

Rebuilding Reverence

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everyone. My name's Steve. You haven't met me before. I'm the senior pastor here at St. Paul's. I'm grateful you've had your Bibles open. And I just want to kick off this morning with a content warning. The following message contains yet another running illustration. I'm sorry about that. Actually, it's more of a story than an illustration.

It will become an illustration eventually, but it was Thursday morning. I was on the final leg of a 11K run through Blankhobe National Park. And the next thing you knew, like I was right at the end of it, then all of a sudden, a wood duck launched itself out. I could just see it at the corner of my eye coming at me from the left. And so I ducked. Pun intended.

The duck swung around behind me, landed on my shoulders, flapping its wings like this on my ears and pecking the back of my head. I'm like, what on earth is going on here? It was all in a matter of seconds. Now, this time of year, I normally see signs up occasionally, beware of bagpipes. I get a duck, for goodness sake. I've never seen a warning sign for a duck. But maybe we should have some warning signs for ducks. Now, see, the thing is, I had a plan. I was enjoying the plan. I even got a moment in the run there where I was just praying and thanking God for the ability to run and for his creation. And then it attacks me. All of a sudden, and I'm running along and I'm trying to still run with this duck on my back. And I'm swiping at it, trying to get rid of it.

Eventually, it jumps off. And then I ran probably an extra five to 10 metres and then just stopped and went, well, that's it. It's all over now. Like, I was so disorientated that I had to go back past the duck, as it turns out, which, again, attempted to chase after me. What all of a sudden happened? I had this goal and all of a sudden, I was right near the end of it and it just stopped. Had the effect of totally throwing me off course, as you can imagine, momentarily disorientated.

[2 : 5 0] Now, it's not surprising that a moment like that, you would lose focus. Now, it's taken me, you know, a couple of days to try and work out how I can tell you that story and connect it with Nehemiah.

At first, I was just going to tell you the story. But really, the real issue here for me is I connected with Nehemiah, and I see Nehemiah 5 in particular, is being on target, then all of a sudden just totally losing focus and just stopping, just stopping. And that's one of the things that happens here in Nehemiah. For the Christian life, it is a battle to stay focused, and particularly stay focused on our primary calling to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and strength, and our neighbour as ourself. If you're a Christian for any length of time, you will know that the world, the flesh, the devil are the three constant tempters, that is temptation within, temptation without, and temptation beyond, luring us out of focus, sharp focus on loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

Sometimes it's in a dramatic event, such as a duck launching at you that throws your focus in a run. More often than not, for me, it's the long grind of a run. I recently ran a half marathon.

One of the hardest things in a half marathon is not the physical challenge. It's not your heart. It's actually your mind. It's not your cardio. It's the ability to stay focused for such a long period of time on a task like that. And inevitably, they say around the 16, 17, 18K mark is when you start to wander. Your mind wanders and starts telling you, I can't do this. I can't do this.

I can't do this. If you're on a marathon, you will know it's around somewhere between the 25 and 32K mark that your mind says the same thing. Your body might be still trudging along, but your mind's saying, I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this. Just stop. Just give up. It's the ability to stay sharp focused. And what we see again and again in the Old Testament is that Israel regularly lost focus on who God is and who they are and what he's called them to do. And the consequences were devastating, which is where we're up to in Nehemiah. We've touched on this already.

[5 : 41] The book of Nehemiah is a time in history when the Israelites are trying to rebuild Jerusalem, 140 years after a catastrophic event that was God's disciplining of his special people.

In 586 BC, the Babylonian army came in, sacked Jerusalem. The elite of the people were carted off, deported down to Babylon. The city was left in ruins. The people were crushed, enslaved again under the rule of a foreign nation. All because they honoured God with their lips, but their hearts and their lives were focused on other things. And so now after 70 years of exile in a foreign land, God started to bring his people back to Jerusalem. And so the question is, as Nehemiah is in these early chapters, is would they come back? Not just physically come back, but would they come back to him? Would they obey the covenant requirements and show the world how brilliant it is to be friends with Yahweh? Now, while much of the activity of these first chapters of Nehemiah are about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, the main purpose is about rebuilding the covenant people of God. Hearts and minds aligned with God. Nehemiah 4, we were there last week. The wall builders were under enormous pressure to stop this rebuilding work, this reforming work. In chapters 5 and 6, there is once again pressure to stop the rebuilding work, but it's different. This time, the pressure is coming from within, amongst God's people themselves.

Once again, they are losing focus on their primary calling to obey God, obedience to God. So if you've got, it might not be on the St. Paul's app, but anyway, use a notepad or whatever, three points, losing focus, a focused life, and regaining focus. That's where I'm headed this morning. So focusing, losing focus. The first five verses of chapter 5, a very significant problem is raised. As the work on the wall is progressing, farms are languishing. The people need to eat.

