

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 5:14. We continue our study in Nehemiah.

It is a book that really chronicles the work of God in calling a man to a service and how that the Word of the LORD, working in a heart, can change a nation.

Nehemiah was a young man, Jewish man, born in captivity. He'd never been to Jerusalem, but he desired and began to desire to rebuild its walls to bring honor back to the place one day God had put His name. It was 445 B.C. The walls had been down since 586 B.C., 141 years of devastation, and no one had really done a thing about it. The book is about leadership, on discovering how God works, what His will might be for my life, on how that the church works in ministering one to another. It's a great manual on handling opposition or planning or diligence or personal integrity.

In fact, we're only going to look at six verses this morning to look at Nehemiah's private affairs. The context, notice in verse 14, begins with the word "moreover." And, because of the word "moreover," we are forced to kind of go back to what we studied last week, where Nehemiah had to confront some high rollers in the congregation who had begun to subject their own people to slavery and high, exorbitant payments on loans, forced sale of land and all because there was a famine, there was the king's pressure, the life was difficult. And, because of that, these wealthy nobles had, in wickedness, begun to really subject their own people. So, verse 6 of this chapter, Nehemiah, hearing about that, was very angry, and he called them out on it. In fact, all of those verses - down through verse 13, he gathered an assembly against them, and he said, "What are you doing? We're trying to get people out of debt, and here you're making it worse for us." And we talked about, last week, that the enemy, up to this point in the building of the wall, had brought pressure from outside of the congregation. There had been mockery, there had been intimidation, there'd been some threats of attack, there had been some subterfuge, if you will. But here it was the first attack from within, and it discouraged the people and brought hopelessness to them. It almost stopped the work in its tracks. Down in verse 10, Nehemiah said to these guys, "I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this charging of interest, or this usury." At a time of suffering and famine and

sacrifice, he implored these folks within the congregation to stop the abuse. And then, when they said that they would do it, he said, "I want you to give it all back, and 1% of everything you took as well, as interest," and they said, "We will." And he said, "I don't believe you." So he had the priests come and make them swear publicly to the LORD, in the LORD's name, that they would do as they said. In fact, in verse 13, he prayed that the LORD would deal with them if they were lying. And all of the people said, "Amen," and what started off in a chapter with great outcry, in verse 13 ends up with great unity again, and the enemy's plans were defeated.

Well, with that having been said, we get to the word "moreover," and since the subject has come up, Nehemiah feels it's important to distinguish himself from these wicked kind of selfish nobles that were in their midst. And so, in these last six verses, he puts his own personal life on display. Rare that you can look into the private affairs of a man in power, but he opens the book to kind of say, "Look, this is the way I've lived my life." And it is a leadership model for all who would serve the LORD.

Thomas Carlyle, who was a Scotsman, wrote one time, "Adversity is a painful trial indeed, but there's even a worse trial than adversity, and it is advancement." And there are few people, I think, that can do well with living in the lap of luxury. Because of our flesh and all, to maintain your moral ground or your emotional well-being, your spiritual balance, while having much power and a lot to be able to deal with, few people can handle promotion with honor and yet honor the LORD through it all. One fellow who apparently could (the fellow we read this morning about - Asaph, in Psalm 75) showed that he was kind of head and shoulders above the rest. He wrote twelve of the psalms of the 150 that you have, but he wrote there in verse 5 this morning (we read it), "Don't toot your own horn." I think that's pretty much what it says. "Don't toot your own horn," and, "God will raise you up, and God can set you down" (verse 7). But the world oftentimes views advancement or promotion, if you will, as being a combination of luck and shrewdness and maybe just plain hard work. From God's point of view, promotion in the church or in the body of Christ has everything to do with His will for your life. Where are you going to find yourself serving? And it really doesn't matter how far up or down the ladder you find yourself. That doesn't matter. It's faithfulness to God in the place God has called you. That's all that ever matters. So, you look at David's rise. He was a shepherd; he became the king. Joseph went from prison to prince virtually overnight; he had been faithful. Daniel went from POW to vice president. Amos graduated from fig picker to God's national spokesman. And they all did it

very well. They handled the place that God put them in a way that honored the LORD, and so did Nehemiah. In the midst of the chapter 5 kind of rebellion on the social level, amongst God's people, here's a guy who handled finances and self-gain and power in a way that honors the LORD.

