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NEHEMIAH 7

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

[PRAYER] Father, we come before you as humble people, recognizing our deep need for you. We look around ourselves, around our country, around our world and we see all kinds of challenges that cause us great humility and great need for you. We ask, Lord, for you to work in our world. We pray for our President, that you'd give him wisdom. We pray for the tensions with Iran, for the persecution of Christians in North Korea and other places. We pray for the starvation that's taking place often in several African countries. Lord, the needs are huge around our world. But you know each of our hearts and you know that even in our own hearts we have needs that weigh us down, struggles that we face. Lord, we're grateful that we can come together as a church, that we're united by your Spirit, and that we can find encouragement and hope, belonging, connectedness, and also we can find through you solutions for those deep needs inside of our hearts. We're grateful for your word that you've given us. The anchor, the rock that it is. So as we look at it today, we ask that you would teach us some foundational truths, things that we need for our own hearts. Encourage us today. Lord, there are some who are not here today who may be listening through the Facebook Live. We pray for them too. We ask that you would bless them in their hearts today. Use your word to teach us and to change us. We ask in Jesus' name, amen.

I want you to think for a minute, what did you accomplish this last year in 2019? What did you complete? Or what progress did you make in your life? What kind of accomplishments? Let me give you some ideas if you're thinking about this. Maybe you accumulated some assets or you increased your financial position a little bit more this last year. Maybe something took place in your work where you were able to progress or maybe you moved to a new job. Maybe in your Bible study you picked up some new skills and teaching from God's word in some way. Maybe in relationships you've increased them or made some changes in relationships. Maybe you've worked on some personal boundaries that would help you to move forward in one way or another. Maybe something in your health has been an accomplishment.

The reason I think about the accomplishments is because in our passage today Nehemiah has reached a milestone, an accomplishment for him. But I think it's interesting that God isn't so much concerned with the outward appearance as he is with the heart. Certainly the outward things, the accomplishments that we have, the assets, the activities that take place in our lives are important. But God looks deeper.

I just want to suggest that you pause with me for a moment to look at the progress you've made and maybe those different areas will indicate some things that have gone on deeper in your heart. That maybe if you moved somewhere in your finances is because God is doing something deeper

on a heart level and you can focus on these heart qualities that God is developing more in your life. Maybe you're becoming more frugal or more content or more generous in your finances. In your work maybe you're becoming more diligent or creative or thorough. You see there's something deeper going on, but this isn't just about surface. Maybe in your Bible study you become more focused in your heart or you've become more spiritual or even wise. In relationships maybe you've become more gracious or friendly or committed. Maybe in personal boundaries you become more cautious or on the other side more bold or more sensitive or self-controlled. Maybe in your health you become more self-disciplined that you've developed perseverance or conscientiousness. Part of what I'm trying to indicate here is that God wants to do something deeper in our lives and it's not always about the surface things that other people see, but God sees what's going on inside of our own hearts.

Now as we study the book of Nehemiah, I try to take the principles we learn about leadership and the principles we learn about progress in Nehemiah's life and his work and apply them to our own spiritual lives. What is God doing in our own spiritual walk? How is He trying to make changes in our own hearts? I want to do that some more today by focusing not so much on the accomplishments that other people might see, but the accomplishments that are going on inside of our hearts, those things that make up who we are. I want us to look at that a little bit more. Because I think we're going to see in Nehemiah's practice now and what he does in this story as we go through it some application that we can apply to our lives as we identify those things that God is doing inside of our own hearts.

So do this with me. Would you please stand as I'm going to read just the first verses of Nehemiah 7. If you have your Bible and open it up, you'll be able to follow along and you'll notice that there are 73 verses in Nehemiah 7, but most of them are names of people and numbers of the numbers and their family. Which we won't be reading today, but I do want to read the first six verse and draw some applications for our lives from these verses.

Nehemiah 7 – After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place... I just want you to see this sets the stage for us. We're talking about after he had achieved a goal, after he had accomplished something. That's what we're talking about today. After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there: These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. in company with Zerubbabel, Joshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum

and Baanah). And then the list goes on, name after name after name through the passage which I'm not going to read for now.

