



REBUILD

SEEKING RESTORATION

a season of prayer & fasting for 2021



REBUILD

A SEASON OF PRAYER AND FASTING FOR MORGANTOWN CHURCH

Morgantown Church Family!

We dedicated a month at the beginning of 2020 to pray and fast together. It was a powerful time of spiritual renewal! We did not know then what was on the horizon for the rest of the year, but I'm convinced those 30 days of seeking God together gave us the strength to walk through a tumultuous year with faithfulness. We are not on the other side just yet, and many of us are walking with a limp as we continue to navigate this season, but that time together was vital preparation.

And now as we look ahead to the future that God has for us, there are many question marks and uncertainties that define 2021. As a church family we want to face them together, as the people of God, striving to live the purpose of God in a broken world. Praying and fasting together will help us to step into that calling. We are being invited, during this tumultuous season of transition, to seek after God whole-heartedly for the renewal of our hearts, to help us reconnect to meaningful discipleship community, and the restoration of a broken world. The book of Nehemiah will be our guide. It is a story of physical rebuilding and spiritual restoration that seem appropriate for our broken world.

In our broken world, there is a longing. It's a longing to know and experience more of God. And I think that lies at the center of what God wants to do in our midst. Yes, God is calling us to dig in deep together in relational disciple-making. Yes, God is calling us to whole-heartedly worship him for his glory and goodness. Yes, God is calling us to love our neighbors on our street and in our lives. But it begins with our desire to be with him, to know him, to experience his presence, and to walk in step with his Spirit. He is calling us to seek him. To pursue him. To follow hard after him. To seek first the King and his Kingdom. That's exactly what we are being invited into—a full-throttled pursuit of the presence and power of God in our midst!

This month of prayer and fasting is not a means to manipulate God to do our bidding. It's not a way to make God love us more. It's not religious obligation, or a way to show off our spirituality. It's about humbling ourselves, confessing our desperate need for him, and learning to let go of anything that keeps us from his presence.

As we pray and fast together, my encouragement is to focus less on what we are letting go of and focus more on what we are taking hold of—the promised presence of God! Each of us will be letting go of different things, but we are all seeking to grab hold of God, and I believe God wants to grab hold of us.

We are praying that the hunger pangs we feel will draw us more deeply into relationship with him. We are chasing after him, together. We are asking him to do what only he can do.

I wrote those words last year as we kicked off our fast, and I still believe them today. I'm ready to go, hopeful for the future, and excited to see God at work among us!

I love you all so much! Let's get to work!

Peace,

Brad Schrum

LET'S GET STARTED!

From Sunday, **March 7** through Sunday, **April 4 (Easter)** we are committing to two things.

PRAYER

First, we are asking that everyone who considers Morgantown Church their home to commit to set aside time to **pray everyday**, intentionally and fervently. We will be providing a month-long prayer guide centered on the story of Nehemiah to help jump start your time in prayer. Inspired by that revival story of Nehemiah rebuilding a nation, we are seeking God in three areas of rebuilding and restoration:

1. **RENEWAL** of our hearts to seek him first
2. **RECONNECTION** to deep spiritual community
3. **REENGAGEMENT** in the disciple-making mission

We have provided this short prayer guide to help jump start your prayer time each day.

FASTING

Second, we are asking that each of you take **your next step in fasting**.

We encourage you to read a short primer on fasting called **Revival Starts Here** that provides a practical overview of fasting. You can find links to audio and e-book versions, plus several other resources on our website at morgantowncoc.org/fasting.

BEFORE THE FAST

1 CHOOSE YOUR FAST

Start by deciding how you will fast during this prayer journey. Take time to let God prepare your heart by reading *Revival Starts Here*. See pages 45-49 for practical ways to choose your fast, and explore the other resources at morgantowncoc.org/fasting.

- ☐ Read pages 45-49 of *Revival Starts Here*

2 PREPARE

Next set aside some time to prepare your mind, body, heart, and community for this journey. See pages 49-51 of *Revival Starts Here* for helpful tips. You can also go to morgantowncoc.org/fasting for links to other resources.

- ☐ Read pages 49-51 of *Revival Starts Here*

FILL OUT YOUR PRAYER CARD

3

During this season of prayer, we want to take time to specifically pray for our neighbors, coworkers, classmates, family members, friends, and MCOC family members.

- ☐ Write one name or family in each of the squares on the back of the prayer guide.

DURING THE FAST

1 SET YOUR HEART ON GOD EACH DAY

Use this prayer guide to help you set your heart on God each day. Grab a Bible, a journal, and spend time talking with God each day. Begin each prayer time in quietness.

2 PRAY AND FAST FOR RECONNECTION AND RESTORATION

Use the prayer points in the guide to help you begin praying for the people around you each day, as well as areas of brokenness in your life. Pray for spiritual community.

3 WORK TO REBUILD A BROKEN WORLD

As you pray for your own heart and the people in your life, God will open up doors for you to show love and share Jesus with others. When God opens a door, walk through it obediently! Let's work toward the rebuilding of world together!

Nehemiah 1v3-4

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." When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

We used to sing a song at church camp that always struck me as being a bit odd. I was new to faith, and had only just begun to trust and follow Jesus. The lyrics started like this: "Break my heart, dear Lord..." The melody was moving, but even with poetic license, I had a hard time with those lyrics. Why would we want God to break our hearts? Wouldn't we rather have God *heal* our hearts, instead of break them?

As we begin this journey of prayer and fasting, let's consider a few important questions.

What moves you? What makes your heart beat with purpose? What makes your heart break? What are the passions of your life? What stirs your soul?

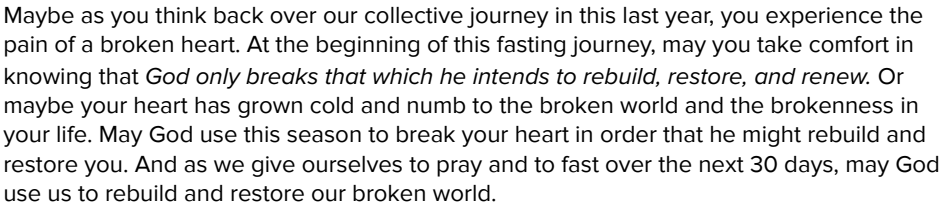
These questions set the stage for God to work in and through us. We are reflecting on the way God was at work through Nehemiah and Ezra to rebuild the strength of God's people following a time of intense national crisis. As our own community begins to emerge from the COVID crisis and the other hardships that have marked this season, there are many parallels between the story of rebuilding in Nehemiah and our own story.

The people of Israel had been exiled—living in a foreign land, ruled by other kings, restricted in their ability to worship. Their temple, their city, and much of their identity had been destroyed. We haven't had a city or temple destroyed and we haven't been exiled, but so many of the routines, rhythms, and relationships that constitute our day-to-day lives have been significantly impacted. There's no question that our church family, our community, our nation, and our individual lives have been radically altered. Our external circumstances may be different than those Nehemiah encountered, but we have felt a collective brokenness. I do not think that devastation is too dramatic a word.

