

I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD. (v.15)

When some new discovery is made people herald it with great applaud. It may be some long lost relic from a bygone era, or a piece of parchment with some work by some great author or musician, or a painting from a famous artist which had been missing for years. There is currently such a painting on display in the National Gallery in London. It was bought for £45 at an auction but turned out to be a painting by Leonardo Da Vinci. The oil on wood panel painting, Salvator Mundi, or Saviour of the World, depicts Christ with his right hand raised in blessing and his left hand holding a globe.

An even greater find is recorded in 2 Chronicles 34:15. During Josiah's reign as king of Judah, he ordered the repair of the temple. In the temple, Hilkiah the high priest found the Book of the Law that had been given to Moses by the Lord. When Josiah '*heard the words of the Law*' (v.19), he felt convicted and later stood before his people to make a covenant to keep all that was written in the book (v.31). The Bible is still the best book we can discover. In it we learn what God wants us to do to please Him.

Many people would contend the Bible is a book of history, but the teaching on its pages is as new today as it was then; it is as important today as it was then. Josiah knew this. The book that was discovered was most likely the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible. This was written by Moses hundreds of years before and yet Josiah '*tore his robes*' as he realised how he and the people had been ignoring God's Word and not following God's ways. Josiah realised the teaching was as true for them now as it had been in the days of Moses.

And it is still as true today. When we pick up the Bible and read it we discover truths that apply to us in this generation the same way as they did centuries ago. Oh that we might daily read it as we read the newspaper, damp from the press, realising that it is our Father's great message for the life of every day!

Pray: thanking God for His Word.

Reflect: do I daily read the Bible and see it as God's message for today?

Josiah, however, would not turn away from him...he would not listen to what Neco had said at God's command. (v.22)

Josiah was a good and righteous king. He had set in order the reform of the land and the restoration of the temple. During this time the Book of the Law was rediscovered and Josiah on hearing it realised how sinful the people had become and how far removed they were from walking in God's ways. Josiah brought about change and renewed the covenant.

Here in chapter 35 Josiah celebrates the Passover with the people and we see his kindness, generosity and love for the people coming through as he willingly provided for the lay people. His generous example was followed by his officials. It was worth reminding ourselves how much people follow a good example. And this Passover was like no other celebrated during the reigns of the kings. Apparently this Passover was better because of the care that was taken to do things in strict accordance with the Law of Moses.

Josiah walked with God. But before we think he is so perfect we come to the latter part of the chapter and discover that walking with God does not exempt us from mistakes – no matter how close to God we are, we are still human and prone to sin. Josiah saw Neco, king of Egypt heading for a battle that had nothing to do with Josiah. He decided to go out and face him. Neco warns him that God has told him to hurry into battle but Josiah ignores the advice to stop opposing God. Josiah disguises himself and goes out to fight but ends up injured and dying from his injuries.

I think that often we can get the idea that as long as we're going to Bible Studies, having daily Quiet Times, and even praying a little every once in a while, that whatever we do will magically turn out wonderful. As if we can make no mistakes. It's not that simple. Sometimes I wonder if we simply aren't as sharp as we should be in paying attention to God's warnings and promptings. Let's stay sharp and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Pray: asking God's forgiveness for the mistakes we make.

Reflect: do I think that everything will always turn out wonderful?

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling-place. (v.15)

“I love my job,” said a young nurse, “but it’s so frustrating when I tell people what they need to do to stay healthy and they don’t follow my advice.” I smiled in empathy as I recalled times in the bank advising others what they had to do in order to keep the cash area in order and for it to balance each week and yet they ignored the advice and every week I had to go in and help find the difference. And as I thought on these stories of people ignoring our words of advice and how frustrating it was for us, I suddenly began to think on God. “If you and I feel frustrated when people don’t follow our professional advice,” I said, “imagine how God feels when we ignore His.” He’s the only One with perfect knowledge of what’s good for us, yet we often behave as if we know better.

And that is the case here at the end of 2 Chronicles. The kings continue to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, ignoring him and refusing to turn back to him. God was infinitely patient. Again and again we read that he had pity on the people and sent word to them through messengers. But they mocked God’s messengers and despised their words and ignored them. They did not turn back to God.

Eventually disaster struck. God had enough. Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Babylonians. There is only so long that God will go before he tires of our rebellion. And that ought to be a warning to us. Somehow we have become adept at hearing God’s Word and thinking it applies to someone else – we tend to think there must be an exception for us.

God speaks to us through His Word. He graciously teaches us what is best. He patiently presents what is right and good, and allows us to choose it. The question is will we listen and heed his advice.

Pray: thanking God for teaching us what is best through His Word.

Reflect: do I listen and heed God’s advice?

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing. (v.1)

Here is a chapter that reminds us that God loves and cares for his people even although they have sinned and rebelled against him. God has brought punishment upon his people as he has allowed them to be taken captive into Babylon for seventy years. Now he is about to bring healing. He is about to restore his people. This is a reminder that God keeps his word and his promises. I wonder how many times we promise to do something but then as time goes by we forget all about it. God does not forget.

How can I be so sure? Well this chapter begins as Chronicles ended with Cyrus speaking to the people telling them that they may return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. We read in verse 1 that God stirred Cyrus' heart and caused him to say and do as he did. This is a change for us in the Bible. Up until this point God has used foreign rulers to chastise his people, here he is using a foreign ruler to bring blessing and healing and restoration.

