

Workers for God

Nehemiah 1:1-6, 11; 2:1-5; 4:7-9; 8:1-3

Prayer for Illumination

Thank you, Lord, for the riches of your word. Be with us in this hour, that we may profit from this scripture. Enlighten our minds that we may understand, soften our hearts that we may respond, and direct our wills that we may obey Your word. In Christ we pray, Amen.

Who Serves God?

Why did you come to UNAM? People have many reasons for going to the university. Some go because they love to study. Some hope someday to get a job that makes them important. Some want to get rich, or at least make enough money to live comfortably. In the U.S. some students go to university to find a husband or wife. Some go because their parents told them to go. Is one of these reasons true for you? Or did you decide to come to UNAM to serve God? And do you think that when you study for your classes, write papers, and take exams, you are serving God?

A common belief among Christians is that pastors, evangelists, and missionaries serve God. And musicians – if you play in a Christian band and play worship music. If you have any other sort of job, you may serve God by witnessing and giving money, but that's all. Sadly, often the work you do every day is considered valuable only to the extent that it enables you to share the gospel and make money to give to the church. This semester in the CUR we are seeing that this belief is not right. The Bible teaches that God placed man on earth to do all sorts of work, and such work well done pleases God.

Two weeks ago Pastor Marco Escalente preached from Genesis chapter 1. He showed that God is a worker. He worked for six days creating the earth. Then God made man in His image – a creature who works, just like God. In Genesis chapter 2 we saw God giving man his work, and instructions for doing it. The work of the first man, Adam, was to care for the garden, and it was a pleasant task. This was what Adam was made for, and he enjoyed doing it. And to help him in this work, God gave Adam a wife. Last week Pastor Marco preached from Genesis chapter 3, and showed how sin has ruined the whole universe. One effect of sin is to make work unpleasant, often difficult, and sometimes miserable. The problem is not work – it is man. Or more precisely, it is the sin that is in man. We are corrupt, and we corrupt everything we touch. But although sin damages us and our work, it does not immediately destroy us. God put limits on the effect of sin. And for those men and women who worship God, God uses their work to bless others and to improve the world. Next week Pastor Marco is going to show how Jesus changes our work, but today we want to look at some Old Testament saints who served God through their work.

When you talk about serving God, many people think that is what priests and monks, pastors and evangelists do. Of course you can serve God as a pastor, and in other full-time church work – and these are very important roles. But what we see in Genesis and the whole Bible is that everyone who worships God can serve God in his own job. We can serve God as farmers, and carpenters, and teachers, and engineers, etc. You even serve God when you labor at your studies. Today we are going to see several people who had ordinary jobs, but served God in powerful ways in those jobs.

Ranchers and Craftsmen

In chapter 12 of Genesis we are introduced to Abraham. Abraham was a sheep rancher, but he became the father of all believers. We first meet Abraham in a city in Mesopotamia, where God called him to move to a new land. Abraham obeyed God and moved his whole household all the way to Canaan. There he built altars and led his family and servants in worshiping God. He made friends with his neighbors, told them about God, and prayed for them. Abraham is such an important figure in the Bible, it is easy to forget that he was just a sheep rancher. But he was no ordinary sheep rancher. He was a sheep rancher who served God by doing his work well, leading his family in worship, and telling others about God.

Four hundred years later Abraham's descendants numbered hundreds of thousands, and God appointed Moses to lead them. One of Moses' jobs was to build the tabernacle – a tent for worshiping God. Moses was a prophet, but Moses knew nothing about building things. So God equipped others to do that work. Here is what God said to Moses about building the tabernacle:

The LORD said to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you." Exodus 31:1-6

Bezalel and Oholiab were expert craftsmen. No doubt they made dishes and jewelry and all sorts of items which people need on a daily basis. But when it was time to build a tent for worship, their skills were needed. It was not their job to teach God's law, or offer sacrifices. God chose other men to do those things. But priests and prophets do not have the skills of craftsmen. But did you notice how valuable this work is to God? God filled Bezalel and Oholiab with His Spirit to do this work – just as He also filled the priests and prophets with His Spirit. All sorts of people serve God – not just the professional religious people. And ordinary people use the special gifts they have to do so. And this is more than just natural talent – God gives His Spirit to His people to perform their jobs well.

