

Acknowledge the Lord

(SHOW VIDEO CLIP) I could preach a whole sermon on these cats. They are us! That little guy who keeps falling off and getting back on ... that's the young man working sixty or eighty hours a week. That's the woman working at a soul-killing job that drains all her energy. That's the man saddled with responsibility for keeping house and home on a salary that doesn't *even* track with inflation, much less get him ahead. And the world would say that this is as good as it gets. Just try to hang on and keep pace.

That other little guy ... the one with one set of paws on the treadmill and one set on the ground ... that's the guy with ticket-to-heaven faith. Just enough to feel the ground beneath his feet but not enough to get himself off the treadmill. He's living between two worlds, which is the worst possible life. Your grounded feet tell you you're not going any place, but your treadmill feet are working overtime to give the impression that you're keeping up.

We'll say this a million times in here and it may take a million times for some of us to get it ... the treadmill is not the abundant life that scripture promises us. The pace the world sets and the goals the world sets in front of us ... that is not the abundant life. This is the reality Nehemiah got when his brother showed up to tell him about the destruction of Jerusalem's wall.

Up to that point, Nehemiah was on a treadmill and living under the illusion that this was the purpose of his life. His job was cupbearer for the king. Which means he tested the king's wine to make sure it hadn't been poisoned. Then one day, his brother, Hanani (which means "God is gracious" ... gracious enough to pull me up out of a treadmill existence), came to see him at the palace and told him Jerusalem was in a shambles. "The whole place has gone to pot. Even the walls have fallen down," Hanani said.

And when Nehemiah hears that, I feel him finally getting it that the treadmill is not the answer (and I wonder if you've heard that yet?). The walls of Jerusalem ... which marked the identity of God's people ... were falling apart ... while Nehemiah got his bills paid. But God had called him to something more significant. So he went home to help his people and himself figure out who they really were. And to do that, they started with the wall but that was only half the vision. Once the wall was rebuilt, then the people inside had to rebuild themselves ... to get a vision for their own identity as people of God.

So this week, Nehemiah moves us ... from wall-building to people-building. Because yes ... the walls have to be built ... we have to have food on the table and a roof over our heads and the bills paid. But to be honest, I see a lot of folks stopping there ... getting caught up in the appearance of things, while the vision gets lost. Because, see ... just getting the walls built ... is not the abundant life. Above and beyond the physical needs, there is a God-sized vision for your life. What does God want to accomplish in your life beyond paying the bills? Do you have a vision for your life ... a purpose that will point to the presence and power of God?

Here's what I see in chapters six through eight of Nehemiah. It is about building a vision for life that honors God.

First, get the right perspective. (Nehemiah 6:15-16, NLT) *On October 2nd the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. (Because) they realized this work had been done with the help of our God.* So at the end of the day, it is not Nehemiah or the builders or even the king who gets the credit. It is God. Which is the mark of a great vision ... it comes from God and it points back to Him.

One of the most amazing facts in this story of Nehemiah is the fact that there are no miracles. Everything that happened ... even finishing a whole city wall in fifty-two days ... was simply the people of God being obedient to the will of God. The only power at work in this project was obedience to the will of God. Did you realize that simple obedience to the will of God is a kind of power?

Last week I was talking with someone about how anxious I can sometimes get, and they asked me a question that sort of surprised me. They asked, "Is it possible that you are doing more than God is asking you to do?" My first thought was, "Yeah!" Because I am an above-and-beyond kind of person ... and it strikes me that doing more than what's required is a good thing. But I have to tell you ... it never occurred to me before that if I'm doing more than *God* asks, then I am probably *not* living in obedience. In fact, if I'm doing more than God asks of me, then the excess is not only useless ... it could be destructive. It saps energy and diverts attention and creates confusion and may even create expectations of others that aren't healthy.

So at the end of the day, I'm left with learning the difference between spending time and investing it ... between walking a treadmill and walking a path. Do you hear the difference? It is about perspective ... whether I'm in performance mode trying to please people, or in obedience mode honoring God. Andy Stanley says, "You are accountable *only* to the one who has invited you to partner with him to create what could and should be."

None of us wants to wake up one day to find out we've spent all our time without investing it. The key is getting a perspective that honors God, then letting Him do the work. Paul says, in 1 Thessalonians 5:24 (NLT) – *God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.*

So start with God's perspective then **keep the right focus**. Because the world is full of distractions. For Nehemiah, it was the constant distraction of the critics. He says (Neh. 6:19, NLT) - *They kept telling me about Tobiah's good deeds, and then they told him everything I said. And Tobiah kept sending threatening letters to intimidate me.* So it was a constant he said/she said kind of thing from people who had nothing better to do than distract the man with the vision. And that can be a great frustration ... I know ... but it can also be a great opportunity. Even in the rough places where it is hard to focus, God may be up to something we are not even aware of.

