

# The Real Warfare of the Reforming Leader

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We're going to turn now to our reading, and we're coming to our final study in the book of Nehemiah, and Nehemiah chapter 13.

And just, if you'll find Nehemiah chapter 13, which is page 408 in the Church Visitors Bibles, and we're going to start reading at verse 4, and you'll see that verse 4 begins in our Bibles, now before this, rather implying that these things happen before the words of verses 1 to 3.

But in fact, that is not so. These words shouldn't be taken in a temporal sense, before this, but in what you might call a spatial sense, before this, meaning in front of.

Literally, it says before the face of. It's used about 30 times just in Ezra and Nehemiah. If you turn back to chapter 9 and verse 24, I'll give you an example, in case you don't believe me.

Chapter 9, verse 24, it says, So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them, the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites. You subdued in front of them, before their faces, these peoples.

[ 1 : 1 9 ] Look down at verse 28. After they had rest, they did evil again before you, in front of you, before your face. So, that's really how we should translate the beginning of verse 4.

And you'll understand, as we begin to read, because the end of chapter 12, verses 44 to 47, speak about the commitment Nehemiah and the people made to give provision for all the work of the temple, all the tithes, the offerings, the provision for the priesthood, the singers, the Levites, the teachers of God's word.

And verses 1 to 3 speak of the great commitment they made, once again, to obey Moses' commands, to separate themselves from all pagan foreigners, and to be pure, as God called them to be.

But, verse 4, in the face of this, Elishabh the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber, where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem. For in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, that's 12 years after this story begins, in the 20th year of Artaxerxes, so it's much later, for in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I went to the king, and after some time, I asked leave of the king, and came back to Jerusalem.

[ 3 : 0 6 ] And then I discovered the evil that Elishabh had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry. And I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.

Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chamber. And I brought back there the vessels of the house of God with the grain offering and the frankincense. I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers who did the work had fled, each to his field.

So I confronted the officials, and I said, why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then old Judah brought the tithe of the grain, the wine, and oil into the storehouses.

And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah, the priest, Zadok, the scribe, and Padaiah of the Levites. And as their assistant, Hanan, the son of Zachar, son of Mataniah, for they were considered reliable.

And their duty was to distribute to the brothers. Remember me, O my God, concerning this. And do not wipe out my good deeds, my loyal covenant acts that I have done for the house of my God and

for his service.

[ 4 : 22 ] In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepress on the Sabbath and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys and also wine, grape, figs, and all kinds of loads which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.

And I warned them on the day when they sold food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah in Jerusalem itself. Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and I said to them, what is this evil thing that you are doing profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way?

And did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath. As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and I gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath.

And I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

[ 5 : 37 ] But I warned them and I said to them, why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time on, they did not come on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love, your covenant love. In those days also, I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.

And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and could not speak the language of Judah, but the language of each people. And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair.

And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, you shall not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not King Solomon, king of Israel, sin on account of such women?

Among the many nations, there was no king like him and he was beloved by his God and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.

[ 7 : 00 ] Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib, the high priest, was son-in-law of Sanballat, the Horonite.

Therefore, I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated that priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Thus, I cleansed them from everything foreign and I established the duties of the priests and Levites each to his work and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times and for the first fruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, do turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 13, page 408, if you have one of the visitor's Bibles.

A chapter all about the real warfare of the reforming leader. Often, at the end of a story, you have a little epilogue, don't you?

[ 8 : 23 ] It begins something like this, many years later. And it tells of how everything went just wonderfully and children were bountiful and grandchildren and all was well for years to come.

Well, here we have Nehemiah's epilogue. After the great climax of chapter 12, the walls built, the city repopulated, worship and witness restored, a great celebration and plans and provision for that continuation.

And now it is many years later, verse 6, tells us. Remember, the story began in the 20th year of Artaxerxes and all the building work, everything we've been studying happened really over a matter of a few months, at the very most, perhaps a couple of years.

But then, after 12 years, Nehemiah went back to Persia, to the king. He probably stayed for some years and then asked to come back to Jerusalem.

So, very probably, we're dealing with something like at least 15 years after the main events of the story. Why is it here at all?