Let's stop there. You may be seated.

I want you to see that Nehemiah had achieved a goal. He had accomplished something. I think there's something that happens inside of us when we accomplish things in our lives. Even if it's on a daily basis. You finish your to-do list. Some of us never finish our to-do list, but I know there are to-do lists that you finish and you mark off the last thing and you like to throw it in the trash. But you like to mark off the last thing, even though you're throwing it in the trash first. Right? You mark it off because there's a sense of accomplishment. Well here we are with Nehemiah. He has accomplished something very important. He has accomplished his goal, which was to build the walls and set the doors in place. But it's after that that he does some things that are very important. I want to draw attention to those things.

He appoints these three groups of people. The first group of people he appoints are the gatekeepers. Now I want to suggest in our personal lives that if you look back at what God has done inside of your heart in 2019 that you want to solidify and celebrate that growth. Solidify and celebrate. That's what's going to happen here with Nehemiah. He's solidifying the accomplishment by posting these gatekeepers. He didn't just build the gates and the walls, but he wants them to be fortified, he wants them to be useable, he wants to move forward. So he's going to make a shift in his work from the actual physical walls and gates to the people that are living inside of the towns. So we're going to see that shift in this chapter.

But I think it's important for us to take as an application that when God has done something inside of our hearts, we want to stop and we want to solidify that. We want to say hey, this is what God has done in my life. I encourage parents to do this with children. Because sometimes children don't recognize the growth in their own lives. They live in the present. So life keeps going on and on and on and sometimes children get discouraged about the lack of progress they see. I guess that's not always children. Sometimes as adults we get discouraged by the lack of progress we see in our own lives. But I encourage parents to say, "Look, I know that was an anger episode that you had, but I want you to see the progress you've been making. Remember last year at this time? You were throwing yourself on the floor, kicking and screaming. Now look, we're making progress here." In other words, we're solidifying the gains.

I think it's important for us to pause every once in a while because life goes on and we don't see the progress that God is making in our lives. God is changing us. He's making us to be more like Christ and that's in very specific ways. Maybe your experience in the last year wasn't one of accomplishment, as you might think, but maybe it was one of difficulty. Maybe there was a tragedy in your life or pain that you experienced. Maybe in the midst of that God used that to develop some greater character, a closeness to Him, a sensitivity to the pain of other people. So I would suggest it's good to solidify those gains. Because when we experience pain and when we experience suffering, we do become sensitive to other people. But then sometimes when things start getting better, we start losing that sensitivity. We want to capture that. We want to solidify it. Wherever you are in your growth, you want to see what has God done in my heart? Not just the accomplishments or the progress I'm making in my lifestyle, but what is He doing inside?

So the gatekeepers were those people that are solidifying the gains that Nehemiah had made. And then we come to this next group of people, which are the musicians and the Levites. As you might imagine, these are the worshipers. Nehemiah wants to establish this sense of worship, so he's appointing these worshipers. Now I think it's important that he does that at this point because it can be very easy for any of us when we find ourselves with assets, activity, or accomplishments to develop a sense of pride. Pride that says look what I've done, look what I've accomplished, look at the assets I've accumulated. So we start developing this sense of pride. Now there's a good sense of pride, which is okay. But there's a bad sense of pride that's dangerous because it opens us up for temptation the belief that we are somehow bigger than we really are. Pride can make us more self-focused and selfish. So we need to recognize that if it weren't for God's grace, we wouldn't be where we are today. Worship is one of those things that does that.

When we listen to worship or we participate in worship, we're drawn into how big God is and how small we are. A very important lesson that we must remind ourselves of every day. That humility grows inside of us. Even though we're growing in our lives, we must remain humble so that we can take those gains and solidify them, but recognize that it's only by God's grace that we're breathing today. It's only by God's grace that we have assets. It's only by God's grace that we have a house or a car. It's only by God's grace that we have the job that we do. God has given us grace and when we recognize that grace, we're drawn to worship God in such a big, awesome, marvelous way.

