

Our worship service for January 30th, 2022 endeavored to reflect the value of connecting with people of many different ages. We invited four members of our congregation from different decades of life to speak on the same theme. We're grateful to Mary Ashleigh Craver, Carlisle Franks, Marie Sumerel, and Ella Sasser for sharing their thoughts as part of worship.

The service is part of our series from the book of Nehemiah, a series we started last week with our online worship service. Today we focus on a passage from Nehemiah where the Israelites are trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The project starts off pretty well, but soon outside forces begin to scheme and plan to destroy the Israelites' progress. Nehemiah and his allies get wind of this plan, and so they take two steps, steps that are mentioned in one verse (verse 4:9) and nearly in one breath. The wall-builders pray to God, and they post a guard "day and night" to ward off intruders.

Lots of times in the Bible, someone just prays, or dips their feet in a river, or undertakes some other action that demonstrates great faith, and that alone is sufficient to lead to victory. Lots of times in our world, we may be hesitant to give some things up to God, believing that we have to handle these things on our own or that we shouldn't bother God with our problems. But here is a case where Nehemiah and his crew pray first and then also post a guard to defend their work. Their faith walks a line between deferring to God and taking action. In worship today, we hope to ponder that line as well through our own modern-day examples.

Reflection on Nehemiah

By: Mary Ashleigh Craver

The passage in Nehemiah demonstrates the power of prayer and faith but is supplemented by physical work. The worst week of my life encompassed both. In November of 2013, I was studying for my Masters in Physiology at NC State. I was in a challenging neuroscience course and we were nearing the end of the semester. Simultaneously, my grandfather, who I was very close with, fell ill and was in serious condition in the hospital. I visited him and received updates while trying to also study for an upcoming neuroscience exam at the end of the week. Suddenly, my computer crashed. You know, the black screen of death that when you try to reboot you just see the home screen spin and spin...and spin some more. It was done. All of my notes and study materials for this exam were toast. This may not seem like much of a challenge compared to others presented today, but for a pre-med applicant, all exams were a big deal.

The next day, I was told the devastating news that my grandfather had passed away. I was distraught with grief in the moment. I prayed to God to help me through all of these challenges which seemed to be mounting up quickly at once. I knew that He would help me when I could not help myself. After a good cry session, I moved forward with a plan of action. My computer was taken to the repair shop in an attempt to back up files which were lost but in the meantime I still needed to study. I had remembered that my own class notes and outlines had been emailed to myself so I could access those to study on my phone. I'm not sure how many of you have ever tried to study on a 4 inch screen but I assure you it was difficult...especially in a subject where tables and diagrams are important. Given my grandfather's death, it might seem ironic that I asked to take my exam early. My professor clearly understood the situation and told me I could take the exam later the following week after the funeral. But I knew I needed to compartmentalize my grief so I would be able to focus and be fully present for his funeral and the days leading up to it. God helped me put aside my feelings, my sadness, and the distraction of my grandfather's death and helped me focus on studying. In a couple of days, I took the test. I really didn't care what I made on it – words never

spoken by a pre-med – but I needed it behind me. We moved forward with the funeral arrangements and then I could fully let down and grieve as I needed to.

I knew my ability to stay calm, make a plan, and execute that plan was a gift from God in those days. Prayer, in conjunction with hard work brought me through that week. I ended up doing well on the exam. Looking back, it was one of those times that I don't know how I made it but I'm sure I never want to go through it again. I've had many other challenges since that time but one thing remains the same – all of these I could not have tackled without God's help which is always available to us, if we ask.

FAITH AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

I was entering my last year in seminary. Irma and I had been married for seven years and we were expecting our first child. Needless to say there was great excitement and much anticipation. The pregnancy went well and we were preparing, the best we could, to become parents. Since both of us were the youngest child in our family grandparents, too, were most excited.

The day came, on a Sunday morning, Father's Day, and I awakened Irma, said, "I believe we need to go to the hospital". Her response was as always, "I am the nurse in charge of the nursery today and we are short staffed" Being the devoted nurse that she was, I said "no, I think you need to call your doctor and we need to get to the hospital." Off we went.

I was supposed to supply preach in Durhan and so I asked the doctor about this and he said, "go ahead, it's going to be hours!" I left the hospital to get to the church just on time. Don't know what I said and probably none of the congregants knew. I rushed back to the hospital and was greeted by Drewry and Elma, Irma's brother and sister-in-law. Their first words, "you have a baby boy", and then a strange look prevailed their faces. In a few minutes they told me that our newborn had deficiency in both hands and feet. What a shock! I went to the room to see Irma and she said the plastic surgeon had already been and talked with her and would talk with both of us soon.

How we had prayed for a healthy baby. Why? What had gone wrong? When we began to talk we both agreed that we would talk with the plastic surgeon, look at alternatives, and realize our responsibility as new parents. We decided to go with the surgeon here in Raleigh, and not go to Chapel Hill, since the plastic surgeon in Chapel Hill did not begin with corrective surgery until a child was two years old.