And the threat is compounded due to a recent famine, but specifically, it's compounded because of a heavy tax burden. And they need grain for next year's crops. So the essence of the first five verses is a call to Nehemiah, something like this. Nehemiah, we have been seven weeks away from our farms building this wall in really desperate times. And so this whole wall building project is just making matters worse. We've got to stop building the wall. It's a call to stop the work on Jerusalem so that they can go and get their families in order. Let's put a pause on what God has called us to do here because there's something a little bit more pressing. See it? It's good stuff. Let's just divert focus for a bit.

Now, I'll come back. When we've got everything else in order, we'll come back to God then and do his work then. Now, Nehemiah doesn't stop the work, but he does deal with the threat that he's seeking to unravel God's charge to his people. And the real threat here is the nobles and the officials. And Nehemiah is furious with them. Have a look at verse seven. You are charging your own people interest.

[9 : 47] You see, here's the problem. God's word to his people was absolutely crystal clear on this issue. Crystal clear. Exodus 22, 25. If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal. Charge no interest. This is one of the laws that governs God's people to let their life together so that they could show the world how brilliant it is to live in relationship with Yahweh, their God. And the covenant people of God are struggling to rebuild themselves after 70 years of slavery because of disobedience to God's law. And the nobles and officials are once again doing the very thing that caused the exile. What were they thinking?

They're ignoring God's word. And once again, you see the community of God's people unraveling. If we just flick over very briefly to chapter six, I want to see something here real quick.

In verse one, we see that the goon squad from chapter four have reappeared. Sanballat, Tobiah, Jeshem the Arab. In particular, Tobiah is mentioned in verse 12 and again in verses 17 to 19. And right throughout these chapters, we see that Tobiah is against the purposes of God. He's against the people of God. What makes that so terrible is that Tobiah's name means Yahweh is good. Yahweh is good. He's a fellow Jew with a great name and a great pedigree. But he is not convinced by his own name that Yahweh is in fact good.

Friends, every society and culture that the Christian church has found itself placed within has been a threat to the church. Every single society and culture from its inception.

[12 : 13] There is always pressure from without. But it is, I believe, more easily matched by the threat of every church community losing sight of God's goodness as revealed to us in his word. Easily matched by that.

That is more fundamentally the problem. And what Nehemiah does here is he calls these nobles and officials back to God's goodness. In chapter five, verse eight, chapter five, verse nine, shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of the Gentile enemies?

When the Bible talks, as Nehemiah does here about the fear of God for the people of God, it means a respect and awe for God's holiness, his sovereignty, his goodness, his mercy, that ultimately leads you to respond with a life of submission, obedience, consistency, integrity, and joy.

I would suggest that Nehemiah's narrative here of opposition to the wall of Jerusalem being built here should be understood in terms of spiritual warfare. From chapters four right through to chapter seven, this is spiritual warfare. You see, Satan operating in Nehemiah's time, hated the rebuilding work of Jerusalem. In Nehemiah four, he uses tactics like psychological warfare, physical threats, personal discouragement. In chapters five and six, he deploys incrimination, intrigue, innuendo, and intimidation. His main tactic deployed right from the very beginning in Genesis chapter three with Adam and Eve to Jesus himself in Matthew four is to get us, as he did attempt with them, one with Adam and Eve, didn't with Jesus, to actually doubt God's word and his goodness. Specifically, his goodness as revealed in his word.

And I want you to know that there is a war going on for your soul. And your enemy, Satan, has no conscience. He has no compassion. There is no Geneva Convention here.

[15:10] He has no remorse. He has no morals. He feeds on pain and anguish and filth. There is nothing in Satan which is even remotely redeemable. There is no virtue. He is but a dark void.

He is supremely cunning. He has been honing his methods for millennia. He is an accomplished philosopher, theologian, and psychologist. He is the ultimate manipulator, subverter, and actor. He often mixes just enough truth with falsehood to make a lie seem plausible. He instills doubts consistently in your heart, in your mind to doubt God's goodness and the truthfulness of his word. He will do it all the time. It's his main tactic. It's how sin began by instilling a doubt of God's word and his goodness in Adam and Eve. And he persuades us often, especially in the West, that the Christian life is not a battle. And so if you are experiencing any kind of battle at all, well then therefore God must not be good. That's his main tactic for you in the West.

You see, he hates God. He hates God's children. He hates the work of Jesus Christ to build his church from people of every tribe, language, and nation. And he will do whatever he can to destroy the work of the gospel in your life and in the life of this church. He will try to do it by some dramatic event.

