

“Spiritual Fitness”
Nehemiah 1:1-11
Series: Book of Nehemiah, #01
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Theme: **Spiritual Fitness Is Important For Serving God.**

Introduction

This morning we launch a new series on the book of Nehemiah. It is one of the O.T. books of history, but it is not *just history*. The book is often referred to as a book about leadership. It gives us truth about moving into leadership, facing tough situations and people, planning, organization and management, and more. Whatever your role and situation, there are many vital truths in this book for you with many more practical applications.

- balancing faith in God and personal responsibility;
- the importance of faith and faithfulness;
- the indispensable role of prayer;
- how to deal with promotion and success, as well as hostility and opposition;
- how to deal with discouragement and anger;
- how to motivate others.

But this morning, as we look at chapter one, the book and we begin with a focus on *Fitness*. Now, *physical fitness* has been a popular activity and booming business for quite some time. More people, equipment, facilities ... Every experience, however, is not a positive success. One writer tells us,

“I used to believe all those television ads that told me I could attain a high level of physical fitness in the privacy of my own living room. Using a variety of torturous instruments seemingly designed by unemployed executioners, I could tone and firm various portions of my anatomy in just three easy payments.

“My rowing machine now stands in the corner of my balcony where I use it as a laundry rack. My easy-to-store GUTBUSTER is easily stored in my sock drawer, and I split the seams on my Trim Jeans. My cross country skiing simulator only comes out at yard sales were it remains unsold ...

“My apartment is a graveyard of grim reminders of my commitment to physical fitness. After all the money I spent, the only reducing that was done was to the inside of my bank account.”

This morning, of course, we are not thinking about *physical fitness*, but *spiritual fitness*. It is important to be spiritually fit — important for your own relationship with God as well as your testimony to others and service for God.

We see a portrait of spiritual fitness as we look at the opening verses of the book of Nehemiah. How much do we know about Nehemiah? If you spent time in church as a child, you may have learned that he is the second shortest person in the Bible [How do we know that? His name, of course: *Knee-High-Miah*]. And, by the way, who is the shortest? [Bildad the *Shu-hite* (book of Job)].

On a serious note, let's get acquainted with Nehemiah by starting with a bit of history. Israel divided into two kingdoms after King Solomon. The northern kingdom, called Israel, fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. as a result of their turning away from God. They were scattered; they never returned as a group. The southern kingdom, called Judah, fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. for their turning away from God. As God had told them, they were in exile for 70 years.

People returned to the land in three movements.

- Starting in 538 they came to rebuild the temple and settled, under Zerubbabel. The temple was completed in 516/515, and that marks the end of the 70 years.
- In 458 Ezra the Scribe, a religious official, led people back. He taught the law, and they saw spiritual revival.
- In 455 Nehemiah appears on the scene. He came to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so the city and people would be safe, secure, and could prosper.

Let's think about Nehemiah the man. He was not a prophet, preacher, priest, nor a scribe. We do not know what kind of training he had, but God blessed him. He arose to a prominent position where he could be instrumental in God's work.

Chapter 1 gives us a glimpse of his "*Spiritual Fitness*." In these verses we see four essentials, four indicators of spiritual fitness which underscore the truth that spiritual fitness is important for serving God.

Fitness: A Genuine Concern For God's Work.

Spiritual fitness is demonstrated by being aware of the times. Look at the opening two verses, (1-2 READ)

"The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem."

Nehemiah wondered about, was concerned for his people who were back in the land, and

especially Jerusalem. There was no *Jerusalem Daily Times* on the news stands of Susa (or Shushan), where he lived and served the Persian King Artaxerxes I. Nonetheless, Nehemiah was aware of his people's situation, and wanted to know exactly how they were doing.

How aware are we of the situation of God's people and work beyond ourselves, our families, church, friends, area? Yes, the world is a very big and there is more to know that we can know. At the same time, there are so many resources today that can help us: our church, the EFCC/EFCCM, other missions and parachurch agencies; then there's the internet. We can be and should be aware of the times in which we live.

Nehemiah's concern for God's work was also demonstrated as he took the initiative to keep up to date. He did not wait for word to filter to him, he *sought it*. He asked sought out people and asked questions. *He took the initiative to keep up to date*. When his brother and others came back, he didn't waste time to get information. *Why?* Because he had "a genuine concern for God's work."