Notice that this is all to fulfil what the prophet Jeremiah said. Jeremiah had spoken of the people being away from Jerusalem for seventy years and during Jeremiah's time the people were led into captivity. Jeremiah had spoken of God knowing the plans he had for his people, plans to prosper them and not to harm, plans to give them hope and a future (29:11). And that time is now coming. God keeps his promises. And even before this in Isaiah's time Isaiah spoke of Cyrus being the shepherd of God's people (44-45). God keeps his word - he has everything planned out.

So next time we feel like despairing because we feel things are not going as they should and that God has left us, remember that he never leaves us nor forsakes us and that he is a God who keeps his promises and will bring his plans to bear in his time.

Pray: thanking God for all his promises and his faithfulness.

Reflect: do I stand on the promises of God?

Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles. (v.1)

The names of over 4.5 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust are stored in the computers at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Visitors can search for a person's name, and if that name is on file all known information about that individual will appear, including a photo. The memorial continually seeks and gathers information on Holocaust victims, and workers there say that the ultimate goal is to identify each one of the six million victims. Yad Vashem is a very moving example of the importance of names.

Names are important to God too. We see that throughout Scripture. Once more we come to a list of names here in Ezra 2. This list is of those who decided to return to Jerusalem and Judah. This is important for it reminds us that God knows us by name and loves us as individuals. It was important, too, that the priests, Levites, and others who were to serve in the rebuilt temple be identified so their service could be established. In fact, those whose family records could not be found were excluded from the priesthood (59-63). The list is also important because the Jews who submitted to Babylon and went into exile were the ones who, according to Jeremiah's prophecy, were obedient to God and would be blessed by Him.

Only 49,897 returned. What happened to the rest? Well some had clearly become so settled in Babylon. They had accepted the way of the world. They enjoyed the pleasures of the land they were in. They were content living without knowing and following God. We have to be so careful that we don't become so comfortable in the world that we forget about God and forget where our home ultimately is – heaven.

The Lord has a book of names – it's called the Lamb's book of life. Is your name in it?

Pray: for each other as a church family that we would remain close to God and not get tempted by the lures of the world.

Reflect: is my name in the Lamb's book of life?

But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. (v.12)

When the Olympic Games resumed in London in 1948 after a twelve-year absence due to World War II, the competitors included two athletes who represented what could be called the old and the new of Olympic champions. A Dutch track star who had first competed in the 1936 Games in Berlin, Germany, returned in 1948 at the age of 30. She was relatively old by Olympic standards, but she won four gold medals! Another hero at the 1948 Games was a 17-year-old American named Bob Mathias, who won gold in the decathlon.

Interesting things happen when the old and the new come together. One of the most famous examples of this in the Bible is found in today's text, as the older exiles cried and the younger ones rejoiced when sacrifices were offered in Jerusalem for the first time in fifty years. The purpose of the exiles' return to the land of Israel was to rebuild the temple and to re-establish worship as God's covenant people.

Here the foundations are laid and a shout goes up – so loud a shout it was heard far away (v.13). It is right for us to praise God for all his goodness. And that praise ought to be exuberant. We are called in the bible to shout to the Lord and to clap our hands (Psalm 47:1), to lift our hands and praise the Lord (Psalm 134:2) and to sing praise to God (1 Chronicles 16:9). It is sad when we do not feel free to do that in church. Get on and praise God as he has called us to from His Word.

In the midst of that though it is OK to weep in worship too. The young ones rejoiced because they saw a temple in Jerusalem for the first time. The older people realised this temple wouldn't be anything like the one they remembered, so their praise was mixed with sorrow. We can worship God in different ways - let's thank God with a heart of praise - even though we may express it differently.

Pray: praising God for his goodness, faithfulness and love.

Reflect: what reasons do I have to shout God's praise?

Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. (v.4)

Former Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev often denounced Joseph Stalin in an attempt to move the Soviet people away from idolising the brutal deceased dictator. During one public meeting at which Khrushchev was denouncing Stalin, someone in the crowd shouted, “You were one of Stalin’s colleagues! Why didn’t you stop him?”

“Who said that?” Nikita Khrushchev roared. The place went quiet as the audience froze in fear. Then in a quiet voice, Khrushchev said, “Now you know why.”

Some people are so intimidating they can stop us in our tracks, while others are more subtle in their attempts to manipulate us. For the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem they saw both kinds of opposition. Firstly their enemies came and asked to help them – to work alongside them. They subtly wanted to join them and then disrupt them. People will often come to us subtly and try and make us compromise. We have to be strong in sticking to the task God has given us.

When that didn’t work they started intimidating them. And when that didn’t succeed they had people try and frustrate their plans. When the subtle approach didn’t work they went for the all out attack and the people were forced to stop work by a decree from the king.

Satan is determined to stop us from serving God and doing his work. He does it in various guises – using those within and those outside the church. He quietly and subtly whispers to us in order to divert our attention, he puts stumbling blocks in our way, he forces us to stop through all out attack. Let’s not give in to opposition. Let’s stay close to God and trust him to lead us through as we do his work.

Pray: for strength to keep serving God faithfully.

Reflect: what is holding me back from serving God wholeheartedly?

And the prophets of God were with them, helping them. (v.2)

To modernise a familiar legend, the devil had a garage sale. He marked all his tools with their appropriate price: hatred, envy, lust, deceit, lying, and pride. Laid apart from all of these was a rather harmless looking but well-worn tool marked much higher than the rest. A buyer pointed to it and asked, “What is that tool?” The devil replied, “That is discouragement.” “Why is it priced so high?” the man asked. “Because it is more useful to me than the others. I can pry open a man’s heart with that when I can’t get near to him with the other tools. Once inside, I can make him do whatever I choose. It’s badly worn because I use it on almost everyone. But few know that it belongs to me.” The devil’s price was so high that the tool of discouragement was never sold. He still uses it on God’s people.