So, we're going to look at these few verses. I'll give you four things that I think probably stick out that you might want to write down - beginning with verse 14 which tells us that promotion brings greater accountability, and it will bring tempting privileges. Verse 14, "Moreover," Nehemiah writes, "from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions." It does seem, from what we read in chapter 2, that Nehemiah, when he was sent here and got privilege from the king to come rebuild the walls, part of the condition was that he'd be the governor. The year is the same as chapter 2:1. And so it does seem like when he was sent out, "You can go rebuild the walls, but I want you to then be responsible to the kingdom to govern that area of Judah." And so, "from the twentieth year of Artaxerxes" aligns up with what we read back in chapter 2. Jabez is a guy, in the Scriptures, who prayed for stretched boundaries. He wanted to serve the LORD. He didn't feel like he was doing enough. He asked the LORD to put him in the most useful place that He could and to grow him. Nehemiah's another guy that didn't seem to shrink away from responsibility, even though he probably felt fairly inadequate going to be a governor - especially in a lawless land. But he didn't see that as a challenge that God couldn't use him in, nor did he view that promotion, if you will, as a place of personal privilege. He really did look at this place as being a place of service. And so he looks back to those twelve years, writing. But he said, "In the twelve years that I was there on the job, I never used the provisions for the governor for myself. I didn't use the place for privilege. I used it for serving." If you look at folks in the Scriptures like Stephen, Stephen rose to greater service through being faithful in the little. He started setting tables, and pretty soon he was preaching to everyone who would listen in standing before the most powerful men in the country. Jeremiah - another guy, young guy - God called. Moses - faithful man in the little. All of them used by God, willing to go forward to places of power and privilege; all of them using that place of power and influence as a way to glorify the LORD, taking the glory that God gave them and turning it back to Him. None of them used it for self-service. You don't find amongst these men of God the entitlement outlook where, "This comes with the job, and this is owed to me." It's a pretty refreshing thing to see people that could take advantage that

don't or that don't feel they are owed anything in their place of service. It's a pretty good insight into Nehemiah's mindset as he comes to this place and seeks to do the will of God. Nehemiah recalled the very day that he was made governor. He remembers the years that he has been serving. He's able to comment on the response that he was, to the benefits that the position might have allowed him. He wouldn't even allow his family to participate. "That's not what we do. We came here. It was difficult. People were struggling. I didn't want to live in that position at all." And all of the food allowances made, Nehemiah decided he wouldn't take liberties with his expense account, and though privilege was at his fingertips, he kept it at arms-length. It's integrity where only God sees.

Now, here're Satan's attacks, and in chapter 6 we'll see his last attack. By the time we get to the middle of chapter 6, the wall will be done. But needless to say, here's a pretty subtle kind of temptation because privilege can become a place of great stumbling and especially when you're a believer, and people watch you, and they expect. Though they'll do the same thing, they'll expect better from you. Jesus told the story of a fellow who was waiting for the LORD to come who was the master of his house (Luke 12). And the LORD said, "If he had known the hour in which the thief would come, he would have watched, and he wouldn't have allowed himself to be broken into. So, be ready because the Son of God will come in an hour you don't expect. And then who will be that faithful and wise servant who has been made master over his own household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is the servant who, when the LORD comes, will find so doing. He'll make him ruler over all of his goods. But, if he's an evil servant, if he begins to say in his heart, 'The LORD is delaying His coming,' and then he begins to beat his servants, and eat and drink with the drunkards, that day will come to them when they are not expecting it, and there will be judgment, gnashing of teeth." There was an irresponsibility that came.

