

TGC

GOD'S WORD,

LEARNING FROM THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

OUR STORY

EDITED BY
D. A. CARSON AND
KATHLEEN B. NIELSON

God's Word, Our Story

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God's Word, Our Story

Learning from the Book of Nehemiah

D. A. CARSON
AND
KATHLEEN B. NIELSON,
EDITORS

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Foreword

Nehemiah is one of my favorite books in the Bible. I've taught through it many times. In these thirteen chapters, we are shown how greatly God cares for his city, his people, his kingdom. During one of the lowest moments in our history as God's people, he raised up an extraordinary servant to accomplish the daunting task of rebuilding the city walls and the people within those walls. We grant that Nehemiah is one of the Bible's finest champions, but God himself is the ultimate and only hero of this, and every, biblical book.

I commend this book to you. Kathleen Nielson drew together outstanding expositors, who addressed attentive thousands at The Gospel Coalition Women's Conference in June 2014, and whose written expositions will now serve many more who want to learn from God's Word and learn more about studying and teaching God's Word. At the conclusion of every exposition, Kathleen has assembled sage advice for those who would teach the text.

One of the chief concerns of The Gospel Coalition has always been faithful, intelligent, Spirit-empowered, gospel-centered exposition of the sacred Scriptures. From our very earliest meetings as TGC Council members, we prayerfully discussed how we might encourage our sisters in the Lord, just as we wanted to strengthen our brothers in the Lord. But I think none of us imagined what a powerful and fruitful ministry would one day rise up under Kathleen's remarkable leadership. The regional training events planned

for ensuing years, in which women leaders in local churches will be diligently trained to teach the Scriptures and to teach others how to do so, will expand this great work even further, as part of the ongoing ministry of TGC's women's initiatives.

We will all be the wiser for studying each of the chapters in this book, in order that we may serve the church and the world through faithful biblical exposition.

Sandy Willson

Senior minister, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN
Founding member of TGC Council

Introduction

On Exposition

Kathleen Nielson

Why, some people ask, do we devote so many hours at a Gospel Coalition conference to those huge plenary sessions, where one person stands up front and talks? Ours is an interactive age, and people aren't used to listening for such long periods; couldn't we cut a few of those talks?

Not really, and here's why. The Gospel Coalition is one of those ministries that holds the preaching and teaching of God's Word as centrally important. And we want that importance to show in our conferences—especially in an age when expository preaching is less and less valued.

This collection of talks from The Gospel Coalition's 2014 National Women's Conference (TCGW14) is a bit different from previous collections. Our aim in this volume is not just to share the talks, but also, in the process, to encourage readers to think about the nature and value of biblical exposition. We'd love for readers to be not only inspired by reading these messages on Nehemiah, but also better equipped to do the kind of study and preparation that would enable them to expound the Word themselves—

perhaps to large audiences, to Bible study groups, to children, or to a friend over coffee.

To that end, we've included after each chapter not only reflection questions but also a few comments, including personal comments from the contributors, on the process of studying and preparing; these "Think Like an Expositor" sections focus on just one or two particular aspects of teaching that text. The conclusion looks back and reflects on the work of digging into Old Testament narrative in particular. The whole book, then, is an initial exploration of the *how* of exposition, through the various voices of these experienced Bible teachers. This introduction begins the conversation by asking three basic questions about biblical exposition: *What? Why? and Where?*

The *What* of Biblical Exposition

What do we mean by *biblical exposition*? The term is used quite often, and sometimes loosely, within the evangelical world. *Exposition* traditionally means some kind of public display—a "placing out," according to the root meaning of the word, as in a museum's exposition of a valuable collection. The items in the collection are laid out in an exhibit that allows people to take in the treasures that are there. That's what biblical exposition is, at its heart: not creating new treasures—or decorating the old ones—but laying out the Word treasures that are there and helping people see them clearly in the form in which we're given them—that is, passage by passage and book by book, within the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Among those who embrace expositional teaching, various definitions (and various strategies) can be found. One helpful, succinct definition comes from Pastor David Helm: "Expositional preaching is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text."¹

¹David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 13.

In other words, an expositor's main job is not to expound an idea or ideas taken from a text; it is not to expound the present culture in relation to a text; and it is not to expound an argument supported by various fragments of texts. An expositor's job is to *expound a text* of Scripture by bringing to light its whole form and content—and not simply as an academic exercise: notice these words in Helm's definition: "empowered" and "rightfully submits." The power of exposition comes not simply from right answers about the text and certainly not from a powerful personality that gets the text across, but from a right and full submission to the powerful Spirit of God who breathed out the Bible's living and active words, who dwells in the Christian preacher or teacher, and who actively helps him or her rightly to articulate the meaning of the words in the text so that they penetrate hearts as they are intended to do, for the glory of Christ.

The *Why* of Biblical Exposition

We understand the *what* even better when we begin to ask the *why* of biblical exposition. Why is it so important to expound Scripture—to lay it out clearly, to let its shape and emphasis be the shape and emphasis we offer to our listeners? I will offer five reasons, but the list is not exhaustive. I recommend exploration of the various publications and authors noted in this introduction in order to study more exhaustively all sorts of questions relating to biblical exposition.

First, *biblical exposition is so important because the Bible is God speaking*. If we had to choose just one reason, this, of course, would be it. If it is true that these words are God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), written by men who "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21), then nothing is more important than hearing these words clearly. The One who spoke these words made us. He also made a way to save us from his wrath, which we in our sin deserve. He loves us and lights the way to him. That way is found in his Word. That way is Jesus, who is

at the center of this Word. Hearing this Word clearly and truly is a life-and-death matter. Submitting to God's Word as to the Lord himself is what we human beings were created to do, for his glory and for our good. When a person stands up to handle the Word of the God of the universe, eternal realities are at stake.

These realities are personal, not abstract. God's Word is alive and active because God is alive and active. Sometimes we actually forget he is there as we receive and discuss his words to us. Pastor Mike Bullmore offers a great reminder: "Preacher, imagine God sitting in the congregation as you preach. What will be the expression on his face? Will it say, 'That's not at all what I was getting at with that passage.' Or will it say, 'Yes that's exactly what I intended.'"²

Second, *biblical exposition is so important because it gives us confidence in our message*. The above quotation from Pastor Bullmore can be a little scary. When we're honest, we redeemed believers know our sins and limitations that regularly impede our teaching. We know we're fully capable of missing what God is getting at, or perhaps being guided by our own concerns and perspectives more than by deep study of and submission to the actual text. We all miss the expositional mark regularly. Please be sure that we do not offer these talks on Nehemiah as perfect examples. (I think I can speak for all the contributors!) They are humbly offered as examples, conceived with the aim of pleasing God by letting people hear as clearly as possible his life-giving words.