[ 9 : 29 ] I mean, why would you not end your memoirs on that high point of chapter 12? Well, it's because Nehemiah is an honest man and God is an honest God.

And he wants to teach his people to be honest and to be realistic about themselves. And he wants every Christian leader to know that the work of reformation according to God's word and by his spirit will never be complete as long as we live in this fallen world and with these fallen natures.

Do you remember how we began our series in this book right at the beginning? It was quoting the words that Daniel heard from the angel. To the end there will be war. Now, Daniel was told that not to discourage him or discourage God's people but to prepare them because the angel also said, you remember, but the people who know their God will be strong and take action.

But of course, great realism and great resilience will be needed if that's to be so. And this is certainly a chapter that presses that lesson home for us. How vividly we see the enemy still at work, still taking opportunity to attack, especially when there was a leadership vacuum with Nehemiah out of the picture.

And Matthew Henry, the Puritan, says that the enemy always sows his seeds when people are asleep or absent. Just like when Moses was off up the mountain in Sinai, the golden calf was built. [11:01] And how true that often is still in the church today. It is often a leadership vacuum, doesn't it? Isn't it? That leads to all kinds of mischief. And likewise, it is often after a very significant time of blessing and growth and advance in the life of God's people that there's a very great backlash and a regression.

And that's why Paul keeps turning us back to the Old Testament in saying, these things are written for us in the church of Jesus Christ today so that we'll be warned not to seek after evil as they did. And he says, we should take heed lest we fall because our temptations are exactly the same as theirs and our flesh is just as weak as theirs was. The New Testament is the epilogue, if you like, of the story of God's redemption in Christ.

Tells us what happens many years later after the triumphant resurrection and the ascension of the Lord Jesus. And what do we see? The great advances of the gospel in the book of Acts giving way to all these letters of Paul to churches full of troubles, full of sin, not least among their leaders, full of unfaithfulness.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, begins with letters to the seven churches representing the whole of the church in Asia Minor. And what does it say? Nearly every single one of them is a call to repent.

[12:27] And the watchword is you must persevere to the end through many battles to receive the crown of life. That's why the Apostle Peter says you must strive, all of us, to make our calling and election sure.

And we need to learn realism about what that means. And it means there will always need to be ongoing reformation among God's people and in our hearts right to the very end.

There's no point of special dedication or achievement that we can reach from which we can't slip back. There's no such thing as a congregation or any fellowship of God's people that is unassailable by evil.

And there will be no such thing as real, ongoing, spiritually reforming leadership that doesn't involve battles. Plenty of them. So this is a very important chapter for any Christian congregation, for any Christian leaders, whether you're leaders in the church or in your home or any other group at all of the people of Christ.

And it's a chapter I think that forces us into real humility. But it does also offer us real hope. So I want to look at it under four headings. The first will definitely be the longest.

[13:46] And it's this, Nehemiah's great problem. which is both troubling and very threatening. It must have been such a massive disappointment to Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem and find all the things that he did.

But it wasn't just the disappointment. The real danger of the situation is what so alarmed him and called for these actions that we see in our chapter. This was a massive threat to the integrity of God's people as the people of God and their distinct identity as his, as the seed of the woman with whom the responsibility for nothing less than the fulfilling of all God's plans and purposes for saving this world was in their hands.

I wonder if we grasp today the enormity of the task that the Lord Jesus has given to his church today. It is to the church, to us, that he has committed the mission of his gospel that alone will bring eternal salvation and will change this world forever.

If we don't think that the integrity of the church is important, we don't think it's a very big deal that the church should be kept pure.

Friends, let me assure you, God himself considers it a very big deal. And Nehemiah certainly did here. And that is what explains his actions.

[ 15 : 15 ] As Derek Kidner puts it, if on his first visit he'd been a whirlwind, on his second he was all fire and earthquake to a city that had settled down in his absence to a comfortable compromise with the Gentile world around.

What he find on his return is evidence of corruption of the true faith in almost every area of the people's lives. Let's summarize it under the three areas that Nehemiah gives us here, beginning with verses 4-14 where we see the corruption of worship.

We see the desecration of this sanctuary by wicked men who through their nepotism and their neglect show their utter contempt for God himself. This is one of the most blatant in your face defiances of the word of God imaginable.