The exiles who had returned had been discouraged and put off their work by their enemies. The work stopped for a number of years. But here in Ezra 5 it restarts. So how do you overcome discouragement and begin again? You need a jolt, a kick-start, a jump-start. Two prophets from God come and shake the people up. They brought God’s word to the people. They helped them as they got back to work and stood with them. And then they helped them persevere when further trouble came.

And that’s where we must start – with God’s Word. Next time you feel discouraged pick up your bible and read. Get your focus back on God. Allow Him to point out your sin through His Word, to remind you of His grace and mercy through His Word, to show you the plans He has for you through His Word. Get your focus back on God and not on yourself or your problems.

It is also good to get alongside someone else or allow them to get alongside you. Have a mentor, someone older and more experienced who can encourage you and walk with you. And persevere – don’t give up at the first hurdle. Keep going.

Pray: for God’s help in overcoming discouragement.

Reflect: what am I discouraged with at the moment? Have I taken it to God in prayer?

The LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel. (v.22)

Dwight L. Moody faced more than his share of opponents and critics during his incredible ministry in Chicago and around the world. In the early days of Moody's work someone nicknamed him "Crazy Moody," and Moody himself said that some people probably considered him a fanatic. Others complained that he was in ministry for the money and was using his work to gain favour with the wealthy. But instead of driving people away from Moody, his critics' attacks increased Moody's popularity, helping to expand his work. God used all these attacks against Moody to further spread the gospel.

Anyone who doubts that God can turn a negative situation around needs to spend some time in the book of Ezra. We can't say for sure that Tattenai, the Persian-appointed governor of the area that included Palestine, was a bitter opponent of the Jews. But his challenge of their right to rebuild was a major obstacle to the completion of the temple. These events became the biggest boost the Jews had for their project since King Cyrus's original decree.

Tattenai wrote to King Darius asking if Cyrus had issued a decree about the rebuilding of the temple. Darius had a search undertaken and when he discovered the decree from Cyrus he ordered Tattenai and his people not to interfere with the rebuilding work. Indeed they were to contribute to it. What a turnaround. The temple was completed and the people rejoiced. They celebrated the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread with great joy because of all God had done.

Instead of letting opposition stop us we should keep trusting in God and persevere in his work. He may well use that opposition to strengthen us and increase the work and spread the gospel.

Pray: for a situation where you feel under attack just now – asking God to strengthen you and help you persevere.

Reflect: do I have the courage and faith to persevere despite opposition?

For the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel. (v.9-10)

On Jack Borden's 101st birthday, he awoke at 5 a.m., ate a hearty breakfast, and was at his law office by 6:30 ready to begin his day. When asked the secret of his long life, the practicing attorney smiled and quipped, "Not dying." But there's more to it than that. Mr. Borden, who was baptized at age 11 in the Clear Fork of the Trinity River, said "I'm a firm believer that God has His hand in everything that happens. He is letting me live for some reason. I try to do the things that I believe He wants me to."

Ezra experienced the gracious hand of God on his life. We see mention of God's hand upon him as we are introduced to him here in Ezra 7. The king not only gave his verbal permission for Ezra and the people to return, but also gave a written decree for Ezra to carry. This decree included several commands of the king, beginning with the fact that any Israelite who wanted to could leave with Ezra. The king and his counsellors were sending silver and gold with Ezra to buy offerings to give to God. They were also given permission to receive more from those who gave them freewill offerings. Ezra was placed in charge of appointing a government in the land. Artaxerxes gives Ezra and those he appoints authority to enforce the both the Law of Moses and the Law of the Persians.

God's hand was certainly on Ezra. And we are told in verse 10 why – Ezra had given himself to studying and living the Word of God as well as teaching it to others. God desires to bless those who place such high value on His Word. Ezra had set his heart on studying the Word, putting what he learned into practice in his own life, and teaching it to others. All of these things are connected to promises of God's blessing. Because Ezra made the Word of God a priority in his life, God made Ezra's life a priority.

Pray: for help in reading and learning from God's Word

Reflect: do I make the Word of God a priority in my life? Do I apply what I learn and live by it?

So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. (v.23)

A 12-year-old Haitian girl's feet were so deformed that she was actually walking on her ankles. She asked some missionaries if they could help her, but the girl's father, who looked to a voodoo priest for advice, refused to let the doctors operate.

So the missionaries began to pray fervently that God would intervene. After 2 days, the father returned with his daughter and gave them permission for the surgery. Just before the operation, the youngster pointed to her heart and said, "I'm not afraid, because I put Jesus right here." The operation was successful, and all who knew about this situation are praising the Lord for His answer to prayer.

We see Ezra and the people here doing the same thing and having the same reliance on God. They are returning to Jerusalem and they have with them a large amount of silver and gold. This was to be a freewill offering to the Lord. Carrying this amount of valuable items was dangerous. They would be open to attack from bandits and robbers. So before they began their journey they stopped to pray. Indeed they fasted and petitioned God.

Ezra knew that you can prepare, observe safety rules, surround yourself with bullet-proof glass, buy insurance, and all the rest, but if God is not granting you safety, there is nothing that will protect you. Isaiah 31:1 reminds us to seek God for protection and help. Ezra knew that apart from the protection of God, you really have no protection at all. And so they humbled themselves, fasted, and sought the Lord in prayer for a safe journey. When they safely arrived they gave thanks to God.

What a lesson for us as we live life – to pray, then to work and then to praise God for answered prayer and help.

