when the Jewish people were living in captivity under another nation, God exalted him to the prominent place of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 1:11). And when Nehemiah voluntarily took a demotion to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, God had another promotion in store.



Quotable

A Christian leader's private life is constantly under the devil's attack. Choose to stand firm—no matter what.

—Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

How to Handle a Promotion

Nehemiah 5:14–19



GETTING TO THE ROOT

The Source of Promotion

In the Hebrew text of Psalm 75:5–7 we find three words all derived from the same root: *rum*. The first, *lamarom*, translated “on high”¹ (Psalm 75:5), refers to a sense of arrogance, self-exaltation. The word *hariym*, or “exaltation” (75:6), describes the process of ascending from a lower to higher place.² Exaltation does not come from anything in this world, though worldly minded people may believe it does. Where does *hariym* truly come from? Verse 6 says that God is the One who “exalts” (*yariym*). But Psalm 75 makes an important contrast and clarification. God is also the One who “puts down.” So both promotion and demotion come from God—not from the world or from our own doing.

2. Promotion: An Example to Follow (Nehemiah 5:14–19)

In the midst of gates being rebuilt, stones replaced, and enemies rebuffed, it became apparent to the people that Nehemiah was an outstanding leader. So they promoted him to the highest office in the land of Judah—governor.

Nehemiah, a wise and godly leader, said yes when God cast His decisive vote in Nehemiah’s favor. As soon as he had accepted the appointment as governor, though, he faced four major areas of testing that come with every promotion: privileges, policies, projects, and people. And the key to surviving this onslaught is integrity.

Privileges. Every promotion comes equipped with its own special set of privileges, rights, benefits, and special favors. Few can resist using them without abusing them. Nehemiah did not abuse his privileges; he chose instead to exhibit integrity.

“For twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor’s food allowance” (Nehemiah 5:14). Although Nehemiah had the right to indulge and enjoy a sumptuous diet built into the governor’s budget, he restrained himself—over a long period of time. With the people still facing hardship, Nehemiah exercised self-control and refused to presume on his office and the people.

Policies. Nearly every promotion carries with it the pressure of former policies. No matter what the position, almost all promotions involve stepping into someone else’s shoes—and policies. And that means pressure to do what has always been done or pressure to try something new. In his new job, Nehemiah faced three corrupt policies passed on from his predecessors. They had enforced heavy taxes, extorted food and money, and allowed their servants to oppress the people. The political and social scavengers who fed off of this way of life surely put pressure on Nehemiah to look the other way. But we can see Nehemiah’s resolve in just one sentence: “I did not do so because of the fear of God” (5:15).



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Nehemiah 5:14–19

Projects. Not only did Nehemiah avoid taking advantage of the people, he also didn't slack off on his God-given work (Nehemiah 5:16). He and his servants weren't there to buy land for themselves or accumulate power or wealth; they were there with a goal in mind. Although his newfound political position afforded great opportunity for distraction, Nehemiah never lost sight of his primary task: building the walls of Jerusalem.

People. With more than one hundred fifty people to feed at his table every day, including officials from surrounding nations (5:17–18), Nehemiah could have focused exclusively on parties, politics, and protocol, forgetting about his God-given work. Or he could have obsessed over the project and forgotten about the needs of the people. Nehemiah resisted the temptation to mistreat or neglect his people or to regard his needs as more important than theirs.



LET'S LIVE IT

Every promotion tests the integrity of leaders in the areas of privileges, policies, projects, and people. Nehemiah exhibited absolute integrity in his promotion. There was no credibility gap, no cause for suspicion or wondering.

In what areas of your life and leadership do you need to evaluate your integrity? Complete the following chart, assigning yourself a letter grade and explaining why you assigned yourself that grade.

Test	Grade	Explanation
Privileges		
Policies		
Projects		
People		

ENDNOTES

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 928–29.
2. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 926–27.



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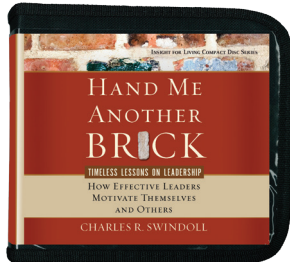
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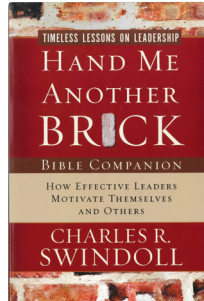
Nehemiah 5:14–19



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Operation Intimidation

Nehemiah 6



LET'S BEGIN HERE

For months, Nehemiah led the project of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls in spite of constant opposition, both subtle and overt. As the walls neared completion (Nehemiah 6:1), threatening foes once again assailed this leader. But this time the attack was much more insidious than before—the enemy attempted to intimidate Nehemiah through several frightening plots. But because Nehemiah had developed God-given discernment, none of these plans succeeded . . . and the wall was completed.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. When Did the Attacks Occur? (Nehemiah 6:1)

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, the enemies of Israel, tried to trap or discredit Nehemiah again and again, with ever more creative tactics. With the ancient equivalent of a modern ribbon-cutting ceremony in sight, and as a feeling of euphoria washed over the people, their enemies began to focus their deceitful attacks on Nehemiah. They waited for a time when their operation of intimidation would be least expected. Though Jerusalem's main defense was almost ready, Nehemiah's personal defenses were about to be tested.

Because of Nehemiah's rock-solid integrity, he had successfully kept the ravaging enemies of Israel at bay when they tried to interfere with the completion of the wall through angry threats (Nehemiah 4:1–3). In Nehemiah 6, however, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem gave up their pursuit of Israel and singled out Nehemiah himself for personal attack. In four separate attacks, Nehemiah's enemies set their best traps to stop him from advancing Israel's recovery. And in all four cases, Nehemiah's wise, God-given discernment delivered him, and his perseverance sustained him.



Quotable

*One of the marks
of a mature leader
is the ability to
graciously say
no without
always having to
explain why.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Operation Intimidation

Nehemiah 6

2. What Were the Attacks? (Nehemiah 6:2–14, 16–19)

In Nehemiah 6, Nehemiah carefully described the four different kinds of attacks his enemies used to try to intimidate him.

First, Nehemiah's enemies sent a personal request, intending to lure him into a trap (Nehemiah 6:2–4). Not only did Nehemiah discern his enemies' treachery, he also sensed another danger—the potential for a delay or stoppage in the work (6:3). A mature leader knows when to say no. Nehemiah sensed the cold heart behind the warm invitation, and he kept himself free from the trap with a firm no. He said it not just once but four times (6:4).