And it's right at the heart of the church of God. That's what verse 4 signifies. As I said, the translation before this is unhelpful.

It's quite wrong because clearly verse 6 tells us this was happening many years later. But literally it says in the face of this, meaning in the face of everything you've just read about the people's commitment to provide for the temple, about their commitment not to be mixed with foreign paganism and foreign gods.

[ 16 : 39 ] In the face of all of this, not only does Nehemiah find the temple is neglected, but he finds the Ammonite of all Ammonites, Tobiah, the sworn enemy of everything he's ever stood for.

He finds him ensconced right at the heart of the temple. Verse 5, in a chamber which is large. And if you look at the size of it, it was the size of a warehouse. It was to be filled with all these supplies for God's work.

But they had obviously been cleared out of the way to make way for God's enemy and all his furniture. It is deliberate in your face desecration of the sanctuary of God and disobedience to the command of God.

Someone who should never have been there at all was asked in and given a place of influence and power right at the heart of God's church and things which should have been there, all the provision for the true ministry of God's church, again by God's direct command, as verse 5 says, had been abandoned and put out.

And behind it all was nepotism, as verse 4 says. Tobiah was somehow related to Elisha the high priest. And not only that, verse 28, look down. Worse than that, his son Jehoiada, who may actually by this time have succeeded him as the high priest, he was married to the daughter of Sanballat, who was even worse than Tobiah, if such a thing could be possible.

[ 18 : 09 ] It is such a direct rejection of everything that the people had committed and covenanted to back in chapter 10 with a solemn oath and curse that they took upon themselves to separate themselves from pagans, to give all the honor and the provision for the house of God and the work of God.

And as verse 7 says here, this was not just a bit of an issue as we might euphemize it today. Nehemiah says this is evil.

Verse 29, he says it's a desecration of God's house. But nepotism like that can cause corruption because, as we know, blood does run thicker than water and blood very often runs thicker than faith commitments also.

And that is still sometimes true today, isn't it? You know that in churches. Sometimes family dynasties and connections can cause all kinds of difficulties. Church leaders often find themselves in very difficult situations because somebody is misbehaving and it's very difficult to deal with them because of their connections and their relations and all of that sort of thing.

Well, it wasn't just nepotism here but it was neglect. as verse 5 implied and you see that explicitly in verses 10 to 14 because the tithes and the provision was not coming in.

[ 19 : 36 ] Maybe people now had had a grudging attitude to giving. Maybe they just didn't care anymore about the temple. Maybe they were as Malachi the prophet said, robbing God. And remember, Malachi was ministering very probably around this very time.

But the result was a desertion of the ministry. Verse 10, the Levites weren't being provided for so they had to go back to their lands to grow food so they could live. But notice in verse 11 that Nehemiah puts the blame squarely at the door of the officials.

Perhaps it wasn't that the people were not willing to give but that temple bureaucrats were siphoning it all off into a gravy train to line their own pockets or just perhaps to have a bloated bureaucracy.

That's hardly an unheard of thing in centralized church administrations is it? Nor is the corruption that siphons off church money, gospel money to enrich ecclesiastical institutions.

Think of the vast wealth that the Church of Rome amassed during the Middle Ages corruptly. That was one of the things that led to the Protestant Reformation. And here is just such a picture of the corruption of worship.

[ 20 : 49 ] Wicked men showing contempt for God in their nepotism and in their neglect of God and His work because they wanted man's favor and they wanted worldly gain.

Well with that going on in the heart of the temple it's hardly a surprise is it to see in verses 15 to 22 the whole of Israelite society generally being corrupted by wealth. These verses speak of disdain for the Sabbath by worldly men living for money and material gain and just showing by that their complete conformity to the world.

You remember when we looked at chapter 10 that we saw that the people pledged themselves to embrace God's Sabbath command. And it wasn't just about the Sabbath day but it was about a whole way of life because Sabbath culture is a culture of anti-materialism.

It's a culture that liberates you from slavery to merely this world and this world's things. God's people are liberated people liberated from slavery in Egypt no longer enslaved to this world but freed to live for God and to live for God forever.

And so they can trust God for their mere earthly needs. We don't need to slave just to live. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness says Jesus and all these things will be added to you.