The kind of confidence we're talking about is a humble confidence developed through Word study that is not disconnected from personal communion with the God who spoke it. This communion is known only through Christ, who by his death and resurrection made that communion possible. It is encouraging that, as we dare to teach, we believers in Christ have the best help possible: not only his people around us, but his own Holy Spirit with us and in us to help us take in the words he breathed out. In a chapter that

²Mike Bullmore, "A Biblical Case for Expository Preaching," 9marks, Feb. 25, 2010, <http://9marks.org/article/biblical-case-expository-preaching/> (accessed June 11, 2015).

offers a most excellent summary of “The Hermeneutical Distinctives of Expository Preaching,” David Jackman comments on the importance of prayer as “central to the process of preparation”: “We are entirely dependent on God’s Spirit to open our blind eyes, unstop our deaf ears, and soften our hardened hearts, so at every stage in preparing to preach we seek the author’s help to rightly hear and handle his Word of truth.”³ For years, my husband and I, along with our children, sat under the expository preaching of Pastor Kent Hughes, who consistently pointed his congregation to a full awareness of the triune God’s presence as the Word was preached; that was a great gift.⁴

Our confidence comes ultimately from a personal trust in the first reason why biblical exposition is so important: that this is indeed God’s Word—God speaking. We are aiming to lay out for people not our own wisdom from inside of ourselves, but the wisdom of words that come down to us like the rain and the snow from heaven, watering the earth, bringing fruit, accomplishing that which God purposes (Isa. 55:10–11). We don’t have to rely on our wit, our rhetorical ability, or our winsome presence—although God can use all those things if he so chooses (the contributors to this volume have various and generous doses of those gifts). What we trust finally, though, is that what we have to offer, by God’s grace, is sure, unfailing, beautiful, and effective—his Word. Our job is to get out of the way and let it speak (or, rather, let God speak, by his Spirit). These words are alive with the breath of God.

In his book *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, Tim Keller offers an extremely helpful initial discussion of the call to “Word ministry” on multiple levels—clearly establishing the basic principle that those who teach the Bible

³In *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 9–21.

⁴See the Preaching the Word commentary series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), many volumes of which Kent Hughes wrote, and every volume of which includes his Foreword, “A Word to Those Who Preach the Word,” in which he talks about knowing the presence and the pleasure of God while preaching. A fuller discussion can be found in his “Anatomy of Exposition: *Logos, Ethos, and Pathos*,” first delivered as part of the Mullins Lectures at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1998) and available at <http://www.simeontrust.org/media/doc-khughes-anatomy.pdf>.

in any context must faithfully present God's words. Keller takes us to 1 Peter 4:10–11 and to Peter Davids's instructive thoughts on that passage, in which the apostle Peter admonishes anyone who speaks to “do so as one who speaks the very words of God” (NIV).⁵ In doing so, we can trust his words to do his work, by his Spirit.

Third, *biblical exposition is so important because those who preach or teach should be guides, not gurus*. This point is obviously related to the last one. Because our confidence is in the Word itself, by the Spirit, we must aim to teach that confidence to others as we share the Word. We want to communicate not how much we have found in the text, but how much is to be found in the text—and, in the process, a bit about how to find it. We don't want listeners to go away saying, “Wow, what a good speaker. She's amazing. I never could have found all that in there”—but rather, “Wow, that was an amazing passage of Scripture. It struck my heart. I loved seeing how it holds together and fits into the whole book. I never thought about how directly it relates to Christ and to the gospel. I think I'll try asking some of those same questions of this other text I'm studying . . .”

Maybe that sounds a little ambitious or contrived. But, again, maybe not. Maybe that's really what we should be after. Don't we want to send people away marveling at God himself, moved to follow him more closely, lifting up his Son more wholeheartedly? In one sense, it's easier just to try to be witty or winsome and to pull a group of listeners along by those means. In another sense, it's much harder and more pressure-filled to make the message depend on *me*. In the end, I want my listeners to be protected from me! We want our listeners to follow us, yes—but to follow us in the way of his commandments, in the delightful path of his testimonies (Ps. 119:24, 32). We want to be guides, not gurus.

⁵ *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 2–4. In this discussion, Keller references P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 161.

Fourth, *biblical exposition is so important because regular expository teaching tells God's story truly*. Biblical exposition works through passages of Scripture in context. Most pastors who are biblical expositors preach through biblical books, passage after passage and week after week, so that their congregations receive God's Word in the form he ordained: in books, and in the collections of books we know as the Old and New Testaments. Many of these pastors, along with their elders, have made sure that this commitment to expository teaching trickles down through all the groups and programs in the church—so that a women's Bible study, for example, also is working regularly through books of the Old and New Testament. This is not to say that from time to time there isn't a great topical talk or series of talks. It is to say that the regular diet of Scripture intake consists of the whole Word of God, whole book by whole book.

We take in the Word in whole books because that is the form in which God has delivered his Word to us. He's made us a "people of the book." Even though in this day we all tend to be people of topics and snippets of information digested through one quick link after another, we must respect the beautiful coherence of the book we call the Bible. If an artist presented us with a magnificent sculpture, we probably would not feel free to break it apart and decorate our houses with one piece of it here and another fragment of it there. What if the artist visited us and saw his work of art torn to pieces? Now, it is certainly true that a topical or a nonexpositional Bible talk can do either a good or a bad job of respecting the coherence of Scripture. I would venture to guess that, if it does a good job, there's a good chance the speaker has spent time doing some background work in biblical exposition related to the verse or verses mentioned in that talk. Occasionally, a nonexpositor has so satiated himself or herself in the whole of Scripture that one part naturally and beautifully resonates with another.

The Bible is God's work of art. Each book's form and content, and the unity of the whole Bible, represent an unparalleled literary

masterpiece, with multiple genres combining to speak one unified story. It's the universal story, the true story of the universe. It's God's telling of his redemption of a people for himself for his glory, through his Son. We like to summarize the arc of that story in four parts, as several of our TGCW14 speakers mention: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Every book, from Genesis to Revelation, finds its place and its ultimate meaning within that big story. And every passage within every book finds its meaning as part of that whole book and as part of the whole story.

There's no other way to get the story right than to listen to it the way God tells it. There's no other way to delight fully in the story than to contemplate it in its fullness. We deepen our knowledge of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world, as we grasp his part in the story from the very beginning (in creation) to the very end (at his second coming and into eternity). The cross and resurrection that are the climax at the center of the story cannot be torn away from the beginning and the end—and all the other parts in between. Every passage of Scripture finds its fullness of revelation in the gospel of Jesus Christ; as Charles Haddon Spurgeon famously taught, just as from every town, village, and hamlet in England there is a road to London, “so from every text of Scripture there is a road to Christ.”⁶ In him are life and light, from the story's start to finish. To know and to grow in Christ, we need to know God's Word.

