

Since Day 1 Cornerstone is a vision-driven, faith-grounded, church-unifying, and God-affirming church.

I remember well the excitement of the hundred or so Cornerstone folks who embraced the vision of having our own community-centre like facility in our first capital campaign 2004.

In the 25 yrs of Cornerstone history, we have witnessed the Lord's guidance and empowerment in each defining moment of mission advance. God always brought in new people and resources "in His Time" to equip Cornerstone to move forward in unity; we experienced His superabundant grace, extravagant love, and faith-shaping miracles in the midst of every challenge.

Jesus is our Cornerstone and since the beginning of the pandemic He has enabled us to pivot, to adapt, and to depend on His protection and provision. We haven't just overcome the many challenges but by His mighty power have also accomplished infinitely more than we might ask or imagine.¹

One of our 2024 ministry goals is to re-assessing Vision 2020 which we'd shared in the Fall of 2019, for the purpose of discerning a fresh iteration of Cornerstone's Vision 2020, or maybe a modified version, or even a brand new vision altogether!

¹ Cf. Eph. 3:20 NLT

In order to have the right posture instead of walking ahead of Him, we are launching a new 10-week sermon series on the book of Nehemiah, *Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose Through Fresh Eyes*.

In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar defeated Judah, the southern kingdom, destroyed Jerusalem, and exiled the Jews to Babylon.

In 539 Cyrus II, the Persian King, conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland.²

Nehemiah was a cup bearer to the Persian King; he was an exiled Jew who had risen to high office and led the 3rd wave of Jews returning to Jerusalem, to rebuild the walls and the people's faith in 445.

Nehemiah left a cushy job to re-invigorate, re-organize, and reform a disparate and demoralized people to re-commit to God in the midst of strong opposition.

We can definitely draw valuable principles and practical lessons from Nehemiah as we begin our discerning process of God's purpose for Cornerstone with fresh eyes.

² Cyrus II sent the first wave of exile returning to Judah/Jerusalem led by Zerubbabel who became the first governor in 538 and laid the foundation of the temple for its reconstruction. Ezra, a direct descendant of Aaron and a scribe well versed in the Law, led the second wave back to Jerusalem in 458.

Nehemiah shows us the first step in assessing reality right from the get go:

Look for clarity and understanding of the matter at hand, even when the truth hurts.

In the month of Kislev [i.e., November/December] in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and ***I questioned them*** about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, ***“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”*** (Neh. 1:1-3 NIV)

“I question” – Nehemiah takes the initiative and earnestly asks for specifics, listens to other’s perspectives, demands clarity - this underlines his sincerity and deep concern for what’s happening in his homeland.

While Nehemiah is 800 miles away from Jerusalem, he’s not just a distant observer but taking personal interest in gathering facts and considering perspectives, processing what’s been communicated and pursuing a comprehensive picture as much as he can.

He discovers that the people are disillusioned, their spirit crushed, and their faith compromised – in essence, they

buckled under pressure, tossed the word of life aside, and lost their identity as the people of God.³

Have you ever considered why the broken walls of Jerusalem have caused so much sadness and why its reconstruction is so important?

Jerusalem with its temple is a symbol of the city of God, God's dwelling place – a coalescing of heaven and earth as well as a miniature of Eden⁴ - it’s a place of safety and security for human flourishing so they live out their identity and calling in the presence of God and before the watching world.⁵ It points to the future splendours of the new heaven and new earth, when all things are made right and where God dwells in the midst of His people forever.⁶

Nehemiah’s inquiry clarifies for him the dire and desolate state of the holy city and its inhabitants. If **“The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference,”**⁷ then Nehemiah loves

³ See also Ezra 4:8-23.

⁴ Cf. Ray C. Stedman, “Nehemiah:Rebuilding the Walls,” <https://www.raystedman.org/bible-overview/adventuring/nehemiah-rebuilding-the-walls#:~:text=Nehemiah%20is%20the%20account%20of,the%20strength%20of%20hat%20life.>

⁵ Lovett H. Weems Jr., “10 Leadership Lessons from Nehemiah,” <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/ten-leadership-lessons-from-nehemiah/#:~:text=God's%20leader%20keeps%20the%20real%20purpose%20before%20the%20people.&text=The%20vision%20was%20to%20rebuild,identity%20as%20people%20of%20faith.>

⁶ See. Rev. 21:9ff.