Pray: for God's help in a situation you face currently.

Reflect: do I always pray first before serving God? And do I always give him thanks for answered prayer?

And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice. (v.4)

Someone has said that God's people tend to have short spiritual memories. Most of us can verify the truth of that statement. We're usually pretty good at following God in tough times because, after all, where else can we turn for strength and help? But when times get better, or God gets us out of a tight spot, it's easy to forget His deliverance. Worse yet, sometimes we wind up back where we started; doing the things that got us into trouble in the first place.

It seems almost inconceivable that the Israelites of Ezra's day could have fallen into the sin of intermarrying with the idolatrous peoples around them. This was the one sin that, as much as any other, led to Israel's spiritual downfall and captivity. God had strictly forbidden intermarriage with other nations, because He knew that His people's hearts would be led astray. This was not an issue of racial purity, but spiritual purity. Israel's long spiritual decline can be traced back as far as Solomon, who married many foreign women who worshiped detestable idols. Solomon's wives turned his heart from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8), and the worship of idols was established in Israel.

When Ezra heard about this sin and how rampant it was, he was appalled. The fact that God's people had entered into sin so quickly after leaving Babylon and so blatantly in rebellion to the Law of God just wiped him out. His physical reactions demonstrated his inward feelings. He tore his clothes to demonstrate that his heart was ripped. He pulled out his hair and beard, causing himself physical pain to match that of his spirit. And then he just sat down in silence. Sin in our lives or in the lives of those around us should cause us to feel the same.

This led on to Ezra praying for God's forgiveness. He didn't make excuses and he did not excuse himself. He prayed for forgiveness for them all. May we not forget the lessons of the past and may we be quick to repent when we do sin.

Pray: for God's forgiveness for sin in your life.

Reflect: how is my spiritual memory? Do I look to God always?

But in spite of this there is still hope for Israel. (v.2)

The late Sam Rayburn, legendary Texas congressman and former speaker of the House of Representatives, once offered this advice to other members of Congress: “On any piece of legislation, if you’re convinced in your heart that something is right, do it, go after it, fight for it, even if you find yourself in a minority of one.”

Ezra wasn’t a politician, but he knew that he was doing the right thing in seeking God’s forgiveness and confronting the people who had entered into unholy marriages with non-Israelites. And in this case, he was not alone. Ezra’s deep and sincere grief brought forward a large group of people who were also deeply distressed over this violation of God’s Law. They encouraged him to be strong and they would stand with him and support him.

In the midst of the serious nature of the situation the people recognised that God is faithful and just. There is still hope (v.2). And so there is. God judges sin, but forgives those who are repentant. God hates rebellion and iniquity, but gives man time to realise his wrongdoing and turn away from it. God is angered by transgression, but is merciful to transgressors that seek His forgiveness. There is always hope in the cross of Christ.

Ezra called all the people together and explained the situation. He exposed their sin and called for them to repent and turn from it. The people were challenged by this but recognised their sin and were willing to do as he said. A few opposed this but most did not. As the chapter concludes we see the list of names of those who were guilty. And we see them turning from their sin and making a guilt offering before God.

May we stand up for the truth always, and not be afraid to confront a brother or sister caught in sin. May we point them to the cross and pray that they seek God’s forgiveness.

Pray: for strength to stand up for the truth.

Reflect: do I allow others to keep me on the right path?

For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed. (v.4)

Some people prefer not to know what's going on, because information might bring obligation. "What you don't know can't hurt you," says the old adage; but is it true? In a letter to a Mrs. Foote, Mark Twain wrote, "All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence; then success is sure." But what we don't know could hurt us a great deal! There are people in the cemetery who chose not to know the truth. The slogan for the 1987 AIDS publicity campaign was "Don't die of ignorance"; and that slogan can be applied to many areas of life besides health.

Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem and the Jews living there because he had a caring heart. When we truly care about people, we want the facts, no matter how painful they may be. Closing our eyes and ears to the truth could be the first step toward tragedy for ourselves as well as for others. Nehemiah asks to find out what is going on and then when he discovers he is heartbroken and weeps. The information he has makes his heart heavy and for many days he mourns and fasts and prays. The information he received led to prayer – and not just prayer but prayer and fasting.

After praying and fasting for some days he then prays a very specific prayer. He prays for his people. He firstly confesses sin – his and the people's. He does exclude himself from this but enters into to it. He recognises that he himself is not faultless. He then asks the Lord to be attentive to his prayer and to give him favour before the king. Nehemiah is cupbearer to the king. This is a very trusted position. The cupbearer would taste things before the king did so that no one could poison the king. Nehemiah is respected and trusted and well thought of by his master. Here he asks the Lord to grant him favour as he goes before the king to ask him for help.

It is good to find out about others – even if that means we have to respond. Nehemiah responds by turning to God in prayer. What better a starting place?

Pray: for friends and loved ones today.

Reflect: do I always respond firstly by taking things to the Lord in prayer?

Then I prayed to the God of heaven. (v.4)

Former US president Dwight Eisenhower once remarked that leadership requires “persuasion, and conciliation, and education, and patience. It’s long, slow, tough work.”

Given these requirements and the hard work involved in leadership, it’s not surprising that the list of effective leaders in history is relatively short. And if you want to narrow that list even further, limit it to those leaders who accomplished the most amazing things under the toughest circumstances imaginable. Nehemiah’s name would be on this short list. He was a captive in a foreign country who had no way to return to his devastated homeland and no resources to rebuild it even if he were able to go back. Nehemiah also served a pagan king who had already stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem once (Ezra 4:17–21) and had heard on more than one occasion that those Jews in the Persian province of Judah were rebels.