Second, his opponents circulated a public letter defaming Nehemiah's character (6:5–9). Nehemiah set a good example to follow for handling gossip: he calmly denied the charge (6:8), he put the blame where it belonged (6:8), and he took his hurt to God (6:9).

Third, they formed a subtle conspiracy, seeking to frighten him (6:10–14). Nehemiah's enemies tried to catch Nehemiah with his guard down in the place he was most likely to feel secure—the temple. But again, Nehemiah's discernment enabled him to see the enemy's snare camouflaged beneath the false piety.

Fourth, Nehemiah's greatest enemy, Tobiah, sent threatening communication (6:15–19). The wall was finally finished! The schemes of Sanballat and Geshem had been thwarted . . . but before any celebrations could begin, more opposition arose. Tobiah was busy conducting guerrilla warfare of his own with a barrage of letters designed to intimidate Nehemiah.

3. How Did the Attacks Affect the Situation? (Nehemiah 6:15)

The campaign of intimidation by Nehemiah's enemies certainly put Nehemiah's discernment to the test, impacting both his personal life and the work God gave him to do. Because Nehemiah stayed on his knees, he was able to face the threats without giving in to them or losing sight of his ultimate goal. And Nehemiah matched his enemies' commitment to harassment with his own relentless commitment to finish the wall (Nehemiah 6:15–16).



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Operation Intimidation

Nehemiah 6



A CLOSER LOOK

Dealing with Gossip

Let's step back for a moment and examine the underlying characteristics of Sanballat's letter—the same traits we find in all tales churned out by the rumor mill. First, the source of a rumor is often unknown. Verse 6 says, "It is reported" (Nehemiah 6:6). Who reported it? If it's a rumor, usually no one quite knows. Second, rumors are filled with exaggeration and inaccuracy. Sanballat declared that this news was being discussed among "nations," but it was likely limited to the grapevine in and around Jerusalem. Third, rumors lead to personal hurt and misunderstanding. Even though it isn't implicitly stated in these verses, whenever a person's integrity is impugned, it hurts. Rumors are designed to cause pain. Finally, rumors are employed by those whose motives are evil: "So come now, let us take counsel together" (6:7). Sanballat was still eager to arrange for Nehemiah's one-way trip to Ono.

Gossip and its close cousins, slander and libel, are all part of a large family of insidious sins that include other prominent members such as greed, envy, murder, strife, and deceit (Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:20; 2 Timothy 3:3).

Regardless of how well a leader may manage people and projects, the unseen sin of gossip can eat away at any person's credibility. And just as we wouldn't put up with murder in the workplace, so as leaders, we must shield ourselves and our people against the character-assassination that comes with gossip.



LET'S LIVE IT

Over and over again Nehemiah avoided the traps set by his enemies by exercising discernment. Without that, Nehemiah's and Israel's promising future might well have been buried in the valley of Ono. Perhaps your desire to lead effectively and efficiently has been jeopardized by a lack of discernment. Maybe you've trusted people you should have doubted or kept your distance when you should have invested. Perhaps you hired a scoundrel or overlooked the gifts and abilities of a quality employee. Developing and applying discernment in leadership is essential.

In your own experience, how does discernment play a role in determining when to say yes and when to say no? If your discernment skills are still developing, do you know one or two wise people who can help you practice discernment?



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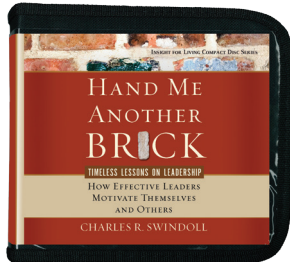
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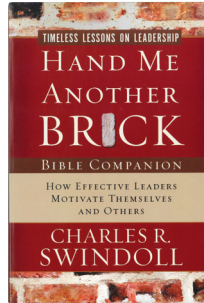
Nehemiah 6



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Revival at the Water Gate

Nehemiah 8:1–12



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Once the walls and gates were finally completed (Nehemiah 6:15), Nehemiah organized Jerusalem into a well-guarded, stable body of people (7:1–73). Immediately upon the completion of this massive task, he made plans to revive the authority of the Scriptures in the minds of the citizens. The testimony of God's Word had been silent for far too long. The beginnings of spiritual revival were taking place. And the potential for revival is always present in our own lives, if we just know where to look.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Setting of Revival (Nehemiah 8:1–2)

Having completed the wall and elected Nehemiah as governor, the people of Israel were well-organized, well-defended, and well-governed (Nehemiah 7). But their spiritual welfare still languished from neglect. So they asked Ezra to meet with them in what would prove to be the beginning of a legendary spiritual revival.

The people met at the square in front of the Water Gate. One of the key figures at this gathering was Ezra, a godly scribe and priest. As a scribe, Ezra possessed expertise in two areas. He was an expert in the realm of legal matters—able to act as both judge and jury before the people, and he was an expert in interpreting Scripture—able to teach the Word of God. As a priest, Ezra could enter the temple to represent the people before God.

According to verse 2, the people voluntarily came together, seeking spiritual food from the Law of Moses after decades of hunger for its nourishing power. This revival took place “on the first day of the seventh month” (8:2). What's so significant about the timing? For the Jews, that day marked the beginning of their most sacred month of the year in which they celebrated three important feasts: the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths. Traditionally, the Scriptures were read on the first day of the Feast of Booths, so after hundreds of years, the Israelites started fresh—with obedience.



Quotable

*Every Bible-
teaching ministry
hangs on
three wires.*

Is it accurate?

Is it clear?

Is it practical?

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Revival at the Water Gate

Nehemiah 8:1–12

2. The Event of Revival (Nehemiah 8:3–8)

Nehemiah 8:3–8 contains a detailed account of the exposition—or explanation—of Scripture which the people heard that day. That exposition had three distinct characteristics.

First, *the exposition included reading of the Scriptures*. Ezra read to the nation of former prisoners of war the life-giving Word they had so sorely missed. He read to them for several hours as the people stood and listened in silent awe (Nehemiah 8:3–5).

Second, *the exposition included praise because of the Scriptures*. Ezra praised God for what He had revealed to them in His Word (8:6). The Israelites then responded in a spontaneous, unguarded expression of praise and gratitude.

Third, *the exposition included insight into the Scriptures*. These verses strike a beautiful balance between the emotional and the intellectual. Each Israelite received a large, satiating helping of the Word through the teaching ministry of Ezra and the Levites (8:7–8).