The Jewish people were accustomed to worshipping God and celebrating worship. Every Sabbath day we set apart a day for the Jewish people where they would recognize the fact that God rested on that Sabbath day and they were to acknowledge Him and recognize Him. But there were seven feasts that took place in the Old Testament, each one having a purpose. Those feasts would be a way for them to mark the progress that they've made or the future that they're going to or acknowledging God. I just want to take you to the feast for a moment. I want to look at the feast as a way that the Jewish people celebrated God, celebrated life at different points during the year because it will remind us, I think, of what we need to do and draw our attention in worship to God in the midst of that.

I'm going to show you two slides. This is four of the feasts and the next three are on the next slide. I just want to draw your attention to the festival on the left and its importance. I want you to see what's taking place in the culture of the people.

In Passover it was a reminder to the people that God is the one who delivered us from Egypt and never forget that because He's the one that's delivering us now every day.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was to remind the people that they were leaving the old life behind and entering a new way of living.

The First-fruits at harvest time when they came and brought the first fruits of their harvest was to remind them that God provided for them. It's only by God's grace is the idea that I have this produce and so I'm bringing this to the Lord.

Pentecost was this feast that showed joy and thanksgiving or this big harvest that came. Just thanking God, recognizing it's because of God that any harvest that I have in my life has taken place.

There was the Feast of Trumpets which was their new years would be like our time right now. New Year, blowing the trumpets. It was a time of expressing joy and thanksgiving to God as they look forward and look back.

The Day of Atonement, that very special day that took place once a year, Yom Kippur, which established for them a reminder of the fellowship they have with God. It's like when we celebrate communion, that reminder that we have fellowship with God because what Christ has done on the cross.

The Feast of Booths is when they're camping out once a year for a week, just a fun time for the families and for the people to camp out and look at the stars to remind them that God protected them in the wilderness and renewed Israel's commitment to God and trust in His guidance and protection.

Feast days all throughout the year reminding people to worship the Lord. And now Nehemiah in his work stops and pauses after accomplishments that have taken place and he sets the gatekeepers in place and he also puts the musicians and the Levites in their place.

I can imagine the musicians and the Levites just watching our creative arts team develop and the worship that we do on Sunday morning. Can you imagine? Just picture yourself in the midst of the worship that took place. In order to do that I'm going to show you a passage of scripture where these musicians and these Levites are actually leading worship. It happens at another time of accomplishment when the temple of Solomon is completed. Solomon pulls them together and this is what happened.

All the Levites who were musicians—Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives—stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals (boom!), harps (wow, what a beautiful sound) and lyres (those are guitars). They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. Wow. I wonder if they drowned out the harps and the guitars. The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord for the accomplishment of building the temple. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang these words: “He is good; his love endures forever.”

Those are the words I think we need to be sang in praise and worship to God when we experience the growth in our lives that God has brought us this year to this point. He's growing us in our lives to where we are now. We need to say these words. *He is good; His love endures forever. Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple.* What a magnificent experience that must have been with worship all around.

Nehemiah is establishing the worship. And it's not just worship for what has taken place and worshiping God for bringing us to where we are. It's this worship that's moving forward because worship will be a foundation for them. As Nehemiah is appointing the worshipers from now on the worshipers will be singing and playing. The musicians will be doing their thing and creating music because it will be foundational to all the things that are going to take place in the coming year.

I would suggest that application is very true for us too. We want worship to be foundational and central in everything that we do. That we first and foremost are worshipers before God.

Paul said it this way in Romans 12:1 – *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.* That there's this dedication that we make. Not just looking back at what God has already done, but what God is going to do as He's moving us forward in our lives.

So Nehemiah establishes and finishes the work, at least this assignment. I would suggest the assignments come and go, but the mission always stays the same. That God continues to grow us in our lives. He's taking us somewhere.