When Nehemiah was confronted with the news of the devastation of the people of God, he was moved to tears. Confronted with that pain and brokenness, Nehemiah recognizes the enormity of the rebuilding project, while also discerning the opportunity to bring spiritual renewal and restoration to the hearts of the people. Moved by these realities, Nehemiah dedicates himself to prayer and fasting.

There are moments in life when we are brought to a realization that we have nowhere to turn but to God. Perhaps you have had those moments, maybe even in the midst of this season of devastation. This was Nehemiah's experience. His broken heart led him to seek God in prayer and fasting. Still reeling from his new awareness of the devastation experienced by God's people, Nehemiah recognized that God alone was able to bring about restoration.

Sometimes, in order for God to bring restoration and renewal in our hearts (and through our lives, for the world), *he must first break our hearts*. This is not an insignificant thing. A heart that has been broken by God is a heart that experiences brokenness, loss, and pain in tangible ways. It is a painful experience.



Does your heart beat with a desire to see God move in our community? Does your heart break for your brothers and sisters who are hurting? Are you moved with passion for the church? Have you been moved to pray and seek God for renewal?

PRAYER POINTS

- God, will you use this season of prayer and fasting to begin to rebuild and restore my heart and my life? Will you begin that rebuilding and renewal today?
- God, will you help me to see the brokenness of those around me, and will you use me to help restore and to rebuild the places of brokenness.
- God, will you give our church a passion for restoring that which needs to be restored and rebuilt?
- God, will you use this time of prayer and fasting to help me deeply connect with other followers of Jesus?
- God, will you break my heart for what breaks yours?

Nehemiah 1v5-6

“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...”

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

The story begins as Nehemiah hears about the destruction of Jerusalem and the brokenness of the people of God. He dedicates himself to pray and fast in order that he might seek God for the restoration of the city and the renewal of the hearts of the people. Our text today is the beginning of his prayer.

Nehemiah begins to pray with an awareness of who God is. He is Yahweh—the LORD—the God who makes covenant with his people, who revealed his name to Moses in the burning bush, and who has committed himself in faithful covenant love to his people. He is the God of heaven, who reigns supreme over all the cosmos (including exile, pandemic, job loss, disease, addiction, and all!). In short, the God to whom Nehemiah prays is “great and awesome.”

And perhaps most significantly of all (at least for our context), this awesome God who rules from heaven and loves his people *is a God who listens*. This is the grounding theology of prayer. *God loves* and *God listens*.

“Are you listening?” In my family, we have to frequently ask our little girls this question... and the answer is almost always a resounding “No!”. With Yahweh, however, we never have to ask this question! When his people pray, God listens!

As we begin this fasting journey, it is important that we understand this truth. We are not praying and fasting in order to get God to listen to us. This isn't a vain attempt to get God's attention. We have his attention! He is already listening! Instead, *we are praying and fasting in order that we might give our full attention to God*.

In our fast, we are letting go of physical things in order to better pay attention to the spiritual realities of God. As we start this season, does God have your full attention?

PRAYER POINTS

- God, thank you for revealing your name, your character, and your nature to us through you Scriptures. Help us to know you more!
- God, thank you for being king over the universe and yet taking time to listen to me!
- God, as we pray and fast in this season, help us give you our full attention. Please remove any distractions from my life!
- God, I lift up the concerns of my heart to you. (Spend time praying through prayer needs in and around your life.)

Additional Reading: Psalm 116v1-7

Nehemiah 1v6-7

"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."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

Not long ago, our house grew eerily quiet for a few short moments. As I searched for our youngest daughter, I found her hiding underneath her little activity table—covered in chocolate and cookie crumbs. It was her vain attempt to hide the evidence of the cookie she had stolen off the counter and devoured before dinner.

As Nehemiah continues his prayer, he moves from acknowledging the power and reign and faithful love of God to confessing sin. You are probably familiar with practice of worship and praise, but confession may be a different story. Confessing sin is not usually commonplace in our culture. In fact, there is a strong pull in our hearts toward *hiding* our sin rather than *confessing* it. We would rather be caught hiding under the table than bringing our sin into the open. And yet confession plays a crucial role in revival, renewal, and in the restoring of our hearts. There can be no revival or renewal without confession. In this time of prayer and fasting, we are calling on God to move in power to rebuild our lives and community, but we also must own our sinful participation in the brokenness of our world. If we are going to rebuild and restore, we must grow comfortable in the practice of confession.

When Nehemiah's prayer in context, there is something striking in it. Nehemiah played no tangible role in the sin that led to the destruction of Jerusalem. It happened a generation earlier! He simply wasn't around! Nehemiah understands, though, that the same disobedience at the root of Israel's idolatry also lived in his heart. As part of the universal family of God, he owned that sin in his confession. He confessed his own sin, and the sin of his "father's family."

As we begin this season of fasting, spend time today confessing your sin. Ask God to reveal in you the places of sin in your own life that you have kept in hiding. Turn over your shame and guilt to God. Consider your family, our culture, even our church. Confess any sin that the Holy Spirit reveals.

We confess our sins, because as 1 John 1v9 reminds us, when "we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." We remember "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," (Romans 8v1).

PRAYER POINTS

- God, would you reveal in me the sins of my heart?
- God, I confess my sin to you. Have mercy on me!
- God, I thank you for the forgiveness Jesus brings!
- God, please help me to walk in greater obedience to you!

Additional Reading: 1 John 1v5 - 2v2

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10

"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.'

I can probably count the number of promises my dad made to me on one hand. He was not really a promise maker...but he kept the promises he made. *Always.*

What promises has your Heavenly Father made for you? The Scriptures are actually full of the promises of God! And not once, in all human history (*or in your own life!*) has God ever failed to keep a promise to his people. Nehemiah knows this. In his moment of desperation, Nehemiah calls on God to remember the promises he had made to his people.

When we pray, we pray the promises of God. Richard Sibbes wrote several centuries ago that in prayer we “strengthen our supplications with arguments from God's Word and promises...A sincere Christian will pray, wait, strengthen his heart with the promises, and never leave praying and looking up till God gives him a gracious answer.”

In 2 Chronicles 7v14, God makes a promise. He says “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

As we pray and fast together, we are humbling ourselves to seek God's face, repenting of our sin, and calling on God to remember his promise to bring forgiveness and healing!

What promises of God are you clinging to in this season? Spend time today reflecting on the promises God has made to you in the Scriptures. How have you seen God faithfully answer his promises to you?

- God, thank you for being a promise-maker, and a promise-keeper!
- God, help me to remember all the ways you have been faithful to your promises!
- God, as we humble ourselves and cry out to you, bring your healing and transforming power in our lives! Remember the promise you have made!