[ 22 : 12 ] You can trust God and the Sabbath is a sign of God's grace. It's a sign of liberty from that world of slavery. But you see it's so deep in our human hearts isn't it?

To want to go back to slavery. We think we need liberation from God's commands and God's gracious direction and rule. We think that we know better. That's the story right from the beginning isn't it?

In Eden. It's a story of the people of Israel under Moses. Let's go back to Egypt. Wasn't it great there? It's the same in the New Testament in the church in Galatia.

They thought they were going on to far greater liberation but Paul knew how wrong they were. He said how can you turn back to the weak and worthless things of this world?

How can you want to be slaves again? You see but that is what conforming to this world's materialist values is doing. It's going back to slavery.

[ 23 : 09 ] It's going back to a horizon for life that is merely this world and its things not the eternal kingdom of God. And that's what Israel were doing here.

Amos way back in the 8th century had warned them of the dangers of this drift in their society. So had Jeremiah read Jeremiah 17. This Sabbath breaking will lead you into exile he said and that is precisely what happened.

And that's why Nehemiah warns them here in verse 15. I warned them. And friends I think it is a warning about the materialistic world that we still need to hear in the church today.

Many Christians today have said this before talk about wanting to be liberated from the bondage of commands like the Sabbath as though it were a bondage that was a nuisance to us to think that our Christian Sunday for example would be kept in any way special or observed.

Now it's true I think in Scotland particularly in certain parts of the country and at certain times there has been a legalism there has been a religiosity about Sabbatarianism just as there was among the Pharisees in Jesus' day but we do need to challenge ourselves about the materialism of our culture we need to ask has it really been great for our world and is it great for us to conform to the world has it been a great liberation a great advance for our culture for example that our shops are open seven days a week and some of them even 24 hours a day is that a great liberation for us or is it a bondage is it perhaps why we have so much work related stress in our society today is it why there is so much family and social disruption not to mention the largest debt mountain in history which no nation knows how to handle and no new president will be able to sort no matter what he thinks is it a good and healthy thing that we as God's people should just conform our thinking and our lives to the materialistic consumeristic world view that's all around us that's what these verses show

[ 25 : 28 ] Israel was doing they were indistinguishable from society all around them look at verse 15 Israelites engage seven days a week just like the pagans and verse 16 the pagans hard attitude

in the midst of Jerusalem itself exclamation mark note the emphasis there profaning the Sabbath right in the heart of God's holy city the way of the world the values of the world right at the heart of the people of God you see God took his Sabbath very seriously because to ignore his day the whole culture and the way of life that that signified was to clearly put this world before the eternal world in his kingdom it was to put this world's idols before him in your life and God still takes that very seriously you cannot serve two masters said Jesus you cannot serve God and mammon this material world with all its money and achievement ambition career learning success whatever it is that you covet and chase see corruption by wealth by living for mere material gain of whatever kind it is that betrays our conformity to the world and that has been it will always be a real threat to the integrity of the people of God and if it's not challenged he knows that it will end up destroying them and extinguishing their witness in the world as most certainly it would the third threat that Nehemiah encountered in verses 23 to 29 which is corruption of Israel's men by their women disobedience in the sexual realm by weak men who by living for their passions and for seeking peace just show their compromise with their natural sinful nature and once again this was a flagrant departure from the solemn curse and oath that they said they'd bind themselves to in chapter 10 not to intermarry with unbelieving pagans but you see it was a real ongoing witness you see the same thing back in Ezra chapter 9 and 10 you remember and it was a huge threat to their spiritual life but not only to their spiritual life look at verse 24 it was so dangerous to the next generation because if the children followed their language language and culture of their mothers they were going to be deprived of the word of God because they didn't know the language of the Bible the Bible was a foreign book to them and so as Derek

