

# A GREAT WORK



# A GREAT WORK

A CONVERSATION WITH NEHEMIAH FOR PEOPLE  
(WHO WANT TO BE) DOING GREAT WORKS

JON SWANSON

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When word came to Sanballat,  
Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of  
our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not  
a gap was left in it—though up to that time I  
had not set the doors in the gates— Sanballat  
and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let  
us meet together in one of the villages on the  
plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; so I  
sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am  
carrying on a great project and cannot go  
down. Why should the work stop while I leave  
it and go down to you?” Four times they sent  
me the same message, and each time I gave  
them the same answer.

Nehemiah 6:2-4



# CONTENTS

*Foreword* ix

*Preface* xiii

I. The Six Routines i

*About the Author* 12





# FOREWORD

HOPE SWANSON

With the rise of self-publishing, books that have no business being sold are regularly finding their way onto Amazon.

Someone has a cool life story or wrote a great creative writing sample for a class, and suddenly people are saying “You should write a book.” They don’t really mean it and would never purchase the finished product, but it’s what the writer wants to hear. He or she decides to sit down and type up a manuscript. Because self-publishing doesn’t require anyone’s approval, the writer can put it up for sale and then sink into a depression when it doesn’t sell more than the few pity copies bought by relatives and close friends.

So why are we publishing this? Why is this book more worthy of publication than any of the others?

Unbiased opinion: my dad is a great writer. Seriously, if I didn’t think he was talented, I wouldn’t be spending time doing this. He writes well, he writes good, he writes to teach, and people learn. He has made friends all over the country and world over the past several years as he has written posts on various blogs, spoken at conferences, and tweeted about

the coffee being ready. (You don't have to take my word for it. Check out [300wordsaday.com](http://300wordsaday.com) or follow him on Twitter at @jnswanson to find out for yourself.) And the fact that he spent over a decade studying and teaching communication and rhetoric, and a lifetime working on understanding what it means to follow Christ gives him some credibility. (Not to mention that he's already published three ebooks that have sold pretty well.) It's quality, thoughtful, insightful writing. He did the necessary research. He worked to understand, and it's worth sharing with those who struggle with the Old Testament.

People don't read the Old Testament. Okay, so we read Psalms and Proverbs, parts of Isaiah, parts of the Pentateuch, and other stories that we think are cool (Esther, Ruth, the anointing of David, etc.). But Nehemiah? "Oh, he's the one who built the wall, right? Yeah, I kinda remember reading that story in my Read-the-whole-Bible-in-a-Year plan. I guess it was pretty cool." Dad's book takes us into the story. The subtitle is "A Conversation with Nehemiah for People (who want to be) Doing Great Works." Sometimes Dad might sound a little crazy because he's saying that he's having conversations with Nehemiah, but that's what it's like. You'll get over it. It's a different way of reading the OT. As I read Dad's book I am constantly reminded that Nehemiah was a real guy who actually oversaw the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, who actually faced opposition, who actually prayed and fasted for four months until the king asked him what was up. Readers will have an understanding of Nehemiah that you

## A GREAT WORK

just can't get from reading a traditional commentary. Unless you actually understand traditional commentaries, in which case I commend you. But read this book. It's worth your time.

It's quality. It's different. It's helpful.

It's worthy of publication.

-Hope Swanson



# PREFACE

## *Conversations with Nehemiah*

You want to do something great.

We all want to do great things. We all want to change the world. We all want to do something that matters, to be someone who matters. I do. You do, too.

We don't have to be in charge, we tell ourselves. In fact, we're not sure we could be. But we're tired of just doing stuff for someone else's agenda.

You and I have both read too many management books, leadership books, greatness books. They are full of great ideas, promises, guidelines. But maybe we need to look at the Bible. After all, people who hang around church have heard that the Bible is a place to look for significance. But we don't know where to start.

I'd like to suggest the story of Nehemiah.

*Nehemiah* is a book in the Old Testament, between Ezra and Esther. It used to be packaged with Ezra. In most top-selling Bibles, it's not any more. It hasn't been for many centuries. And Nehemiah is the lead character in that book.