We may think that one topic and one verse on that topic are the most relevant stuff to offer the group we're leading or speaking to, but in the end, the most relevant message we can offer is consistent teaching through the Word of God, by which God's Spirit reveals God himself to us. And God is eternally relevant. We all think we know what we need to hear; God knew it from the beginning, and if we keep listening to his voice through his Word, we'll keep getting to the topics we need to have addressed (some of which

⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Christ Precious to Believers,” sermon at Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens, March 13, 1859, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0242.htm> (accessed June 17, 2015).

we didn't know we needed). We will address these topics through passages we study in their contexts before we jump to our own contexts. We will discover a beautiful network of roads to Christ. And, in giving careful attention to God's story the way he tells it, we will find our individual stories within it.

These talks on the book of Nehemiah have been exciting to so many because they uncover an amazing part of the story that not only connects beautifully to the whole Bible, but also connects with each of our own parts in the story right now. This story of returning exiles is our history as the people of God, and he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever—working out his eternal plan of redemption through his Son. It is hugely encouraging to find whole-Bible connections and deeply personal connections in the chapters of Nehemiah, as we follow the story from the opening scene in the capital of the Persian Empire to the final scene in Jerusalem.

Fifth, *biblical exposition is so important because it grows us up into mature followers of Christ*. “Little-snippet teaching” is one way to stay on a milk diet forever instead of moving on to meat (see 1 Cor. 3:1–2). For one thing, exposition challenges our minds and hearts to take in the literary logic of the larger biblical story; we stretch our thoughts, for example, to take in the details of the first Passover celebration, and then connect the Passover with Jesus, the Lamb of God; we picture the Jerusalem temple in all its intricacy, and then see the picture come alive in Christ, who is our temple—and who then calls us to become living stones in a living temple; or we follow the train of thought through those Old Testament sacrifices, which covered sin, to the sacrifice of Christ, which washed it away. Scripture asks of us complex progressions of thought and imagination, and we become mature in every way as we submit to following the life-giving ways of the Word. God himself is infinite and gloriously holy; the gift of his Word allows us the privilege of beginning to delve into the glorious depths of knowing him. This privilege lets us practice for life in eternity.

We're not talking about knowledge just for the sake of pure knowledge, to be sure—although the kind of careful study involved in expository teaching will stretch any person intellectually. But biblical exposition is, at heart, about knowing God and making him known through his Word. First and foremost, the Word makes us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The kind of maturity the Word invites us to embrace, then, is a growing up in the Lord—in his ways, in his thoughts that are higher than ours, and ultimately in Christ, who is the full and perfect revelation of his Father. In knowing Jesus through the Word, we know and commune with God more and more deeply. In sharing the Word, we share not just knowledge about God; we share the living Christ. “Him we proclaim,” declares the apostle Paul, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:28–29).

Sharing the Word in this way happens among people. Expository teaching is not a solo performance to be isolated from a community. This is the problem, of course, with conferences that pull people out of their normal communities and eventually connect virtually with millions of people whom the speakers never see or know. The Gospel Coalition is a ministry intent on helping to build up the church; our goal is to send preachers, teachers, and church members back from our conferences (and from listening to these conferences) to their local congregations, encouraged and equipped to serve even more fruitfully there, among real, live people!

The scene in Nehemiah 8 gives a powerful picture of what it looks like when God's Word is expounded to God's people. This huge assembly of returned exiles—“men and women and all who could understand” (vv. 2, 3)—gathered in the square before the Water Gate and listened attentively for hours to the reading of the Law, while Levites moved among them, helping them understand:

“they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (v. 8). They explained the words so that the people got the meaning. They expounded the Word to God’s gathered people—who went away rejoicing “because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (v. 12).

Nehemiah goes on to show ongoing effects of the Word at work among God’s people as it is explained and received with clear understanding and open hearts. Of course, part of what the people understood from the biblical exposition was the story of their sin and their need for a deliverer from that sin. The ongoing effects of that part of the story are evident as well, in subsequent chapters. And part of *our* understanding of Nehemiah is the part he and his people played in God’s preparing of the way for the promised deliverer. The maturity required of all of us, at every point in redemptive history, comes from receiving and believing every word of God’s delivered revelation of himself, as the Spirit enables us—which means, for us now, receiving and believing in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word made flesh. The believing people God is creating for himself through his Son are the great *why* of biblical exposition.

Why is biblical exposition so important? Because the Bible is God speaking. Only as we expound his Word can we be confident in our message, serving as guides, not gurus, telling God’s story truly so that people can know and grow up into Jesus Christ, God’s Son.

The *Where* of Biblical Exposition

We’ve said that biblical exposition takes place among God’s people. And we’ve used the terms *preaching* and *teaching* to refer to that activity practiced by both men and women. Where do women in particular fit in, in relation to the question of preaching and teaching? We at TGC joyfully and wholeheartedly affirm “the distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men,” a role that, according to Scripture, is grounded in creation,

fall, and redemption.⁷ We also joyfully and wholeheartedly affirm that, along with the authoritative and teaching roles set apart for qualified men in the context of God's gathered people, there are more opportunities to teach God's Word in this wide world than all the women of the church together will ever be able to meet. Granted, among committed complementarians, there is not perfect unanimity concerning the hermeneutical significance of the conjunctions in 1 Timothy 2:12 or concerning certain contexts of teaching. We must all study hard and prayerfully, listen well, and articulate carefully—and we must do this in the context of the church, as members of Christ's body who worship and serve in local congregations where we can fully commit ourselves to respect the authority of the elders in leadership.

And we must encourage women to learn to teach the Bible and train them to do it! The opportunities to teach other women are huge today. These opportunities are not to be scorned in a scramble for other or wider audiences that might seem more desirable; there is a significant need for well-trained, articulate women who can expound Scripture well to other women who want to learn. Opportunities exist in Western settings, where women are increasingly hungry to learn from each other in substantive ways, within the clear context of church life and leadership. And opportunities exist in spades in non-Western settings—in many cases, where no man would ever be allowed to venture. As global connections and awareness grow, so should our hearts—to take the good news of the living Word to women in places where they have never heard, and into women's gatherings where only other women are able to infiltrate. Sometimes these gatherings are on the other side of the globe, and sometimes (often) they are just around a few corners from where we live.