You remember, early on, how the disciples battled constantly about greatness and position and glory and honor, and it was their driving interest. Even as Jesus is at the last supper, just hours away from the cross, they can't let it go. It dominates their heart. In this area, the enemy can undermine most any spiritual work that is going on, and he almost does it here. If you preach spiritual value and heavenly rewards, and yet, like some of these television evangelists, live totally in the lap of luxury, no matter what you say, what you do will undermine your credibility. No one's going to believe you. They will laugh at you. They will scoff. The world hates that kind of lying life. Politicians who cut budgets and then give themselves huge

raises, who use government planes for personal use. It goes on and on. You just shake your head and go, "That's just the way they are." But hopefully no one's looking at you, saying, "That's just the way they are." And God hates it in His people because it robs us of the distinction that we should have in the world. We shouldn't live the same way. And, as Nehemiah has to deal with whoever or however many folks within their midst (there in the first thirteen verses), he said, "Look, that's not me. That was them, not me. We don't live like this. We don't do this. We don't follow that way." And so Nehemiah sets aside the privileges of service, and he focuses on example, and he is proud of himself and his staff with the level of accountability that he is able to set before the people. He led as the LORD would be pleased.

Promotion will always bring greater accountability, but it will also bring tempting privileges. There's always a way, when you get more opportunity to serve yourself, to do that if you're not careful.

Second of all, promotion should allow you, as a believer, opportunities to make changes in the way things have always been. We read, in verse 15, "But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God." Nehemiah could easily have followed the former governors' practices of overtaxing the people just so that they could enrich themselves. He could have used the argument, "That's just the way this works, this is the way it has always been done," and argue that he's not doing anything out of the ordinary. But he chose to be above reproach and to not give the enemy any foothold whatsoever. How good would it be if you gained in the world but lost, in a spiritual sense, your influence over the lives of others? What if everyone was doing it? To him, that was no concern of his. And I like the fact that Nehemiah was not looking around to see how it had always been done. It wasn't important to him. What people had done before him doesn't matter to him. He wasn't interested in what they had done; he was only interested in one thing - "I fear the LORD, I want to please the LORD." He's the only one that's watching. He's the only one that matters. In fact, fear of the LORD governed the governor's behavior, and it set the tone for all of the restraints that he put on his flesh - which he could have indulged in that position of power.

When Solomon's son, Rehoboam, came to the throne after Solomon, his dad, died, he had the opportunity to lower taxes. I mean, Solomon was a builder, and he just

absolutely killed the people with taxes. They lived in poverty while he built these beautiful places. That's all he cared about. And so, when he died, his son was in a position where he could have really turned the tide for the people, got rid of these exorbitant taxes that his dad had levied for years. But, instead, he met with some of his young buddies and thought, "Now it's my turn, and rather than releasing people from that pressure, I'm going to make it more difficult than it has ever been." And he saw it as a great opportunity to enrich himself (1 Kings 12). And so, the reaction of the people was, "No way, we're not paying," and the kingdom was split in two. And ten of the tribes would go north and would live for hundreds of years in defiance of God; only two, Judah and Benjamin, would stay in Jerusalem where God had put His name. But, because of the division, both the north (which would eventually be overthrown by the Assyrians) and then the south (which would be dragged into captivity, which now has come back and that's what Nehemiah is dealing with), all of that came because there was one guy that wanted to live in his position to please himself, not to serve the LORD.

Contrast Rehoboam's life with a guy like Joseph. Joseph is given his position by the LORD through great suffering, through no fault of his own. But when he comes to power, rather than enriching himself or looking to think about any kind of a personal gain, he's very interested in taking care of God's people. He begins to lay aside monies and provisions because the LORD has shown him that a famine was coming (of great proportion), and the people weren't going to be able to make ends meet. And so he served the people, he planned ahead, he watched over their needs, and he was a godly man. Joseph was wealthy. So was Abraham. So was David. But their wealth God used for His glory. Wealth didn't have them, and they didn't come to it by the oppression of others. They used the promotion God had given them for His glory. It was promotion for God's honor, not for personal benefit.