*Nehemiah* seems like a textbook. I think it is. I think God knows exactly the story he wanted to tell about a life

depending on him and doing a great work. So when we read it, it should come as no surprise that it makes sense.

I've read *Nehemiah* several times during the past four decades. During the summer of 2012, I started reading it differently. I taught it with a couple of small groups. I wrote at [300wordsaday.com](http://300wordsaday.com) about the study I was doing. I decided to write a weekly newsletter about what I was learning. And as I was writing the first issue, I discovered I was having a conversation with *Nehemiah*.

No, really.

And this is a collection of those conversations, occurring over coffee and tea. I know, of course, that coffee was identified as a drink a thousand years or so after *Nehemiah* lived. But for a guy who shows up in 445 BC, he seems to enjoy it. And some of our conversations are filling in things not covered in the book of *Nehemiah* and the rest of the Old Testament. But I have worked to maintain the integrity of the Biblical story.

# THE SIX ROUTINES

*Nehemiah 10*

I wanted to empty my inbox before the weekend. I opened an email from a friend. I knew I wasn't going to meet my goal.

The message was a description of a difficult situation, a betrayal in a relationship. I knew both parties. I didn't want to take sides. But it was clear that one side was the offender, one side was the violator, one side had acted with flagrant disregard for the other. I needed to provide some counsel.

I looked over my shoulder at Nehemiah. He was sitting quietly, sipping coffee. His right finger was tracing some letters, but it just looked like "w o y".<sup>1</sup> Nothing I recognized. I tilted my chair slightly, making it squeak.

"What comes after 'I'm sorry'?" I said as Nehemiah looked up.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

1. Of course, in English it meant nothing. In Hebrew it was probably *sh'ma*. I just didn't know Hebrew well enough. And Nehemiah was simply praying, even with his finger.

“All the time we get into trouble. All the time we do foolish things that we don’t mean and wrong things that we mean. All the time we hurt people, break relationships, fall short of our intentions. And then we stop the bad behavior. We say, ‘I’m sorry’. But that doesn’t seem like enough.”

Nehemiah was blunt. “It’s not.”

That didn’t help. “I know,” I said. “We feel a need to make up our offense, somehow. But some offenses can’t be mended. A betrayal can’t be un-betrayed. Years of rejection can’t be restored. A slandered reputation seems stained forever.”

Nehemiah actually looked sympathetic. “Time cannot be replaced,” he said quietly. “But the relationship may be restored.”

I looked confused.

Nehemiah smiled. “I think that you have a more complete understanding of reconciliation than we had. God’s told you more of his story than he had told us. But I can tell you what that step after ‘I’m sorry’ looked like for us. And then you can decide what to tell your friends.

“You and I already talked about the confession we made. We acknowledged who God was and what he had asked us to do. We clearly identified what we had done wrong. We acknowledge that it was wrong. We asked for favor from God.

“At that point, ‘I’m sorry’ was as much as we could do about the immediate problem—it stopped our headlong run away from someone and started a conversation with them. But stopping is only part of the process. It doesn’t change



the direction we are moving. We have to turn around and start living a different way.

“In the case of your friends, there may have been vows that they took about the way they were going to live their lives. In our case, we had a clear set of directions from God about how to live. We acknowledged that we hadn’t been living that way. The next obvious step was to start living that way again.”

I held up my hand. “May I interrupt for a minute. You skipped the list of names that comes right after your group confession.”

Nehemiah shook his head. “I’m talking about restoring relationship with God and you are asking about a list of names?”

“But aren’t you the one who taught me about the importance of names?” It had been several weeks since we talked about the list of people who rebuilt the wall, but I had to believe that this list was an important part of the confession and repentance.

Nehemiah was quiet for a few minutes. When he started, it was clear that I hadn’t been reading closely enough. “The list of names, what you call Nehemiah 10:1-27, isn’t part of the confession and repentance text. It’s like a footnote to explain the end of what you call Nehemiah 9:38. The document itself, the written-out prayer to God, reads

*In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it....The rest of the*

*people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand— all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles...*

“Since you stopped me, yes, the names are important. But at this point, what’s more important than each of the names is that we were simply saying that in this confession and recommitment, we were all together. From the youngest child to the governor, we were the people of God.”