I don't know in your life what God will be doing in this next year. You may not even know what God is going to do in your next year. But maybe you already do. Maybe you look at that list and you say you know I think God really wants me to develop more of patience or more self-control or more of something in your life. So you start on that pilgrimage. But we never know exactly where God is going to take us. We might set a goal. "Lord, I'm going to start focusing more on self-discipline in my own heart, in my own life. I think that is something that you want me to do." But I find that often life in setting goals is like being on a river and trying to navigate down that river. You might set your target on a goal, on a rock that you see, on a house that is down there on the river and you head toward that. But at some point the river turns and God has a different direction in mind. So we reset our goals and establish that. I don't know how God is going to lead you and what He's going to do, but I do know that it's not so much about externals as it is about the heart. When worship is at the center of our hearts, God can do amazing things in our lives and wants to do that.

The next thing he does in verse 2 is he put in charge of Jerusalem...he's going to make this guy the mayor of Jerusalem. My brother Hanani. If you remember the story, if we go back even to Nehemiah 1:2 you'll see the first time Hanani is mentioned. He's the one (if you remember) who came from Jerusalem while Nehemiah was still in Persia and he brings word that there's problems in Jerusalem. The walls are torn down, the people are in shame. It's what starts the process. Now Nehemiah works with him for several months, obviously, through this and he sees something in him that says I'm going to appoint this person to have a position of leadership. But the position of leadership comes after something else takes place in his heart. So it says he chose him for two reasons: *because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do.*

So we ask the question if we go back to this chart that we started with in my own thinking this week, if we look at this and say okay where are my accomplishments, where does the integrity

come? I think it comes when we take away all the categories and we just look at the heart kind of things. Because integrity is the internal strength to match external challenges. The internal strength to match external challenges. Yes, integrity does mean honesty and honesty is a way of being able to deal with the temptation to lie or to steal or to take advantage of the people. So that form of integrity is important for someone who's going to be the mayor. But the internal strength that we have is also something that might be the self-discipline that we have to meet a challenge that we're facing or the patience to live with ornery people. It's this integrity that we have inside to meet the challenges of life.

The word integrity has this idea of internal strength. Just like metal, if we measure metal strength we're looking at the integrity of the metal or the integrity of a bridge. It means that that bridge is strong enough to withstand the weather, strong enough to withstand the pressure of the traffic that's on it. There's a lot of traffic that goes by our hearts that tries to draw us away in various areas. I would suggest that God wants to build inside of us godliness. Something that's so strong, and it's very practical in any of these areas. These are just a few things I thought of, but God might be doing something different in your own heart. The idea is that there is an integrity that Hanani had that gave him the position or that he was recognized. So he had this position that Nehemiah gave him.

So I want to think not just about what God has done in your life in the last year, but what does He want to do to strengthen your integrity? What does He want to do to build something inside of you? Whether you're a young person or an adult or you're married or single, male or female, wherever you are in your life God is growing you. He's doing something inside of you. Where does He want you to go? What form of integrity does God want to strengthen in your own heart?

I think the best way to look at this is to go back to the passage in Nehemiah 7:2 because he mentions that there's two things. One is integrity and the other is this fear of God. I want to suggest that when we make God the person we worship in our lives, if we are making Him first place in our lives then He is the one who builds inside of us these qualities. He builds inside of us the integrity. He builds inside of us the things that we need in order to address the challenges that we face in life. Hanani had these two things, integrity and the fear of God. So Nehemiah placed him as the mayor over Jerusalem.

You can see as you go through the passage down here in verse 4 that now we have a different problem. Which just reminds me as I look at Nehemiah's life that his jobs keep changing or his tasks continue to change, but the mission remains the same. In fact sometimes in our lives God does what He does to Nehemiah. Watch this in verse 4. There is a problem presented in verse 4 and then verse 5 is going to see what happens to Nehemiah. Verse 4 is the problem. *Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.* So now he's finished the walls. That was his original intent. The assignment is going to change because verse 5 says – *So my God put it into my heart...*

What is God laying on your heart right now? When we're sensitive to the Lord, we're allowing Him to do a work in our lives and He speaks. He lays burdens on our hearts. There are all kinds of problems in our world today. There are problems in our church, there are problems in your family, there's problems in our town, there's problems at your work. There's all kinds of

problems. But the interesting thing is that God many times will put something on our hearts and that gives us the next assignment, gives us the next task. But even in the midst of working out those tasks that we have at work and at home in health and all those things that we mentioned earlier, God is doing something on the inside. Because there's these arenas. The arena of work, the arena of family in which God sanctifies us to grows us and develops these qualities on the inside. So Nehemiah is going to shift his tasks as he continues to work and his shift is going to be more on the people than on the actual fortress that he had built.