And Nehemiah wants to be sure that people reading the account understand that that wasn't him or his heart. So you read here, "But I did not do so. I did not do so. That was not my way of life." Something that we, as believers, should probably say more rather than less. Refuse to follow custom. Refuse the status quo. Just because "it's always been done this way" doesn't mean it should be done that way with you because, when God puts you in a place of promotion, you have the opportunity to make things different, to change things. You don't have to leave them as they always were. You can have an influence, especially if your heart is His. "I just want to serve the LORD. In fear of the LORD, I want to do that

which is right. I want to honor the LORD in all that I do." So, Nehemiah only sought what God wanted. The essential parameter for him was, "I just want to please the LORD," and in pleasing the LORD, he was able to lead others. So, promotion gives you opportunity to bring change. You can set the tone if you're in a place of leadership. You don't have to do like everyone else has done. You don't have to follow the crowd. Here's a man with great personal convictions, and his word, when he was in power, was the last word on the issue. "Knock off the charging of interest, and swear to God before the people. Or, if not, may the LORD wipe you out!" This is not an easy guy to be with unless you're on sides with him. But yet he's the one who set the standard and enforced the policy. And I would say if you're in a place of leadership, if it matters to you, make sure it matters to those that follow you. Or get others to follow you. Nehemiah was pretty strong and severe in this. "I wouldn't let my brothers eat the provisions. I wouldn't let my staff go in the other direction." Look, it's easy to follow the crowd. It's far easier to follow the crowd than to set the pace. There are plenty of chameleons who will do whatever it takes to be liked. "Anything goes" within reason. "I don't want to make any waves.....as long as I get mine." But if all of the believers live that kind of life, how can the world even see that we are different? We are different. "Who shall stand in the holy hill?" we read in Psalm 24:3. "Who's going to stand in the holy place? But those who have pure hearts and clean hands, who haven't lifted their souls to idols or sworn deceitfully. They're going to be blessed by the LORD." And Nehemiah lived a life so far different from the culture around him that he stands out like a sore thumb. If we live for the LORD, and His Word becomes our standard, we'll never have to use the old excuse, "Everyone's doing it." We'll just be able to say, "This is the way the LORD would do it. This is the way we would honor Him." "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). That's what Jesus said. "And I will honor you."

So notice, in verse 15, that the former governors even justified their wickedness by sharing their wealth with their cronies. Right? Even they let their servants bear rule over the people. They shared the wealth, if you will. Privilege was found in their administrations at every level. But that led to graft, as far as Nehemiah was concerned, and he sets a better tone and a better course. He says, "We're going to fear the LORD. We're going to do this God's way, or we're not going to do this at all." Promotion brings opportunity to bring change.

Thirdly, verse 16, promotion demands diligence, and it's certainly a continued focus. We read, in verse 16, "Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did

not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work." Nehemiah was not quickly turned from what got him here - namely (in fact, through the end of chapter 6) the whole goal was one thing, "Let's build the wall, bring honor. That's why God sent me here." Chapter 7 on, in the book of Nehemiah, turns from wall building to spiritual building, and he brings in all the big guns to say, "Let's get on the right page with the LORD now," and he turns from the wall to the people and their spiritual well-being, their strength. But Nehemiah says here, in verse 16, "I came to work. I continued to work on the wall." He was narrow-minded, he was deep and not simply wide. And I want you to notice that he used his position to just get closer to the goal that God had set. He was narrow in his focus. He wasn't sidelined. Look, he said this, "We didn't buy any land." How much do you think land would begin to be worth when it now had a wall around it? If he knew that that was coming, he could have set himself up. "Oh, this is going to be worth tons of money later on! The wall will be built. I'll invest now. I see what's coming." He doesn't do it. His goal isn't personal gain; it is all about accomplishing God's will. So he's not self-interested, he's not deluded. He stays on track. And he won't let anyone working with him get that way either. "We're not buying anything." He's not letting his staff get away from the focus for which they had come. So he taught by example. He wouldn't settle for anything less. Like I said, the world often places higher standards on you than they place on themselves. It's always interesting to me when people say, "Well, I thought they were Christians!" as if, somehow, "Oh, yeah, they've got to live different than you." But they do have to live different than you. We expect to see a different life. We are often so anxious to prove that we can fit right in. We work really hard on being "regular." "Yeah, we're just one of the guys....." until the day comes that the world goes to hell, and we go, "Yeah, we're not really of that group at all." When it comes to belief, from the world, we are as different as cheese is from chalk. But when it comes to practice, we can oftentimes fit right in. That's horrible! And Nehemiah said, "No way. I'm not here for that. I'm not here for gain. I'm not here for good real estate decisions, looking ahead, projecting. I'm here to get the work done that God has given me to do." And that's what he was driven by. He was an honest, godly man in power. He wouldn't let himself or his team profiteer from their service of the LORD. "That's why we're here. I don't want to get involved in anything else. This is what I want to do."