I held out my hands in apology. “I was wanting to show off,” I said. “I do that. I’m sorry. Would you start again?”

Nehemiah smiled. “Exactly right,” he said. And then laughed at the confusion on my face. “Although it seems too simple, when we approached God we said, ‘we’re sorry. May we start again.’ And the commitments that follow are our understanding of what starting again looks like.”

It made sense. A little. “And then you approached God. You took a curse and an oath. Was it like ‘cross my heart and hope to die?’”

“Remember Moses and Solomon?” Nehemiah said. “We talked about them when we talked about my prayer. Solomon had described what would happen if we obeyed and what would happen if we didn’t. There was blessing and curse there. We were simply accepting those terms again now that we were back in Jerusalem from the ends of the earth. After all we’d been through, we didn’t worry about

the curse part. There was no way that we would turn from God. That's what we believed.

"What we were focusing on was the future, returning to the path that God had laid out. We were simply promising to obey God's law. That was the oath.

"The Law was what had been given to Moses. Commands, ordinances, and statutes, we were going to do it all. And we were going to do whatever we could to extend the obedience to the next generation. We were limiting the local influences. Who our kids married mattered. We were rebuilding a people, and a people need a purpose and boundaries."

I thought for a bit. "It seems harsh," I said. "All these limits on marriage and acceptance of rules. It seems restrictive until it makes sense. I mean, we all do it. We all are concerned about our group identity. And when we are trying to mend a relationship, it makes sense to consider the likes and dislikes of the person you wronged."

Nehemiah nodded. "We had contact with others. I was working in the court of a conquering kingdom, after all. But what is the nature of that contact? We talk with them, we buy from them. But there needed to be constraints, the things that identified us as us. The rule breathes."

"Really? When I read through the list of things that you were agreeing to do, they seem to cover all of life. Wasn't it restrictive?"

Nehemiah smiled. "It's time for us to talk about routine. Sometimes restriction sounds like a bad thing. And sometimes it is. But when we are thinking about a way of

living, following God's way, it's possible that there are restrictions that make sense."

I started thinking about the idea of routine: a set of thoughts and behaviors performed consistently. What if there were routines that were healthy and helpful?

Nehemiah interrupted my thoughts.

"Number your paper from 1 to 6," he said.

I groaned.

Nehemiah smiled. "You see how that simple action puts you in a learning mode?"

"It puts me in a testing mode," I said. "It reminds me of all the quizzes in school that I wasn't ready for."

"Exactly," he said. "Actions can remind us of the context where we used that action before. In this case, for you, the context of quizzes is an unpleasant reminder of your own unwise behavior. But what if you had actually studied when you were in school? In that case, the process of numbering your paper would have reminded you of the times when you got to show to yourself and your teacher that you had learned something, right?"

As much as I disliked the reminder of my poor study habits, I understood. Repeated actions shape us and can then remind us of the context. It can be a bad thing, like flashbacks, or it can be a very helpful thing, like being reminded of commitments.

"Back to the list. I know that sometime you are planning to talk about how I was shaped by reading the Law. This will be an illustration. I want to give you six kinds of routines that God put in place to remind us regularly about his work.

They are all folded together in our promises to God in chapter 10, but I want to lay them out more simply.

*“First, there were daily routines.* You remember how I had talked to God morning and evening for four months as I was wondering how the walls could be rebuilt? That morning and evening prayer had been part of my routine long before my brother came with the bad news. Morning and evening prayer was part of our story as a people. The Levites prayed in front of the altar morning and evening.<sup>2</sup> David had prayers, psalms, for morning and evening.<sup>3</sup> Through Moses, God laid out morning and evening sacrifices.<sup>4</sup> He said there was to be an offering all the time, but he specified morning and evening to start the offerings. When you are offering a lamb, it takes that long.”

I interrupted, “But we’re not doing burnt offerings any more. And no one has, Jew or Christian, since the temple was destroyed in 70 AD.”

I was relieved by that, since I’m not a fan of blood.

He paused. “Do you think that the removal of the sacrifice means that you don’t need daily reminders?”