3. The Mobilization of God's People (Nehemiah 8:9–12)

The remnant of Israel wept over the sins of their forefathers that had led them into captivity. Then, when the Law of Moses was explained to them for the first time in decades, the people not only became reacquainted with their own laws and sacrifices, but they were also reintroduced to Yahweh, the holy God of Israel. In the light of His perfect presence, their own great sins broke their hearts.

Certainly, this kind of guilt is wholly appropriate. But the people needed to move on from feeling remorse to knowing the joy of God's grace and forgiveness. So Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites, as loving ministers of God's Word, moved their people from mourning to celebration (Nehemiah 8:10–12).



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Revival at the Water Gate

Nehemiah 8:1–12



A CLOSER LOOK

A Teachable Spirit

For a full day prior, the people of Jerusalem had listened as Ezra read the Scriptures. They absorbed the facts, but they still lacked true insight. Several factors will always be necessary to gain spiritual understanding. First, it takes time. The people had to process what they learned before they came back to build upon that foundation. Second, it takes the right people. The people specifically sought out Ezra the scribe to teach them the Scriptures. The Bible repeatedly affirms the importance of godly people imparting life's wisdom to those willing to learn it. That's the third factor: it takes a teachable attitude. The older leaders were members of Ezra's peer group, and yet they said, "Teach us." They demonstrated a genuine desire to learn. Sometimes the Lord wants to deliver the insight we need through our peers. But if we are to learn from them, we must come with a teachable attitude.



LET'S LIVE IT

Before we leave this incredible scene of revival at the Water Gate, let's pause to consider four practical lessons.

First, *no life is complete without the spiritual dimension*. Many of us are like the Israelites—we have well-organized lives and homes, but we lack a vibrant spiritual life. We feel the pangs of emptiness. We feel the same aches as the spiritually starving people of Israel. And if we don't fill that hunger with God's Word, we'll naturally try to fill it with something else.

Second, *no spiritual dimension is complete without scriptural input*. Just as our physical bodies depend on food to sustain them, our spiritual lives depend on the food supplied by God's Word. The Lord Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, confirmed this truth: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Third, *no scriptural input is complete without personal obedience*. Hearing the truths of Scripture without acting upon them is like sitting down to a feast without partaking. The people of Israel not only heard the Word of God, they acted upon it. First they restored the reading of the Word, and then, as we will discover in the next message, they reinstituted a God-ordained feast. They personally digested what they heard, allowing God to nourish their hearts.



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Revival at the Water Gate

Nehemiah 8:1–12

Fourth, *no personal obedience is complete without great rejoicing*. Rejuvenated by the first solid spiritual food they had ingested in years, the people of Israel dried their tears, gathered their children, and headed home with a feeling of euphoria that rivaled the day they completed the construction of the walls. They were exuberant in their restored relationship with God.

Do you have a specific place and time set aside to spend with the Lord, digesting His Word? If so, where and when? If not, what is the greatest obstacle that prevents you from spending more time with Him?



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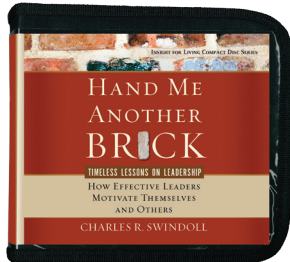
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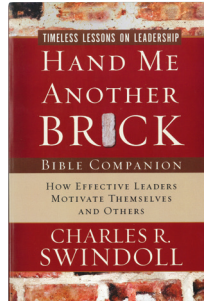
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

The Fine Art of Insight
Nehemiah 8:13–18



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The spiritual revival led by Ezra at the Water Gate (Nehemiah 8:1–12) was just the beginning of the Israelites' desire to remodel themselves before the Lord. In search of a solid foundation in the Law, they returned to Ezra, seeking insight—wisdom that could be built into their daily lives. They committed to clear away the rubble of wrong thinking and their old patterns of living, replacing them with obedience to the Lord and His Law. This biblical method for spiritual renovation is an excellent model for rebuilding our spiritual lives today.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Pursuit of Insight (Nehemiah 8:13–15)

In our last message, we observed the people's spiritual renovation in a revival led by Ezra. As the Israelites started to move back into a right relationship with the Lord, they discovered that they needed spiritual insight. These five truths will also help us gain spiritual insight.

First, *gaining insight takes time*. Merely memorizing biblical facts does not automatically result in wisdom. In Psalm 119:15, the psalmist wrote, "I will study your commandments and reflect on your ways" (NLT). To gain insight we must feast on a regular diet of God's Word.

Second, *gaining insight takes people*. Successfully pursuing insight involves learning from the right kind of person. According to Nehemiah 8:13, Ezra was the rare and essential person Israel needed. The leaders of Israel huddled at his feet to gather pearls of wisdom.

Third, *gaining insight takes the right attitude*. According to Proverbs 13:10, "Wisdom is with those who receive counsel." The men who came to hear Ezra that day were all leaders in their own realms (Nehemiah 8:13), yet they came with open, appreciative, eager attitudes.

Fourth, *gaining insight takes the right source*. Ezra never intended to be the people's true source of insight. After so many years of pursuing insight himself, he knew where to lead the people to find it—"they found [it] written in the law" (Nehemiah 8:14).



Quotable

*Do you teach
the Bible? Then
set your heart to
study God's Word
and to practice
what you
have learned.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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The Fine Art of Insight *Nehemiah 8:13–18*

Fifth, *gaining insight takes the right response*. The men of Israel who gathered to search the Scriptures that day rediscovered a priceless celebration that many had forgotten—the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths). Then they observed the feast with obedience (8:14–17).

2. The Products of Insight (Nehemiah 8:16–18)

Israel's insight into the Law brought about three visible results. And these responses will be evident in our lives as well—when we truly seek insight from God's Word.

The first visible result of insight is *personal effort* (Nehemiah 8:16–17). A person with insight will put forth whatever effort it takes to obey God. The Jews chose to obey God. And they paid the price with their efforts to make booths according to God's specifications, even when it may have appeared ridiculous to others.

The second visible result of insight is a *willingness to change* (8:16). Those who possess insight choose to leave behind old habits, seeking instead to live out the truth.

The third visible result of insight is *great rejoicing* (8:17). Those who possess insight overflow with the joy that comes from obedience. Though the Jews had little experience celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles in makeshift booths, nothing could quench the happiness that flowed from their hearts. Insight leads to immediate obedience, and obedience results in unfathomable joy. Joy doesn't imply ease or a lack of difficulty but delight in God.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

The Feast of Tabernacles

Memorials, monuments, and celebrations are designed to commemorate an event of deep significance. Through feasts and other holidays dictated by the Lord in the Old Testament, the people of Israel recognized the reality of God's provision and renewed their commitment to obey Him alone.