Neither should we scorn opportunities to teach children, in both formal and informal contexts, shaping the whole trajectory

⁷See The Gospel Coalition's Foundation Documents: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents>

of human lives in the pathways of the Word. And many kinds of teaching take place less formally—in a small-group discussion, over tea, or perhaps in a Priscilla/Aquila-like session (Acts 18:24–26). I appreciate the clear message of authors already noted that the principles of biblical exposition are crucial for all teachers of the Bible, in multiple contexts.⁸ In the end, every believer in Jesus Christ is called to study and share the Scriptures—to do Word ministry in all kinds of contexts. The *where* of biblical exposition for laypeople, including women, needs to grow and expand, as all God’s people become more and more equipped to share the Word faithfully and well.

May this volume of talks from TGCW14 help to further that end! By God’s grace, may we in the church be raising up many women and men who love the Word, who delight to lay out its treasures, and who encourage others to share those treasures through faithful biblical exposition, for the glory of Christ alone.

⁸Keller’s *Preaching*, for example, emphasizes this point, recommending the same emphasis in the seminal work by Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1996).

Taking Action in Light of God's Word

Nehemiah 1-2

Kathy Keller

As we begin the study of Nehemiah, will you take a minute to find this book in your Bible? Take a look at its location in the Old Testament. Did you find it right in the middle, just before you get to Psalms?

No, Nehemiah is *not* right in the middle. It's at the end. Now you're puzzled, because it looks like it's in the middle of your Old Testament. But Nehemiah is chronologically at the end of the Old Testament books recording the history of Israel. There's a lot more Scripture that follows it: the Wisdom Literature, the Psalms, the prophetic utterances. But in Nehemiah, we get the last glimpse of Old Testament history before the curtain comes down and the silence of four hundred years begins, only to be broken by the angels singing about the birth of the Messiah.

Nehemiah is an Old Testament narrative that shows God's people mercifully returning from exile in accordance with God's promises, but at a very great point of need. Israel is no longer a magnificent kingdom, but a weak, conquered remnant. The people are rebuilding a broken-down city under the leadership of a man whose only visible qualification is that he follows God.

Let's jump right into the text: Nehemiah 1 and 2. There is much to learn here for twenty-first-century believers who want to be faithful to God's Word. As we'll see, this narrative tells a story of understanding and trusting God's Word.

Setting the Scene

Living in New York City, you tend to meet people who know people who know people. So over the past year or so, especially around the season of summer blockbuster action movies, I've had an occasional thought of trying to connect with someone in the film industry and selling Nehemiah as the next action movie—although, given what Hollywood recently did to Noah, maybe not.

If we try to imagine Nehemiah as an action movie, here's how it might open: a dark, brooding shot pans the destroyed walls surrounding Jerusalem. The stones have tumbled down. The gates are just piles of firewood, still smoking. The inhabitants, a small and hardy collection of returned exiles, are weeping and grieving.

Quick cut to Susa, the location of King Artaxerxes's citadel. Kislev, the month, is flashed on the bottom of the screen. Hanani, whom Nehemiah refers to as a brother, rides up with several others on tired and weary mounts. Gasping for breath, swallowing much-needed water, Hanani reports to Nehemiah this fresh disaster.

This is not the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem that took place under King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC, when the Jews were first taken into exile. That's old news. That had happened seventy years before, as the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had foretold. The southern kingdom of Judah had fallen to pagan invaders, just as the northern kingdom of Israel had much earlier. Nebuchadnezzar-

zar, at the head of the Babylonian army, had invaded and taken Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, broken the walls, and taken the people into captivity.

But through all the years of exile, God's people had held on to the prophets' promises that there would be an eventual restoration. Isaiah 44:28 gives God's words specifically about King Cyrus ("He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose"), about Jerusalem ("She shall be built"), and about the temple ("Your foundation shall be laid"). In time, against all probability, pagan kings had begun to allow the captive exiles to return to their homeland. God was fulfilling his Word. We read in 2 Chronicles 36:22, "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing" (NIV).

Remember that part, the writing. That's important.

Verse 23 continues: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the LORD their God be with them'" (NIV).

There are commentators who hypothesize that Cyrus was not merely showing compassion to his enslaved people by letting them go home and reestablish their own temples and worship, but he was also hedging his bets. He figured if they were all praying to their own gods for him, somebody was sure to be paying attention somewhere, and he would be in good order with some god or other.

But whatever Cyrus's motives were, God had promised through Isaiah and Jeremiah that Cyrus would be his shepherd—Isaiah actually uses that word, *shepherd*—to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

So here we see the first of many examples of the Word of the Lord finding its fulfillment in the mixed motives of a pagan king.

One of my favorite proverbs says that the heart of the king is like a stream of water in the hand of the Lord (Prov. 21:1). We see it here.

Back to Hanani's news to Nehemiah. This destruction of the wall and the gates is new destruction on top of old; it is destruction of the rebuilding that had commenced, sanctioned by Cyrus, king of Persia, when he began allowing the conquered people to return to their homelands and reestablish their worship and their cultures.

If we look in the book of Ezra, which is essentially a companion piece to Nehemiah, we see that the first wave of exiles had returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel, whose first priority was to rebuild the temple so that worship could recommence. The return had started and the rebuilding had begun, but then disaster had struck—the pressure of surrounding adversaries brought the work to a halt, and it was not to be resumed until about fifteen years later, when Zerubbabel's temple was finally completed with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

Again, during the return under Ezra half a century later, pressure from surrounding enemies halted the rebuilding—this time of the city and its walls. In a fast-forward section of Ezra 4, we learn that the officials of the Trans-Euphrates region reported to King Artaxerxes—that's Nehemiah's king, remember—concerning the progress in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes stopped the rebuilding of the wall lest Jerusalem become secure again and perhaps stop paying tribute and taxes. The king decided the work should stop until he had a chance to think it over and determine whether it was in his own best interest to let it continue.

This was an unmitigated disaster. It was actually worse in some ways than the original destruction and exile. The return of the exiles had been promised and had begun, but now it seemed as though God's Word, in the process of being fulfilled, had been stopped by evil men who had axes to grind and didn't want to see Jerusalem reconstituted.

Without a secure wall to defend the people from predators, raiders, and the surrounding powerful nations, there would be no permanent restoration of Israelite culture. Their heritage, their way of life, would cease. They would be assimilated into the surrounding cultures. The law and the Word of God would be forgotten as the remnant intermarried, and they all would just go away. There would be no more Israelite nation to bring forth God's promised Messiah.

So the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem were not just part of the normal longing for a national homeland; they were key ingredients in God's redemptive plan for the world, because the Messiah was to come out of the Israelite nation. But there wasn't an Israelite nation anymore, and there was never going to be one unless this rebuilding took place.

