

Well, good evening, y'all. Good to see you all tonight as we wrap up our study of Ezra and Nehemiah. We're doing a little recap tonight, and this will be the last study before we transition to summer prayer meeting, which will be held in Smith Chapel beginning next week for the months of June and July for back here in August, sometime in August, probably about mid-August. So we'll take a break from the teaching, the lesson time, and we'll just focus on the meal and 30 minutes of prayer and then we're done beginning next week. So please join us for that. We will be over in Smith Chapel for it. So tonight I wanted to recap again the book of Nehemiah and to kind of touch on the high points again and focus on Nehemiah as a man. and the kind of Christian that he was and how the Lord used him and how he had many detours in his life and how the Lord brought him from where he began to where he ended up. But I think you all would agree that God seems to take pleasure in using very, very unlikely people to accomplish his purposes. He does this again and again and again, not only in scripture but in church history. A friend of mine gave me a biography years ago about a missionary by the name of Lilius Trotter. I don't know if y'all are familiar with that name or not. But she was an aspiring artist. She was very gifted. And her medium was sketching and watercolors. And she had a promising career ahead of her. A very, very talented artist. She was a woman of privilege and means. She lived in England about 150 years ago. But she chose to give up her life of ease because she was convinced that the Lord was calling her to be a missionary to Muslims in Algeria. And so she laid her privilege and her wealth aside and she pursued that with all of her heart. Nevermind that she didn't know a word of Arabic at the time, not a word. And never mind that she had a heart condition that caused her to tire out very, very easily and required her to have long periods of rest after short periods of activity. What others saw as impossible, Lilius Trotter saw as God's calling on her life and she pursued it wholeheartedly. And the name of this biography, appropriately enough, is A Passion for the Impossible. It's a great title and it describes her life very well, at least what I know of it. Some might look at that sort of kingdom ambition and say that that is just arrogance. or that is outright lunacy. Why would anyone lay aside those privileges to attempt something that seems impossible? Well, Lillia simply believed her Bible, and she saw this recurring pattern again and again in scripture, that God loves to use very regular people to accomplish extraordinary things, does it again and again. So with that opening fall, let's pray as we begin tonight. Father, we thank you that you are an awesome and sovereign and holy God, that you created all things from nothing, a span of six days, and all very good. You sovereignly oversee and superintend all that you have made. You work

all things for good for those who love you and are called according to your purpose. Father, why would we be amazed when you continually do amazing things through very ordinary means and ordinary people? Thank you for how you did that in the life of Nehemiah, in the life of Lilius Trotter and countless other Christians who have followed you and attempting big things for you. Lord, I thank you for how that is reflected in Nehemiah's commitment to prayer and commitment to action. Thank you for being with us through this study. Be with us this evening as we recap these things and refocus on them with a look ahead. In Christ's name we pray, amen. So why does God give us certain personalities and certain life experiences and certain specified training earlier in our lives? Well, often it seems that the Lord is preparing us for things that only he knows about. And we have zero clue about what's around the corner, but we know that God is preparing us for something. Nehemiah is one of those people that God shaped and formed in his early years in unique ways and then put in a unique position of influence at a certain time in history to accomplish something that most people would consider absolutely impossible. Nehemiah was a layman. He wasn't a person of specific priestly or theological training. He's an everyman. and he's given a very unique calling by the Lord. When we first meet Nehemiah, he's got a pretty good gig. He is the cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes. Persia is the new superpower in the ancient world and being cup bearer is a pretty secure position in that kingdom. And Nehemiah enjoys success in that. It's a pretty prestigious appointment for an exiled Jew who's come out of Jerusalem so many years ago. Now, Nehemiah has very little power of his own to speak of, but he is appointed as cupbearer in a very strategically influential position for such a time as this, you might say. So he's an insider with the king. King Artaxerxes trusts Nehemiah implicitly. The cupbearer, as you know, gets to taste the wine for the king to make sure it hasn't been poisoned. So this issomeone that you trust with your very life, quite literally. And no one is thought to be more loyal to the king than the cupbearer. So the cupbearer was also relied upon, sometimes for counsel, for advice. The king would confide in the cupbearer. But besides Nehemiah's vocation, what really mattered most about him as a person was that he was very much a man of God. As loyal as he was to his boss, the king of Persia, he was even more loyal to his Lord. He was unconditionally loyal to God. And because he was, Nehemiah is intensely concerned about something that's happening 800 miles away in Jerusalem. When we first start the story, it's been 70 years since Zerubbabel had managed to rebuild the temple of God. And it's been 13 years since Ezra's return to Jerusalem to be a shepherd of the people's spiritual needs and to care for