Continued on next page



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The Fine Art of Insight *Nehemiah 8:13–18*

Continued from previous page.

God had ordained several annual feasts in the Old Testament—each one illustrating a significant aspect of His relationship with His people. They were “memorials of God’s saving acts in the past, . . . sacraments of His sanctifying power in the present, and . . . types of His anticipated victory over sin in the forthcoming first and second advents of Jesus Christ.”¹

The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) was an annual remembrance of a time when the Jews lived in temporary quarters. From the time they were delivered from slavery in Egypt under Moses until they entered Canaan under Joshua, they lived in tents. This feast was designed to remind them of the Lord’s care and protection during their time in the wilderness and His promises to protect them and provide for their needs in the future. As such, they were instructed to gather branches and build small booths to live in for the seven days of the feast (Leviticus 23:32–43).



LET’S LIVE IT

Like the men and women of Ezra’s day, we need more than just occasional insight if we’re going to make any real spiritual progress. And just how are we to do that? Consider these two practical suggestions.

First, *we need to spend time in the Scriptures every day* (Nehemiah 8:18). Clothing yourself with the wisdom of God doesn’t come from window-shopping in God’s Word. You must enter into His storehouse of insights regularly. And when you come across a fitting insight, remember that God’s Word is not to be tailored to your life . . . your life must be measured and tailored to fit His Word.

Second, *believers need to gather regularly for times of worship and celebration*. Proverbs 27:17 says, “Iron sharpens iron, / So one man sharpens another.” Ezra pointed the Israelites toward the true source of wisdom and insight, leading them in regular worship and celebration. God intends for believers today to join together in the same way (Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24–25). We all need the encouragement and strengthening of our faith that come from fellowship with other believers.

Do you take time regularly to feed on God’s Word by hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, or meditating on Scripture? If not, what other priorities are taking precedence? How might you make time in God’s Word a priority in the coming days?

ENDNOTE

1. E. D. Isaacs and J. B. Payne, “Feasts,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, E–J, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 293.



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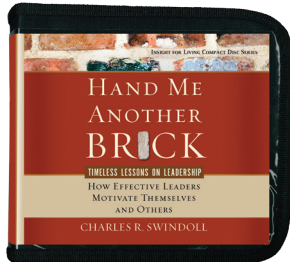
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

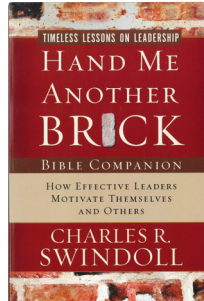
The Fine Art of Insight
Nehemiah 8:13–18



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Four-Dimensional Praying

Nehemiah 9; 10:28–31, 39



LET'S BEGIN HERE

After God's people had heard and obeyed His Word by observing the Feast of Tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:13–18), they met for a time of corporate prayer. The celebration brought them to an understanding of both the holiness of God and the depth of their sins, which led to an expression of deep sorrow and humility. Together they prayed, offering up sincere confession as well as thanksgiving and praise. And they committed to change—to study and obey God's commands from that point forward. The Israelites' example provides guidelines for the discipline of prayer that are meaningful, logical, and relevant for us today.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. General Observations (Nehemiah 9:1–5)

In the previous message, the Israelites faithfully reinstituted the long-forgotten Feast of Tabernacles. On the morning after that memorial celebration, they experienced another unforgettable day of spiritual awakening. To sharpen our understanding and appreciation of the prayer we're about to study, let's pause for a brief overview of three important facts.

First, *this is the longest prayer recorded in the Bible*. It recaps Israel's history, reviewing God's acts of compassion and kindness toward them over the centuries.

Second, *the prayer was uttered in a context of humility and purity*. A strange-looking assembly gathered that morning. From every direction a herd of people clad in scraggly goat's hair and with gaunt faces, empty stomachs, grieving hearts, and dirt-covered heads, came together and raised their voices as one in an outpouring of confession. The Israelites strongly desired to purge themselves of the sin in their assembly as well as in their hearts.

Third, *the prayer reached in four directions*. The Israelites' prayer spanned history from creation to their present day and even looked into the future. First, in Nehemiah 9:5–6, the people looked up in adoration and praise. Second, in



Quotable

*The very burden
you're under
right now was
given by God. So
when you lay it
back on Him,
it fits.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Four-Dimensional Praying

Nehemiah 9; 10:28–31, 39

Nehemiah 9:7–31, they looked back with heartfelt thanksgiving on all that God had done in their past. Third, in 9:32–37, the people looked at their present situation and brought a petition before the Lord. And finally, in 9:38, the prayer concluded with a look ahead and a commitment to future obedience.

2. Four-Dimensional Prayer (Nehemiah 9:5–38; 10:29–31, 39)

With this background in mind, let's take a closer look at the structure and purposes of this faith-inspiring prayer, considering each one of its four dimensions.

The first dimension of prayer is *looking up (adoration and praise)*. The Israelites began by praising the “name” of God, which to them was synonymous with the resplendent glory of His being. They praised Him for His exalted position, set on high above the mountains. As they continued, they began to comprehend the grandeur of His peerless sovereignty and praised Him for His matchless creation, which daily heralds His omnipotence, faithfulness, mercy, and love.

The second dimension of prayer is *looking back (reflection and thanksgiving)*. The lengthiest section of the prayer, from Nehemiah 9:7–31, takes us on a whirlwind tour of Israel's past, documenting the hand of God in each event. As though we are on a journey through the landscape of their history, we see the people's prayer carefully retrace the moral and physical wanderings of their forefathers.

The third dimension of prayer is *looking around (petition and confession)*. In this next section, Nehemiah 9:32–37, the Israelites' prayer moved from the past to the present. The people focused again on confession, freely admitting that they were facing hardships because of their sins. And in an impassioned plea, they asked the Lord to enter into the pain they felt as they lived in their own land under the yoke of another nation.

The fourth dimension of prayer is *looking ahead (direction and commitment)*. After considering their current situation and presenting their requests to the Lord, the Israelites began to look toward their future. They remembered the terrible consequences of disobedience suffered by their forefathers and realized that this would be their future as well if they didn't make a drastic change.