Do we think about, raise questions, seek information about God's work here and in other places? The devastation of hurricane Katrina is at the top of our news. Knox is part of the EFCC, an association of over 150 churches across Canada. The EFCA, which has over 1,400 churches, has only one church in New Orleans and one on the north side of Lake Ponchartrain in Covington. Even so, the EFCA has established a mechanism to give funds and send work teams for both the near future and long term. Just one of many church and church related bodies getting involved. Information on the needs of believers there, among all denominations, is scarce now, but will be available.

Like Nehemiah, we need to take the initiative to keep up to date. It is part of *Spiritual Fitness*.

Fitness: A Clear Vision Of The Needs.

Having clear vision of the needs starts with a clear view of the facts. Go on to verse 3,

"They said to me, 'The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.'"

The report was given, and Nehemiah understood it clearly. Take note of some background on the conditions, from Ezra 4.

- Work had begun on securing Jerusalem just over a dozen years earlier.
- Protests from the surrounding led the Persian government to stop the work. ("They will build walls and then revolt! Remember they were once a great power!")
- Nehemiah knew the history and he made sure he got the facts of the current situation, and saw them clearly.

The first step to a clear vision of the needs is a clear view of the facts. How clearly do we see

the needs of Christians, indeed of all people around us? Do our preconceived ideas and stereotypes get in the way of seeing the facts clearly? How do we see people in Edmonton ... from the poor and homeless to the wealthy? What about the people in the middle east, Africa, South America?

With a clear view of the facts in place we need to add a clear interpretation of those facts. Verse 4,

“When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

It is not always easy to accurately interpret the facts we see and learn. There is a story of a pastor who walked through a park on the way to his office each day. He noticed an older man, just sitting on a bench, day after day. He felt sorry for him. One morning he held him an envelop with \$20 inside and a simple note, “Never despair.” The next day the man approached the pastor and handed him \$60. “What’s that for?” The man replied, “Never Despair finished in the money in the 2nd race.”

Nehemiah’s actions demonstrate he had “a clear interpretation of the facts.”

- He was not prejudiced by his own court position or views.
- He didn’t get angry and ask, “Whose fault is it? Who blew it? Who is responsible for this mess?”
- Nor did he shrug his shoulders and say, “That’s too bad, but they knew the risks. There’s nothing I can do.”
- What he did do was weep, mourn, pray and fast for the disappointed, hurting, vulnerable people, for the work of God that was not progressing; and, as we will see, for what he could do.

Nehemiah’s *spiritual fitness* is seen in his “*clear vision of the needs*,” as well as his “*genuine concern for God’s work*.” Spiritual fitness is important for serving God.

Fitness: A High Priority On Prayer.

Let’s note, briefly, four key aspects of Nehemiah’s prayer life. First there was prayer of worship and praise. Nehemiah did not burst into God’s presence and immediately present a great grocery list of requests. Go to verse 5,

“...I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments...”

His worship and praise reflect an accurate view of God:

- God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that is;
- God is the loving Promise-Keeper to those who love Him and keep His command-

ments.

This is a good place to begin in prayer: worship and praise.

Then we see Nehemiah's prayer of confession. Pick it up at verse 6,

“let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.” (6-7)

Nehemiah confessed the sin of his people as well as his own. He did not try to evade any of his own sin by confessing only the rebellious sin of the former generations, of which everyone was well aware.

As well, we see prayer based on God's promises. All of our prayer to be both meaningful and effective, must be aligned with God's truth and will. One very important part of that is God's promises to us. Notice a few promises from God's Word in this prayer.

- In verse 8, from Leviticus 26:26-27, 33, “Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples.’”
- In verse 9, taken from Deuteronomy 31:1-5, where God said “but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.”
- And then in verse 10, taken from Exodus 32:11, “They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.”

Our prayer life should be guided and sustained by the promises of God in his word.

- If you struggle with being forgiven by God, pray 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleans us from all unrighteousness.”
- If you wonder why you should continue to pray for those you care about who do not know Christ, and who don't respond to or even respect God's word which you share with them, pray to God grounded in the promise of Isaiah 55:11, where God tell us, “So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”
- If you don't think you can endure the persistent, dominating temptation and sin, personalize and pray the truth, the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man, and God is faithful, who will not

allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but will with the temptation provide the way of escape also so that you will be able to endure it.”