Kidner says a single generation's compromise could undo the work of centuries once their children are lost well the next generations are lost somebody was telling me just the other day of a man they knew a man in his 60s who'd come back to the Lord and during his prime years his years as a father and a husband with family he had drifted away from Christ from the church but he'd come back to the Lord in his 60s and that's a wonderful story but but he lost his whole family to the church all his children and his grandchildren and that's what happens isn't it now clearly this threat involves both men and women it takes two to tango but the emphasis here and it's very clearly an emphasis that is frequent in the Bible the emphasis is on women leading men away from faith it is a particular weakness of men even great unwise men like Solomon here verse 26 pagan women made even the great Solomon to sin that may be unpalatable but it's a fact that the Bible asserts that women often make weak men sin see our culture today is so shaped by feminism so shaped by confusion about gender that it might be outrageous to some of you that I would even say such a thing but the Bible is very clear all through it from Genesis 3 onwards and Paul is very clear and very specific if you read 1 Corinthians 11 if you read 1 Timothy 2 so is Peter 1 Peter 3 and so on both men and women have to be realistic not to compromise with their sinful nature and not to compromise with the sinful assumptions of the culture all around us and men have a weakness because of their passions their sex drive and and because of their desire for peace in their relationships men want a quiet life this is the truth ladies if their wives badger their husbands in a relationship they will acquiesce because they want peace and Christian men need to acknowledge that reality and Christian women wives need to realize it too and you need to help your husbands and not hinder them in being a godly man in being a real man a proper man in being leaders in putting the language of Judah as it were in first place in the family's life not just the language of Ashdod in putting spiritual matters first not just social matters and we need to see the threats in our culture because there is a great assault on masculinity in our culture today in part that is because secular feminism has lied to women and made women in our culture believe that you can have everything that you can have everything that a woman has always had and you can also have everything that men have also had always had and you can have it all at the same time you can have an intense commanding career and you can have a wonderfully varied social life and you can have fashion and glamour and you can have fitness you can have the perfect body and you can have small children and you can have the perfect home and you can have all of these things that is a lie you cannot have all of these things

at least you cannot have them all at the same time that is why there's so much dissatisfaction around us in our society today but friends if Christian women if wives and mothers insist on wanting to have all of these things then there's a real danger a danger that men will become more and more devoted to mere domestic and social involvement in the home and not to real spiritual leadership

not to their nurture in and their nurture of the church and if that happens then more and more church life will just become fitted into family life if it can be and when it can be instead of it being the other way around family life ordered around church life and a man if he is made to feel torn between the demands of his wife at home and his duty to

God and to the church let me tell you because a man wants peace he will acquiesce he doesn't want trouble and strife he doesn't want a cold shoulder in the bedroom either and when his wife says you can't go to that prayer meeting you can't go out of church again you can't be doing that I need you at home we need you at home you acquiesce and some of you will not like me saying that I've got a bulletproof vest on underneath my shirt but I've said it and I'm going to say it again I want you to listen if you don't insist on the language of Judah that is your clear commitment to the covenant community of God's people the church if you don't insist on making that dictate to your family life and not the other way around you will reap what you sow in the next generation and that's the truth of God and that's why Nehemiah took this so very seriously well we've seen the great problems

Nehemiah faced let's look at what he did in response Nehemiah's great purge which both confronted and cleansed the community verse 30 summarizes everything he did in his own words I cleansed all the impurity I established a bulwark of proper spiritual leadership again and I provided for the real work of God's temple Nehemiah instigated a necessary confrontation and people didn't like it that's why it was contentious but he did it verse 11 he confronted the officials verse 17 he confronted the nobles verse 25 he confronted the people who were engaged in wrong relationships and he did it friends because Christian leaders have to confront they have to say and do things that people don't like they have to warn of things that people don't want to hear as Nehemiah did in verse 15 now don't mistake that does not mean Christian leaders are to be contentious people confrontational people by nature no read 1st

[ 35 : 49 ] Timothy 3 that's the opposite of what they're to be but they must be willing to confront and contend when it's necessary because that is the only thing that will bring what Nehemiah brought here which was a necessary cleansing and it wasn't soothing savalon liquid was it it was more like scrubbing an open wound verse 8 a summary eviction for Tobiah and all his furniture and we might be shocked by that but as Jesus himself showed when he evicted men and furniture from the temple sometimes gentleness is sin zeal for the Lord's house consumed the Lord Jesus Christ just as it consumed Nehemiah right here and as Matthew Henry puts it so should zeal for the holiness of God's temple in our hearts consume all us sometimes a violent cleansing is necessary isn't it when matters of heaven and hell are at stake pluck out your eye rip off your hand better to limp into eternity than to be lost in hell