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Four-Dimensional Praying

Nehemiah 9; 10:28–31, 39



A CLOSER LOOK

Authentic Prayer

This section of the longest prayer in the Bible is particularly authentic in its pain and humility. When the suffering we endure as a consequence of our own sin bears down, it's natural to wonder how much the Lord cares about our pain. If it's a result of our own sin, we deserve to hurt, don't we? So why should He care? Like most of us in our weaker moments, the Jews projected their own fleshly attitudes onto God. How easy to forget God's mercy, God's grace. We need to pray honestly and express how we feel (even if it isn't theologically astute). We should dare to pray what we authentically think and feel. If we're doubtful of His love for us, we should tell Him! If we're angry with Him, our heart should express it and confess it. He already knows everything about us. He won't be shocked. We aren't hiding anything from Him.



LET'S LIVE IT

The Israelites' prayer led directly to obedience. The process of recognizing God's greatness through praise and reflecting on His provision with thankfulness is designed to lead us to a realization of our own sinfulness, dependence on Him, and a deep commitment to change.

Consider the four dimensions of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, petition, and commitment. How are you doing in these areas? Choose one and write out a specific plan for incorporating it into your life this week.



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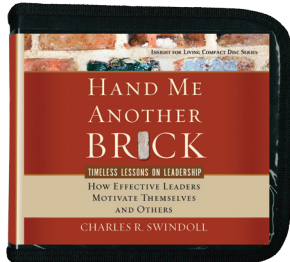
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Four-Dimensional Praying

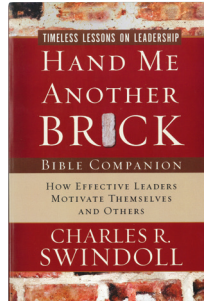
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Putting First Things First *Nehemiah 10*



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In Nehemiah's day, when the people of Jerusalem prayed, they meant business! They did not offer mere words—they signed their names to a sealed document (Nehemiah 9:38). The document contained an agreement that was prepared and established before God. In it they promised to pattern their lives according to His truth, to put first things first. Through this episode in the life of Nehemiah, we will carefully examine this promise and consider the impact our priorities have on our lives.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Document of Promise (Nehemiah 10:28–29)

In Nehemiah 10, Israel's leaders stepped up to sign their names to a vitally important document—a declaration of dependence on God. This document of promise served as an official contract between the people and the Lord, reestablishing right priorities built on His laws. Nehemiah 10:29 uses two specific words to describe the document: “a curse and an oath.” Inherent in the word for *curse* is the idea of coming into an oath with God that, if it is broken, allows the consequences of a curse. In light of the seriousness with which the revived remnant of Israel viewed God's Word, we can be confident that they took their written oath with the utmost reverence.

Those who signed the declaration of dependence on God numbered eighty-four. Following Nehemiah's signature were the names of twenty-two priests (Nehemiah 10:1–8), seventeen Levites (10:9–13), and forty-four leaders of the people (10:14–27).

According to Nehemiah 10:28, the people who committed themselves to the task of obedience had two things in common. First, they physically removed themselves from the pagan influence of foreigners—they “separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God.” And second, they were old enough to understand the contents of the document. But that doesn't mean they were all male dignitaries or elders in the community! Also included were “their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding” (10:28).



Quotable

*You don't enter
the secular realm
when you punch
the clock at work.*

*All of life
is sacred.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Putting First Things First

Nehemiah 10

2. The Promise (Nehemiah 10:29–39)

The Jews' promise of obedience included an official declaration of secession. They separated themselves from a world that followed the whims of the latest philosophies and pagan religions (Nehemiah 10:28). In order to do this, Israel had to resist the powerful pull of the culture around them, even if it meant facing ridicule and rejection. Israel was willing to stand alone in obedience to the Lord. By patterning their lives after the Law of Moses, they would be God-pleasers rather than people-pleasers.

Following their general declaration of dependence upon the Lord, Israel then clarified the details of their promise to obey in three important areas: home, society, and place of worship.

First, the Israelites promised to keep their home and family relationships clear of foreign influence. From experience, they knew that their Achilles' heel was their tendency to intermarry with people from pagan lands. The exchange of sons and daughters led to the exchange of religions, eventually diluting Israel's faith in God.

With the second specific promise, the people of Israel extended their obedience from their homes into their society. They committed to restore the weekly and yearly calendars that governed Israel's life. By refusing to buy goods on the Sabbath and through other practices, they would carry their faith and distinctiveness into the marketplace and their world.

Third, in Nehemiah 10:32–39, God's people promised to honor God's house, Israel's place of worship: "Thus we will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39). By donating a portion of their income, the tithe (Numbers 18:21), they would fund the ministry of the temple so that the priests could again offer sacrifices for the people. Following the laws commanded by God in the past, the people again committed to dedicate to God the "first fruits"—their firstborn sons and animals (see Exodus 13:2), the first of their crops (Exodus 23:19; 34:26), and the first of their dough (Leviticus 23:17). In so doing, they would reinstitute worship of God at the temple. It would be a top priority.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Putting First Things First *Nehemiah 10*



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Swearing by Seven

In Nehemiah 10:29 the people took on themselves “a curse and an oath” to follow God’s ways. The Hebrew word *shava*, “to swear an oath,” is a vivid term that stems from a root that means “to seven oneself” or “bind oneself by seven things.”¹ In the ancient world, the Hebrews didn’t seal a contract or an oath with a mere handshake or a signature on a piece of papyrus. Instead, they literally did seven things related to their oath as a way of binding themselves to the promise. We’re not told what the seven things were in this case, but we find other examples in the Bible. For example, when Abraham made an oath to King Abimelech, he gave the king seven ewe lambs (Genesis 21:28–32). These lambs served as living reminders of Abraham’s oath.



LET’S LIVE IT

Our own lives can be living documents of obedience to our Lord, but to do so, we must heed three principles from this message.

First, *serious thought precedes any significant change*. You cannot waste time dabbling in shallow thinking and careless priorities without diminishing who you could be and what you might do in the future. In other words, change is dependent upon the planning that precedes it.

Second, *written plans confirm right priorities*. Most of us are not used to writing our priorities on paper. Typically we keep them like children’s toys in a mental chest full of ideas all jumbled together. Disentangling them from the frivolous, the unrelated, and the outdated requires writing them down, straightening them out on paper. Otherwise, all those impressive priorities we carry around in our heads and occasionally discuss with others will simply remain mental and never become life-changing catalysts.

Third, *loss of distinction and conformity to the world go hand in hand*. Apart from your attendance at Bible studies and church, can anyone look at you and recognize the distinctiveness of Christianity? Look at your home, your work, your relationships, and ask yourself, “Am I really any different from the world?”