them spiritually. And now Nehemiah is called to the forefront, to the limelight for such a time as this. So that wall that once stood so proudly and so strongly around Jerusalem has now been reduced to rubble and the gates have been burned by fire. And when Nehemiah hears this very bad news, it breaks his heart. He has a visceral emotional reaction to that terrible news. And Nehemiah teaches us a very valuable lesson about what we do when something happens that breaks our heart. We go to God, because where else can we go? He alone has the words of life. He alone has the hope. He alone has the sustaining grace that we need. So Nehemiah speaks to God about this problem. And as he does, as is so often the case with prayer, he begins to formulate a plan in his mind, or rather, God begins to give him a plan that sort of coalesces in his thinking as he is praying. How often when we pray about a seemingly insolvable problem, and all of our lives are filled with unsolvable problems, but as we are praying for them, something occurs to us that we had never considered before. This seems to have happened with Nehemiah. As we continue to persist in prayer, he reveals to us how we ourselves can be part of his answer to our prayers. So he shows us specifically how we fit into his plans, to his answer to the prayer. So Nehemiah begins to get a sense of how he himself can be strategically used as God's answer to his own prayer. Specifically, God's calling him to go back and to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Now, that is a big, big commitment, and it's one that's going to require a sacrifice of Nehemiah. Nehemiah, you see, has to be willing to leave this good gig he has, which is a pretty secure thing for an exiled Jew in Persia. With the safety and security of what has become to him a very familiar home in Persia, to leave what he knows and venture out to what he does not know. So Nehemiah has to be willing to give this up, to follow God to Jerusalem, again, for this seemingly impossible task and mission. Well, he does so, and the rest, as they say, is history. God uses him in astounding ways. And what stands out above all with Nehemiah in this, when God uses him, is that he is first and foremost a man of prayer. Nehemiah is always praying to God. Before his mission to rebuild the walls, during the building project, and after the project is completed, we hear these prayers going up repeatedly to God. Nehemiah keenly felt his need at every juncture for the Lord's help, and it drove him to his knees time and time again to ask for that help. This is another parallel with Lilius Trotter, who sometimes lived in absolute dependence, desperate dependence even, on God to break down walls racially, and linguistically and culturally with those Algerian Muslims. And she knew unless he did break down those barriers, her mission was going to fail. And so she