Devotion to God and God's People

Fast forward 1,000 years. Abraham's descendants became a mighty nation, but over time they stopped serving God. They were conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Their temple and capital city were destroyed, and many were carried to exile in Babylon. Seventy years later they were allowed to return and rebuild their temple, but the city still lay in ruins. God provided a man to rebuild the city, and his story is in the book of Nehemiah. Let's turn to this book and read how God used a professional man to accomplish one of the most important works in history. Someone read Nehemiah 1:1-6, 11.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the most powerful man on earth. The job of the cupbearer was to taste the king's wine before he drank it to see if it had been poisoned. Nehemiah was chief of security for the king. He was like the head of the secret service who guard the president. This was a very important job, and I am sure Nehemiah was paid very well. Nehemiah had it made! He had a comfortable job with great benefits. Someday he could retire in Susa, the capital city, and enjoy life. But Nehemiah was not such a man. When he heard how his countrymen were suffering in Jerusalem, and how the city of God was in disgrace, he broke down in tears. Now this was not a few teardrops. Nehemiah cried for days. He refused to eat anything. And he prayed. Nehemiah was a security guard, but he loved God deeply and he loved his people deeply.

This passage records part of Nehemiah's prayers. He knew that the reason for the captivity and exile was the sin, the rebellious nature of God's people. He also knew that God's people continue to struggle with sin. Nehemiah knew that the root problem for man is not the government, or the economy, or parents, or spouse. No the root problem for mankind is the rebelliousness that is each person's heart. All our other problems arise from the sin in our hearts – the bad government, the greedy businessmen, the lazy employees, selfish parents and disrespectful children. So the first think Nehemiah did was to confess his sin and repent of it. He admitted that he and his countrymen had brought all this suffering and disgrace upon themselves, and he asked God to forgive them. Nehemiah's example applies to everyone, including all of us here. If you would serve God, the first step is to admit your sinfulness – your tendency to rebel against God – and to ask God for forgiveness.

Notice also in verse 11 that Nehemiah made a specific request of God. He said, “give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Apparently by the end of Nehemiah’s days of prayer and fasting, he decided to do something so bold it was alarming. He planned to ask the king for help with Jerusalem. This is shocking because these ancient kings were ruthless tyrants, unpredictable and easily provoked. In the book of Esther we read that even the queen did not have permission to enter the king’s presence without his requesting it. The king might easily have killed Nehemiah for asking a favor from him. This verse shows that Nehemiah was a man of courage, but he did not rely on his courage or his wits. Nehemiah relied on God, and he prayed for God’s help. And Nehemiah expected God to help him with this building project.

Do you think that God is interested in security guards or builders? Is it important to pray about such work? How about your own work? Do you pray for God’s help when you go to class, or when you study, or when you take an exam? Do you think that God is interested in your work? Do you think God cares about what you do?

Well let’s see how well this prayer worked. Let’s read Nehemiah 2:1-5.

Nehemiah the Builder

So the next time Nehemiah took wine in to the king, the king asked him what was wrong. This is an answer to prayer, right? Now Nehemiah would get a chance to ask the king to help Jerusalem. So why did Nehemiah become afraid – very much afraid? Because Nehemiah was in the presence of the man who could sentence him to immediate death for not pleasing him. It was not Nehemiah’s place to drag his personal problems into his work. His job was to cheerfully do his work – not act all sad and miserable in front of the king. Now we see how powerfully God answered Nehemiah’s prayer. God gave Nehemiah favor in the sight of this powerful, unpredictable king. God moved the king to become interested in Nehemiah’s sorrow, and even offer to help. This was a huge answer to prayer!

