

If you talk with people very long, it will become clear that most of us are facing some challenge in our lives that seems so daunting as to be almost impossible. In the account of Nehemiah, we find a Jewish man highly employed in the Persian government facing a burdensome task that must have, at times, seemed beyond accomplishing. However, with a fascinating mix of humility and boldness and in spite of dreadful obstacles and opposition, he perseveres and is brilliantly successful. Nehemiah provides us with a wonderful example; he encourages us to stand up and overcome our challenges.

It is a familiar fact of life that the most vexing challenges are not overcome quickly but require a frustrating length of time and effort, as well as a determined attitude of perseverance. Nehemiah's story demonstrates that perseverance must be accompanied by humility. The opening setting of this account is the palace of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes around 445 BC. Nehemiah is the Jewish cupbearer for the potentate. The cupbearer was much like the chief of staff to American presidents. He was the chief executor of his lord's desires and chief protector of his office and person. He governed access to the emperor's presence and attention, and made certain his food and wine were safe and excellent. Clearly, it was an office of great trust that required many skills involving court protocols, diplomacy, and management. Add to this the fact that Nehemiah was a member of a conquered people and it is appar-

ent that he was a man of remarkable character and wisdom. In the first chapter of his book it is recorded that he has found out that even though a great number of Jewish exiles, originally conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians in 586 BC, have returned from captivity and have established a viable society, they still have not rebuilt the protective wall around the capitol city of Jerusalem. He finds this especially disturbing since the Temple of YHWH, Israel's God, is centered there. Interestingly, Nehemiah's first reaction is not to sit down and ask, "Now, how can I fix this?" Instead this man of such station and ability sits down and, recognizing that he is a servant of God, begins to pray:

"So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *for many* days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, *You* who keep *Your* covenant and mercy with those who love *You* and observe *Your* commandments, please let *Your* ear be attentive and *Your* eyes open, that *You* may hear the prayer of *Your* servant which I pray before *You* now, day and night" (Nehemiah 1:4-6)

There is a bumper sticker that says, "There is a God, and I am not He." Running about in the frenzy that is our daily world, we can forget that this universe is much bigger than we are. We do not begin to possess the power or wisdom

to deal with its intricate workings. Only the Creator of heaven and earth is sufficient to empower us to stand and be victorious. The humility of prayer brings the support of a loving, mighty and wise Father which enables us to persevere.

This humility was also evidenced in Nehemiah's interaction with other men. In Nehemiah 2:20, he answers the contempt and ridicule shown by Sanballat and Tobiah, two enemies who will plague his efforts, by insisting that it is the favor of the God of Heaven that will give success. "So I answered them, and said to them, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem."

A man of Nehemiah's status would be tempted to reply from wounded pride, hurling useless personal epithets. This kind of squabbling is emotionally draining and demoralizing whereas his humble answer, recognizing that the work is God's and He will prosper it, encourages and strengthens. Similarly, in Chapter 5, we see Nehemiah's humility with his fellow workers when he refuses to accept the money Persia usually required a vassal region to raise for any governor that was sent to oversee them. He also joined in the labor to build the wall. He did not issue imperial orders, throwing the weight of his lofty position

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Nehemiah

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around, but led by example True humility in our dealings with others will be more likely to produce cooperation and helpfulness, encouraging everyone to persevere.

Nehemiah demonstrates another striking dynamic of perseverance as he follows prayer with bold action. In Chapter 2 he proposes to Artaxerxes that he be sent to Jerusalem to accomplish the rebuilding of its walls. It is true that, as commentators note, there had been instability in that part of the empire, and that this idea might have been consistent with the emperor's interests, but it is also true that Nehemiah is asking that the king's most valued administrator be sent away for an indefinite time. This was not a step to be taken lightly. Reading Chapter four, we are struck again by how Nehemiah follows prayer with strong action. Israel's enemies, including Sanballat and Tobiah, decide to attack the workers in the city to put an end to the construction. Nehemiah organizes the work force so that half of them stand guard, and the laborers build with one hand and hold a weapon in the other. He even establishes an alarm system formed so that a trumpet blast summoned the armed men to an area under attack. All through the book, faithful prayer is followed with action. When facing a challenge, passivity and inaction can be paralyzing as fear and frustration build over time. Trust in God and perseverance overcome the obstacles.