Additional Reading: 2 Peter 1v3-4

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 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."

We are longing for the day when we can step out of this season of separation, disruption, and pain into what God has next for us. There will not be a clean line of demarcation that tells us we are in a new season, but one day soon we will look back and realize that God has done his work to renew us and rebuild us. God will get us there!

As we strive to rebuild and renew in this transitional season, however, we will have hard work to do. Nehemiah was facing a similar challenge. His heart had been burdened by the suffering of his brothers. He fasted and prayed. *And now he was preparing to act in obedience to the burden.* As he prepared to petition the King, he was fully aware that his success was dependent on God and God alone—that's why he prayed.

If we are going to emerge from this experience with faithfulness and fruitfulness, we will only do it with God's help. That's why we are praying and fasting. We are asking God to do what only God can do, even as we strive to walk in obedience to do the work he has given to us.

Think about times that God has worked powerfully in your life. How have you seen God answer prayer in the past? Allow that past faithfulness to inspire your prayer as we work together toward God's future for us. Has God given you any clear steps of obedience? Ask for God's help to faithfully and fruitfully obey.

- God, thank you for hearing and answering my prayer so faithfully! (Thank him for specific responses in your life.)
- God, please show me how I can join you in the work you are doing in our world
- God, grant me success as I strive to walk in faithful obedience to you.
- God, help our church to be successful in the disciple-making mission.
- **Additional Reading:** Ephesians 3v14-17

FRIDAY, MARCH 12

I was very much afraid...

Fear is a powerful motivator. Sometimes it can make us shake in our shoes, paralyzed and unable to move forward. Sometimes fear causes us to shrink back in hiding. Sometimes it makes us run from God's calling on our lives.

Have you experienced fear in this season? As we look ahead, are there places of fear in your heart?

In our text today, Nehemiah comes into the presence of the King of the Persian Empire, the most powerful man in the world, who had authority over Jerusalem and the people of God. In this moment, he is presented with an opportunity to step into the calling God has placed on his life. The king perceives Nehemiah's broken heart, and gives him the chance to share his heart. It is like the dramatic moment in a movie when the music builds and the tension is high. In the tension of that moment, Nehemiah recognizes the gap between his calling and his own capability. He does not feel up to the task, and he is afraid.

Take time today to do an inventory of the fear in your heart. Have been living in fear? Has fear prevented you from walking in God's calling on your life? Have you missed out on God's blessing because you were too overcome by fear? Are you experiencing fear right now, in this season of prayer and fasting? Is there fear in your life that is keeping you from drawing closer to God and your brothers and sisters?

- God, I confess that I have often been fearful, and my fear has kept me from obedience.
- God, you have always been faithful. Remind me of your faithfulness and help me to overcome fear!
- God, give me courage and strengthen my heart!
- God, as you give me opportunities to step into your calling on my life, help me to follow you with courage and conviction!

Additional Reading: Isaiah 43v1-7

The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and 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."

What do you want? What do you need God to do for you?

These are crucial questions. Don't skim over them. Slow down and consider: *what is it that you want God to do in your life?*

Last year as we approached Christmas, our daughters knew exactly the kind of gifts they wanted—an “Elsa Castle,” (from Disney’s *Frozen*), a giant unicorn, a Santa baby doll. Our girls had clarity about what they wanted, and when Christmas morning arrived, they experienced the joy of receiving those things for which they had asked.

Jesus says to his followers, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it,” (John 14v14). What a profound promise (and on that Jesus makes repeatedly)! As we pray and fast for the desires of our heart, we are petitioning a God who has promised to answer!

What are you asking for this season? What in your life needs rebuilt and restored? Where do you need God's healing and power in your family? In your neighborhood? Your spiritual friendships? Your relationships?

- ▶ God, thank you for being a Father who longs to give me the desires of my heart. May the desires of my heart be pleasing in your sight.
- ▶ God, please help me to pray with boldness and faith for those things you've placed on my heart. (Spend time praying about specific things in your life).
- ▶ God, will you reveal to me the broken places that need to be rebuilt in my life?
- ▶ God, when you answer, help me to give you all the glory. When you show us your power, I will never try to touch your glory! It belongs only to you.
- ▶ **Additional Reading:** Psalm 37v3-7

SUNDAY, MARCH 14

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites...

Today's verse may never make its way onto a coffee cup or trendy social media post, but don't miss the crucial spiritual truth that we encounter here (and all throughout the story of Nehemiah). Whenever a follower of God decides to seek the blessing of God for the people of God, the enemies of God will resist.

One week into our fast, you are probably already experiencing that resistance (or you will experience it soon!). Don't be dismayed or surprised! Resistance and opposition come with the territory. The apostle Peter reminds us of this. He writes that we should not "be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." (1 Peter 4v12).

As we pray and fast, the Enemy will do whatever he can to distract you, to discourage you, and to get you off your mission. Don't give him a foothold! Keep your eyes on Jesus, and keep pressing in to experience God's purpose for you and for our church!

Nehemiah responds to the opposition by saying “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding...” (Nehemiah 2v20). He kept moving forward, trusting God for success. Let’s do the same!

- God, help me to be aware of the schemes of the Evil one.
- God, give me courage to stand up and resist, relying on your power for success.
- God, protect our church, our families, and our community from the attacks of Satan.
- God, continue to grant us success as we give ourselves to work for you.

Additional Reading: 1 Peter 5v6-11

MONDAY, MARCH 15

I went up the valley by night, examining the wall.....Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

The old proverb says that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.” For Nehemiah, the “project of 1000 bricks” launched with *the decision to do it*. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he journeyed into the night to survey the damage, he called the leaders together and cast the vision for rebuilding. *Then they got to work.*

Sometimes the journey between conviction and obedience is the most difficult. It is one thing to know something needs to be done; it is something else entirely to actually do it. The Spirit of God will bring us to conviction, but it is up to us to take the first step of obedience, but sometimes we get stuck in the place of conviction without ever take the first step of obedience.

Delayed obedience is disobedience. Are you hesitating to start the journey to which God has called you? Are you stuck between conviction and obedience?

Has God placed any burdens on your heart? Are there areas in your life where God has called you to join him in rebuilding and renewing? Maybe there is a conversation you need to have. Maybe there is sin in your life that you need to confess to a trusted friend. Maybe you need to rearrange your finances. Maybe God has revealed some ways your daily priorities need to shift.

Are you ready to get to work? Take that first step, and watch how God will begin to transform your life!

- ▶ God, please reveal to me any areas of my life in which I am hesitating to surrender full control.
- ▶ God, I trust that your plan for my life is better than my own. Help me surrender more fully to your purpose for my life.
- ▶ God, would you give me courage and conviction to take that first step of obedience today? Would you help me to have wisdom to know where to begin?

Additional Reading: James 1v22-25

Nehemiah 3v19-21

Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section, from a point facing the ascent to the armory as far as the angle of the wall. Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest. Next to him, Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired another section, from the entrance of Eliashib's house to the end of it.