Things are tough for Nehemiah. There is a lot going against him. And we can empathise with him because at times in life we have much going against us. At those moments we may feel like giving up or walking away. Look at Nehemiah though. In this moment as he stands before the king with a sad face the king asks what is up. He explains about the city of Jerusalem and then the king asks what he wants. Nehemiah shoots up one of those arrow prayers and then asks the king for time off to travel and to oversee the rebuilding of the wall. He also has the courage to ask for items for doing the rebuilding. And the king responds favourably to Nehemiah.

Prayer is a powerful weapon in the Christian’s armoury. God caused Artaxerxes to be compassionate toward Nehemiah’s concern and favourable to his request. The king gave his cupbearer the time, the authority, and the military protection Nehemiah needed to return to Jerusalem and do something about the city’s plight. May we never fear and always turn to the Lord in prayer.

Pray: for courage to face a situation you are in just now.

Reflect: do I have the faith to trust in God and pray to him for help?

The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them. (v.2)

The work of repairing the walls begins and it is interesting to see how it works. The people all worked together. All through this account you will find the phrase '*next to him*' worked so and so, and '*next to them*' worked others. The writer takes note not only of the workers but also the shirkers, however. Verse 5 says of the men of Tekoa: '*their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.*' Did you know that God records slackers too? When people will not take up their ministry, God puts their name down in that column as well. But the rest all worked together. They helped one another. Nehemiah had so marvellously organised this that each one had a section of the wall or a gate assigned to him.

Notice also they worked near their home. Verse 10 Jedaiah '*made repairs opposite his house.*' Verse 23 tells of certain men who '*made repairs in front of their house.*' The important truth that emerges is that this is God's design for ministry. God has placed us all strategically where He wants us to be. Your neighbourhood, office, or home is where your ministry should be. That is why God put you there. This is brought out beautifully here as we watch these people working in their own neighbourhood.

Finally, each one completed his assigned task. They kept on until they had finished the work. Some had more to do than others, but no one failed - except the '*nobles*' of Tekoa who would not dirty their hands. I have learned through the years that responsibility is always the mark of spiritual maturity. The most mature members in a congregation are those who stay with the work that has been assigned to them until it is done.

God is building His church right where you are. What are you doing to help in the work? Are you working together with others?

Pray: for the strength and determination to keep going in the work you are doing within the church locally.

Reflect: am I sticking at the task until it is done?

Our God will fight for us. (v.20)

Years ago, Theodore Roosevelt noted, “It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with dust and sweat and blood; and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

We all face our critics at times – those people who criticise our work, our productivity, our faith, our family, our living; those people who seek to stop us doing what we are doing; those who want to put us down and take us out the picture. Nehemiah also encountered stiff opposition from all sides as the work progressed on the wall of Jerusalem. When the enemies of the Jews saw that the workers were actually getting somewhere on this staggering job, they realised it was time to act. Sanballat, Tobiah, and their friends may have wanted to rule Judah themselves, or they may have been motivated by hatred of the Jews. Moreover, Tobiah was an Ammonite, a people who were the ancient foes of Israel.

These men started with ridicule, and when that didn't work they plotted to kill Nehemiah and the workers. Nehemiah knew their threats were not empty, so as a leader of prayer and action, he turned to the Lord for help and then put a plan into effect. It is amazing how Nehemiah set up his defences without stopping the work. But we also need to remember that he and his workers were in a dangerous position, and the people were exhausted from the hard work. Nehemiah realised that if the enemy attacked in force, it would be a fight for survival. So he kept a trumpeter with him who could rally the people at any point of attack.

In his time of trouble Nehemiah turned to God in prayer and then acted to keep the work going. May we never stop doing what God has called us to do.

Pray: for God's protection on all those serving in the church.

Reflect: how do I respond to critics?

*Remember me with favour, O my God, for all I have done for these people.
(v.19)*

Believers exert a positive influence on others by setting a good example with the consistency of their lives. Will Houghton, president of Moody Bible Institute during the 1940s, was such a person.

Before Houghton became president of Moody, he pastored a church in New York City. An agnostic living there was contemplating suicide, but he decided that if he could find a minister who lived what he professed, he would listen to him. Since Will Houghton was a prominent figure in the city and a pastor, the man chose Houghton for his case study. He hired a private detective to watch him. When the investigator's report came back, it revealed that Houghton's life was above reproach. The agnostic went to Houghton's church, accepted Christ, and later sent his daughter to Moody Bible Institute.

Nehemiah is an individual who had a positive influence on others. This man had heard the despairing news that the city walls lay in ruins. He prayed to God for help and approached the king asking to go and repair the walls. The king allowed him. Nehemiah not only oversaw the work but he rolled up his sleeves and got his hands dirty. As well as that we see a problem with the poor arising here. Nehemiah responds by giving the poor money and grain from his own pocket.

Nehemiah then rebuked the nobles and officials for not doing enough to help the poor. On account of how Nehemiah lived his own life, they could do nothing but listen to him and follow his example.

We set an example to those around us as we live our lives. May we set such a good example that people see our good deeds and glorify God (1 Peter 2:12).

Pray: for God's help in living life his way and being a positive influence on others.

Reflect: does my life point people to the Saviour?