We probably need to stop here and sing "Happy Birthday" to Velcro. It is sixty years old this year. Do you know how Velcro was discovered? A guy named George de Mestral ... a Swiss engineer ... went hunting with his dog and noticed on his way home that all these burrs were stuck to his fur and and to George's clothes. George got interested in that and examined a burr under a microscope and noticed all these little hooks that would catch anything with a loop ... clothes, fur, hair. So he began testing different materials to re-create the effect ... and that's how VELCRO got invented. Through an irritation. Because a guy caught a burr on his clothes.

You never know how God might use even the most irritating things. If we can keep our focus, God will use even the irritations to do great things through us. What in my life right now ... good or bad ... has the potential to point to the power and presence of God?

Get the right perspective, keep your focus there ... then **get the right people on the bus**. Nehemiah writes 7:1-2 (NLT) - *After the wall was finished and I had set up the doors in the gates, the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites were appointed. I gave the responsibility of governing Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah, the commander of the fortress, for ... he was a faithful man who feared God more than most.*

That's the character of a man God uses ... someone who is faithful and who keeps a healthy respect for the things of God. I've learned that God rarely uses the obvious people to do His work. And what I've noticed that God uses most is faith ... because that's what He is using to build His church. This is what Jesus said to Peter ... "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Faithful men and women who fear Him ... are the blocks God is using to build His church. When we're talking about building a vision, the people we want on the bus with us are not the most talented or well-resourced, but the people who walk with God. It is the same principle for building a strong home or a strong business: Become the man or woman who walks with God and that quality will attract business and build health.

So to build a personal vision, we need a perspective that honors God. And we want to stay focused on that goal, and we want folks around us who also understand the will of God and are faithful to it. **Then we want to unify around the right purpose.** Go back to the story in Nehemiah. Once the wall was completed (Neh. 8:1-2, NLT) - *All the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given for Israel to obey. So on October 8th Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand.*

They gathered not to celebrate a great wall. They gathered to celebrate a Great God. They gathered and listened to Ezra the priest read from God's Book because they got it that the wall was not the point. At the end of the day, it is all about God. So they gathered to remember whose they were ... how good, how able, how strong the Father is. "O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder, *consider* all the worlds your hands have made ... How great thou art!"

Do you remember that leper who got healed by Jesus in Luke 17? Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem when he came across ten lepers, who we assume he'd never met before, but who cried out when they saw him, "Jesus, master! Have mercy on us!" Jesus looked at them and had mercy. He told them, "Go and show yourself to the

priest.” And they went and as they were walking off, their leprosy disappeared. There were ten of them, remember, but one of them ... as he saw his body getting healed ... he ran back to Jesus, shouting praises. And he fell down before Jesus ... because in the face of that miracle he was completely unable to do the politically correct thing and keep heading for the priest who would pronounce him clean. Instead, he ran back to the source of his healing so he could search that face for the power of God. Because he knew in whose presence he’d been. “Oh, Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder, *consider ...!*”

I wonder, in your life right now, what you are worshiping ... really? Are you admiring your great workmanship? Or your paycheck? Or your accomplishments? Or are you worshiping the God who gives it all? The people of Jerusalem didn’t stop to admire a wall ... they stopped to consider the power of *Him*, the mercy of *Him*, the wonder of *Him*. The purpose that unified them was the glory of God. How great You are!

Which is really the next step in building a personal vision: Give honor to the right God. The story says (Neh. 8:6, NLT) - *Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people chanted, “Amen! Amen!” as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.* Which must be the most dangerous position in the world. So I need to ask you a pretty dangerous question: have you ever once in your life done that? Have you ever once bowed down ... on your knees ... face to the ground ... and worshiped God? Not because you’ve been told to but because it is the only response that seems right for all He has done? Andy Stanley says, “Spiritual maturity is measured by how readily we respond to the *person* of God rather than the *promises* of God.” It is about understanding that who is asking is more important than what He is asking you to do. As Stanley says, “The end of a God-ordained vision is God.” When is the last time you really worshiping Him?

Last thought: Be sure to follow the right set of instructions. When the wall was completed, the people of Jerusalem went back to the Book. Nehemiah 8:7-8 (NLT) says - *The Levites ... then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.* This is where the people of God go for instruction, encouragement, discernment, for the next phase of the vision. For the beginning of the vision. If you thinking this morning, “I’d love to have a God-sized vision for my life, but I don’t know where to begin.”

I'm sure on this ... the place to begin is with the Word of God. You could start just by reading the words in red in the book of Matthew. Just read those words and I'll guarantee that God will begin to speak. Jesus said (Luke 11:28) - *Even more blessed (than any other knowledge) are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice.*

Bottom line: Our work ... our life ... is to honor God. I don't know about you but I don't want to come to the end of my life and find out I've wasted my time. I don't want to spend a lifetime on a treadmill only to find out too late that I've spent a lot of time and energy without getting anywhere. I want my life to count for something. I want your life to count for something. God wants your life to count for something. What is your vision?