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

When you read through this section of Nehemiah, it may be easy to gloss over it. There's not much action, plus a lot of weird names. But don't get hung up on the names, and don't miss the significance of what's happening. Now that the work on the wall has officially begun, the writer begins to chronicle how it was accomplished: through the people of God—individuals working together, for a common purpose and goal.

Nehemiah could not do the work alone. Yes, God had inspired him, called him, and was at work through him. He had the gift of leadership. But the rebuilding work would require all the people of God to come together to play their part, and do the work in front of them. Each person was responsible for their work, and not the work of anyone else.

As we grow forward, we can only do the work of rebuilding and restoration *together*.

Before moving on today, don't miss what the Scripture says about Baruch. He not only repaired his section of the wall, but he did it "zealously."

Can it be said of you that you have been zealously doing the work that God has laid out for you to do?

Take a moment today to do an honest assessment of yourself, and your work of disciple-making for the kingdom of God. Have you left the work for someone else? Are you putting your hand to the task with zeal and passion?

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, thank you for calling me to be part of your people and giving me a crucial role in your disciple-making mission for the world.
- ▶ God, I admit that it is often easy to get distracted from the work of disciple-making. Please help me to do my part!
- ▶ God, please help our church continue to grow in our commitment to work together for the mission you've given us!
- ▶ God, give us success as we give ourselves to the work of rebuilding and renewal!

Additional Reading: Romans 12v4-8

Nehemiah 4v1-2

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

Early in the story of Nehemiah, we reflected on the inevitability of opposition to the mission of God. Satan has been doing battle against God and God's people from the beginning of time. It continues in the story of Nehemiah and in our journey of prayer and fasting too.

This time the opposition comes as ridicule. "How can these feeble people bring life back from death?" The resistance is not unexpected, but it is still a stinging rebuke because—objectively speaking—it is actually a valid point! The task does seem to be insurmountable! The city is in ruins, a devastation wrought by the world's most vicious empire! The rubble seems impossible to build.

When you think about your life, our world, and the journey ahead, do you ever get discouraged? Do you ever feel like it may be too much? Does the rubble feel too overwhelming?

Nehemiah and the people heard the ridicule, and they saw the rubble, but they also knew something that the opposition did not. They knew that the God of heaven could bring beauty out of the rubble and ruins. As the taunts from the enemy echoed through the ruins, the people of God moved with confident assurance knowing that (as we sometimes sing) "up from the ashes, hope will arise."

What are the ashes in your life? What are the ruins that remind you of the way things used to be? Are there areas of your life that seem hopeless? Do you hear the taunts of the enemy echoing in the rubble?

As we continue our season of fasting, we are making our way toward Easter Sunday, when we will break our fast and celebrate the power of the resurrection of the son of God. We commit to the work of God, even when all seems hopeless, because we know that God can bring life where death seems to have conquered. He can bring hope out of ashes, life out of ruins, worship out of the rubble, and life out of death.

Where in your life do you need to experience resurrection power today?

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, thank you for the resurrection of Jesus that brings me life, salvation and hope! Help me to hope in Jesus' resurrection!
- ▶ God, help me to experience the power of the resurrection! Bring life out of the brokenness (pray for specific areas of your life).
- ▶ God, help our church to participate in the power of resurrection in our mission to make disciples of Jesus.
- ▶ God, may your resurrection power be at work in our culture and our community to bring renewal and restoration.

Additional Reading: John 11v25-26, Ephesians 1v19-23

THURSDAY, MARCH 18

*So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height,
for the people worked with all their heart.*

This is a short, but powerful verse for our prayer and fasting.

First, *it celebrates progress, not perfection*. We are striving for progress in our walk Jesus. We may never reach perfection, but *we celebrate progress!* The fact that you are committing to this journey (even if you've experienced some missteps along the way), is indication that you are progressing and growing! That's worth celebrating! Maybe you haven't seen the complete fulfillment of the prayers you have been praying these last few weeks, but are you seeing progress? Are you seeing God at work? You may not be where you are going yet, but you are not where you used to be, either! Praise God for progress!

Secondly, it reminds us that in the work of God, *progress happens when the people of God work together with all their heart*. While fasting and seeking God is an individual discipline, we are also on this journey together.

Keep working at it with all your heart, knowing that your brothers and sisters in Christ are joining you in the journey!

Have you seen God bring about progress in someone else's life? Take time today to reach out to someone and encourage them in their fast and journey with Jesus. Celebrate the progress they are making, and strengthen their heart!

- ▶ God, thank you for the way that you have been at work in my life!
(Thank God for specific areas of progress you have noticed).
- ▶ God, please help my brothers and sisters in Christ to be strengthened and encouraged today. Bring to mind someone that I can connect with and encourage today.
- ▶ God, help me to give myself and my whole heart to you and your work. Remove any hindrances or sin that is still lingering in my heart.

Additional Reading: Ephesians 4v11-16

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

As the story continues, so does the work of God, and so does the opposition. With every opportunity from God, there is opposition from Satan. That opposition doesn't stop when progress is made.

We are almost two weeks into our time of fasting. How have you experienced spiritual battle in your life? Is Satan attacking you with extra temptation? With cynicism or apathy? With doubt or despair? Have you found yourself getting angry or easily frustrated? How are your relationships doing?

What I love about this passage is not that it reminds us of the inevitability of opposition, but the way that depicts Nehemiah's response. He calls the people to pray, but he also instructs them to post a guard to deal with the physical threat. Nehemiah embraces prayerfulness and watchfulness together. He leads by seeking God and forcefully guarding vulnerabilities.

As we continue to pray and seek God, you may also need to “post a guard” in your own life. After all, Proverbs 4v23 tells us to “guard your heart” above all.

How do you need to guard your heart? Are there changes you need to make in your life to help protect your heart? Are there additional things in your life you need to let go of? Sin you need to put to death? Are there safeguards you need to instill? Do you need to have a conversation with a brother or sister to help deal with your spiritual struggle?

- God, I want to grow closer to you, but I know Satan will oppose me. Help me have strength and wisdom to resist!
- God, help me to be aware of the schemes of the Enemy. Help me clearly see my own vulnerabilities.
- God, will you give me wisdom and courage to make the necessary changes to guard my heart and my life in you?
- God, will you help me to do my part to protect my brothers and sisters?

Additional Reading: Ephesians 6v10-11, 13-17

Nehemiah 4v13-14

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

When I was kid, I would galavant around my house in a superhero costume, pretending to be "Super Brad," (so much for a secret identity, right?) and reducing the world. I used to love watching war movies with my dad. Epics like *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* have always been my favorite stories. It is not the violence, but the heroism and valor and adventure that stir something deep inside of me. I don't think it is just a masculine phenomenon, either. My two girls, decked out in pink and purple dresses (with "twirl-ability" of course!) will imagine tales of rescue and courage as they dart throughout the house.