But I prayed “Now strengthen my hands.” (v.9)

After the American colonists’ victory over the British in the Revolutionary War, conditions in the new nation were far from perfect. Rampant inflation and other severe problems led one army officer to write a letter to George Washington on May 22, 1782. The letter suggested that the commander seize power with the help of the army, declare himself king or dictator, and establish a stable government that could meet its financial obligations. Washington reacted to the idea with scorn. “I must view the proposals with abhorrence and reprehend with severity,” he wrote back. “I am much at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to this idea which to me seems big with the greatest mischief’s that can befall my Country.” The officer quickly dashed off a letter of apology.

Washington’s reply is strikingly similar to the answer Nehemiah gave to those who charged that he was scheming to set himself up as king of Judah. Nothing in his conduct as governor of the province could have given anyone reason to think he was making a grab for power. The charge that Nehemiah was plotting treason against King Artaxerxes was just one of the tactics of his enemies trying to destroy him and God’s people.

Nehemiah knew that the letter from an enemy leader contained lies designed to scare him and his countrymen off the job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. But Nehemiah was wise. He responded by continuing to do what he knew was right. He was sure his motives were correct. So he asked the Lord to strengthen his hands for the work that remained (v.9).

When we are falsely accused or disturbed by the threats of others let us not listen to their words but continue to listen to the words of God and keep doing what he has called us to do. Pray that God would strengthen our hands for the task to which he has called us.

Pray: that God would strengthen your hand for the task he has called you to.

Reflect: are my motives in serving God pure and correct?

So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. (v.5)

The wall is rebuilt and Nehemiah has set the gatekeepers, singers and Levites in place. He then appoints Hanani to be in charge of Jerusalem. He does this because Hanani is a man of integrity who fears God as well. Our reputations count. People watch our lives: how we speak and act. Our lives may draw people to Christ or push them away.

Nehemiah then reports that God put it in his heart to gather the people together. We then find the list of names of all the people who returned from exile. We have already seen this list in Ezra 2. Why the need to repeat it? Well it does serve as a break between the physical wall being rebuilt and then the spiritual reform of the people themselves. It also serves as a reminder that people are important to God. Nehemiah uses the list to instil in the people a reminder of their personal and national identity as God's people and to encourage them to fulfil their responsibilities in light of this identity.

Although these names do not mean anything to us, they mean something to God. He knows His people by name. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, "calls his own sheep by name," and they follow Him because they know His voice (John 10:3-4). Make sure that Jesus knows you by name! You may be thinking, "Doesn't Jesus know everyone by name?" In the sense of His omniscience, yes. But in the sense of personal knowledge, no. Make sure that you are one of His sheep!

Here in Nehemiah there are people who are excluded because their family records could not be found. They are viewed as unclean for the priesthood. Let us make sure we are on the family list. If you have never accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour now is the time to change that.

Pray: thanking God for your salvation and your place in his family.

Reflect: do I take my responsibility as a child of God seriously?

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. (v.8)

A contender at the 2005 World Scrabble Championship Finals in London said mathematics and a good memory are necessary to win, but not a good vocabulary. A New York Times journalist described the event as “a time when language divorced itself from meaning” because a champion may create a high score using obscure English words such as zobo and ogive without knowing their meaning.

All of us are susceptible to what might be called “The Scrabble Syndrome” - using words to win religious arguments without understanding and demonstrating their meaning. Bible verses can become weapons against those who disagree rather than life-altering truths to be lived. It is important for us to not only know the term but to know what it means in simple every day language.

Here in Nehemiah Ezra has brought out the book – the Torah, the first five books of the Bible – and the people have stood up as he has done so. Interestingly they stand as it is taught as well. The Levites came and taught the people from the Book. We read in verse 8 that they not only read it to the people but they made clear what it meant. They explained the concepts behind the words. They gave it meaning so the ordinary person could understand.

That is what I, and hopefully all good pastors, seek to do in their ministries – read and explain God’s Word so it is plain and clear for everyone to understand. In our own conversations with people we should seek to share God’s Word with them in a simple down-to-earth way. Not so we detract from what the Book actually says but simply so that those we share with understand the actual meaning of what God is saying to us. As we read and share God’s Word with them make sure they have a copy of it open before them so they see what we are reading and sharing.

Pray: thanking God for your pastor and praying that his teaching would be good and clear.

Reflect: do I share God’s Word clearly and simply with others?

Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting. (v.6)

Someone has said that the most miserable person on earth has to be an atheist who suddenly feels grateful and has no one to thank. That's one problem God's people don't have. In fact, we are commanded to live in an atmosphere of continual thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

The community of God's people who had been restored to their land had a long list of reasons to praise God. The Levites, who led them in worship, called on the assembled people to do just that. This remarkable public service of confession, praise, thanksgiving, and commitment to obedience included three hours of listening to the reading of the Law, and another three hours of confessing sin and worshipping.

In the previous chapter the Book had been brought out and read and taught to them. The people recognised their sin and wept. Nehemiah reminded them not to grieve for '*the day of the Lord is your strength.*' Here on a later day that month they come to deal with their sin. The day is spent fasting. Without taking time to prepare and eat food they are able to spend more time focused in on God. They read from God's Word and as they heard the Word they examined their lives and God by his Holy Spirit revealed their sin. The people then confessed that sin to God. Following this they worshipped God.

Their worship was from grateful and thankful hearts – grateful for all God had done for them and thankful that he had forgiven their sins and was restoring them in his presence.

We too when we read God's Word ought to allow the Holy Spirit time to reveal any sin in our lives, then we can confess that before God. We are then in a place to thank and praise him for all he has done for us through Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross of Calvary.

Pray: thanking God for Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Reflect: am I continually thankful for all God does in my life?

