

LIVING
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**DAILY
BIBLE
STUDY**



CEDARCREEKCHURCH

What's Your Ideal Vacation?

Monday, January 9th, 2017

Imagine waking up to the sound of birds chirping, and a view of a vast mountain capped in snow just outside your window. The sun is shining, the trees look magnificent, and the weather is in the low 70s. You can choose how to spend your day based on how you feel. Maybe you go exploring the wooded area or even walk up the base of the mountain to catch a view you've never seen before. Or perhaps you sit on the porch with a cup of Ethiopian coffee and a good book. Either way, what you do is up to you and your family.

I've just described my ideal vacation.

What's yours?

It might be like mine, or it might be something quite different. You might want it to be hot all the time – though I'm not sure why anyone would want it to be hot all the time – with an ocean view.

Either way, we can all imagine what a great vacation would be like, but none of us expect that vacation to just *happen*, right? We know that we can't just one day wake up on vacation. Instead, we understand that to have a vacation, we must plan for it. Vacations don't happen by accident.

Should our approach to life be different? We know that we must take steps to live a well-built, joy-filled life, but often, we don't know which steps to take. New Year's resolutions, or resolutions in general, are a perfect example of this phenomenon. We resolve to make changes to grow, yet often we fail to invest the planning to make those resolutions reality.

In their book, *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*, Bill Burnett and Dave Evans talk about how engaging in "design thinking," a human-centered approach that leverages creativity and collaboration to spur solutions, can help us to achieve the life we desire. By combining the concepts of design thinking, and the timeless truths found in the biblical story of Nehemiah, we can see how God might bless us with a well-built, joyful life, especially when we encounter problems.

Nehemiah, a Jew who grew up in the captivity of the Persians, was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I. In the opening chapter of the book, he is told that the walls and gates of Jerusalem had been destroyed. Jerusalem, the Holy City of Israel, was vulnerable to destruction by its enemies. Nehemiah's

initial response is worth noting. “When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4). A problem was presented to Nehemiah. He wept and immediately went to God in mourning, fasting, and praying, presumably seeking his next step. In a sense, he got curious as to what God would have him do given the news just delivered to him. This is the first mindset in design thinking: *Get Curious*.

We are going to encounter problems. These problems threaten our chance of experiencing a well-built life; however, if we take the posture of curiosity as to what God might want us to do amid these problems, we can gain the perspective necessary to experience joy.

For the next 21 days, we are going to be fasting as a church. Fasting is an incredible opportunity to get curious about God. I hope that you join us in fasting, and like Nehemiah, you get curious.

Nehemiah 1:4

“When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.”

How can you change the way in which you approach problems to be more like Nehemiah’s approach?

Are you participating in the church-wide fast? Let us know what you’re fasting from and how it’s going!

If you would like more information on fasting and journaling, we have Fasting and Journaling Guides specific to our Design Your Life series available at the welcome center and in our More Resources section at www.livingitout.tv.

This post was written by Andy Rectenwald, the Director of the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study.

What to Do in Challenging Situations

Tuesday, January 10th, 2017

We all experience difficult situations and must make difficult decisions – sometimes in what seems like a split second. As situations and circumstances occur in our lives, we have the opportunity to choose the way we respond. Do we respond with a negative and depressing attitude, or do we engage in the situation and trust God to create space for growth in our life?

We can observe and learn from a man from the Old Testament named Nehemiah, who is faced with a serious conflict. The way he responds in the midst of a stressful circumstance is an example that everyone can learn from and be challenged by. In Nehemiah 1:3-4, we learn that Jerusalem's city walls are completely destroyed:

They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire." When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:3-4).

The walls of Jerusalem, home to thousands, are destroyed, leaving the city in danger. Nehemiah could have given up, become depressed, or let anger overtake him. Instead, he sets the example of crying out to God, spending time with him, and worshiping him. For days he mourned, fasted, and prayed. We must do the same. Rather than running from challenging situations, we must embrace them and believe and trust that God is in control, that he is working all things for his good. We must pray and ask God for wisdom, knowledge, and joy. God promises that if we "seek him wholeheartedly, we will find him." (Jeremiah 29:13)

How, in the past, have you responded poorly to a challenging situation?