We are so often captivated by stories of heroism and battle and the struggle between good and evil *because we are living that story*. The spiritual war rages all around us. We were born into a world at war. We are not bystanders, but active participants in the struggle for the heart and soul of the world. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood; we do not fight with lightsabers or rings of power. The heroes in the battle are not Jedi, hobbits, or princes in shining armor, *but the battle is real all the same*.

You were not made to shrink back in fear or to passively sit by while war rages. You are called to fight in spiritual combat. As we pray and fast, we are joining this spiritual war!

Nehemiah calls the people to "Remember the Lord...and fight for your families..." What in your life is worth fighting for? Where do you need to see God's transformative power? Who do you need to pray for today? Devotion, fasting, and a relentless dedication to intercessory prayer are some of our weapons for the spiritual battle. Let's use them bravely!

We are called to to fight, but we fight this battle on our knees.

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, the battle rages around me, and sometimes I feel like I can't fight any longer. Help me to remember your awesome power!
- ▶ God, will you give me the courage and strength to keep going, to keep seeking you, and to keep fighting for the people I love?
- ▶ God, will you help us be on the offensive to combat the forces of darkness around us through prayer? Will you give us insight to know where and how to fight for you?

Additional Reading: Ephesians 6v12, 18-20

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. . . "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"...

With a sword on the belt, a hammer in one hand, and weapon in the other, Nehemiah continues to embrace both prayerfulness and watchfulness, mixing spiritual power with practical preparation.

He also recognizes a crucial insight for us. *The people of God are vulnerable when they are spread out and separated.* We've certainly experienced that during the pandemic! Even now, as we pray and fast, one of our greatest dangers is that we will attempt to seek rebuilding and revival alone. We may hold steady for a while, but if we persist in our attempt to follow Jesus alone, our faith and strength will eventually falter.

As we pray today, our encouragement is a simple one. *Find someone to connect with on a spiritual level.* Reach out to someone. Have a conversation, pray with them. Be intentional about coming together in the fight.

When we come together, our prayers are strengthened, and so are we! Let's join together, and watch as God fights for us.

Who do you need to reach out to today?

- God, we have felt the vulnerability of our isolation and separation. Please bring us together again soon!
- God, thank you for the support and strength you have given us in your church family. Help me to be intentional about growing in spiritual friendship with others.
- God, please bring to mind someone that I can connect with today, so that we might mutually encourage each other.
- God, help our church to be open and welcome to those far from you, even as we grow deeper in our connection to one other.

Additional Reading: Hebrews 10v23-25

Nehemiah 5v5-12 [Read chapter 5 for the full context]

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" ... Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

In our reading today, the story takes something of a strange turn. The story shifts from the drama of rebuilding the wall to an argument about economics. It seems like a diversion from the thrust of the story. The situation is a little complex, but the short version is that there are people who are going hungry while others are taking advantage of others. Nehemiah learns of this, and he is outraged!

Nehemiah knows that even with all the best external architecture and physical support, the people of God must continue to embody the heart of God's love for each other, or else the rebuilding and restoration project will ultimately fail. They may rebuild the walls, but without a heart that cares for each other, the city will collapse from the inside out. Without spiritual revival, the physical restoration will be all for nothing.

We face a danger as we pray and fast. We can easily become so enamored by the physical externals of our fast and so intently focused on our own personal experience that we lose sight of God's heart of justice and compassion for us as the family of God. The prophet Isaiah lays out a clear vision for the kind of fast God has desired (Isaiah 58). It's not a fast of religious observance but of relational awareness. God's chosen fast is one that promotes justice for all of God's people. Fasting is about seeking God in a way that the blessing of God flows to all people.

As we continue our fast, let's make sure that we aren't only focused on the external details. Let's keep building one another up, taking care of each other, and loving each other! Pursue justice, mercy, & faithfulness. Reach out to someone today. Help someone in need!

PRAYER POINTS

- God, I am sorry for all the ways I have selfishly considered only my own needs & wants.
- God, remind me that our fast is not just religious obligation. Help me to pay attention to the needs and hurts of those around me.
- God, help me to grow in my love for people—especially people who are hurting and struggling. Help me to show love in tangible ways.
- God, please help me to see opportunities to help someone in need!

Additional Reading: Isaiah 58

Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

One of my roommates in college had an uncanny laser focus for his academic work. While all the rest of us were busy cracking jokes, playing video games, and boisterously neglecting our academic work, he would sit in his chair, eyes locked on his computer, grinding out his work. On occasion, the other roommates would try to get him to get off task and blow off steam, but he never lost his focus.

The work set before us, much like Nehemiah's, is an important work. The disciple-making mission has a literal eternal impact. There is nothing more significant for our lives than the mission of God. And yet, so many lesser things easily get us off track. Part of the beauty of fasting is that it helps us focus on things of eternal significance. Our lives are filled with so many distractions. As we let go of some physical things for a season, we are praying that we might take hold of deeper spiritual realities, to live on mission for Jesus with focus, determination, grit, and perseverance.

Focus. Determination. Grit. Perseverance. These are the virtues necessary for growth in the kingdom of God. Is your life marked by them? If it is, then keep on keeping on! But if not, may this time of fasting and prayer be used to develop those qualities for your life in the Kingdom!

Jesus calls us to “seek first his kingdom,” (Matthew 6v33) and the Hebrew writer tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus,” (Hebrews 12v2). How has your focus been?

- God, thank you for inviting me to be part of your mission to rescue the world!
- God, I am so easily distracted! Please help me to have an unrelenting focus on work that you have set before me.
- God, use this season of fasting to help me develop an eternal focus for my life that extends far beyond this month.
- God, help our church to persevere with grit and determination!

Additional Reading: Philippians 3v12-14

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days...When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

Have you ever experienced the miraculous power of God in your life?

I'm guessing that you have, even if you weren't aware of it. We often only look for God in the big and dramatic moments. While it is true that God certainly works in those instances, he frequently works in our lives in the same way he works in Nehemiah's story. There was no fire from heaven or miraculous display of power. There was, however, a dedicated group of believers who worked together for a common purpose. God worked through them to accomplish a seemingly insurmountable task. The wall was completed, their enemies pushed back, and God was glorified—all through the work of each person.

Never underestimate the *power* of God working through the *people* of God who give themselves to the *purpose* of God! When the people of Nehemiah's day joined together, God worked powerfully through them to complete the wall. God can do mighty things through our work too!

Where do you need to join with God in the rebuilding of a broken world? How can our church participate in God's purpose to renew all things in Jesus? What could God accomplish through us, if we gave ourselves fully and completely to the mission of God?

- God, thank you for all the big and small ways you have been working in my life! Help me to see your work more clearly!
- God, thank you for the way you have blessed our church family with gifts, talents, and experiences.
- God, please help us to stay unified in our commitment to you and each other.
- God, use your church to help renew and restore our neighborhood, our city, and our world!