We are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it. (v.38)

A grey-haired old lady who was a long time member of her church went out the door one Sunday and said to her pastor, “That was a wonderful sermon, just wonderful. Everything you said applies to someone I know.” The key to spiritual renewal is not to apply God’s truth to those we know. It is to apply it personally and specifically.

In Nehemiah 8, we saw the beginning of a revival as God’s people gathered and listened to His Word being read and explained. In chapter 9, the people repented and confessed their sins. Now, in chapter 10, they make a corporate covenant to put God’s truth into practice in a number of specific areas. They don’t know how else to show their commitment so they make a binding agreement and put it in writing. And I love the way the leaders start the ball rolling and then place their seal on it at the end. This is a big commitment.

The chapter lists the names of the leaders who signed the covenant (9:38-10:27); the general obligation of the covenant (10:28-29); the agreement not to give their children in marriage to outsiders (10:30); to keep the Sabbath (10:31); and to provide for the ongoing maintenance of temple worship (10:32-39). They are wanting to take all they have learned in these past days and commit to following it from now on.

By putting it all in writing they are showing that they want to change and want to walk in God’s ways always. This written agreement would serve as a reminder to them of that commitment. We show our commitment to God in various ways. One of the ways is baptism as we publicly declare our faith in Jesus and our desire to walk with him always. We are able to look back on that moment and remember our commitment. Are we committed to walking in God’s ways?

Pray: asking God to help you walk in His ways today.

Reflect: have I committed to following Christ wholeheartedly? Have I declared my faith publicly in baptism?

*The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.
(v.2)*

Although the city wall had been rebuilt at this point, Nehemiah discovered that he had a problem. He had a fine, well-defended city but without people! His solution was to draft families to move there, for a capital must be inhabited since it is the heart of the nation. As the governor, he simply issued an edict: "One out of every ten people living in the suburbs must move to Jerusalem." He went through the towns and cast lots to bring the people in to the city.

If you read this carefully, it is apparent that when a man was chosen to move into Jerusalem, he was permitted to decline if he wanted to. That is because God wanted volunteers for this. So a man could be chosen but could decide against moving. Then the lot would be cast again and another name chosen. Sooner or later someone would be found who consented freely to go. According to the account, those who chose to go were commended by the people. They honoured them because they volunteered to do what God called them to do.

The same principle applies in the church today. According to the New Testament, we are all called into the ministry - all of us! The ministry belongs to the saints! The minute you become a Christian, you are moved into God's New Jerusalem. You are asked to take up work there, to serve God according to the spiritual gift He has given you. But you must also volunteer to do it. God does not force His people to do what they are asked to do. He gave us all spiritual gifts, but He does not force us to use them. Yet if you want to be respected or honoured and commended at last by the Lord Himself and by all His people, then the wise thing is to volunteer to perform in the area of ministry He has opened up for you.

Pray: thanking God for the gifts He has given you.

Reflect: am I cheerfully and willingly using my gifts to serve God in His church?

The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. (v.43)

I love going to the Keswick convention in the summer. I don't know how many are crammed into the tent for the meetings (must be well over 1,000) but the singing can be immense. I remember singing one of the great old hymns and feeling the hairs on the back of my neck stand up! I've often wondered what it sounds like outside. If you are late coming to the meeting you can hear the singing from afar. That's what it must have been like here in Nehemiah 12. We've seen the walls rebuilt; the people restored in their relationship with God, confessing their sin and committing to walking in His ways going forward; and now it is time for the dedication service.

Two choirs stood on the walls and sang their praise to God. So loud was their rejoicing we read that it could be heard far away. Joy cannot be contained. It must break out in praise to God through songs of thanksgiving. Whether those who hear our outpouring of joy understand it or not, it will resound as a chorus that cannot be ignored - the music of lives lived out in praise to God.

We also learn of giving here in chapter 12 as we see men appointed to look after the storerooms. The people gave from grateful hearts and that is the best way to give. Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell the story of an old Scotsman who inadvertently dropped a gold sovereign in the collection bag at a church service. In those days when the ushers took up the offering, they used a long pole with a bag on the end of it, which they passed among the pews. This old Scotsman put in a gold sovereign by mistake when he meant to put in only a shilling. As soon as he realised his mistake, he tried to retrieve his sovereign. But the usher pulled the bag back and said, "Nah, once in, always in!" The old man said, "Ah well, I'll get credit for it in glory." The usher replied, "Nah, you'll get credit for the shilling!" That is all the old man intended to give. So we are to give as God has given - freely and gladly. Sing for joy to God thanking Him for all He has done in our lives and give cheerfully to Him too.

Pray: praising God for all He has done in your life.

Reflect: do I freely and gladly give to God?

I was greatly displeased. (v.8)

The high priest allowed Tobiah to move into the temple. To make room for him, the high priest took over the storeroom that was set apart for the grain, oil, and incense used by the Levites in their purification and ritual ceremonies. So there were two wrongs involved. An Ammonite and his family were actually living in the temple, contrary to the Law of Moses; and, they had deliberately defrauded the Levites of their rights of storage.

When Nehemiah returned he went into prompt and passionate action. He threw the baggage out, purified the room, and returned the oil, grain, and incense to their proper place. Many people feel that he overreacted. Today we do not get upset by the presence of evil and think it strange that a man should act like Nehemiah did. We have lost to a great degree our ability to express outrage and public indignation over things that are wrong.

We must remember, however, that this is similar to the incident in the New Testament when Jesus came into the temple and found it filled with moneychangers. Jesus reacted in a way similar to Nehemiah. He made a whip and went around the temple, upsetting tables and driving the moneychangers out. It indicates that there is a time for strong stands against the evils that others have indifferently accepted.