The planning and labor needed to rebuild the city walls that had been torn down and the gates that

had been destroyed by fire would have been daunting under the best of circumstances, but Nehemiah's perseverance was demonstrated as he built under several forces that threatened to devastate the work. As we've already seen, a confederation of neighboring powers opposed any attempts to secure the city of Jerusalem, including foes from Ammon to the east, Samaria to the north, Philistines to the west, and Arabs from the south. Israel found herself surrounded by hostile foreign enemies. If we have read the words of Jesus our King, we will remember that we too will face this kind of opposition, as he says, "As the world has hated me, so it will hate you." Co-workers, cultural influences such as news and entertainment media, or even governmental institutions can be sources of ridicule or opposition that threaten to undo any progress we make toward overcoming the challenges in our life.

As terrible as the pressures from worldly opponents may be, it is those that arise from within that can be most disheartening. In Chapter 6:10-14, we read that a conspiracy of false Israeli prophets and prophetesses joined with the foreign enemy to try to discredit and frighten Nehemiah through lying predictions and advice. Who ever really understands why those who we count on within our own families or faith community for support, strength, and counsel may choose to betray us when we are most vulnerable? Sadly though, we cannot read of the lives of Moses, David, or even Jesus, among many others, without finding that they were savaged by family, friends, or colleagues. Though

we have these warnings, it is always crushing when it happens to us, and it may cause us to want to quit our work from the pain and despair. We must, though, see the examples of Nehemiah and others that have gone before us and persevere through the strength and courage provided by our merciful Father.

Finally, the most deadly and insidious threat to overcoming the challenges before us is the problem of personal sin and evil practices. The confessional prayers in chapters 1 and 9 help us to face the truth that our own sins, if not confessed and forcefully left behind, may be our undoing. The ultimate reason that the walls and gates of Jerusalem had been destroyed in the first place was the judgment of God on the determined practice of sin and evil by Israel and Judah in the past. It wouldn't have accomplished anything if Nehemiah's generation had successfully resisted the opposition of external and internal foes if they continued to sin, bringing the judgment of God upon them again as their forefathers had. Nehemiah, however, once again persevered in obeying the covenant of God and putting away deceptive and seducing sin.

If we read the account of Nehemiah carefully, we will understand that he was a man who faced the same thoughts and passions as we do. His excellence of character arises from a consistent humility that relies constantly on the mercies and strength of his God, allowing him to take bold action and, in the end, persevere under the trials of his day. Our challenges will be unique to each

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Prayer can take many forms from the formal, well-thought-out prayer in a worship service to a quick “help me” in times of trouble. Prayer should not be just a habit, but a way of life—a continual seeking God in every aspect of each day. As any good habit, though, it takes some conscious discipline to pray always and continually, at least in the beginning. To help us to learn to pray the book of Nehemiah is full of wonderful examples of prayer, from the formal to the quick “Nehemiah” help-me prayer:

In a time of great despair:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses..."

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your

servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." (Nehemiah 1)

When afraid:

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it." Nehemiah 2

When facing opposition:

Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. Nehemiah 4

When strength is needed:

For they all made us afraid, saying, their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands. Nehemiah 6

In confession and sorrow for sin:

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent

had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God. Nehemiah 9

In praise, adoration and thankfulness:

"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you. Nehemiah 9

In each of these prayers you can hear and feel the true longing to serve God, to do his will, the recognition of the need for his strength, and the utter humility of the petitioner. We know that God heard these prayers.