Additional Reading: Acts 2v42-47

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

The wall has been completed, but the story goes on, because God always intended to do more than rebuild a wall—he wanted to restore the heart of a nation! The work to rebuild the wall surrounding Jerusalem was always about creating space for a spiritual revival to break out among the people. *The physical rebuilding set the stage for spiritual revival.*

In our prayer and fasting, we have chosen to let go of physical things in order to take hold of spiritual things. The physical discipline of fasting sets the stage for the spiritual renewal of our hearts.

There are many factors that contribute to spiritual revival, but hunger for God's word is a bedrock. In our story, Ezra reads from the Scriptures all day (you thought some of our sermons were long!), and the people are so hungry for God that they feast on the Scriptures all day. As the people begin to feast on the Word of God, a spiritual revival begins to break out!

During our fast, when the physical hunger pangs come, allow them to create in you a spiritual appetite for the living Word of God! Allow your physical hunger to act as a reminder that we are not meant to “live by bread alone.” May our physical hunger create in us a spiritual hunger to see God move in our midst!

- God, thank you for the power of the Scriptures that can renew hearts and lives!
- God, may your Word take deep root within my heart!
- God, will you give me a greater hunger for your Word?
- God, will you help our church to always remain committed to your Word?
- **Additional Reading:** Psalm 1

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Something powerful happens during the times of worship at the MOV Work Camp that meets at Ohio Valley University each summer. Some of the most profound worship experiences of my life have happened at that camp. It's a gathering of several hundred students that come together to paint houses for people in need during the day, and then come together, paint-covered and exhausted, to sing and worship in a stuffy old gymnasium with uncomfortable chairs and bad acoustics. It is not exactly the kind of "worship environment" that worship ministers would design, yet the worship is always Spirit-filled and passionate.

I've often wondered what set those times of worship apart from the many other worship experiences in my life. It's not the music, the people, the stage design, or the physical comforts. It is the genuine response to the work of God. When you spend all day working purposely *for* God and *with* others, an overflow of praise is the natural response.

Painting houses with purpose together led to singing God's praises with passion together.

That is exactly what is happening in our passage today. The people have worked and prayed together. They have overcome obstacles. They have seen God faithfully provide for them. And now there is a spiritual revival breaking out as the people worship God, lifting their voices and their hands and as they bow before God.

As we give ourselves fully to the work of God—both in this season of fasting and in the seasons to come—may we respond in passionate worship together! May our united purpose lead to united praise! In your prayer time today, spend time worshipping God for what he has done for you and for our church.

- God, help us to work with purpose for you and worship you with passion!
- God, thank you for the way you have been with us through our struggles!
- God, thank you for being good and full of love toward me. I worship you, fully and freely!
- God, be glorified in our church family, both in our work and our worship!

Additional Reading: Colossians 3v15-17, Psalm 95v1-7

Nehemiah 8v9-11,17-18 [Read chapter 8 for full context]

"This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. . . Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." . . . "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve." . . . From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

Our time of joy and celebration and feasting at the conclusion of our fast is still several days away. Don't let the celebration in our text today tempt you! It's actually a powerful testament to what we are chasing after together.

As the spiritual revival continues to sweep through the hearts of the people of God, they are moved to grieve and weep. The power of the Word of God has revealed the depth of their sin. The people have been cut to the heart and are brought to repentance. This is a great thing! Remember from the beginning of our journey that often *God will break a heart before he restores it*. That is what is happening in the story, and hopefully you have experienced similar moments in our journey together!

Ezra and Nehemiah understand that confession, repentance, and spiritual grieving are necessary in order to experience full revival. However, they also recognize that God has been at work drawing the hearts of the people to himself, and that is something to celebrate! So in this moment, the people are called to feast, rejoice, and celebrate together.

During our time of separation in this pandemic, we have been desperately longing for the time when we can come together as a family to feast, worship, and celebrate. Let this passage inspire hope that the day for celebrating together will come! In the meantime, we continue to cry out to God in our prayer and fasting with joyful anticipation of the celebration that is to come. We look forward, not just to the time of breaking our fast, but to the time sharing in the wedding feast of the Lamb at the renewal of all things!

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, even as I celebrate your goodness, help me to be still before you, with a full awareness of your holiness and my own sin.
 - ▶ God, we continue to pray for the day when our church can be back together to celebrate you as a family! Bring that day quickly! In the meantime, strengthen our resolve and commitment to each other while we are separated.
 - ▶ God, thank you for giving me reasons to celebrate, even in times of struggle. Will you help me to reflect on those today?
 - ▶ God, Jesus said that he came that we might experience his complete joy. I admit that I do not always feel complete joy. I pray that his joy would overflow in me!
 - ▶ **Additional Reading:** Revelation 19v4-9
-
-
-
-

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

This is another pretty jarring shift in the narrative. The people have moved from celebration and feasting to confession and fasting. These are two very different experiences, both vital elements in the spiritual rebuilding and restoration project.

By this time in our fast, you are probably looking forward to a day of feasting and celebrating! As we reflected yesterday, that day will come soon! And even now, in the middle of our fast, there are things to celebrate!

Even so, let's not rush too quickly into celebration. Don't be afraid to sit in the discomfort of waiting and praying. After all, fasting is about humbling ourselves before God. It is a time to repent and confess our sins. It's supposed to be uncomfortable. We grow through the discomfort and struggle!

During our time of fasting, has the Lord revealed any area of sin in your life and your heart? Are you willing to confess those to him, and to repent of them? If you are not willing to let go of them, will you ask God to help you to see your sin for what it is, and to help you to repent of it?

What began as a movement to rebuild city walls has turned into a full-fledged spiritual revival, and the on-going practices of repentance and confession have been pillars of that revival. The city walls offered physical protection, but spiritual protection was a result of their repentance and confusion.

- God, please continue to reveal all areas of sin in my life.
- God, help me to live in greater purity and holiness before you.
- God, thank you for being faithful to forgive me! Please make me new by the power of the gospel!
- **Additional Reading:** Psalm 51:1-12

Nehemiah 9v4-6

They cried out with loud voices to the LORD their God. And the Levites...said "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you..."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

The worship and praise continues! As it does, the people turn their attention from themselves and their sin to the character and glory of God. This Godward shift is important in the movement of spiritual rebuilding and restoration! If we focus only on ourselves and our sin, it always leads to hopelessness and despair. But when we can make the shift from self-focus to a God-focus, it will fill us with renewed hope and purpose.

In this prayer, God is revealed as the everlasting God and the creator of the ends of the earth. He is exalted above all things. No matter what we go through, God reigns above it all! May that thought fill us with hope today!

This reflection leads to an important question for us: *Is God above all things in your life?*

As we approach the end of our time of prayer and fasting, begin to consider if God really is over all and above all in your life. Has your time in fasting revealed any other "lords" in your life? Are there things you have placed on the throne of your heart? Where do you turn in times of stress and anxiety, or fear and doubt? What is your comfort and security?