[17:06] Or he will just gradually and subtly by shifting your attention away from God. Bit by bit by bit. And before you know, I just can't do this anymore. I just got to give up.

He wants your focus off God. And therefore that means he wants your focus off the gospel. He wants your focus off his word. I've never, ever had any that I can ever recall, not certainly markedly, anything to ever divert me away from opening up Facebook.

Never felt a temptation to divert me elsewhere to open that up. Or to scroll the news. Pick up the Bible, however.

The amount of things that get in the way of that is remarkable in my life. So let's look to a focused life.

Nehemiah, on the other hand, he's a great example of resisting this temptation and staying focused on faithfulness to God and his word in this text. There is an attempt to get Nehemiah to deny God's word.

[18:30] In chapter 6, verse 10, Nehemiah goes to the house of a man named Shemaiah. Now he is some kind of a prophet. And he shares with Nehemiah a prophecy that he has apparently received from God.

Let us meet in the house of God inside the temple and let us close the temple doors. Because men are coming to kill you.

By night they're coming to kill you. See the message? Nehemiah, run. Run. Run. Take sanctuary in the temple because people are coming to kill you. Save yourself, Nehemiah.

Nehemiah responds in verse 10. Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life?

I will not go. How did Nehemiah know? He makes a point there. I realize there was not a message from God, he says. How does he know that? Because Nehemiah wasn't a priest.

[19:38] And he knew from Exodus 22 that for him to run into the sanctuary, the temple, is a violation of God's word requiring him to die.

Save your life. Save your life. Run to the sanctuary. Save your life from these men. And it would result in him going into the sanctuary and being struck down by God instead.

He knew that. He knew his Bible. See, Nehemiah here appeals to his own example as one who walks in the fear of the Lord and by judging even this so-called prophet from God's word. It's seen also in his integrity of life and his compassion for God's people. Have a look at chapter 5, verse 14 and 15.

For the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his 32nd year, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. [20 : 53] But the earlier governors, those preceding me, placed a heavy burden on the people and took 40 shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lauded it over the people.

But out of reverence for God, I did not act like that. Nehemiah has certain rights by virtue of his position as being appointed governor.

A food allowance, a stipend. But he voluntarily relinquished them. What motivates that kind of self-sacrificing, non-oppressive leadership?

Why was Nehemiah different from the others? Verse 15. Because of the fear of God. It's this reverence for God that controls his life, his attitudes, his priorities.

Nehemiah relinquishes his rights. He serves his brothers and sisters. He is a non-oppressive leader. As opposed to the nobles and officials, he is a non-oppressive leader.

[21 : 59] This is not a mere outward compliance. It is a heart that is captivated by God himself. His heart delights in God.

He does not lord it over. A gracious God had made him a gracious ruler. Now we might think if we flick forward into the New Testament, the likes of the Apostle Paul, who says in 1 Corinthians 9, that he made himself a servant of all.

But in the end, both Nehemiah and Paul reflect the God-focused life of Jesus Christ, who we are told in Philippians 2, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

So what's the point? Jesus is a great example for us to follow? Well, yes, but more significantly, he's a much-needed substitute for all of us.

[23 : 13] Because, friends, when we look at Nehemiah 5, we tend to think of ourselves as the Nehemiah in this text.

But we're not. We're the nobles and officials. They're the ones who represent us. We don't fear God as we should.

We don't act rightly. We deserve punishment. That is what we should receive. And yet, Matthew 20 reveals how Jesus leads graciously his flawed and his failed humanity.

He says, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave.

Just as the Son of Man, speaking of himself, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, for all.

[24 : 29] Right there is the difference between Nehemiah and Jesus. Jesus is the only one who gives his life as a ransom for the sins of many.

He became a slave to death on the cross to liberate us from a life of oppressive slavery to sin. Set free to serve him and others with freedom and joy.

In Jesus, God's disposition towards us is delight. Not oppression. Delight.

Because Jesus was able to take upon himself our sin. He was able to withstand the full blow of God's just wrath for our rejection and our disobedience.

You see, Nehemiah here is a wonderful pointer to the character of God in the way he handles the flawed and the failed in chapter 5.

[25 : 29] It's so easy to skip over this, but in verse 10, he says, let us stop charging interest.

In other words, what he's saying there is, let's repent of this. Repent of this. He's calling them back into faithfulness to the good God.

He gives them a second chance to make things right. Let me tell you, if you're not sure about the Christian faith, let me just make a statement here for you to ponder.

Christianity is the only world religion that declares that there is a divine being who is both infinitely powerful, infinitely holy, and infinitely gracious at the same time.