was keenly, desperately aware of her dependence on the Lord, and Nehemiah was as well. There's a repeated refrain that comes up again and again in the book of Nehemiah. Remember me, O God. Remember me, O God. In fact, Nehemiah closes his autobiography with these words, remember me with favor, oh my God. So throughout the impossible task of what he has to do in Jerusalem, Nehemiah's leadership was absolutely exemplary. This is a very skilled man with a great faith. He's a model of delegation. And as you all know, if you've ever tried to attempt something big for God, you can't do it yourself. You've got to train others who will follow along using their gifts and abilities to carry out the tasks that have been given to them. So Nehemiah does a great job of that. And God really uses Nehemiah as the driving force or the point of the spear to erect the city walls in record time. In 52 days, they throw up the walls of Jerusalem and make them stable again, which is an astounding accomplishment. One could only be accomplished by God's grace. God used Nehemiah as the driving force to do this. And the sheer volume of troubles and problems that Nehemiah faces is absolutely overwhelming. I get tired just reading about the constant problems, the fighting's without, the fears within, the constant troubles, the difficulties, the obstacles that this man has to overcome by God's grace. So, so obviously was God's hand on this whole mission that even the enemies of the project had to admit in the end that God himself was behind it. And they reluctantly did admit that with quite a bit of fear and trembling that, you know, God himself really is with these people after all. And God also used Nehemiah, even though he was a layman, to be an important catalyst to spearhead a revival among God's people. It wasn't just that he accomplished a menial task, it's that he was part of God's plan to spiritually awaken the people of Judah again. So he was masterfully used by the Lord. Now, not everybody has Nehemiah's leadership skills and acumen. We might not feel like we are in an important position as he is or will ever be. So you might think, how could God ever do anything great through little old me, through someone like me, through someone with my meager gifts and talents? But there are a couple of ways that you can be more useful to God than you might think. One of those is to become a person who is given to prayer. Not just the who does that once a day and checks it off. Yes, I have my quiet time, but someone who is given to praying without ceasing, praying about everything, opening up your heart to God. Nehemiah certainly did that. So welcome him into your thoughts. Share your thoughts with the Lord. He knows our thoughts anyway, of course, doesn't he? So why not share them completely with him? He wants to enter into those thoughts and transform those thoughts. We might think from time to time,

you know, my little problems are too mundane for God. He has bigger fish to fry. But if it's enough to occupy our thinking and consume our emotions and our energies, God wants us to share it with him. So pour your heart out to God like Hannah did. Spread out your problems in the presence of God like Hezekiah did. Pray arrow prayers to God. If a specific problem comes home

to you and you feel overwhelmed in the moment, shoot an arrow prayer to God. Engage in longer seasons of concerted prayer, also like Nehemiah. He does that as well. Secondly, be not only a person of God given to prayer, but also be a person given to action, resolved by God's grace to take those things that God is teaching you from his word and resolve by his grace, empowered by the spirit to put those things into practice. Nehemiah did that in the details and was used mightily of God. Who knows that the God of the impossible might just have a mission that he specifically wants you to accomplish for his purposes. To revisit Lilius Trotter, at the end of spending 40 years in Algeria ministering to those Muslims, she'd established quite a bridgehead for the gospel there. uh, couldn't really be measured as much in numbers, but her influence is staggering there. She used her writing ability and her artistic ability and most of all, her contagious love for the Lord and her love for people to influence generations for Christ. An Algerian woman whom Lillian Lilius had befriended once said this about her. No one ever, ever, loved us like she did. What a legacy for Christ. So may we like her and like Nehemiah cultivate that passion for the impossible. Why? Well, because the God that we serve has told us nothing shall be impossible with him and through him. Well, a few strengths and accomplishments from the pages of Nehemiah and from the man Nehemiah himself. He was certainly a man of character, a man of persistence, just would not give up, and a man of prayer. He was a brilliant administrator. He was a great planner, a great organizer, a catalyst, you might say, an executive, a great motivator, Nehemiah would have made a great basketball coach, I think. There are times as a coach when your players need encouragement. There are times as a coach when the members of your team need to be taken behind the proverbial woodshed. There are times as a coach when you need to be a counselor to your players. There are times when you need to be a drill sergeant. And a good coach intuitively knows when each of these things is called for. Nehemiah seemed to have an intuitive grasp of what his people needed. He could be stern and he could be very gentle. And the Lord led him in that amazingly. So the wall of Jerusalem was built in 52 days with his help, went from a pile of rubble, smoking, fuming rubble, to a strong wall protecting Jerusalem in 52 days. Again, an astounding achievement by God's grace. And as a political leader, he led the nation to religious reform and spiritual awakening. A modern-day

political leader who was also instrumental in revival that stands to me as a modern parallel is Abraham Kuyper, who was the prime minister of the Netherlands and also an ordained minister, used both politically and spiritually in incredible ways, much like Nehemiah was. Another great thing about Nehemiah is that he remained calm and poised despite all sorts of opposition. pretty convicting to me. Sometimes

under opposition and under stress, I can be anything but calm. Nehemiah always seemed calm and poised because of his faith in the Lord.