What can you learn from Nehemiah's response?

When You're in Crisis You Should...Confess?

Wednesday, January 11th, 2017

What's your first reaction when facing an incredibly difficult circumstance? Do you despair, "freak out," or shut down? Do you think about how to solve the problem? Do you take it to God? Many times, we aren't sure what our posture should be in these particular circumstances but maybe Nehemiah's story can give us some insight.

Nehemiah was facing a life-changing problem. The walls of Jerusalem are destroyed, leaving God's people without a defense against their enemies. Before taking action, we see Nehemiah respond to this surprise in an unexpected way: he mourns, fasts, and prays. Today we are going to take a deeper look at Nehemiah's prayer and how that can guide us through our troubles and other unexpected events in life.

It would be easy to understand if Nehemiah started his prayer lamenting the news he received, the challenges ahead, and the despair he feels. Instead, Nehemiah starts by praising God! Not blaming God or cursing his enemies, but praising God.

Many studies show that gratitude journals not only make people more positive, but also improve their mental and physical health, have a positive impact on relationships and careers, and even improve the quality of their sleep. It is common to set fitness goals at the beginning of the year. What if the start of reaching your goal was as easy as acknowledging what is already good in your life? What if it could be accomplished while drinking your morning coffee, or on your way to work? Many people don't like journaling, and that's okay. Instead of writing until your hand hurts, try writing a bullet list of 3 to 5 things for which you are grateful.

As Christians, it is important to not just acknowledge the blessings in your life but to thank God for those blessings. Thank God for who he is and what he means in your life. Start your day by praying to God and sharing the list you wrote. Then look back over the day and week to see if you can notice the positive changes in your life.

The next thing we see Nehemiah pray about is his sins. What do Nehemiah's sins have to do with the wall being down around Jerusalem? Were his sins directly responsible for this tragedy? Probably not, but the act of confession has everything to do with Nehemiah's relationship with God. The foundation of any good relationship is honesty. Although God already knows our sins, the

Bible tells us to confess our sins to God and ask forgiveness. Nehemiah had to clear the air and get right with God before starting the mission God set out before him.

The combination of praising God and asking forgiveness for our sins is powerful. It gives us perspective on the past but also in looking forward. It reminds us of God's promises and his presence in the coming days. And it frees us to be in the right frame of mind to focus on the problem ahead. How much easier would our problems be if we followed Nehemiah's example?

Nehemiah 1:5-7

⁵O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, ⁶listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! ⁷We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.

When facing difficulties or trials, why is it important to both praise God and confess your sins?

What surprises, difficulties, or problems are you facing today? Have you brought these issues to God in prayer?

Instead of focusing on your problems today, focus on prayer. Focus on God. Take time to praise him for the blessings in your life. Look back at 2016 and acknowledge the wonderful surprises that happened, both large and small. Follow your praise with humility and admit your sins to God. After praying, re-evaluate your outlook on 2017 and the issues you face.

Prayer:

God, thank you for loving us and blessing our lives. God, I am not a perfect person. I confess that I fall short of your perfect standard. I know you will be with me in the coming days. Amen.

This post was written by Kaye Althaus, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study.

Obedience and the Reward it Brings

Thursday, January 12th, 2017

Church sermons and Bible studies often focus on the wondrous gifts of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. And this is for a good reason; these gifts reveal the essence of God's unconditional love for us and represent the keys to our eternal future with him.

Every one of us – even the most virtuous person you've ever met – has sinned and fallen short of God's perfect standard, and without his mercy, we would all be destined to spend eternity apart from God.

Today, let's consider the flip-side to this topic. Rather than focusing solely on the wondrous gift of God's forgiveness when we falter, let's unpack the similarly valuable rewards he grants us for obedience. Make no mistake; God loves his followers in both sin and obedience. And, if we accept him as our Lord and Savior, we can be assured that our destiny is secure. But as we learn in the story of Nehemiah, amazing rewards are also promised to those who pray to God and serve him obediently.

