

Separating life into distinct categories of "sacred" and "secular" damages, sometimes irreparably, any attempt to live a whole and satisfying life, a coherent life with meaning and purpose, a life lived to the glory of God. Nevertheless, the practice is widespread. But where did all these people come up with the habit of separating themselves and the world around them into these two camps? It surely wasn't from the Bible. The Holy Scriptures, from beginning to end, strenuously resist such a separation.

The damage to life is most obvious when the separation is applied to daily work. It is common for us to refer to the work of pastors, priests, and missionaries as "sacred," and that of lawyers, farmers, and engineers as "secular." It is also wrong. Work, by its very nature, is holy. The biblical story is dominated by people who have jobs in gardening, shepherding, the military, politics, carpentry, tent making, homemaking, fishing, and more.

Nehemiah is one of these. He started out as a government worker in the employ of a foreign king. Then he became - and this is the work he tells us of in these memoirs - a building contractor, called in to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His coworker Ezra was a scholar and teacher, working with the Scriptures. Nehemiah worked with stones and mortar. The stories of the two men are interwoven in a seamless fabric of vocational holiness. In fact, Nehemiah 6:16 says even "the surrounding nations ... knew that God was behind this work." Neither job was more or less important or holy than the other. Nehemiah needed Ezra; Ezra needed Nehemiah. God's people needed the work of both of them. We still do.

Eugene Peterson. *The Invitation: A Simple Guide to the Bible*

READ NEHEMIAH 1-2

Opening

- Where is home for you? How long have you been away from your roots?
- What unfinished, even unstarted, projects at home most disturb you?
- What would you do with a leave of absence from work?
- Have you ever witnessed a hurricane, earthquake, house fire, car accident or war? What was it like to walk through the wreckage?

Digging in — Discovering the Word

- Why is Nehemiah so concerned about Jerusalem? What does he learn about its condition from Hanani and others? (v2-4) How might the events of 2 Kings 25:9-21 and Ezra 4:7-24 relate to his present concern?
- How does Nehemiah respond to this news? What does that say about his relationship with God?
- What do you see of God's nature through Nehemiah's prayer? What does Nehemiah see in himself, the more he focuses on God? What does he recall as he persists in prayer in v8-10? What then is the basis for his final appeal (v11)?
- In these intervening three months, what do you think Nehemiah has been doing? What does King Artaxerxes notice and why? Why has it taken so long for Nehemiah to express his grief?
- What does he request the king to do? What three questions does the king have?
- In Nehemiah's ready response, what do you see that demonstrates his practical wisdom? His dependence on God? On human resources? His respect for his superior?
- What obstacle to his success looms on the horizon? Why?
- What do you think Nehemiah did his first three days in Jerusalem? Why was that important?
- Why do you think Nehemiah said nothing to those who would be doing the work until he had inspected the walls himself? Why inspect walls at night?
- What three points does Nehemiah make publicly to rally the troops to rebuild? Which one do you find most convincing?
- What charge do Nehemiah's opponents bring against him? How does he respond.

Connecting the Dots — Applying the Word

- Do you feel any tension between the demands of your family, your job, and other commitments in your life? How does that tension impact what you do with your time and resources?
- How are the things you do at work or at home "spiritual"? What "spiritual" value do you find in what you do at work or at home?
- How grieved are you about the physical and spiritual state of God's people? Enough to pray? Fast? Act?
- When news of exiled people, brokenness and famine hits you, do you react anything like Nehemiah?
- Do you tend to despair over what is? Accept what is? Or pray for what should be?
- Can others read what you are thinking or feeling, almost like an open book? Or is your heart under lock and key? Why is that?

Prayer: Ask God for wisdom to see the spiritual nature of all things in you life: relationships, work, chores, free time, etc.

(adapted from the Serendipity Bible and The Invitation by Eugene Peterson)