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (1 Peter 3:12)

Bible Reading in the New Year

It's a New Year and time for a fresh start and new habits. The habit of reading the Bible every day is a good one to start and leads to untold benefit in our lives. After all, God, himself, has told us his thoughts and his plans in the Bible. So here are some thoughts on Bible reading:

The entire Bible is the word of God. No part stands alone. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are important for understanding God's message to us. Jesus and his apostles in the New Testament quoted constantly from the Old Testament. In fact Paul the Apostle must have been referring to the Old Testament when he wrote these words to Timothy since the New Testament was not yet compiled at this time:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Every verse and citation must be considered in its context within the chapter and within the rest of the Bible. For example: recently someone quoted Matthew 24:35 to "prove" that the earth will pass away or be destroyed. Look at the actual verse:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. NIV

If this literally means the earth will "pass away", then heaven, too, will pass away. In truth, Jesus used this as an idiom to express how sure his words are.

God is not the author of confusion.

The principles and teachings within the Bible are consistent and in agreement in its entirety. To use the example above, the conclusion that the earth will pass away and not be part of God's future plan and purpose ignores a good part of the Bible. Take a look at these verses:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5 NKJV

They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever. Psalm 125:1 KJV

Go to the Bible to understand God's message. Do not go to the Bible to prove what you already think it says. For example, for many years people have thought that the Bible teaches that there is an immortal soul--that there is a part of each person that lives on after the body. However, if you go to the Bible you will not find an immortal soul. You will find:

"Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall die. Ezekiel 18:4 NKJV

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Mark 14:24 NIV

The Bible many times interprets itself if you read far enough or compare scriptures. Two examples of this are found in Daniel 2 and Matthew 13. Daniel 2 is a prophecy given to the Babylonian king via a dream. Daniel, by the power of God, gives him the interpretation of that dream. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells the parable of the sower and then tells us what it means.

The Bible uses many literary devices such as personification, metaphors, and symbolism. For examples of these devices see Proverbs 9, Psalm 17:8, Daniel 2. The usual rule as with any writings is to understand a passage literally unless the context and meaning cannot be literal. For example this verse from Revelation 12:1 would not be understood to be literal:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: KJV

Always ask God for help in understanding the Bible. God's ways and thoughts are high above ours. We need his help in understanding.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8-9 NIV

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:13-15

May God bless you with understanding and wisdom this year as you read His Word.

Meet the People from Genesis:

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, covers a period of several thousand years and introduces us to some very important people:

Adam and Eve: The first man and the first woman. The first marriage. The first parents. The first sinners. (Genesis chapters 1-3)

"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." I Corinthians 15:22

Cain and Abel: The first brothers. The first murderer and the first victim. (Genesis chapter 4)
"By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did." Hebrews 11:4

Noah: The boat builder who through faith and obedience

saved his family, and many animals, from the destroying flood. (Genesis chapters 6-9)

"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family." Hebrews 11:7

Abraham: Father of many nations, father of the faithful, receiver of eternal promises. (Genesis chapters 11-25)

"And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend." James 2:23-24

Isaac: Son of Abraham. Also received the eternal promises through faith. (Genesis chapters 21-28)

"Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise." Galatians 4:28-29

Jacob: Son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham. He, too received the eternal promises. His name was changed to Israel. (Genesis chapters 25-49)

"Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs." Acts 7:8

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher: The 12 sons of Jacob and the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Joseph was favored by his father and sold into slavery by his brothers. (Genesis chapters 29-50)

"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles." Acts 7:9-10

Portrait of a Saint

Nehemiah, Man of Prayer and Perseverance (Cont.)

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of us, but we have Nehemiah's example which reassures us that we can trust the same merciful Father to empower us to fulfill the task set before us until we, through perseverance, gain the

inheritance in the New Jerusalem whose walls and gates are high and secure, and within which Jesus, King of Israel will reign forever.