So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. Now he's going to identify these and if you look in your Bible you'll see that after verse 7 all the way down to verse 69 are all these lists of people. I would read them if we had more time. I don't want to skip over it to say it's not important. Because what is important when you look at these lists, whether it's genealogies or you look at the lists of people like this, one of the things that's clear is that God is concerned about people and He's concerned about individuals. So He lists their names. There's a group, a number of them and He puts the number of the people in their family. God is concerned about people. Although we're going to skip over those verse, I want you to see the people are important to God. Individuals are important to God. You are important to God and He has great things planned for you in your own life.

But I do want to take you to the last verse because something happened in the lives of the people when they saw all this happening and taking place. Here's what they did. They started contributing to the work.

Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 darics of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work 20,000 darics of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 darics of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and garments for priests.

Here's what happens. When people are involved and they see the work of God taking place, they want to contribute to that. They want to say, "I want to be a part of this. This is important to me."

I remember when the Lord was starting Calvary Chapel Mercer County, it was happening so fast. It happened that on the very first Sunday we met we had 158 people at church on that Sunday. We didn't even know who was working with the children. We just pulled whoever we could to help out in doing different things. One hundred and fifty-eight people on that first Sunday. We knew things were happening fast and we did not have the financial resources to do what we needed to do to start a church. So we put the word out. Can anybody help us with this, that, and the other thing? Put some lists out there.

I remember one particular story. Tom Amidon was one of the men in the church as it was getting ready to start and he was starting to come already in small groups and stuff and some neighbors of his were starting to come. When the word came out, he called and he says, "My dad (who's not a believer) says, 'God is doing something here. I want to give money to pay for the trailer.'" We didn't have a trailer to carry our stuff. So here's this man who says, "I want to give the

\$1500 to pay for the trailer.” That really was inspiring to me. It was an opportunity for us to witness to him and be a testimony for him to see God work. But it was also an opportunity for him to be a part of what was going on in the midst of that.

It's exciting. When God is doing a work, you want to be a part of that. In this case they're talking about financial contribution. But there's also ways that we all contribute in our own skills and our giftedness to what God wants to do. When you see God working, you want to be a part of that.

In conclusion I just want to share with you a verse that I think summarizes this whole idea of God working inside of our lives. It comes from Ephesians 2 where it says – *For we are his workmanship*. The word is *poiema*. It's the idea of crafting a song like Chante can do or others have done with poetry. Crafting that in a beautiful way. But the idea here is that God says *we*. *We are his poiema*. We are His workmanship. We are the ones that He's crafting and building inside. He's building the integrity inside of our hearts. He's moving us from where we were and growing us in those arenas, but definitely in our hearts to be something else. We are His workmanship, which implies that He is not finished with us yet. That we are in process and God wants to do more in our lives in the next week.

But the rest of the verse says – *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand*. That we should walk in them. As you look forward to the next year, you've got to know. God has outlined the path and we're walking in that because God wants to do something deeper and deeper in our hearts. Remember this: That worship is foundational in our lives. God wants to build integrity inside of our hearts. He wants us to solidify the gains that He has done this year and He wants us to celebrate them, but He also wants us to celebrate and worship Him for what's yet to come in each of our lives.

Would you stand with me? Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would now convict each of our hearts. Use your word to touch us deeply in our lives and provoke us in areas that we know we need to grow. Father, we'll follow you. We'll ask you to lead us and teach us. Teach us where we need to take risks. Teach us where we need to be cautious. Teach us where we need to pull back and where we need to move forward. Lord, we ask for your wisdom as you lead and you guide us in the course of this next period of time in our lives. We want to be sensitive to your leadership. We want to follow you in everything that we do. We dedicate ourselves to you now. In Jesus' name, (and all God's people said) amen.