The only one. Jesus Christ came without sin, lived a perfect life of obedience and reverence. He died on the cross for our infidelity, our faithlessness, our oppression of others, our sin, our failure to obey God, our rejection of his word.

[26 : 52] And he offers us a second chance every day. So, let's regain some focus.

What might it look like to live a life staying focused on Jesus? Fundamentally, it means walking in the fear of the Lord. This is the foundation of Nehemiah's life of faithfulness.

His life of service of others is walking in the fear of the Lord. Let me just remind you again, fear of God is an expression that means a reverent submission to the will of God.

It is, according to Proverbs 9, the beginning of wisdom, which means it's the very foundation of how to navigate life well in God's world.

Which is why the title of Jerry Bridges' book, *The Joy of Fearing God*, makes total sense.

[27 : 53] Even though, in the introduction, he says it seems like it's an oxymoron. The joy of fearing God. It's not the fear that something bad will happen to you if you mess up, and so you better be good, better try harder, pull your socks up.

It just simply means respecting the Lordship of Jesus Christ over every part of your life for your joy. When you fear God, you will want intimate fellowship with Him.

You will want connection with Him. And you won't want anything in your life to be a roadblock to Him. Fear of God, therefore, means giving attention to God's Word, discovering His will and His heart for you, but also discovering your own heart.

In our staff devotional this week, or one day on last Thursday, we read Psalm 119 verses 25 to 32 in the daily devotional book, *My Rock, My Refuge*, written by Tim Keller.

The title for the devotion is *The Word is Our Examiner*. And Keller makes this very, very crucial point.

[29 : 20] The psalmist surveys his life using the Word to examine himself. Contemporary people, that's us, tend to examine the Bible looking for things that they cannot accept.

But Christians should reverse that. They should reverse that. Allowing the Bible to examine us. Looking for things that God cannot accept. The psalmist has set his heart on being faithful to God's laws. We cannot truly understand the Scriptures unless we make a basic commitment to saying, whatever I find in your Word, I will do.

Then he says this, This seems restrictive, but it leads to freedom. This kind of devotional life overflows into a life of prayerful dependence, an expectation God will answer and help and deliver us at every point.

It particularly overflows into a life of meticulous repentance of sin and to consider in every situation whether what's happening is for God's glory or my own.

[30 : 44] Ignoring sin does not make life better. It makes it worse, increasingly worse. A focused life that trusts God is good walks in dependence upon His Word and it repents daily of sin.

Regularly of sin. So friends, what chapters 5 to 7 tell us is that the urban renewal of Jerusalem wasn't the only thing that was happening in Jerusalem.

The walls being repaired was only a sign of the relational and heart repair that was needed amongst God's people. When we speak of building the church, our minds are usually captivated by buildings, programs, structures, systems, congregations, denominations, finance, and whatever else.

When Jesus spoke of building His church, He was thinking of the simple but complex process whereby the truth about Himself is received.

the recipients respond to Him on His terms and are then increasingly conformed to Him as they share in the things that the church does in obedience to Jesus' Word under His leadership and independence of His power.

[32 : 16] Incidentally, we are told in Nehemiah 6 that the war was completed in 52 days.

It was nothing short of a miracle. What building gets done in 52 days? And it says the nations around were filled with fear because they could see it was clearly a work of God.

The battle was raging within and without, but God built Jerusalem. Like the building of the walls of Jerusalem, the building of God's church on the foundation of Jesus Christ is one that He will bring to completion.

And it's a story of both spiritual battle, but most significantly, it's a story of significant spiritual triumph.

God will bring to completion His work in you. He has given every single Christian the means of grace to stay focused in this building work, the rebuilding of your heart and our life together.

[33 : 43] His spirit, worship, Bible, prayer, brothers and sisters for the task, gifts to serve. So I want to ask you right now, have you bought into Satan's lie that God's not good and that His word cannot be trusted?

What is causing you to lose focus at the moment? What has got your attention? Let me say, if you are stumbling and straying right now, it might be that a duck's landed on your back, so to speak, or you're just getting tired.

Don't believe the lie of Satan that God must not be delighting in you right now. In Jesus, He does all the time, delights in you.

He is not an oppressive God. And so can I call you to get the eyes of your heart back into God's word?

And His multitude of firm promises to you in Jesus, in other words, I'm calling you to repent and turn back, turn back to Him, find refuge in Him.

[35 : 10] How is your focus right now on growing as a disciple of Jesus? What is God teaching you through His word?

What is He pressing in on you right now? What is your next step to walk in the fear of the Lord?

Thank you for ranking, you say to the Lord.