With the king's permission temporarily suspended, the surrounding peoples had lost no time in destroying the work that had been done on the walls. Now it looked as if the return of the exiles and the resumption of their lives as a distinct Jewish people were in jeopardy. This was Hanani's news.

Let's return to our action movie. Pan to Nehemiah's face. Something has to be done. Something *will* be done. *He* will be the one to do it. He leaps into action and . . . sits down to weep and pray to God for four months.

This is where I might lose the interest of any potential movie-maker I might have had hooked to this point.

Nehemiah leaps into action and prays for four months. In our short-attention-span world, it does not look like it, but Nehemiah is actually hard at work. We would focus on the presenting problem—the walls are broken, the gates are burned, the remnant's at risk—and come up with a plan of action, address the circumstance, and fix the problem.

Let me say, as an aside, that circumstances can often be very painful, but they are rarely our biggest problem. Our sickness, our money problems, our singleness, our marriage problems, our

kids, or our infertility—these are hard, but they are not our deepest, truest needs.

Nehemiah has a much broader perspective than we typically do. He knows how God has been working in history since the creation and fall, and that the restoration of Jerusalem is but one part of the great story arc of redemption, which one day will climax with the coming of the messianic King prophesied for so many years, actually beginning with God's words to Eve in Genesis 3. So the action he takes is in light of God's Word.

The rest of what I want to say falls under two headings: (1) Nehemiah understood God's Word and (2) Nehemiah's actions were based in confidence in God's Word.

Nehemiah Understood God's Word

Follow me here. The Bible is made up of many individual stories like Nehemiah's, but in truth it is only one story: the story of God redeeming his people and restoring his world.

Some theologians break this into four parts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Those are all helpful categories, but the overarching narrative is about the true Adam, the Redeemer of the world, coming to redeem a people from every tongue, tribe, and nation, and usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

The Bible is about Jesus, from before the foundation of the earth. He himself taught this truth to his disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27 NIV). Earlier, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees by saying: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40 NIV).

The Bible is not primarily about wisdom for living, promises for comfort, or guidance for the perplexed. All those things can be found within the Bible, it's true, but they are as shiny pebbles

that distract our attention from the great highway running from ruin to renewal. If we read the Scripture stories, the Psalms, the prophets, or the law disconnected from the primary narrative arc of redemption, we will find them distracting or confusing, and hard to apply properly to life today.

Unfortunately, many of us are barely literate when it comes to the flow of redemptive history. We go to our Bibles for something to help us deal with our circumstances rather than to see how God is dealing with the world. But the Bible is not about us; it's about God and his plan to redeem his fallen, miserable world, and restore it to the glory he first sang into being at creation.

Nehemiah knows there is infinitely more at stake here than just the restoration of one people's national sovereignty. He's interpreting the present problem in light of the whole Word of God. He actually alludes to this in his prayer, which we'll consider just below. (The prayer in Nehemiah 9 will more fully reveal the large scriptural perspective on the people's present situation.)

We can't read the book rightly unless we understand all of this. We know through hindsight that the promise is going to be fulfilled through an individual, a Messiah. Nehemiah's whole work is to prepare the way for him, to have a rebuilt nation, city, temple, priesthood, and sacrifices, a place where Jesus can grow up Jewish and be the true Israel, the final temple, the high priest, the ultimate sacrifice. Nehemiah doesn't precisely know how what he is doing will bring this about. But he knows he has to be faithful to God's promises and his Word.

With far less excuse than Nehemiah, many of us are a bit fuzzy on how to read our Bibles and how to find direction for our actions in light of the whole Word of God. For many of us, this is because we have been existing on a diet of artificial inspiration and devotionals rather than taking the time to sort out the Bible as a whole.

How many of you are label readers when you go grocery shopping, checking the amount of fat, sugar, salt, and preservatives in

various products? Here's another question: What would be your response if you took something off the shelf and discovered the ingredients were, in this order: sugar, salt, wood ester alcohol, benzochromium hydroxate, artificial flavor, artificial color, and preservatives? I suspect that many of us would quickly place that item on the shelf next to the bug poison, back away slowly, and then run for the organic food section.

Yet we think little about feeding our souls with equally toxic, nonfood substances instead of the milk and the meat of God's Word. People can find the Word of God mysterious if not completely mystifying when they neglect the work required to unearth its meaning, so they turn to preprocessed soul junk food.

I am not saying that we have to sign up for a seminary education, although I recommend that women be as theologically educated as possible; this can only be good for the church. It can be as simple as reading Jen Wilkin's excellent book *Women of the Word*.¹

In light of God's purpose to redeem his people from sin, as expressed through his promises to Abraham, it is clear to see that Nehemiah is not upset just because the restoration effort seems to have stalled indefinitely; he's upset because God's people are still in disgrace. That's clear from Nehemiah 1:3. God's promises look as if they have been frustrated by the designs of evil men.

Nehemiah is interpreting the present events and his own situation and gifts in light of God's Word and in light of the main themes of the Word. He doesn't need to ask for a sign, lay out a fleece, request an angelic visitor, or even read a particularly appropriate devotional, like a Christian version of a horoscope. Nehemiah understands the Word and he sees where his people are in the progression of redemptive history, so he seeks to enable them to be the people of God so the Lord will continue his plan to save the world through them.

¹Jen Wilkin, *Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

Only when we can do the same thing can we read the Bible without falling into a kind of “If I do this, God will bless me” moralism. Yes, we will see lots of lessons on how to pray or how to handle worry and face opposition, but those lessons will be tied to the gospel of salvation through Christ.

The connector between Nehemiah’s understanding of God’s Word and his subsequent action is his prayer in chapter 1. This is the bridge between “in light of God’s Word” and “taking action.” Nehemiah says he prays night and day, and he mentions Kislev in the beginning and Nisan at the end (Neh. 1:1; 2:1). That indicates he is probably praying this prayer night and day for sixteen weeks. Of course, the prayer itself (1:5–11) has to be a summary of that long, long prayer time, but it shows the trajectory of his weeks of prayer.

First, in verse 5, Nehemiah spends time just looking at God: he is heavenly, great, awesome. And while, yes, he keeps his covenant of love, it’s with those who love him and obey his commands. Nehemiah begins in a remarkably God-centered way, recognizing God’s complete freedom. He actually owes us nothing. Derek Kidner says Nehemiah begins by putting us in our place.²

That’s not the way we modern people usually pray, is it? We start with our own feelings or needs. Or if we start with God, we want to hear warm, fuzzy reassurances from him, speaking to our hearts. Nehemiah, it seems, starts by getting his heart reoriented. Even the most godly people tend to lose perspective under the stress of a crisis, and Nehemiah doesn’t want to let that happen to him.