Nehemiah’s prayer also expressed his genuine desires to God. Look at the first part of verse 11,

“O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.”

Nehemiah’s prayer has included worship and praise, confession, grounding himself in God’s promises, and now also, bringing the true, deep desires of his heart to God. We have no way of knowing how God’s Spirit guided the interaction in his prayer, but we know the first three aspects of his prayer enabled him to be receptive to God’s leading as he now boldly presented his desires to God.

Spiritual Fitness includes a high priority on prayer.

Fitness: A Ready Availability For God’s Work.

We learn to be ready to serve where you are from Nehemiah. He was in Susa, more specifically he tells us, “Now I was the cupbearer to the king.” Palace intrigue and assassination flowed freely there. Records show that up to 15,000 people were fed daily by the king at his palace. But the king usually ate alone — it was quieter, and also much safer!

Nehemiah was the king’s cupbearer. He tasted the wine and food the king ate for poison, not so much for quality. The cupbearer had to be a person who was totally trustworthy because the king’s life *did* depend on him.

The position extended more broadly: to guard and limit access to the king. Even princes had to submit to his screening. Without doubt it was a powerful position.

As well, the cupbearer was a confidant, an advisor to king. Again we see the power in this position. People who had this position were key, influential, powerful and also wealthy. It was a great job ... as long as you kept the king happy.

Nehemiah’s position gave him great privileges and great opportunities. But to come before the king and ask him to rescind the order to stop building the walls of Jerusalem also posed a great personal risk [we will see more on this in chapter 2]. He took the risk to serve God *where he was*. “Make me successful,” he prayed — here, today. He could have thought, “I’m only the cupbearer.” Or, “I can’t risk speaking out on this, after all the king ordered the work to be stopped. I can best serve God and my people quietly, staying here.” Or, “Maybe when I’ve been here longer, learn even more about the court politics and the king, maybe then I could risk to do some bold things, but not now.”

He could have, but did not. He was *ready to serve where he was*.

Are you ready to serve where you are ... right now?

Now closely related to this is being ready to be part of the solution. Nehemiah knew the situation required God's direct intervention, and that God's intervention would be through people ... thru *him*. It's been said, "You are either part of the problem or part of the solution." Nehemiah was "*ready to be part of the solution.*"

Spiritual Fitness" involves ...

- A genuine concern for God's work.
- A clear vision of the needs.
- A high priority on prayer.

But, it is not complete unless we are ready to serve where we are, to be part of the solution; unless there is a ready availability for God's work in, for example ...

- meeting people's physical, social, emotional needs;
- reaching people for Christ, seeing them come to Christ;
- developing ministries;
- building and restoring relationships ...

Spiritual fitness is important for serving God.

Conclusion

How spiritually fit are you, *really*? Spiritual fitness does not require that you have been a Christian for 5 or 10 years or more, or have read through the Bible cover to cover at least 10 times. Nor are we *automatically* spiritual fit if we have been a Christian for a long time, have read, studied the Bible in depth. There are other indicators of spiritual fitness listed in the Bible, but these four are a good place to start evaluating and *working out*.

God wants you to be close to Him, to be growing in becoming more like Jesus, to be used in His service, to be *spiritually fit*. Switch back to physical fitness for a moment. Why are the clubs, centers, gyms popular? Why do they show more results than the "graveyards" of equipment in so many people's homes? Motivation and discipline is part of the reason. As well, there is accountability to others, and your goals.

For spiritual fitness you don't have to go looking. You already are part of a *Spiritual Fitness Center* — *the church*. God has designed individuals and the church so that we need and benefit from each other. God brings His people together so that as He works in and through us *together*, we *build up* the body of Christ — the church, individually and as a group.

As with physical fitness, spiritual fitness is a life-long process. The *spiritual fitness program* includes the elements we have seen in Nehemiah, but not to be carried out just on

our own, but *together* ...

- in one to one relationships;
- in small groups;
- in larger groups;
- in fellowship, prayer, Bible study, worship, service ...

In the next moments that you spend alone with God, reflecting on His truth for you, responding to His call to you ...

- Thank Him for all His grace to you.
- Thank Him for being patient, continuing to work in you so that you grow, become more spiritually fit.
- Review your current state of spiritual fitness. Ask God to help you see it clearly, to be able to step forward boldly to continue to grow, so that you live and serve to His glory.

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