So he dealt with both opposition from without and from within because he knew who the Lord was and he knew who he was before the Lord. He was also capable of being

bluntly honest with his people when they were sinning. He wasn't above saying, stop it. This is what God's law says.

You're not doing it. You're doing something that is rebelling against the Lord. Stop. There will be consequences. There will be repercussions.

And the Lord used that boldness. three lessons from his life.

One is that the first step in anything worthwhile for the Lord is to pray. The first step is always to pray. There was a young minister who once told a session about this big challenge that was facing

the church. And an elder says, well, preacher,

tell us what you're going to do about it. It's almost like,

what are we paying you for, right? And the preacher says, well,

the first thing we're gonna do about it is pray. And the elder

says, oh, I knew you were gonna say that. That's what you always

say. We need to do more than pray about this. So the pastor

says, yes, we do need to do more about it than pray, but we don't

need to do less about it than pray. You can do more than pray

only after you've prayed. Until then, you've done less

than pray. It's a pretty good answer. That

was Nehemiah's plan of attack as well. Pray first, act second. Secondly, under the direction

of God, and with his help, and with his strength, and with dependence

on him, you can accomplish much, much more than you think you

can. God seems to specialize in doing the impossible using

very, very flawed, sinful people. That's all God has to work with,

isn't it? Flawed, sinful people. other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

So pray big prayers that are worthy of a big God. Do hard

things that you can't accomplish except with God's help and equipping. Attempt huge, audacious things

for God as Nehemiah did. Go big or go home with God. And

thirdly is, do you want to serve God? If so, there are two components

from Nehemiah's life that are very, very helpful, talking with

him and walking with him. Nehemiah shows us both of those

things very, very clearly in this book. A few vital statistics about

Nehemiah, just to wrap things up. First of all, where? Well, Nehemiah starts off in

Persia, as we've said, but he ends up in Jerusalem, some 800

miles away. It's a reminder that your place

of origin is not necessarily an indicator of your place of

destiny. God may uproot you from where you are, plant you somewhere else. And he tends to not ask our permission first, but he sometimes does that. His occupation, well, he started off as the king's cupbearer. Later on, he becomes a city builder. And then finally, the eventual governor of Judah. I don't think anyone could have predicted from his first job what his final job would be. Of course, God knew it all along and was preparing him for the next challenge. His relatives, for one, Hakaliah, who is mentioned in several of the lists in Nehemiah. Y'all know there are lots of lists there. Hakaliah is his father. And who are his contemporaries? Just sort of put these folks on a timeline. Ezra, obviously, Artaxerxes, Tobiah, Sanballat, all these are contemporaries with Nehemiah. If you had to sum up Nehemiah's life and book in one verse, it's probably Nehemiah chapter 2 verse 18. This might be Nehemiah's life verse if he had such a thing. It's when he travels from Persia to Jerusalem and he meets with the Jews that are there and kind of assesses the situation, rides around Jerusalem on his horse, assesses what's needed, and then he talks to the Jews there. And he says, I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, let us start rebuilding. So they began this good work.

And he repeatedly refers to this as a good work that God has given them to do. So he shares with them the word of God and the vision that God has given him. And they respond very appropriately. They get to work. They obey what the Lord has communicated to them through Nehemiah. It's a great model. And finally, I'll close with a great quote from Mark Ross on his lectures on Nehemiah. He says, Nehemiah was a man of extraordinary passion and accomplishments, which of course come down to an extraordinary prayer life, to an extraordinary God. There's a record of God's great works through Nehemiah. Yes, he does stand out as a tower among men, but only because of what God did through him. The same God that worked in and through Nehemiah can work in and through us. When we pray as deeply and as earnestly as he did, And when we give ourselves over to his purposes, as Nehemiah did, we can expect him to do extraordinary things through us as well. Amen to that. And with that, let's transition into a time of prayer.