If somebody were to examine your priorities, would they see them as different from the world’s priorities and pursuits? How do they differ? How are they the same?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 989.



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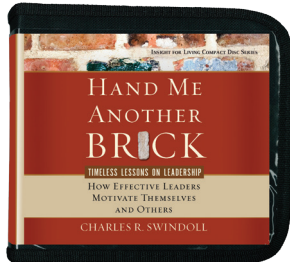
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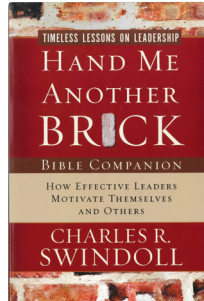
Nehemiah 10



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MM13

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Tucked away in the Bible are verses that seldom, if ever, attract the attention of the hurried reader. Because our pace is so often accelerated, we miss many of the hidden treasures God has stored up for us in His Word. In this message, we'll uncover one such treasure. Nehemiah 11 recognizes the “willing unknowns,” a special group of people who served a vital function in Jerusalem but never saw their names in lights. We will consider also our own sacrificial service and learn to appreciate those who work behind-the-scenes in our homes, workplaces, and realms of leadership.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Historical Background (Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11:1–3)

At the beginning of Nehemiah 7, the wall around Jerusalem had just been completed, security established, responsibility delegated, and the daily schedule set (Nehemiah 7:1–3).

Part of Nehemiah's task in restoring the city's wall was to help revive the city itself. To a Jew, Jerusalem was a place of great honor—their promised inheritance and the dwelling place of their God. With the wall in place, Nehemiah sought to bring back God's people to live inside.

To decide who would move into Jerusalem, the leaders cast lots. Though it seems arbitrary and random, God led His people in making decisions through the act of casting lots (Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 18:6–10; 1 Chronicles 24:31). As the Israelites went through this process, God selected one-tenth of the people to move into the city (Nehemiah 11:1).

God also worked in the hearts of some who hadn't been chosen by lot (11:2). This group of the willing unknowns generously volunteered to move into and help reestablish Jerusalem. Exodus 35 illustrates this concept when it describes the people of Israel who constructed the tabernacle. Those silent servants skilled in craftsmanship, embroidery, weaving, and other arts gave of their treasures, talents, and time for the service of God. Yet not one name from that



Quotable

*If you are gifted
in an area that
doesn't reach
the spotlight,
don't worry.*

*God sees
your value*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

group of volunteers is recorded or remembered. In the same way, the volunteers of Nehemiah 11 uprooted their families, packed their belongings, and built new homes on land covered with tumbled-down structures likely overgrown with weeds and overrun with vermin.

2. The “Willing Unknowns” (Nehemiah 11)

Groups of willing unknowns fill Nehemiah 11. We’ve already noticed the first group, *the people who volunteered to move*. We find the second group when we glance down at 11:10–12.

The people who worked within the temple numbered 822—that’s quite a ministry staff! And not one of them was named. We can bet that a good percentage did jobs that most people took for granted, like dusting, lighting lamps, and cleaning up after the “big-wigs” like Jedaiah and Seraiah, whose names actually made it into the Bible. These folks served anonymously so that God’s people would be blessed as they came to worship.

The next group of willing unknowns included *those who worked outside the place of worship*. The phrase “in charge of the outside work” refers to two types of tasks: maintaining the exterior of the temple and its grounds and serving people in areas such as judging and counseling.

The fourth group consisted of *those who supported the ministry through prayer*. Have you ever seen a best seller titled *The Prayer of Mattaniah*? Of course not. That prayer warrior’s fervent words on his knees went unnoticed by men . . . but not by the almighty God. Mattaniah, Bakkukiah, and Abda probably didn’t preach, landscape, or clean, but they prayed with all their might to keep the temple ministry alive.



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The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11



A CLOSER LOOK

Learning from the Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 11 lists five specific groups who gave to the work of the Lord—even though their giving remained anonymous. These included those who willingly moved into the city, those who willingly worked within the temple, those who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God, those who prayed, and those who sang for the services of the house of God. In God’s eyes, no contribution is ever insignificant. Our gifts and abilities make us valuable, although not necessarily famous. What’s more, the Lord remembers every labor done in love (Hebrews 6:10). Our rewards from God will be based on faithfulness, not on applause. The public may never know the ministries we do in the shadows. But God never checks with them to measure the merit of our service or to determine our rewards. The willing unknowns are not unknown to God.



LET’S LIVE IT

Why spend a whole message studying a bunch of people nobody ever heard of, whose names we’ll never remember? At times we all struggle with our self-esteem or self-worth. Every one of us occasionally wonders if we make any difference at all, or we question the value of our gifts and talents. But even if you haven’t wondered yourself, you can be sure the willing unknowns under your leadership have pondered these issues during moments of discouragement. This unpronounceable passage of Scripture gives us three helpful principles that can encourage us during these times of self-doubt.

First, *your gift makes you valuable, if not necessarily popular*. Being a leader can be a lonely, often thankless job. Sometimes there is little room for failure or mistakes. And others may not notice or understand the extra time and energy you devote to your role. But God sees, and He knows your heart. The same is true of those who are gifted in an area that never reaches the spotlight. They are as valuable as Mattaniah or Uzzi and just as well-known to God.

Second, *every labor done in love is remembered by God, never forgotten*. Hebrews 6:10 says, “For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.” This applies to your most public duties as well as your most private actions. Even if nobody notices your faithfulness, God does. So be faithful!

Third, *our final reward in heaven will be determined on the basis of personal faithfulness, not public applause*. The public may never know of your ministry, whether it takes place in the privacy of your prayer closet or on the back row of the choir. God will reward you in heaven based on the pure-hearted service of your life, rather than according to the number of plaques, trophies, or thank-you notes you’ve received.



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The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Whether you go to heaven or not has nothing to do with your accomplishments on earth. Heaven is a free gift.

If you are not involved in serving as a willing unknown, think of a specific task that needs volunteers, either at your church, in your community, or at your workplace. Set aside your pride or personal preferences and commit to using your time, energy, or skills to help meet this need. How will you begin?