The physical work of rebuilding in Nehemiah's story has been important. It was a major accomplishment! But a work greater than the rebuilding of the walls was taking place: the work of rebuilding a posture of worship in the hearts of the people. Idolatry (worship of something other than God) has been at the root of the problems the people of God experienced throughout history. Ezra and Nehemiah knew that without surgically removing the cancer of idolatry from their hearts, the people of God would end up right back in the mess and brokenness.

Use your prayer time today to take an inventory of your heart. What is on the throne? Do you have idols that need to be knocked down? Are there things you need to do to ensure that God will reign on that throne today and every day moving forward?

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, you are from everlasting to everlasting! You made the heavens. You give life to everything, including me! I praise you for who you are and what you have done! (Think about specific areas in which you have seen God bring life and restoration.)
- ▶ God, would you reign as King of my heart? Would you help me to remove any idols that I have placed on the throne of my life?
- ▶ God, thank you for reigning over the chaos of my life. Help me to trust you more!
- ▶ **Additional Reading:** Isaiah 40v21-31

Nehemiah 9v9-12

"You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take...."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

Yesterday, we reflected on God's covenant faithfulness—how he has proven his love and faithfulness to us in countless ways. Today, our prayer helps us reflect on that faithfulness in a very tangible way by remembering the Exodus story from Scripture. When God powerfully rescued his people from Egyptian captivity and led them into the wilderness, he did so with "a pillar of cloud" and "a pillar of fire." The people were in the wilderness, but God had not abandoned them. The pillars of fire and cloud were tangible reminders of God's presence. He was with them, even in the wilderness.

While we have not been in literal wilderness, we have certainly been on a spiritual wilderness journey. *May we be reminded today that God has been with us every step of the way.*

God has been with you in your fast. God was with you long before, too. He has been with you in the wilderness. God will continue to be with you as we move into the next season. He will be with you as you emerge from wilderness to the promised land.

Have you seen and experienced God's presence in your life? If you have, thank him for it and celebrate it! Maybe you have struggled to see God's presence. Be honest with God about that struggle. Ask God to help you become more aware of his presence. The Scriptures promise us that he is with us, even when we do not see him. Ask God to help you see him.

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, thank you for being with your people in the wilderness. Thank you for being *with us*, in our wilderness!
- ▶ God, thank you for all ways your people have experienced your presence throughout history. Thank you for the ways I have experienced your presence.
- ▶ God, I want to experience more of your presence! Give me eyes to see you and ears to hear your voice in my life!
- ▶ God, help me to follow wherever your presence leads me!

Additional Reading: Psalm 23

Nehemiah 9v38

"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."

Nehemiah 10v39

"We will not neglect the house of our God."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

At the end of my eighth-grade school year, our high school's new football coach called a meeting of all the students and parents who were considering playing football the following year. He told stories of the "glory days" of our football program and cast a vision for the future. He made clear the kind of commitment and work ethic required to be part of the team. This would not be for the faint of heart. By the end of the meeting, I was both intimidated and inspired. That night, he sent us home with a paper—a commitment to the team, a covenant. If we decided to play, were expected to sign our name and make a whole-hearted commitment to the team. Our coach was asking us to take ownership of our role on the team. It was intense, to be sure. But the thing is, it worked! Our team was smaller over the next few years, but it was the beginning of a movement that led to some of the best football teams in school history.

It is a powerful thing to give ourselves to be part of a people and a movement, to take ownership of our role in the movement, to draw a line in the sand and commit.

That is what the people of God do in our Scripture today. They make a binding agreement and they commit. They covenant themselves to God, reflecting the covenant he has made with them. Through the course of this story, the people had taken up and hammers and swords together to rebuild the walls and fight for their families. They had feasted on the word of God, worshiped him passionately, and prayed relentlessly. God had been working among them to cultivate physical and spiritual restoration. And now—on the other side of spiritual revival—they were committing themselves to God and to each other, committing to obediently walk with God into the future. They were owning the movement that God began, and committing themselves to be a part of it.

God has a plan and purpose for our church family! There is work to do in the house of God! But we can only fulfill that purpose and do that work when we each own our role, commit to be a part of the movement of God, and faithfully walk in obedience together!

Are you ready to be part of what God wants to do through us, his church, in Morgantown and beyond? Are you ready to join in? We have a rich past and a promising future, and you have a role to play! Will you own it?

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, thank you for what you have been doing in our hearts during this season.
- ▶ God, help me to see and own my role in the work you will continue to do in our midst for renewal and restoration!
- ▶ God, help me to have a greater commitment to love and care for my brothers and sisters in our church family!
- ▶ God, I give myself fully to you and to your mission. I surrender to you! I want to walk obediently with you!

Additional Reading: Joshua 24v14-15

Nehemiah 12v27-31

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem.... I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks.

Nehemiah 12v40-43

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God...on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

[Read chapter 12v27-47 for the full context]

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

Here we are, at the end of the story! The wall has been rebuilt and the temple restored. The people have returned to the city. Enemies have been pushed back. The peace and security of the city has been secured. Revival has swept the nation. Hearts have been renewed, the people reconnected, and the mission reengaged. It has been a glorious story of faithfulness, grit, and determination! God has fulfilled the work of restoration he placed on Nehemiah's heart.

And here we are, at the end of our fast! We have seen God move in some big and some small ways. We have experienced renewal and recommitment to him. We have worshipped. We have repented. We have experienced God's grace, forgiveness, and faithfulness. It has been a journey of faithfulness, grit, and determination.

We break our fast tomorrow! Today is our last full day of fasting! Use your time in prayer today to prepare to celebrate and worship God for all that he has done.

As a response to the work of God, the people of God sing and rejoice in worship. The text says in verse 43 that the sound of rejoicing could be heard far away. As we gather to worship tomorrow, let's worship so boldly that the hills resound with sounds of God's praise!

Reflect over the past month. What do you have to celebrate? What have been the victories? Have you seen God at work in your struggles?

PRAYER POINTS

- God, thank you for this season of fasting and prayer! Thank you for hearing our prayer, and for drawing us closer to you.
- God, your church prepares to join together in worship tomorrow, would you cause joy to rise in my heart? Would you help me to rejoice in you and your goodness?
- God, even in our struggle, you are good. Help me to believe that more deeply and celebrate it more fully today and for the rest of my walk with you.

Additional Reading: Psalm 98

Nehemiah 13v27

[Read chapter 13 for the full context]

"Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God...?"

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

We break our fast today! Has it been a success? What defines success?

Was the rebuilding of Jerusalem a success? It depends on how you define it. On the surface, the work of Ezra and Nehemiah was actually a colossal failure. Chapter 13 chronicles a series of Torah violations that Nehemiah finds on his return to Jerusalem several years after the walls were rebuilt. The people had promised to faithfully follow the law, but that commitment soon waned, the fired died, and they drifted back in the same cycles of sin that marked their lives before their revival and restoration.