We both prayed but we also reminded ourselves: "we have a

responsibility as parents and interestingly thought of the old saying, "God helps those who help themselves" a saying we had both heard often. Irma went back to work in the nursery at the hospital where she had been working even though she did not plan to return to work at that time. I worked forty hours a week in a men's clothing store, six hours a week in a shoe store, and carried my expected studies in seminary. The spiritual strength as well as the physical strength was given to us. I graduated as planned.

It was a difficult time for us both: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. During that time we both grew spiritually: trusting God and being pro-active with treatment and being financially responsible. We had a surgeon who was caring, direct, efficient and who became more than "just a doctor: a true friend." He worked with us financially and scheduled surgical procedures for six years in order for insurance to pay. Our son grew normally in every manner and we often told him, "you can do anything you want to do". He learned to use beneficially both his hands, even though there was no length on some fingers, learned to walk without a limp and adjusted as he grew.

Irma and I often remarked: "that was a tough timebut: were grateful for our faith and belief in God that He was always with us and gave us strength in every manner to fulfill that which needed to be done."

We, from the beginning of his birth, often stated, "we have a responsibility, we will be given the strength for that which we need to do and we will get through it."

We both learned some life-long lessons: each has a personal responsibility regardless with which we are confronted at the time. Faith is needed: we did have faith but we were also cognizant of individual responsibility, must take that responsibility, and know God will give the strength.

Reflection (January 30, 2022 at Ridge Road Baptist Church)

At 8 pm on Saturday, April 25, 2020, my husband's heart stopped beating and so began a journey. The paramedics arrived in three minutes and began working to revive him. My son, John Luke, and I watched as they carried him to the ambulance to take him to Rex Hospital. As we left the house, neighbors were in their yards around our home and offered their prayers and support as we drove away. Steve's heart continued to stop and he was intubated in the ambulance. John Luke and I were allowed in the emergency room because they did not believe Steve would survive. That was the last time we saw him for 13 days because no one was allowed to visit during those initial days of the Covid pandemic.

There is a saying: Pray as if it is all up to God; act as if it's all up to me. My experience put this expression to the test – would I be strong enough to handle this, and would God be present even in the darker times. Steve was sedated and I had to speak for him and do all I could to help him survive. I know I am a strong person...would God help me be strong enough?

I am a private person, wanting to handle situations on my own and am a "behind the scenes" person, not wanting to shine a light on my own needs. But I found that I did not need to shine a light; my friends and family responded and helped me realize that they were the hands of God for me in this difficult time. As I reached out to friends, when I conveyed my feelings and thoughts, I felt God's presence through that interaction.

This sense of God's presence that I felt through the interventions of medical staff, the support of friends, and the comforting knowledge of prayers, provided for me an experience connecting the spiritual and the physical. It is, of course, helpful to understand the difference between the two, but equally important to know how they are connected. But, through this amazing and traumatic event, I came to realize that God is not off somewhere listening in and observing the situation from afar. God is participating in every aspect of what I am going through. God is the voice of encouragement, God is the skill and wisdom of a physician, God is a homecooked meal delivered without asking. God is with us and within us.

I remain a rather private person, but I still like the saying, "pray as if it is all up to God, act as if it is all up to me." I know beyond a doubt that God will use all of us to be his hands and voice...and because of that we must act. This realization does not come with proof...but, it does come from a spiritual awareness, an assurance that allowed me the strength to grow through this and other difficult times.

We are so glad Steve is here with us today...sharing his puns, showing his care and concern for others, and even in the most challenging of times, cheering on the Wolfpack.

Hello! My name is Ella and I'm a senior in high school. I started coming to worship at Ridge Road about five months ago, mostly for three reasons. One, Trey was my old youth minister, so I wanted to hear him preach. Two, I live about a minute from here. And three, I felt like something was missing from my faith. I think I first realized this following the loss of routine that we've all experienced as a result of Covid.

I grew up going to church every Sunday and Wednesday. Then, once I was old enough to be in youth group, I was there at least twice on Sundays, for Tuesday night bible study and Wednesday nights, and was at every retreat and mission trip available. In March of 2020, because of Covid, all of my normal routines stopped more abruptly than I could've imagined. Not having to wake up at 6 am for school seemed appealing, but the months spent away from the youth group discussions, bible studies, and intentional time set aside for church caused me to lose my focus on God. It became clear to me how helpful my routine had been in keeping my faith strong.

Honestly, that upset me quite a bit. It bothered me that I was struggling with this, since my faith had always been such a constant in my life and now it felt broken, in a way.

Those who know me well, know I am a perfectionist. And so, as is my tendency, I began trying to fix my imperfect faith. I read my Bible regularly and books by Christian authors more often, prayed more, and watched online worship services. While all of these are great, if there is a 'right' or 'wrong' way to build your faith, I was doing it wrong. I began doing these things because they felt like the right thing to do rather than because they were meaningful to me.