⁷ Elie Wiesel 1928–2016, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.000>

God and cares deeply for His people who are called to be a beacon of light in a darkened world, a kingdom of priests who reflect God's character, a people belonging to God to bless to all nations so they will come to worship the Lord.⁸

Facts aren't usually value free and they require biblically sound interpretation; knowledge isn't merely objective but calls for wise response.

After gathering all that he has heard Nehemiah shows his compassionate and humble posture and follows up with the next step in his discerning process:

Strive to align all with God's will and purpose.

"When I **heard** these things, I sat down and **wept**. For some days I **mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.**" (Neh. 1:4 NIV)

Nehemiah feels for the people in Jerusalem; he knows the severity of the challenges. While he might be a pretty smart and powerful figure of influence in the palace as the King's cupbearer, Nehemiah immediately acknowledges before the God of heaven – mourning, fasting, and in prayer - human inadequacies, defective faith, and wilful disobedience.

There's no blaming or finger-pointing but identifying with the brokenness and despair caused by the people's unfaithfulness and disobedience past and present; Nehemiah recognizes the principle of corporate responsibility and mutual accountability before God.

Takes personal responsibility to understand reality from God's perspective and seek His guidance.

"Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name."

1/q-oro-ed4-00011516#:~:text=Elie%20Wiesel%201928%E2%80%932016&text=The%20opposite%20of%20love%20is,is%20not%20death%2C%20it's%20indifference.

⁸ Ps. 86:9-10; Is. 42:6-7; 46:9; Jer. 3:17; Zech. 8:22.

They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.” (Neh. 1:5-10 NIV)

This prayer is saturated with Scripture and captures the essential substance of what Nehemiah has learned over four months of prayer and fasting (i.e., from November/December 446 B.C. to March/April 445 B.C. before he speaks to Artaxerxes).

Through fasting and prayer Nehemiah pleads God’s promises, purifies his motives, gets clarity about God’s purpose and receives affirming guidance for God-honouring actions.

Nehemiah leans on and listens to “the great and awesome God” whose love remains consistent with His gracious dealings with His people. Nehemiah appeals to God’s promise of forgiveness and restoration when His children return to Him.

A “returning” to Jerusalem - the most holy place - must correspond to a “returning” to God-honouring life.⁹

By the end of Nehemiah’s four months prayer-fast he knows what action he has to take: “he moved slowly through the grieving process toward a creative decision.”¹⁰

“Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” I was cupbearer to the king. In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king ... “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.” (Neh. 1:11; 2:1, 4-5 NIV)

Prayer shapes Nehemiah’s heart and strengthens his confidence to act in faith. He is determined, resolute, and strategic; his faith rests upon what God has done in the past; he trusts that God is the One who will pave and lead the way to mission advance.

He takes risk to go for the big ask and is willing to give up prestige and position. His prayer for success is not for personal gain or ambition but for God’s work in and through his participation.

The walls of Jerusalem lay in ruin for over a century and half but they are rebuilt in less than two months - 52 days - in the midst of opposition (Neh. 6:15) – we will learn more about how that came about in the coming weeks.

⁹ Cf. D.J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 138.

¹⁰ Leslie Allen and T. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 89.

But I want to underscore this most important point: Nehemiah spent more time – 4 months – soaking his thoughts in God’s word, shaping his plans in God’s will, and seeking God’s guidance in prayer and fasting.¹¹

Nehemiah has shown us that we will be amazed by how much God can accomplish in and through us when we align ourselves with His will and purpose.

A challenge to pray: take the pamphlets in your hands and commit to pray for Cornerstone re-envisioning process; plan to attend the Pray and Re-envisioning on the morning of May 25th.

If your vision is so big that only God can accomplish it, then you obviously must pray. If prayer isn’t absolutely necessary to accomplish your vision, your goal isn’t big enough.

David Guzik¹²

¹¹ Nehemiah’s prayer is a summary of Deut. 30:1-5; it is saturated in scriptures with which he had embedded in his memory, cf. 4:25-31; 7:9, 21; 9: 29; 10:17; Lev. 26:14-45; Ps. 130:2; 1 Kings 8:52. “Almost every phrase in Nehemiah’s prayer is derived from other parts of scripture, which Nehemiah had internalized after much study.” (Spiritual Formation Bible, p. 683.)

¹² David Guzik, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/nehemiah-1/>