Evil invades us quietly. Before we are aware of it, we have compromised and gone along with standards widely accepted. We find the people of God have often been corrupted by this kind of thing. When it comes down to individuals, this is a picture of our struggle with our flesh. We must be prepared to be drastic and take often painful action to clear up the things that are wrong in our own affairs. Many Christians allow evil to take root in their own lives. This story pictures the way these false forces can invade our lives and take up rooms in the very temple of our spirit, polluting and destroying us in the process. Take action. Do not allow these evil things to remain. Even if it takes painful effort to do so, end it!

Pray: seeking God's forgiveness for the way we have compromised our faith recently.

Reflect: in what ways have I compromised my faith recently?

Then when the king's edict is proclaimed...all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest. (v.20)

In 1967, American vocalist Aretha Franklin topped the charts with her hit single "Respect." The song became an inspirational anthem for the civil rights movement and for others who demanded to be treated with respect.

Long before Aretha's hit record, Queen Vashti topped the Persian charts with her own version of "Respect." The book of Esther begins with King Xerxes hosting a great celebration. In addition to displaying his wealth and power, he also wanted to showcase his wife's beauty. So he commanded that Queen Vashti be brought before him and his guests.

If she obeyed, she would have allowed the king to degrade and disrespect her. If she refused, she risked losing her life. She refused. What courage! Vashti didn't want to compromise her character by being reduced to a piece of property. Her desire for respect led to her banishment – she would never again be allowed in the king's presence. We have no record that Vashti feared the Lord. But her courage shows that she understood the God-given dignity accorded to every human being.

The king's advisors come up with this idea of banishing Vashti and issuing an edict about it all – hoping that women would suddenly respect their husbands more. Respect is earned. And respect has to be given as well as received. Women are not the property of men to be shown off. God created us to live in a loving relationship. Indeed a man is to love his wife as Christ loved the church – that is something to live up to!

Of course in all of this we see God's hand at work. He is not mentioned by name anywhere in the book of Esther but he is at work throughout – his providential hand is there to see. With Vashti out of favour, the king will go looking for a new queen – and Esther will be there to play a key role in saving the Jews.

Pray: giving thanks for your husband/wife and praying for couples within the church family.

Reflect: do I always treat my spouse with love and respect?

Mordecai found out about the plot who told Queen Esther who in turn reported it to the king giving credit to Mordecai. (v.22)

On the morning of September 11, 2001, a small detail averted further destruction in Washington, D.C. and the loss of many more American lives. United Flight 93, taking off from Newark and flying to San Francisco, left 42 minutes after its scheduled departure. This delay allowed some passengers to learn of the other plane hijackings that had taken place earlier that morning. These passengers knew that they, too, would become a bomb in terrorist hands, so they heroically tried to take back the plane from the hijackers.

One simple detail of one ordinary morning - a flight delay - spared many lives. God's rescue mission for His people in the book of Esther is a display of His work through details. In today's reading, we find Him at work, preparing His plans for a crisis that hasn't yet been announced.

The king is looking for a new queen (the old one was removed because she refused to go to his wild party) and he goes through an exercise not dissimilar to Blind Date when it was on our television screens. He has many girls prepared and brought before him. When Esther appears he is besotted by her. She won his approval and became queen. Esther is related to Mordecai and is a Jew. At this point in time no one knows this. She keeps that information to herself. Mordecai sits at the gate, unseen by most people. He hears of the plot and warns Esther who warns the king. Although she mentions Mordecai, he does not receive recognition for his heroics until later in the story. God is weaving a masterpiece together.

God is the most magnificent craftsman, weaving a masterpiece out of our lives with what seem to be small and insignificant threads. In the kingdom of God, nothing is ordinary. A trip to the supermarket, a regular day at the office, an afternoon at your child's football game can be divine appointments. Ask God for wisdom to see where He is at work

Pray: asking God to show us where he is at work and what he wants for us to do.

Reflect: do I see God's providential hand at work in my life.

Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. (v.6)

According to Daniel Schaeffer in his book 'Dancing With A Shadow', the Eskimos devised a way of killing wolves. They planted a knife in the ice with the handle buried. Then they put chunks of fresh meat on the blade and let it freeze. The wolves would smell the blood from afar and come to devour it. As they licked the frozen meat, they worked themselves into a frenzy. Soon they cut their tongues on the razor-sharp blade and began feeding their hunger with their own blood. They would lick until they slowly bled to death.

There is a sense to which Haman is working himself up into such a frenzy here in Esther 3. He craves more power and prestige. He is promoted by the king and given a seat of honour. He likes when people bow before him. He thinks he is better than everyone else. Mordecai refuses to bow down and when this continues for some time Haman gets annoyed and wants rid of him. When he discovers he is a Jew he decides he wants to wipe them out. He comes up with a plan to take to the king to achieve just that. As we will see as the book continues Haman works himself into a frenzy and like the wolves ends up dead himself.

So too, we today can self-destruct on our own pride, selfishness, greed, lust, or thirst for revenge. When we fail to recognise the danger of sin and allow ourselves to become obsessed with it, we are in danger of self-destruction - as was Haman. To avoid that end, let's daily open our hearts and lives to God's examination, and ask Him to forgive us for the sin He exposes.

Let's remember that God is at work in the story here. He knew this was going to happen. That's why Esther is now Queen. That's why Mordecai the Jew sits at the gate and has not received the recognition for his heroics yet. These two will play a major part in saving the Jews from Haman's plan. God is always at work.

Pray: for God to protect us from self-destruction.

Reflect: do I daily open my heart to God's examination?