



“Investing for a Lifetime”

Nehemiah 1:1-11

The Year Ahead

I recently received the following in an email: “Have you ever woken up and felt so excited to be alive that you gave the person next to you a great big kiss? I did this morning, and I will not be allowed to fly with that airline again.”

As we move into the early weeks of February and look forward to all that 2019 has in store, allow me to ask, *How you are doing with your New Year’s resolutions?* I imagine that most of us have thought about losing weight, exercising regularly, reading more books, spending less time staring at a screen, and banning cell phones at the table.

But what about New Year’s resolutions which relate to your faith? We are efficient when it comes to planning for a graduation, beginning a new job, getting married, or moving to a new house. Yet do we invest as much time and effort when it comes to growing in our faith?

A few years back a colleague sent me the following questions:

- 1) What is one thing you could do this year to increase your enjoyment of God?
- 2) What is the most important way you will, by God’s grace, try to make this year different from last year?
- 3) What one thing could you do to improve your prayer life this year?
- 4) What is the most humanly impossible thing you will ask God to do this year?
- 5) What single thing that you plan to do this year will matter most in 10 years or in eternity?
- 6) What one biblical doctrine do you most

want to understand better this year, and what will you do about it?

7) What is one thing you could do this year to enrich the spiritual legacy you will leave to your children and grandchildren?

Asking fearless, challenging questions about your faith is always a healthy process. Recently as a congregation at First Presbyterian, we have been asking similar questions on Sunday mornings.

As we began a new series of Sunday morning studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, we quickly realized that exploring Nehemiah feels as though we are reading someone’s journal. You sense Nehemiah’s heartbeat, hear his sighs and groans as he pours out his hopes and dreams and engages with God and the people of the city. The further you read, the more you find yourself admiring his wisdom and godly leadership. You begin to grasp the significance of the challenges that lay before him as he seeks to impact a city in response to the call of God on his life.

But when you read Nehemiah you have to be careful. You may find yourself praying that God would inspire you in the same way, equipping and enabling you to act in a similar manner toward the challenges you will face in the year ahead.

“The great and awesome God...” (v. 5)

Nehemiah’s prayer (1:5-9) dominates the opening chapter and tells us a great deal about him. He prays in response to hearing that the city of Jerusalem continues to lie in ruins and the future of the city is in doubt. Yet the first thing you notice is that he prays in a similar fashion to so many other people in the Bible. He begins not by focusing on himself and his needs, but by focusing on the nature and character of God.

Like many before and since, Nehemiah, at the moment of his greatest need, focuses on the love and grace of God: “O LORD God

of heaven and earth, the great and awesome God who keeps His covenant of love.” So the prayer begins by highlighting the faithfulness of God. Nehemiah turns back to the one fixed point in his life, amidst his tears and fasting, to powerfully remind himself that God can be trusted. When his back is against the wall and he has nowhere else to go, Nehemiah reminds himself that God is sufficient for every situation he faces.

Nehemiah is fully cognizant to whom he is praying—a God who is awesome and great, One who keeps His covenant of love. The opening words of this prayer remind us that it is one of the classic prayers of Scripture. When Nehemiah describes God as “great and awesome,” he is talking about One who is breathtaking in His character and nature, transcendent in majesty yet immanent in grace, holy and pure, sinless in every fiber of His being. One who loves His children with an everlasting love, a love long enough to last throughout all eternity. Millennia cannot weary it. Denial, betrayal, and apathy cannot empty it of its power. God’s love is high enough that infinity cannot encompass it and deep enough that human depravity can never exhaust it. When Nehemiah calls God “great and awesome,” this is what he means.

So let me ask again. Have you made any New Year’s resolutions that relate to your faith? It is not too late. Losing weight, exercising more, getting up earlier, reading a book a week, or being regular at the gym are all healthy and worthwhile pursuits, but they pale in insignificance to developing your relationship with the living God. Then you can genuinely say, “I woke up this morning and was so excited to be alive!”

Dr. Gibbons messages are available online at FirstPresGreenville.org (click the Media tab) and on Fox Carolina each Sunday morning at 10:30am. Watch the live stream, Sundays at 8:30am and 11:00am at FirstPresGreenville.org.