So promotion brings financial responsibility, and yet it will also bring tempting privileges. It'll provide opportunities for you to make change. But it also requires,

if God puts you in a place of authority, diligence; and that you don't lose your focus because the minute that you do, now the enemy can have his way with you.

Finally, promotion demands a cost from you. If the work is to last, it's going to cost you something. Being moved up a ladder or in a place of responsibility doesn't just benefit you; it costs you. Verse 17, "And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people." Nehemiah practiced what he preached. He took on, personally, the feeding of one hundred and fifty people at a time when a lot of folks couldn't pay their rent. He put his money where his mouth was. He was willing to pay the cost to see God's work accomplished. His example was more valuable to him than whatever money he might have lost in the process. He was even able to help those who were returning to Israel from difficult regimes around them. An ox every day, six sheep every day, every ten days a new batch of wine, fowl - we don't know how many. But quite a hefty personal cost at a time when the bondage was heavy upon the people. And he could have gotten some financial help doing it, but he didn't want to. It isn't that he couldn't have used it. He was just more interested in being the example and the help to these oppressed people than serving himself. Nothing wrong to be paid for your work. It's not the issue here. The issue is Nehemiah chose sacrifice over privilege. That's what the six verses are all about. To him, cost was all right as long as the LORD was being glorified. So he doesn't tax the people, which is how the governor would have gotten paid. He doesn't enforce more burdens upon them so he could get ahead. He was only interested in God's approval.

I love verse 19. He says, and he says this a couple of times as we go through here because there're a couple of times where he has to really confront people, and it's hard, but he said (a couple of times), and this is the first time, "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people." His only interest was that God would approve what he had done. He considered only Him. I remember, years ago, hearing a story of a young violinist's first recital. It was in a pretty prominent place, and this kid was an amazing violin player. But when she was done with her performance, the place just erupted, and there was standing room only, and everyone stood to give her applause. And she didn't even acknowledge the crowd. She looked up at the balcony to see her teacher, to see if he approved.

"Did I play well?" It didn't matter what the crowd thought. She was interested in the teacher that had spent so much time with her, her instructor.

Well, here's Nehemiah. He's doing the right thing, he's denying himself, he's setting the example, he controls the situation because he's in charge. He realizes that it's different than ever, but he wants God to remember it. "LORD, You be pleased. LORD, You be glorified." Nehemiah teaches us that, if you're going to serve and be promoted, you're going to have to be willing to serve willingly, you're going to have to live above a life of reproach, you're going to have to focus on pleasing the LORD and setting the standards, not having the standards set you. And because of that, here's a guy that God could use and get a wall built around a huge city in fifty-two days. I mean, ridiculous. But God's hand was upon him.

So, maybe the question this morning is - who's following you? And what kind of steps are you taking to be, not a crowd follower but a God follower? What does it cost you? And if you're in a position of authority, what kind of tone are you setting? What kind of effect are you having? Because you have to lead by example, the kind of life in public that drives people to see the difference in you from those around you. It's the kind of light that the world is longing for. It's the kind of life only the church can show.

Next week, one last swing at Nehemiah's head before the wall gets done, as the enemy invites him to lunch. "Come on, won't you be my neighbor?"

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
October 16, 2017