Nehemiah cleanses God's house he restores proper right patterns there and he warns the people about their worldliness verse 15 and not only does he give a theological argument of verses 17 and 18 but he forces it through into practice doesn't he in the verses that follow it's no good is it for the preacher just to teach biblical truth if the church has never changed its structures don't reflect obediently the truth of the law of God no God's word needs to get out of the pulpit into the pews into our pores into the whole warp and woof of everything we do as God's people and that needs real resilience that sometimes needs force look at verse 21 there was action clearly wasn't there behind Nehemiah's words I'll lay hands on you maybe it's his response in verses 25 to 28 that we find most uncomfortable all this cursing and then the chasing away of the high priest the curse wasn't Nehemiah venting his own spleen the curse was simply making these people face up to the solemn oath and curse that they had bound themselves to back in chapter 10 Nehemiah is doing what we find so difficult to do in our culture he's grasping a nettle he's speaking about the elephant in the room we say oh you can't say that it's not nice it's so rude you can't do that oh how can you do that to poor Jehoiada and his nice wife I can assure you if Nehemiah did something like this today his inbox would be filled with angry emails saying I can't believe what you've done I demand a response I want to meet with you to tell me what you've done and why isn't the J.I.

Packer Moses David Jesus nor Paul would have ever qualified as Mr. Nice Guy the assumption so common today that niceness is of the essence of goodness needs to be exploded there are more important things in life than being nice see Nehemiah's concern could not be niceness when real love and real faithfulness to God demanded difficult measures had to be taken out of love for these people and their future and the Bible is clear real discipline is an act of love for Christ's people as well as an act of love to God and that means difficult things have to be said difficult things have to

be done difficult people have to be dealt with privately yes if the sin is private if it's an interpersonal matter but publicly if it is public or becomes a public matter that's Jesus teaching in Matthew 18 that was Paul's practice read 1 Corinthians 5 or read

Philippians 4 verse 2 or Ephesians 5 verse 11 but leaders of God's people have to say things and do things that people don't like and that people will resist whether it's leading in the home with your children you know that or in a CU or in a group ministry or in any part of the life of the church but let me tell you it is not easy to do that I know it's very very hard and it makes even the toughest leaders like Nehemiah tremble hence the insight that we also have in this chapter to Nehemiah's great prayer his prayer which is marked isn't it by pain but also by penitence you see his prayer there in verse 14 and 22 and in verses 29 and 31 it's certainly not self-righteous prayer it's the very opposite anybody in Christian leadership knows that because in the face of failure in the face of disappointment you feel it's your fault you're responsible what does

[ 41 : 02 ] Hebrews 13 say of leaders leaders are those who watch over your souls as those who will give an account to God and every failure therefore in the church's life feels like your responsibility and your fault it's deeply painful this is my fault and that's especially so isn't it when people are opposing you opposing your action or at the very least are saying well you didn't handle it well it was done in a very unloving way and when he says remember me oh God he's saying remember me and help me I need your intervention I'm up against it and he says in verse 14 don't wipe away my good deeds the word is literally my my heseds my my covenant faithfulness to you don't wipe away my loyalty Lord you know I'm trying to be faithful you know I'm being loyal to you that's why I'm doing this and don't let the apparent unraveling of all of my work disqualify me from being your true servant spare me verse 22 is what he prays not according to my greatness but look according to your great mercy and covenant love you're a steadfast love he's saying

Lord remember me a sinner just like the thief on the cross prayed Lord remember me a sinner it's a prayer for mercy this isn't the haughty prayer of a self righteous man it's the humble prayer of a penitent man seeking to be faithful in real love to God's people it's the very opposite of self love it's the very opposite of vengefulness look at verse 29 he asks God to remember these wicked ones for God to judge them Nehemiah doesn't Nehemiah warns Nehemiah chastises Nehemiah disciplines yes to restore God's people but he doesn't punish or judge he leaves that to God he throws himself on God and them and says remember me oh Lord it's encouraging I think isn't it if you feel beleaguered at times in Christian leadership whether it's in your home your family your children whether it's in your school SU whether it's in a CU whether it's in any part of your work in the church it's encouraging isn't it that we also can cry out to God like that remember me