When we don’t realize how infinitely great God is, all kinds of distortions creep into our thinking. We panic or obsess because we forget that our God is infinitely great. Ironically, admitting he owes us nothing and that he is majestic, high, and lofty brings more peace than lots of crying out with desperate petitions.

²Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 79.

After adoration comes confession (vv. 6–7). This, too, comes before any petition. In this, Nehemiah is actually following the model that Jesus put into the Lord’s Prayer. Nehemiah confesses both his individual sin and the corporate sin of his people. According to Kidner, after adoring God’s infinite highness and confessing our smallness, we realize God owes us nothing, and therefore we come empty-handed.³ That’s the only way we can come into his presence. There’s no way we can put a claim on God.

Finally, Nehemiah makes his appeal to God (vv. 8–10). He does so based firmly on God’s own Word. He references Deuteronomy, which affirms that God has promised to bring his people back from exile and reconstitute a nation and a house, Jerusalem and the temple, where God’s name will dwell (12:5; 30:4). He alludes to Exodus in verse 10, reminding God how he redeemed his people from Egypt by his mighty hand. God has gone to a lot of trouble already to create this people, and now they need him to fulfill his promises in order to continue as a people.

There had been times when the nation of Israel had sinned so badly as to be on the verge of extinction and final abandonment by God. But Moses had interceded in prayer, and God’s work with Israel had gone forward. Now Nehemiah is interceding in the same way. Again we see Nehemiah’s prayer grounded in the Word, in the history of salvation, and in the conviction that God will fulfill his promises and continue his work of redemption.

So the first action Nehemiah takes (our title, remember, is “Taking Action in Light of God’s Word”) is prayer. Similarly, our prayers should always be in light of the Word. Our prayer life should be shaped and grounded in Scripture as often as possible, as we respond to scriptural promises and statements about God.

Immersion in God’s Word teaches us to pray the same way immersion in language teaches a baby how to speak the language of her parents. Praying Scripture-filled prayers radically reorients

³Ibid.

us away from our self-absorption, giving us perspective, removing our worry and our panic, by humbling us before God.

Nehemiah Had Confidence in God's Word

Nehemiah also takes action based on confidence in God's Word. At the end of chapter 1, he reveals two important pieces of information that will shape the course of action he's planning to take after praying.

Nehemiah asks for God's favor with "this man" (v. 11), who in the next sentence is revealed as Nehemiah's employer, none other than King Artaxerxes. As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah has the trust and the access to Artaxerxes that very few others have. He decides to risk that position and possibly his life to ask for a huge personal favor. He's going to go to the king directly, using his position as cupbearer to get access, and make a request. He knows the danger, and he approaches it in a very humble, vulnerable way.

Verse 11 is striking; despite how slowly Nehemiah gets there—four months of praying, adoration, confession, all of it—when he gets there, he has a very specific plan and a very specific request worked out. The king could be furious. In fact, Nehemiah says, "I was very much afraid" (2:2). Nehemiah knows there is a lot on the line. This is the king who stopped the work of rebuilding and allowed the marauders to destroy the half-built wall. Now Nehemiah is going to ask him to reverse that decision.

I want to pause here to consider the sovereignty of God at work behind the scenes. We can go back in the book of Ezra and see events that had been unfolding at the highest level of red tape. Letters concerning the legality of the wall rebuilding had flown back and forth at the speed of camel between Jerusalem and Artaxerxes's citadel at Susa. To begin with, we are told in Ezra 4 that Rehum and Shimshai wrote Artaxerxes, accusing the Jews of rebuilding Jerusalem with a view of seceding from the empire and escaping the taxes and revenues due it (vv. 9–16). Artaxerxes responded with his own letter, the order to stop work until he

could think it over (vv. 17–22). Providentially, he allowed for the issuance of another decree changing his mind (v. 21).

Ezra tells of this halting of work in his and Nehemiah's time (4:7–23) in the context of telling about the similar halting back in Zerubbabel's time (4:1–5 and 4:24–6:22). So this persecution is nothing new! But God has sovereignly directed. Under Zerubbabel took place one of the most celebrated victories of clerks and paper pushers everywhere and a shining example of God working behind the scenes through bureaucratic red tape. At that time, enemies also sent letters to the king, then Darius. The governors of the Trans-Euphrates—everything past the Euphrates River—and the little potentates of that region wrote to Darius and tattled that the Jews were rebuilding without permission and were defending their actions by saying first that God had told them to and second that King Cyrus had given them permission in the past and had even returned the gold and silver articles that had been looted from the temple. These tattlers asked for a search of the royal archives of Babylon to see if this so-called decree of Cyrus could be found, and also asked for an answer.

Do you remember that I told you it was important that Cyrus had written his decree down?

King Darius issued the order, the archival search proceeded, and a memorandum was found (Ezra 6:2), a divinely filed memorandum showing that Cyrus had indeed issued a decree not merely *permitting* but *ordering* the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Darius conveyed this information to the governors, together with the surely unwelcome orders to assist the rebuilding with whatever was needed: money, animals for sacrifice, and anything else requested by the priests in Jerusalem. Anyone ignoring this order would be impaled on a beam taken from his own house. The rest of Ezra 6 describes the joyful completion of the temple rebuilding under Zerubbabel.

Be careful what you ask for when you ask for a search of the royal archives.

The providence and omnipotence of God have been protecting his people through every stage of this painful process of returning and rebuilding. Nehemiah knows this. He knows God's faithfulness in the past, and he's basing his present actions on knowing that God will not stop being faithful to the word he's spoken to bring the exiles back and to rebuild their city. Like his contemporary Esther, he has risen to his position for just such a time as this.

Nehemiah shows the king great deference: "Let the king live forever!" (Neh. 2:3). Then, when the king asks what Nehemiah wants from him, Nehemiah makes his famous brief "arrow prayer," his inward prayer (v. 4), and essentially goes for broke. If God is going to show him favor, if God is going to continue to fulfill his promise to bring the exiles back to their land and their heritage, it will be now.

First, Nehemiah asks to be allowed to return personally to Jerusalem. He asks for permission to rebuild it (v. 5). Then he goes further and asks for letters giving the royal seal of approval to his mission so he'll have safe passage (v. 7). Oh, and one more thing: he asks for *carte blanche* to access the timber in the royal forest for the building project (v. 8).

The king says yes to everything, and even sends army officers and cavalry soldiers with Nehemiah on his journey back to Jerusalem (vv. 8–9), possibly as a token of his approval of the project and no doubt also for protection from hostile forces.