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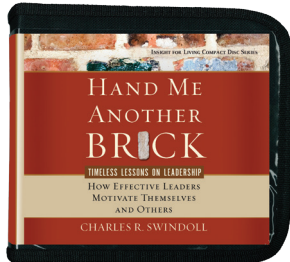
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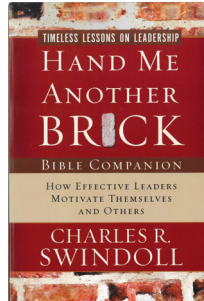
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Happiness Is a Walk on the Wall
Nehemiah 12:27–47



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Chapter after chapter of Nehemiah is filled with challenges, setbacks, criticism, and sorrow as the returning Jews rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. But Nehemiah 12 marks a dramatic change. Following the completion of their immense task, the Jews responded with joy—intense happiness. The city overflowed with the sound of singing. Instruments of music blended with the celebration scene as the triumphant tone of rejoicing was heard from afar (Nehemiah 12:43). In this uplifting message, we'll attempt to recreate that happy scene in our minds and glean from it several practical lessons about joy and celebration of God's mighty works.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Dedication of the Wall (Nehemiah 12:27–43)

Behind Jerusalem's well-constructed wall, a renewed vision brought signs of growth to a barren city. Commerce began to bud again, homes sprouted up, and an influx of new people brought a healthy glow to a city long racked with pain. In Nehemiah 12:27, Nehemiah resumed the movement of his narrative with a description of the preparations for the dedication ceremony.

In order for Nehemiah and Ezra to accomplish the planned celebration, they needed the help of the Levites, a special tribe in Israel responsible for leading worship. The descendants of Levi were specialists in temple and tabernacle activities. If Nehemiah wanted to dedicate the wall for the glory of God, the Levites needed to plan and lead the celebration.

Before the celebration began, the leaders set aside time for purification (Nehemiah 12:30). God instituted the practice of sacrificing animals as a means for His people to receive cleansing from sin. Before the celebration of the wall could begin, before it could be enjoyed without reservation, the people needed pure hearts, cleansed by the confession of sin.

Next, Nehemiah recorded the details of his preparation for the celebration. Imagine dozens, perhaps even hundreds of singers and musicians clambering



Quotable

*Joyful Christians
often enjoy music.*

*Have you noticed
how it's hard
to worry while
singing songs
to God?*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Happiness Is a Walk on the Wall

Nehemiah 12:27–47

onto the new wall, grouping themselves together for last-minute vocal and instrumental tuning as the celebration started! Finally, the bands began to play, the choirs sang, and Ezra and Nehemiah set off in opposite directions along the sturdy wall, rejoicing and trampling underfoot the scoffing of their enemies.

2. Dedication of the People (Nehemiah 12:44–47)

In this description of the dedication of the people, it's clear that their joyous celebration and sacrifices transformed them personally. The prevailing spirit of joy encouraged the people to give gladly to the needs of those appointed to oversee the temple (Nehemiah 12:44, 47). Also, they consecrated their lives, committing to keep the Law of Moses. In this way, the ceremony contained a balance of truth and emotion, words and song, and a healthy respect for the ancient traditions of their forefathers (12:45–46).

In addition to singing and maintaining a positive attitude, joy is also expressed through cheerful generosity. Joy affects our attitude toward things we tend to hold on to, such as money and time. Delightfully giving those things away is the *result* of joy as well as often being a *stimulus* for it. When you delight in the Lord, you desire to give to others; when you give to others, you receive joyful satisfaction. They go hand in hand.



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A CLOSER LOOK

The Power of Music

Besides serving as both a cause and effect of joy, music is also a powerful tool for teaching and memorization. Music, particularly singing, is one of the few activities that engages both sides of the brain. This interaction between the right and left brain allows for quicker transmission of information from short-term memory to long-term memory.

Therefore, music is an excellent way to teach truth. The Israelites used this method to transfer vital truths about their God and their history to successive generations. These “hymns of heritage” sustained their identity and unity as a people (see Psalm 44 and 66 for examples).

And consider the numerous hymns, choruses, creeds, and psalms that permeate more recent church history. Music has been the primary tool used to teach doctrinal truth to generations of Christians. Paul exhorted believers in Ephesians 5:19 to “[speak] to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Music is still an integral part of today’s worship.



LET’S LIVE IT

No one who saw or heard the boisterous cheers and praises of the Israelites that day would have had any doubts about the vibrancy of their faith. Let’s take a moment to examine the vitality of our own faith according to these four solid, applicable principles.

First, recognize that *an atmosphere of happiness should surround God’s people*. One of the most magnetic and powerful forces in any ministry or leadership is the presence of joy. Do you contribute to an atmosphere of joy or detract from it? Do you genuinely enjoy getting together with other believers to offer up praise in song and through giving? Are you enjoyable to be around, or do you give off signals that you’d rather not be bothered by people? An atmosphere of joy should be easily apparent when Christians gather together.

Second, realize that *music is one of the most expressive ways to communicate joy*. You would be hard-pressed to find a genuinely happy Christian who doesn’t enjoy either participating in or listening to music. Music has been given by God to enhance the joy of a worship service and inspire the hearts of Christians. It is one of the most expressive ways we can communicate happiness. Whether we play an instrument, harmonize in the choir, sing in the shower, or whistle a tune to our children or grandkids, music tends to flow from us when we have joy in our hearts.



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Nehemiah 12:27–47

Third, remember that *a joyful spirit will have far-reaching effects*. What was it that was “heard from afar” when the great choirs sang atop the walls (Nehemiah 12:43)? Not the singing, not the instruments, but “the joy of Jerusalem” (12:43). Even for all the money and equipment spent and used today to deliver the Christian message, no television station, radio tower, or Internet connection can match the magnetic power of Christians exhibiting God’s joy on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, recognize that *joy is not dependent upon outward circumstances but upon inward focus*. If you doubt this, look at the circumstances surrounding the Israelites before, during, and after their celebration. They were still under Persian authority, living in a city filled with rubble, and they were unceasingly hounded by outside enemies who opposed them. But they celebrated with a joy that practically shook the homes of their critics. Why? Because they focused completely on the almighty God. Our circumstances don’t determine whether or not we experience or express joy in the Lord. Regardless of what the world may lead us to believe, happiness is a heart matter.

What circumstances today are robbing you of your joy? As a leader, how can you positively influence those within your realms of leadership by demonstrating joyful attitudes and actions?



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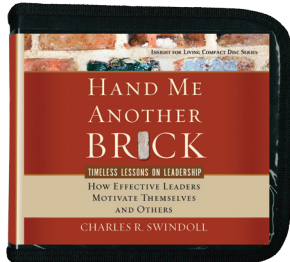
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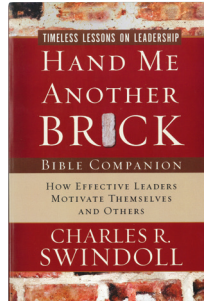
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HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Taking Problems by the Throat *Nehemiah 13*



LET'S BEGIN HERE

One of the occupational hazards of leadership is the need to face, analyze, and solve problems. While supervising the construction of the wall and later while governing the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah faced and wisely dealt with many knotty, complicated problems. In this final message, we observe Nehemiah as he addressed four more critical issues.