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because

when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." James 1:12

JDK

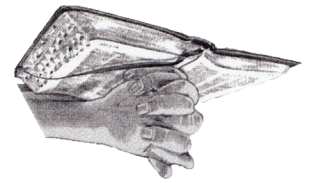
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Daily Bible Readings for January, February and March

Read the Entire Bible in One Year

Day	JANUARY		FEBRUARY		MARCH	
	Old Test	New Test/Psa	Old Test	New Test/Psa	Old Test	New Test/Psa
1	Gen 1,2	Matt 1	Exo 11,12	Matt 28	Lev 23, 24	Acts 24
2	Gen 3,4	Matt 2	Exo 13,14	Psalm 9, 10	Lev 25, 26	Acts 25
3	Gen 5,6	Matt 3	Exo 15,16	Psalm 11,12	Lev 27, Provb 7	Acts 26
4	Gen 7,8	Matt 4	Exo 17,18	Acts 1	Provb 8-10	Acts 27
5	Gen 9,10	Matt 5	Exo 19,20	Acts 2	Num 1,2	Acts 28
6	Gen 11,12	Matt 6	Exo 21,22	Acts 3	Num 3,4	Psalm 19,20
7	Gen 13,14	Matt 7	Exo 23,24	Acts 4	Num 5,6	Romans 1
8	Gen 15, 16	Psalm 1,2	Exo 25,26	Acts 5	Num 7,8	Romans 2
9	Gen 17,18	Matt 8	Exo 27,28	Acts 6	Num 9,10	Romans 3
10	Gen 19,20	Matt 9	Exo 29,30	Acts 7	Num 11,12	Romans 4
11	Gen 21, 22	Matt 10	Exo 31,32	Psalm 13, 14	Num 13,14	Romans 5
12	Gen 23,24	Matt 11	Exo 33,34	Acts 8	Num 15,16	Romans 6
13	Gen 25,26	Matt 12	Exo 35,36	Acts 9	Num 17,18	Romans 7
14	Gen 27,28	Matt 13	Exo 37,38	Acts 10	Num 19,20	Romans 8
15	Gen 29,30	Psalm 3,4	Exo 39,40	Acts 11,12	Num 21,22	Romans 9
16	Gen 31,32	Matt 14	Provb 3,4	Acts 13	Num 23,24	Romans 10
17	Gen 33,34	Matt 15	Provb 5,6	Psalm 15,16	Num 25,26	Romans 11
18	Gen 35,36	Matt 16	Lev 1,2	Acts 14	Num 27,28	Romans 12
19	Gen 37,38	Matt 17	Lev 3,4	Acts 15	Num 29,30	Romans 13
20	Gen 39,40	Matt 18	Lev 5,6	Acts 16	Num 31,32	Romans 14
21	Gen 41, 42	Matt 19	Lev 7,8	Acts 17	Num 33,34	Romans 15,16
22	Gen 43, 44	Psalm 5,6	Lev 9,10	Acts 18	Num 35,36	Psalm 21,22
23	Gen 45, 46	Matt 20	Lev 11,12	Psalm 17,18	Provb 11,12	Psalm 23-25
24	Gen 47, 48	Matt 21	Lev 13,14	Acts 19	Provb 13,14	Psalm 26-28
25	Gen 49, 50	Matt 22	Lev 15,16	Acts 20	Provb 15,16	Psalm 29,30
26	Provb 1,2	Matt 23	Lev 17,18	Acts 21	Deut 1,2	Mark 1
27	Exo 1,2	Matt 24	Lev 19,20	Acts 22	Deut 3,4	Mark 2
28	Exo 3,4	Matt 25	Lev 21,22	Acts 23	Deut 5,6	Mark 3
29	Exo 5,6	Psalm 7, 8			Deut 7,8	Mark 4
30	Exo 7, 8	Matt 26			Deut 9,10	Psalm 31,32
31	Exo 9,10	Matt 27			Deut 11,12	Mark 5

See page 5 for some thoughts on the daily readings.
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