But look also in verse four. In the middle of his conversation with the king Nehemiah prayed. Now this could not have meant that Nehemiah went into a separate room and prayed for a while. It was a quick two-second silent prayer, perhaps “Lord help me now!” Nehemiah was convinced that God was interested in rebuilding Jerusalem and was listening in on his conversation with the king. Nehemiah has already had a long prayer time. He did not need to do that now. But even in the middle of this conversation Nehemiah said a silent prayer for help.

It’s no wonder that Nehemiah said that prayer, because his next request was completely outrageous. He asked the king to release him from his service and let him go to Jerusalem himself to be in charge of the project. Nehemiah risked his life to give up his comfortable job, go to a strange land, and take a job he had never done before. *Furthermore* – the following verses tell us that Nehemiah asked the king to provide the building materials! Everything about this is completely outrageous! No normal person would ever have dreamed of attempting such a thing. But in his prayers Nehemiah became convinced that God was leading him to do this, and he was willing to bet his life on it. Do you think you could trust God to lead you through a dangerous plan like this?

The following chapters of this book tell about Nehemiah’s work of building the wall of Jerusalem. It is very interesting, and I hope you will read it yourself. Nehemiah faced many obstacles, including the hostility of neighboring tribes. Let’s read Nehemiah 4:7-9.

Did you see that Nehemiah made two responses to this threat? First he prayed. Then he set up guards. Nehemiah always prayed. He was a man of action – a builder – but he was also a man of prayer. He

believed that construction projects are valuable to God, he expected God to be involved in his work, and he regularly discussed his work with God.

Finally, in spite of tremendous obstacles, the wall was finished. It was a miracle! – but isn't that what Nehemiah expected and prayed for? After the wall was finished, it was time to address other problems. There were very deep spiritual problems in Israel at that time. Although God had brought them back from exile and protected them from their enemies, the people were ignorant of the scripture and were engaged in serious sin. In a similar situation many men would have said, "I'm a builder. I did my work, and now it's finished. My work is done here." Others would have said, "I have succeeded in building this wall. I have the power to fix these problems. I will order these people to live by God's word." But Nehemiah took neither of these paths. Let's read Nehemiah 8:1-3 to see how Nehemiah handled this situation.

Nehemiah recognized that he had great influence, but he also recognized that real spiritual renewal had to come from the priests. So Nehemiah used his power to support the priests in leading a revival. He was a builder. He was not a priest. He was not going to seize a role not granted to him, but neither was he going to pack up and go home. Nehemiah the builder used his influence to help the priests in the spiritual work that they had to do.

CUR Students Serve God

A couple of weeks ago Barush was ordained to be a pastor. God has used him here at the UNAM, and I expect that God will use him even more powerfully in the future. But God will also use you in the work that He calls you to do. Your work now as a student is important to God. When you devote yourself to your studies and do your best in your classes, God notices and is pleased with your work. And when you get a job as an engineer, or teacher, or chemist, or social worker, or whatever job God gives you, you will serve God by doing your work well. Just as God used Abraham the sheep rancher, Bezalel the craftsman, and Nehemiah the builder to serve Him, so God will use you the teacher or engineer to serve Him.

I hope you will be able to share the gospel with your colleagues. I hope you will give 10% of your salary to the church – and this is a powerful service to God. But also your work – the chemistry you do every day, the social work you do every day, whatever work you do every day is pleasing to God and is service to Him. So like Nehemiah, you should invite God to share in your work. As you go to class, as you study, as you work in a laboratory or office, you should cultivate a habit of prayer about your work. Ask God for wisdom to do your work well. Ask Him for help with difficult problems. Ask Him for help with difficult people. God loves you and cares about your work. Don't leave Him out of it!

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Prayer

Lord God, thank you for making us in your image and giving us work to do. Thank you for these students and the many subjects they are studying. Help them to know and believe that you value their work as students. Help them to know and believe that you will value the jobs they have in the future. Help them to include you in their work by praying on all occasions. Make CUR students a powerful force for good in Mexico and around the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

C. David Green
UNAM
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