Nehemiah refused to let problems conquer him. Intensely desiring to please the Lord, Nehemiah took sin “by the throat” wherever he found it. Throughout our study we have seen him ward off enemies and stir up a glorious spirit of revival among his people. But nowhere is his indomitable spirit more obvious than in his response to the four serious problems recorded in Nehemiah 13. From his example, we will draw several timely, applicable principles for our own realms of leadership.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Four Critical Problems (Nehemiah 13:1–31)

Nehemiah's time in Jerusalem was amazingly fruitful, but he was honor-bound to return to his former position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:6). We don't know exactly how long he was away from Jerusalem before asking permission to return (13:6). However, it was long enough for the children of Israel to get themselves into some serious trouble—the kind of trouble that could eventually deafen the ears of the whole nation to the words of the Lord. Though they were once eager to listen and obey (13:1–3), their eagerness waned, leading to four major problems Nehemiah had to face upon his return to Jerusalem.

First, he discovered a *compromising companionship* (13:4–9). An Israelite priest, Eliashib, offered part of the temple as a private hotel suite for one of Jerusalem's worst enemies: Tobiah. You may recall that Tobiah had been an opponent of the rebuilding project from the beginning. Yet while Nehemiah was away, this man wormed his way not just behind the walls of the city, but inside the sacred walls of the temple. And the high priest allowed it. But when Nehemiah returned and discovered what had taken place, he stormed through the temple and did some long-overdue house cleaning (13:7–9). Nehemiah's response was godly, swift, and decisive.



Quotable

*A wrong
will never be
resolved until
we openly
admit that it's
a wrong.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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Taking Problems by the Throat

Nehemiah 13

Then, Nehemiah faced a *financial fiasco* (Nehemiah 13:10–14). Nehemiah didn't have to look very long before he came across financial waywardness (13:10). The Law of Moses instructed the Levites to minister in and around the temple and commanded the people to support them financially. But because no one distributed the tithes, the Levites had to go back to their farms to make a living. Nehemiah confronted a difficult problem with decisive action by appointing reliable accountants to make sure the finances flowed properly (13:11–14).

Third, he dealt with a *secularized Sabbath* (13:15–22). According to the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath was to be a day of rest following God's example when He rested after creating the world. This people committed to keeping the Sabbath when they signed the covenant in Nehemiah 10:31. How quickly they had returned to conducting business as usual (13:15–16)! But Nehemiah hadn't forgotten the people's promise, and he refused to let them forget it. He reminded them of the consequences their forefathers had endured because of their failure to follow through on their commitments to the Lord (13:17–18). And then Nehemiah set up obstacles and incentives to hold the people to their word (13:19–22).

Finally, Nehemiah confronted a *domestic disobedience* (13:23–31). Many Jews had intermarried with the pagan people around them, resulting in mixing blood, languages, and beliefs (13:23–24). Israel was rearing a generation of children who could not speak or understand the language of the Scriptures. This problem threatened to wipe out Israel's ability to hear the voice of the Lord. For Nehemiah, the greater the problem, the greater was the intensity of his response: "So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair" (13:25). Nehemiah erupted in righteous anger when he discovered Israel's seemingly irreversible error. Israel had experienced judgment for similar offenses in the past, and to avoid God's wrath on the recently restored nation, Nehemiah fired the offenders and showed no partiality or regard for their person or position (13:28).

2. Analyzing Nehemiah's Solutions

Nehemiah followed four basic steps as he dealt with Israel's problems. First, *he faced the sin head-on*. Second, *he condemned it severely*. Third, *he worked toward a permanent correction*. Fourth, *he followed up the situation with prayer*. And though most of the specific problems in Nehemiah's day are unlikely to affect us in our own realms of leadership, the steps he took in addressing problems can be applied to many common issues today.



HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Taking Problems by the Throat *Nehemiah 13*



A CLOSER LOOK

A Decisive Stand for God

After Nehemiah's leave of absence from Jerusalem to attend to his Persian duties, he returned to the holy city to discover major problems. Despite the fact that the resident Jews had made a commitment to remain faithful to God, they had compromised in the areas of maintaining financial integrity, obeying the Sabbath, and preserving domestic priorities. Nehemiah refused to be passive; he took the problems by the throat. But he also modeled the timeless truth that courageous conviction must be tempered with deep devotion. This is where many well-meaning Christians miss it. It is significant that the final verse in Nehemiah's book shows him on his knees in prayer. He had fought hard for the right, but he had kept his heart soft before the Lord. What a magnificent model he was! He was a man of honesty, conviction, and devotion. We should follow his example.



LET'S LIVE IT

Let's take a moment to consider three principles from this message that will guide us as we seek to follow Nehemiah's example of leadership.

First, *dealing with problems begins with honest observation*. You cannot solve a problem that you haven't identified. We must force ourselves to face the truth of our own compromising alliances, areas of selfishness, or failure to keep our word, no matter how painful the truth. Once we have removed the sin from our own lives, we will be able to clearly identify the problems in our realms of leadership.

Second, *correcting what is honestly observed demands fearless conviction*. Many fears keep us from confronting problems—the fear of what others will think or say, the fear of upsetting the status quo, the fear of being misunderstood. Yet once we have honestly surfaced the problem, we must take a firm stand and do what's right.

Third, *honest observation and fearless conviction must be tempered by consistent devotion*. Nehemiah addressed major problems by focusing on God and the standards of conduct he knew God had commanded in the Law of Moses. Prayer was not a cop-out for Nehemiah, but a vital part of his decisive action. Even when he condemned people with the harshest terms, his anger was tempered by a prayer (Nehemiah 13:29).

What is the most complicated problem you're facing today that affects your realm of leadership? Why is it so difficult? What specific course of action will you take to address this problem?



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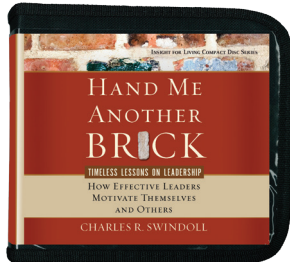
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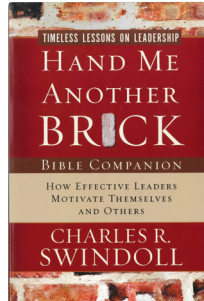
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