Convinced that God has given him the king's favor for which he prayed, Nehemiah just keeps asking. It reminds me of that line in John Newton's hymn: "Thou art coming to a King; large petitions with thee bring."⁴ Newton is actually talking about prayer to God, but Nehemiah gets the principle.

Nehemiah demonstrates, in an almost outlandish way, his confidence in God's Word. If you're going to ask in line with God's glory and to further God's redemptive purposes, ask big—and

⁴From the hymn "Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare" by John Newton, 1779.

look for help God may send through all kinds of sources. That's what Nehemiah does, and the king, for motives known only to himself, becomes Nehemiah's patron, supplying him with whatever he needs to accomplish the task that God has given him.

The book *Gospel Patrons*, by John Rinehart, contains stories of modern-day men and women of generosity who have supported gospel-led people and movements.⁵ While they're not the faces of such movements, these patrons are the givers who make them move. In like manner, King Artaxerxes doesn't lift a finger personally to rebuild Jerusalem, but without his patronage, Nehemiah cannot do what God has called him to do. Kings' hearts, and all patrons' hearts, are in God's hand.

Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem is recorded with four words: "I went to Jerusalem" (v. 11). It is another action taken on full trust and confidence in God's Word. He leaves the world he has known, the privilege and security of the palace. He heads into unknown opposition. There's no mention of the thousand-mile journey on camel, horse, or foot, with heat, sand, flies, discomfort, and danger of all sorts. No. Just "I went to Jerusalem." The rest is sort of beside the point.

Once in Jerusalem, Nehemiah allows himself three days of rest and recovery, then sets out to reconnoiter the damage (vv. 11–16). He goes on a secret overnight survey to inspect the walls from the outside, looking for any weaknesses that would be apparent to the enemy. Does he stop to ask, "What do I, a cupbearer to the king, know about defensible walls or building codes?" No—action must be taken, so he takes the action.

This is a tangent, but I really want you to remember this. Often, God calls you to a ministry by making you the one who sees the need that others don't. Rather than haranguing your pastor, your elders, or the person in the seat next to you about why they don't have a ministry to the elderly, why the church is not doing vaca-

⁵ John Rinehart, *Gospel Patrons* (Fullerton, CA: Reclaimed Publishing, 2014).

tion Bible school in that needy neighborhood over there, or why they don't have this or that support for married couples, realize that perhaps you are seeing the need because God is calling you to be the one who meets the need, the one who starts the ministry or just starts doing it yourself.

This is something I've observed many, many times in our forty years in the ministry: somebody will be really agitated and asking why the church isn't doing this or that. I say, "Well, you're seeing it, and you're agitated because God has given you the ministry to do something about it." So the next time you have a burr under your saddle blanket about something, just consider that it might be God who put it there.

When Nehemiah finally speaks to the remnant living in Jerusalem, comprised of priests, nobles, officials, and the ordinary people who will actually do the work, he gets them on board by recounting how God's hand has been with him up till then, including the interview with the king and its abundant outcome (vv. 17–20). Referring to the disgrace of Jerusalem's brokenness, he again uses language referring to God's redemptive purposes. He locates their situation in redemptive history, not just the immediate need. They have been disgraced, exiled, and humbled because of their sin. But now God's promise to restore Israel as a nation is coming to fruition. And who wouldn't want to be a part of that? God's Word is in the process of being fulfilled. Don't you want to get in on the action?

The Whole Main Point

In just these first two chapters, Nehemiah has abundantly shown us on many occasions how he has taken radical action based on his knowledge of God's Word and redemptive promises. We have a lot to learn from him: his knowledge of the Word of God that undergirded him, and how he trusted and acted in light of that Word.

But that's not the whole main message.

The biggest message of Nehemiah is that it's not about Nehemiah. All of Scripture tells about who? Jesus. I've heard Nehemiah preached as someone who changed careers because he was pursuing his passion; as a person who left the big company for a small start-up because he was doing what he loved; and even as a social activist trying to help the oppressed. All of that is plausible, but none of it's accurate.

Because of his understanding of the Word of God and God's plan to bless all the nations through Israel, Nehemiah determined that he should leave his secure place in the palace at the right hand of the king and go out into a dangerous situation, where the chances not just of failure but of persecution and assassination were high. He was driven by his understanding of God's promises and his redemptive plan.

If we don't understand this ourselves, then when we read the Bible, perhaps we'll take away a list of wise principles of leadership to apply in situations that seem vaguely familiar. Are we in the midst of a building campaign to repair the church? Preach on Nehemiah. Are we experiencing opposition to God's purposes in the world? Think about how Nehemiah handled opposition.

I'm not deriding these principles. Some of them have great usefulness. In fact, I'll call out two of them that I mentioned in passing.

First, I noted that Nehemiah inspected the broken wall from the outside, from his enemy's vantage point—in order to understand what his enemies would see as weaknesses. So, too, we are always to try to understand the point of view of people who differ from us and to see what they see when they look at us in order to shore up our apologetic weaknesses and learn to speak in language that skeptics and unbelievers can understand. That's a good lesson.

Second, when Ezra went to Jerusalem (see Ezra 8:22), he specifically decided *not* to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect him on the journey. His reasoning was that after claim-

ing God's power to protect him, he would be ashamed to ask for human protection, as if he doubted God's power or willingness to watch over him. Ezra and his group even fasted and prayed about making this decision, and, convinced it was the right one, Ezra entrusted twelve priests and ten of their brothers with a fortune of gold and silver to be used in the temple. They set out on that dangerous thousand-mile journey with no escort from the king.

But when Nehemiah goes on the same journey thirteen years later, he gratefully accepts an armed escort as evidence that God is the one behind the king's favor. He has not made similar claims about God's protection that might seem to be contradicted by asking for human protection. And, to be sure, he remembers that it was Artaxerxes himself who had earlier stopped the wall building when opponents had craftily sent their petition; how important it is, then, to bring Artaxerxes on board with this project, helping him become heavily invested in it and thereby surely less likely to be turned against it again. These were two different decisions by two different godly men in two different historical circumstances.

Commentator Raymond Brown has this to say about the differing choices of Ezra and Nehemiah:

One man's commitment to God precluded the escort; the other welcomed it. Ezra regarded soldiers as a lack of confidence in God's power; Nehemiah viewed them as evidence of God's superlative goodness.

Christians frequently differ on important issues, and it's a mark of spiritual maturity if they can handle those differences creatively rather than engaging in damaging verbal warfare. First-century believers differed on some questions, and Paul urged them to "stop passing judgment on one another." . . .