Countless hours and substantial financial resources were spent over the course of decades to rebuild the city and the temple—all so that the people of God would give themselves fully to the worship of God. This story has been about rebuilding the walls, yes. But more than rebuilding walls, *it was about restoring a heart of worship and faithfulness to God!* Spiritual restoration was always the point of the physical labor.

In a depressing shift at the end of the story, the people have turned on God, abandoned the revival movement, and returned to their idolatrous ways. *It is almost like nothing changed.*

Not exactly an encouraging way to end a month of prayer and fasting, is it?

Have things changed in our community? Our church? Our nation? Has a revival broken out? Have we experienced a miraculous outpouring of God's power? Have we rebuilt what has been torn down over the past year? Have we seen an answer for all our prayers? If all this has been left unfulfilled, does that mean our fast was unsuccessful? A failure?

The ending of the story of Ezra-Nehemiah is troubling. All that work for restoration...and the revival fires burned out in the end. Nothing seems to have ultimately changed, at least not where it mattered most. And yet, if you look beneath the surface, there are two things that have been *eternally* changed.

Nehemiah, having joined God in this mission, has been changed. He is no longer the same man! When you faithfully follow God, he begins to work within your heart to change you, even when you can't see it. The Holy Spirit works in partnership with our obedience to transform us from the inside out.

How have you been transformed during the course of our fast? What work has God done in your own life and heart? Is that transformation going to last? Or will you end up like the people in Nehemiah's day who returned to their old way of life as soon as the spiritual intensity waned?

Our month of prayer and fasting has been intense. We have chased after God hard together! It has been a season marked by an acute passion. This kind of frenetic pace likely isn't sustainable for the long-term in your spiritual life, and that's ok. What kind of changes do you need to make so that the transformative work of God can continue? What do you need to do in your life to ensure that you do not immediately fall back into old patterns and sins?



Not only was Nehemiah changed, but the religious and spiritual foundations of Israel were transformed as well. The revival written about in this story did not last, but it set the stage for Jesus' arrival into the world centuries later. *This* generation did not see lasting revival, but *generations to come* would eventually be shaped deeply by these events. They would look back on this moment of history, and—inspired by Ezra and Nehemiah's faithfulness and leadership—would resurrect these revival fires. In doing so, they created a spiritual fervor, an anticipation for the Kingdom of God and a deep faithfulness to the Scriptures that prepared the way for Jesus.

When Jesus proclaimed and embodied the good news of the Kingdom, called disciples, suffered on the cross, and walked out of his tomb, he did it amongst a people who were waiting and longing for God's kingdom to come...*all because they had been shaped by the story of Ezra and Nehemiah.*

Though the ending to this story is bleak, Nehemiah's revival was a seed that took root centuries later and is still bearing fruit today. It may have seemed to Nehemiah like it was all for nothing. But like a seed that falls to the ground dies only to eventually produce lasting fruit, the restoration to which Nehemiah had dedicated himself would be resurrected into a movement that would bring eternal life to all the world through Jesus!

As we conclude our fast, I don't know if you have seen the "results" you've been looking for in the season. But I do know this: even if a revival hasn't broken out or if you are still waiting for your prayers to be answered, this season of prayer and fasting has been an important building block in the work that God will do through us—right now in 2021, and in the generations to come.

We break our fast today on Easter Sunday, a day in which the world is reminded of the empty tomb of Jesus. Today, we move forward into what lies ahead, knowing that even out of ashes and ruins of a broken world, hope will arise! We have confidence to continue the work of rebuilding and restoration because Jesus is alive, he has defeated death, and one day is returning to make all things new!

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, thank you for the way you have worked in my life, especially in this season of fasting.
- ▶ God, thank you for the hope of the renewal of all things. Even in the pain and struggle of this world, strengthen my heart in that hope!
- ▶ God, keep us from falling back into old patterns of sin, idolatry, and distraction. Help us to always keep you as first place in our lives.
- ▶ God, may the work you began in us this season be the building blocks of the work you will do through us for generations to come, until Jesus returns!

Additional Reading: 1 Corinthians 15v58

Nehemiah 13v31

"Remember me with favor, my God."

TODAY'S PRAYER THOUGHT

We have completed our fast! Praise God! Celebrate with someone!

As we close this time of prayer today, we reflect on the last, *haunting*, words of the book of Nehemiah. In these 6 words, you can almost hear Nehemiah's dejection and heartbreak. The project he began with passion and prayer has been completed, but the greater purpose appears to be unfulfilled. The walls now stand, but the people have walked away.

A pastor has said, "Revival fires always begin in the heart of God and are extinguished in the hands of the people."

As we have prayed, maybe you have seen God move in exactly the way you had hoped. Maybe you have seen God do "exceedingly, abundantly more than you can ask or imagine." Maybe God has surprised you by his power....*Or perhaps you are still waiting, hoping, longing for God to move in your life.*

The question I wrestle with as I reflect on these haunting lines from Nehemiah and the conclusion of our fast is this: Who was this fast for? Why did we do it? What was the point? Was it for the external effects? The results? So we could feel good about what we accomplished?

As Nehemiah closes this book, he looks at his passion-project and sees an unfulfilled purpose. In that tension, Nehemiah ends as he started—by praying. His first prayer was long and eloquent. This time his prayer is short: *"Remember me with favor, my God."* Nehemiah is simply asking that God be pleased with him. Nehemiah has done all he could. And his desire now is simply for God to look on him with delight.

Wherever you find yourself at the conclusion of this fast, may you rest in knowing that God *is* pleased with you. His delight in you is not a result of your success or failure in fasting and prayer. It doesn't matter if you nailed every single day of the fast or if every single day was a struggle. God is pleased with you, *because you are his*. When God remembers you, he remembers you with favor, with delight, and with love.

As we move forward into this next season together, may we do so with a confident assurance of God's loving purpose for us! May we move forward together, as the people of God! And may we move forward in faithfulness to see God bring about the restoration of a broken world.

Our fast is over, but the journey is just beginning! God is calling us forward! There is work left to do. Let's go!

PRAYER POINTS

- ▶ God, thank you for looking on me with favor and delight. Help me to know that I am loved by you and saved by your grace.
- ▶ God, please continue the work that you have started, both in me and our church.
- ▶ God, even though our fast has drawn to a close, please continue to renew our hearts, connect us to deep spiritual community, and help us to reengage in your mission to restore our broken world!

PRAYER CARD

A prayer card template featuring a central circle with the word "ME" in red. Six rectangular boxes are arranged around the circle, connected to it by dashed lines. The background is a textured brick wall.

**Write one name (or a family's last name)
in each of the blocks above.**

You can pray for any of your neighbors, coworkers, classmates, family members, Morgantown Church family or friends who need to experience the spiritual restoring power of God.