Nehemiah served as the cup bearer to Artaxerxes I, the king of Persia in the 5th century B.C. After the walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, Nehemiah first prayed to God, then asked the king for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. He knew that reconstructing the walls would be vital to restoring Jerusalem as a thriving city. (City walls were essential to both security and commerce, which in turn, laid the foundation for Jerusalem to serve as a home to religious awakening and reformation.) Benefiting from God's gracious hand, Nehemiah fended off Judah's enemies and led the successful reconstruction of the walls in just 52 days.

Nehemiah was the model of a committed, God-honoring leader. As we've learned this week, Nehemiah first prayed to God, offering praise and then confessing his sins. In Nehemiah 1:8-9, he references God's promises for obedient faith which enabled him to engage in the challenges he faced.

Remembering God's promises gives us the confidence to endure the problems in our lives. There is invaluable comfort and assurance in knowing that when we pray to God and invite him deeper into our lives, we are emboldened to confront earthly challenges with confidence. God's promises give us hope, proper perspective, and propel us forward.

As you know, CedarCreek is observing a church-wide fast from January 9-29. Fasting enables us to hone our obedience to God by increasing our spiritual alertness and focus on him and making him our priority over food, drink, and other things we desire. As you fast, take the time to consider not only God's incredible gift of forgiveness but his rewards for our obedient faith. And take comfort in knowing that if God is for us, who can ever be against us? (Romans 8:31)

Nehemiah 1:8-9

⁸Please remember what you told your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. ⁹But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored."

What does the knowledge of God's promise to reward our obedient faith mean to you?

Is there an issue you are currently facing that you can take to God? If so, engage in prayer and draw confidence from the power of his loving promises.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you not only for your gift of forgiveness but for your promise to reward us for obedient faith. Help me to keep you near and take comfort and draw confidence from the grace and power of your loving hand as I face challenges in this earthly life. Amen.

This post was written by Todd Romain, a regular contributor to and editor of the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study.

Prayer Brings Perspective

Friday, January 13th, 2017

Some of the gifts from last week's celebration are still sitting under our Christmas tree. They are no longer enveloped by beautifully colored paper. They are not waiting for their bright ribbons and bows to be untied. And their tags have long revealed their donor's intended recipient.

Taking a closer look at these gifts may uncover why they are still beneath our tree. One of the gifts was not requested; perhaps the recipient doesn't understand its purpose. Another gift is very large; maybe that recipient just doesn't know where to keep it. And a third gift has many pieces; possibly this recipient just doesn't know how to put the pieces together to form a useful gift.

Do you ever feel like one of those gifts? Your shell is no longer colorful, you're bigger than you used to be, and all your parts don't seem to know how to work together? Welcome to retirement age!

Anyway.

Nehemiah was deeply grieved about the condition of Jerusalem, but he didn't just brood about it! After his initial grief, he prayed, pouring his heart out to God as he looked for ways to improve the situation. Nehemiah put all his resources of knowledge, experience, and organization into determining what should be done. When bad news comes to you, first pray. Then seek ways to move beyond grief to a specific action that helps those in need. Nehemiah fasted and prayed for several days, expressing his sorrow for Israel's sin and his desire that Jerusalem would again come alive with the worship of the one true God. Nehemiah demonstrated the elements of effective prayer: (1) praise, (2) thanksgiving, (3) repentance, (4) specific request, and (5) commitment.

Heartfelt prayers like Nehemiah's can help clarify (1) any problem you may be facing, (2) God's great power to help you, and (3) the job you have to do. By the end of his prayer time, Nehemiah knew what action he had to take. When God's people pray, difficult decisions fall into proper perspective, and appropriate actions follow.

Perhaps like Nehemiah, you are greatly grieved about something. Take the time to pray about it. Thank God for all he has done and specifically ask him what action you should take!

Nehemiah 1:10-11

¹⁰The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. ¹¹O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.

Are you facing problems with which you need God's help?

What is God doing in your life to help you with your problems?

Prayer:

O Heavenly Father, thank you for the blessings you have given me. Help me realize the full value of my gifts. May I use them to honor and serve you, and tell the world about your son! Amen.

This post was written by Pam Haynam, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study.