We are bound to think differently on occasions. Before we hastily judge other believers or ostracize them, we must make every attempt to understand and love them, and discern what we can learn from them as we "make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification" (Rom. 14:19).

We must not rigidly stereotype believers into identical patterns of spirituality.⁶

Those final words of Brown's are important. Ezra and Nehemiah came to totally different conclusions. They reasoned, fasted, and prayed, but they came up with different answers, two opposite strategies for glorifying God, both of which were right. God sometimes asks people to act in different ways. Let's be charitable with one another.

We should examine our hearts to see where we have baptized our own preferences or our cultural differences while labeling any other practices as less honoring to God. God may have different plans for different people in different situations.

But as helpful and useful as these and other applications may be, they're not the point of Nehemiah. "All the Scriptures tell of me," Jesus said (see John 5:39). Not only was Nehemiah playing his role in redemptive history by seeing that the Israelites were reconstituted as a people according to God's promise so as to bring forth the shoot from the stump of Jesse, Jesus, David's greater son—Nehemiah himself was acting out the career of Christ.

There's an old-timey hymn we used to sing at the church where Tim served years ago in Hopewell, Virginia. The refrain begins with these words: "Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe."⁷ Nehemiah literally left a palace and went to a broken world of woe where God's people were in need. He left privilege and safety for hardship and back-breaking labor. If he hadn't done it, Jerusalem would not have been rebuilt, and there would have been no Jewish culture for Jesus to be raised in, and therefore no Jewish Messiah to fulfill God's promises.

Nehemiah was God's instrument in a critical moment of redemptive history, but his story is submerged in the greater story. Jesus is the greater Nehemiah, the one who left the heavenly pal-

⁶Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change*, The Bible Speaks Today commentary series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 50.

⁷From the hymn "Ivory Palaces" by Henry Barraclough, 1915.

ace, the right hand of the King, safety, and glory to come into a world of need. He joined the blue-collar labor force as a carpenter, and spent most of his thirty-three years building things. He came not just at the risk of death, but with the certainty of it. But if Jesus had not done it, our salvation would not have been accomplished.

In Nehemiah, we see an ordinary man serving under the oppression, however benevolent, of a foreign power. What Nehemiah sees is his country in tatters, a shadow of its former glory under Moses, David, and Solomon, self-destroyed and at its lowest point. He and others scrape together a small remnant that sets itself apart, resumes God-designed worship and a godly lifestyle, and carries on, however heartbreakingly reduced in power and glory, the life of the covenant people of God. But it is enough.

God's people do not need to be powerful culturally or in power politically to be obedient to him and accomplish his purposes in the world. All they need to do to glorify him and join the great sweep of redemptive history is to be faithful to the One who has called them by his own name.

Let us not do less than Nehemiah, because we are called by the One who is greater than Nehemiah, and he will accomplish it.

Reflect and Pray

Reflect on each question, and then take a moment to speak or write the prayers that grow from those reflections.

1. Kathy Keller starts by placing the book of Nehemiah in the flow of Old Testament history. Read 2 Chronicles 36:15–23 to review the background of Ezra and Nehemiah. What phrases show what God is like and how he is involved in this story of his people?
2. Find and reflect on the references to “hand” and “hands” in Nehemiah 1–2. What truths does the narrator want to be sure to emphasize?
3. Kathy's chapter emphasizes Nehemiah's trust in God's Word—ultimately in God's promises to bless Nehemiah's

people and, through their seed, to bless all the nations. That trust shaped his action. How does God's grace in the life of this ordinary man personally challenge you to take action today in light of God's Word?

Think Like an Expositor

Kathy Keller had the huge, challenging job of helping us dive into this Old Testament narrative. Her comparison of the plot with an action movie shows one of the delights of this genre: the stories are really good! Old Testament narratives abound with vivid characters and action that draw us in. Nehemiah, the first-person narrator, is quite a masterful storyteller—as well as a good leader of his people.

This talk helpfully acknowledged some of the tensions of meeting such an admirable character as Nehemiah and being tempted to spend all one's time drawing out moral lessons from his behavior. Even though there are a lot of good things to learn, we were carefully pointed here to the story's context—first, the complex historical context, with several waves of returning Jewish exiles ruled by Persians who had conquered the Babylonians who had conquered Jerusalem and taken its people captive. We also were led to grasp the larger biblical context, the context of God's promises that through this remnant of a people would come the seed of blessing, the eternal King. The largest lessons of this talk were not just about trusting God's Word, but about Jesus, who shines through this Word.

When we asked Kathy how she worked on this talk, she responded with three brief points, the first of which was that the task of exposition is hard. She said she struggled, having spoken many times topically but not many times expositively. Many will be able to identify with this struggle.

Her third point delineated her process of study, which is also encouraging, as she mentioned the basics: reading, underlining, taking notes, using commentaries and sticky notes, putting the

text away for a while and then coming back to search for more, trying to think of an introduction, seeing how the passage is about Jesus—the list is a great reminder of the process of work involved in digging into a text.

Kathy had a bit of an unfair advantage, though. Point no. 2, in the center of her list: “I have listened to Tim’s preaching for 40 years, so I used his preaching as my model.” Actually, how wonderful is that!



THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

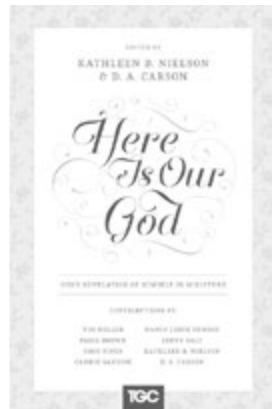
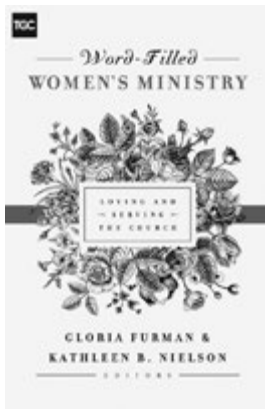
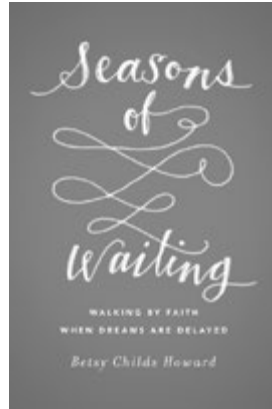
We desire to champion the gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

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“YOU HAVE KEPT YOUR PROMISE,
FOR YOU ARE RIGHTEOUS.”

NEHEMIAH 9:8

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KATHY KELLER

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CARRIE SANDOM, JENNY SALT, & KATHLEEN NIELSON

Leaning Forward in the Dark: A Failed Reformation (Nehemiah 13)

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BIBLICAL STUDIES