I mentioned earlier that I felt like something was missing from my faith. I didn't know what it was at first, but I came to realize that in my relationship with God, ironically, God was missing. What I mean to say is, I was putting so much pressure on myself to fix my faith by myself as soon as possible, that even in my new routine, I was forgetting to listen to God. I really like to be in control. But, I came to understand that I'm not in control in my relationship with God. My faith isn't something I fix; it's not broken. My faith grows with me; I grow with it. But I only grow because God is there the entire time, leading and loving me in my evolving faith, not because I can do it by myself.

I had to find a balance between putting in a conscious effort to deepen my relationship with God in meaningful ways while not letting myself get lost in trying to reach an unachievable goal of having perfect faith. I still do all of the things I've grown up doing- just with a new approach. In each prayer that I say, verse that I read, and especially every worship service or youth group that I attend, I try to see it as an opportunity to reflect on and strengthen my faith, and I do it with God. I put my focus on God's guidance, trying to relinquish the control that I never had and follow His direction in my relationship with him and in every other aspect of my life.

The River
Nehemiah 4:1-15
Trey Davis
Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh
January 30, 2022

The summer before my 21st birthday, I decided I didn't want to celebrate the big day with a keg or a bottle of rum. Instead, I opted to take a special trip with just my dad to commemorate this rite of passage. It seemed like every metaphor I had ever seen for life involved a River. You got caught in the River and had to adjust to the bends and currents as well as you could. You couldn't stop or get off of the River. Sometimes the River flew by in rapids, but sometimes it seeped forward slowly.

I opted to raft the Gauley River in West Virginia, the largest commercially run whitewater in the nation. Dad had done the trip several times before, but not in over a decade. It would be my first time on the Gauley.

I was excited about what the trip would mean for me and Dad. It felt like it would be an amazing chance for the two of us to connect, a significant building block in the foundation of our relationship. I was certain it would be a seminal moment in my life as a son and as a man.

I told Dad about my idea, and he excitedly booked two spots with a commercial rafter. Mom was considerably less enthusiastic. "I thought you promised me to give up this sport," she admonished my father.

A few weeks after I announced my plan, I had a dream. Dad and I were rafting, specifically on the Gauley for my 21st birthday. We hit a major rapid and he fell out of the boat. My father is 6'5" and outweighed me by fifty pounds. I leaned over the edge of the raft to try to pull him in, but his weight and the weight of his wet clothes were too much. I lost my grip and he disappeared. Drowned.

I told no one about my dream. No way was I telling Mom, who grew more and more anxious about our trip as the departure date neared. She offered bribes, both to me and to Dad to try to keep us at home instead of in West Virginia. I think she definitely would have preferred the keg.

I tried to push the dream out of my consciousness, telling myself that dreams were dreams, literally figments of the imagination. I tried to trust that the dream meant nothing. I tried to have faith, but I was unsure of what to do.

A week before we were supposed to leave for West Virginia, a classmate of mine died. He was kayaking on a river in West Virginia, came loose from his kayak, and got sucked into an underground cavern. The water pressure was too much to rescue him. The river was the Gauley.

I called Dad at work, and he asked if I didn't want to go. I assured him I still did. I never mentioned my dream.

That night, Mom called me to ask me not to make the trip. I told her Dad and I were determined to go. I still never mentioned my dream.

Three days later, we made our way to the River. On the bus to our put-in point, the guide reminded us that this was a dangerous endeavor: "You should already know that this is a risky sport, that by going on this river you face physical injury and perhaps even death. People have died on this river. You can stop now, receive a full refund, and ride back to the lodge. Once you get on the river, you're on for good."

Someone else in our group asked when the last time was that somebody died on the river. Our guide answered "last week" and then explained my classmate's death in chillingly simple and rational terms.

Dad looked at me. We said nothing.

The bus parked, and we guided the raft into the water. We were on the River.

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It feels a little silly to compare a vacation to Nehemiah's building of the wall, or even to many of the more serious situations that others have shared today. But getting on the river with my Dad was one of those critical moments in life. I thought the trip would be something that would strengthen and color our relationship going forward...as long as we both could go forward from it. I really wrestled to know what to do: I could pray, but in the end, I would have to make a choice, to take action.

More than anything, forks in the road like these are the times when I struggle with the line between trusting God and taking action.

In these situations, I find myself praying the prayer of American monk Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. Bu I believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you.

Merton kept walking the road, trusting that his desire to do right by God would keep him close to the right path.

When we are faced with the opportunity to take on a mighty challenge, or when we are able to cultivate a relationship—when we are building as Nehemiah built the wall, then Merton's attitude is our best hope. To admit that we aren't sure where we are going, but then to take steps forward anyway, and to pray that the desire to please God keeps us on the right path.