Lord for good I feel so disappointing but you know I'm trying to be faithful you know I'm doing what I can remember me remember what you said that even the weakest efforts in your name for your people that they won't go unnoticed we can do that Hebrews 6 10 tells us God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake serving the saints he knows and even in the face of disappointments he hears us he'll answer our prayers so that as Hebrews 6 goes on to say we also can be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherited the promises just as Nehemiah did and that word inheritors of the promises reminds us I think of one last thing that we mustn't overlook in this passage and that's Nehemiah's great prophecy which is both hope filled but also humbling for us because remember this whole book like the whole

Old Testament is prophecy it points forward it looks for fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his everlasting kingdom Nehemiah was a messenger of the covenant just like Malachi promised he came to God's temple and to his people as a refiner's fire to judge to purify but he was just a forerunner wasn't he of the real Messiah to come the one who would purify his people forever who would bring lasting cleansing and lasting renewal and so this chapter points eloquently to that overwhelming need for ultimate cleansing at last New Bible commentary puts it like this it's as though the book is pointing to its own failure in reminding us that however important good structures and routines may be nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart this people need a real and permanent savior is that not obvious and of course the gospels open don't they with words of fulfillment telling us that Malachi's promise at last come the messenger of the covenant is here to cleanse and to purify not only to outwardly cleanse the temple in his day of its desecrations but to go to the cross to cleanse his people's hearts from sin forever so that even a dying thief can pray

Lord remember me and receive that assurance yes you will be with me in paradise and you see because the Lord Jesus has come and done that we know he will come again just as Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after an absence but when Jesus comes again after his absence he will make us holy forever he will cast out every blot every blemish forever and ever that's his ultimate promise to us that we shall be his spotless bride at last without blemish we shall be like Jesus the only one who is the true covenant keeper so there's hope there's hope for us hope for each one of us when we despair at our own sin at our own constant backsliding at our own conformity to this world hope for the fruit of our labors for this kingdom when it seems such a grinding toil when it seems like weeds just spring up everywhere all the time no matter how much we try and put them down

[ 47 : 05 ] Jesus shall return and then says John we shall be like him there is hope but there must also be humility mustn't there until then don't forget Daniel's words to the end there shall be warfare if the Old Testament closes with a whimper like this so does the New Testament with battles aplenty with calls to arms again and again against the world the flesh and the devil and even the greatest leaders even the greatest teachers like Nehemiah and Ezra like Peter and Paul and John and even the best structures you can possibly ever have for the church they cannot do what only the final renewal of our lives by the Spirit of God will do when Jesus comes to raise us up in new bodies so as Ralph Davis says the end of Ezra

Nehemiah serves as a blinking yellow caution light to those who had placed too much confidence in the reform of the church or indeed of the world yes of course we must press constant reform we must never ever become arrogant or complacent we must never think for example that oh by leaving a corrupt denomination by joining a new one or starting a new one or eschewing them all and being utterly independent so we can be totally holy by ourselves we must never ever think that that will stop us from potentially falling back no we need humility only our ultimate bodily renewal when we're raised up sinless in new bodies by the spirit of God at the return of Jesus only that will bring the cleansing that will really last but until then we need the constant renewal by the same spirit of Jesus living in us and shaping us constantly by his word into a humble people a people who know their need and so are people who are constantly seeking

God's grace semper reformanda is the great saying the church always in need of being reformed according to the word of God our hearts constantly needing to be reformed by the spirit of God through the word of God and friends it will be a battle right to the very end so we must be humble let me end with another word from Ralph Davis Ezra and Ahemaiah should drum into us a holy distrust of ourselves and give us a clear grasp of how tenuous our devotion really is prone to wonder Lord I feel it prone to leave the God I love isn't it healthy to see that and if we do is there not hope there is hope there is hope but we need to keep praying like Nehemiah

Lord remember me remember me remember me in your mercy and your steadfast love let's pray heavenly father we are so conscious of our weaknesses and so many areas of our lives indeed in every part of our constitution how thankful we are that you have given us one another in the church to encourage one another to rebuke one another to restruct one another to call one another constantly constantly back to you and to your word and to your ways humble us we pray never let us be a people who think we've arrived and can never fall help us constantly together to flee from idolatry and to flee to you the God of mercy the God of grace hear us and on this day of national remembrance remember us remember us with mercy oh God our God for Jesus sake  
Amen