He was right. Paul talked about making ourselves living sacrifices.<sup>5</sup> Maybe looking at the *when* of the sacrifice rather than the *what* might teach me about routine. And maybe,

2. David outlined their duties in 1 Chronicles 23, and specified their daily prayer routine: “They were also to stand every morning to thank and praise the Lord. They were to do the same in the evening and whenever burnt offerings were presented to the Lord on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals” (1 Chronicles 23:30-31).

3. Psalm 4 is an evening prayer, for example.

4. In Numbers 28.

5. Romans 12:1.

when Jesus talked about daily bread, he was creating a daily routine.

“Let’s go back to the list please?” Nehemiah’s quiet voice broke in.

“*Second, there were weekly routines.* I’m sure you have noticed that Sabbath was a big deal for me. I made a point out of closing the gates for Sabbath.”<sup>6</sup>

“I’ve wanted to talk to you about that. Why so much about gates?” I asked.

“That’s for later. For now, Sabbath. It was a weekly reminder of God’s rest after creation and God’s rescue of his people from Egypt. We can pause daily, but we need a longer time each week to refresh and remember. To set aside our lists and remember that the strength and direction come from God.”

I sensed that he had much more to say about this subject. I do, too. But not here, not today.

“*Third, there were monthly reminders.* You’ve heard that leaders should reinforce vision every 28 days or so? That’s every four weeks. That’s why God told the people to make a sacrifice every new moon.”

“But don’t the prophets talk about God not liking their New Moon celebrations?”

“Ah, you’ve been searching Biblegateway.com for ‘new moon’, haven’t you. It’s easy to turn a routine, a way of living, into a ritual. We perform a ritual, hoping it has some

6. Nehemiah 13:15-22.

value in itself. It's a kind of magic. You wear your lucky underwear. You show up to church every week.

"And God said, through his prophets, that we as a people had started doing these rituals to placate him, or without thinking. Our bodies did the sacrifice, our minds were somewhere else. Sometime read the way Malachi reams out the priests.<sup>7</sup> But just because we ritualize behavior doesn't mean that we shouldn't look at routine.

"Think of it this way: a ritual is something we do hoping to influence God. A routine is something we do to work on us. A routine like daily prayer or weekly Sabbath or monthly celebration brings our minds back to the story of God's work. But thinking about a routine this way means we have to think about what we are doing rather than ritually acting."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I know," Nehemiah said. "That's why we keep having these conversations. As we *routinely* look at the text, at the stories, at the works of God, we keep getting glimpses that we wouldn't otherwise have if we didn't routinely talk." He smiled. "If you want a practical application of the 28 days thinking, go back to the wall rebuilding. Halfway through the project everyone was getting discouraged. We made

7. For example, in Malachi 2: "And now, you priests, this warning is for you. If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name," says the Lord Almighty, "I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honor me. Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it."

some changes, reviewed our purpose, looked again to God's presence. We needed to get refocused."

I hadn't thought about the wall story that way. I looked at the cycles of attention in my life. I wondered how often I ran out of steam after a month or so. I made a note to look at the calendar for the moon schedule.

"*Fourth, there were annual reminders.* We talked a couple weeks ago about the feasts as occasions for storytelling. In the course of a year, we covered all the stories of God's work. They came with reminders of our failures or struggles. The focus wasn't on our failure, but on God's mighty hand and outstretched arm."

I raised my hand. "You mean like spending time at New Year's looking back at the year and looking ahead?"

He smiled. "Exactly. And at Advent. And Lent. And Easter. And Pentecost. All those times that you could use to understand God's work. Instead you complain about the holidays that Hallmark has created. But think about it. People need celebrations and reminders. Hallmark is just meeting a need for reflection.

"We're running out of time but I want to cover these last two. *Fifth, there were reminders every seven years.* God had laid out a Sabbath year, a time when debts were cancelled and the land wasn't worked and we were supposed to remember that God had given us a Promised Land. The land was created by God, given by God, watered by God."

"Wasn't the exile related to this?"

Nehemiah looked down. "The exile and slavery lasted until the kingdom of Persia took over. This is exactly the



message of God that Jeremiah had preached. The land was made desolate, put to an extended Sabbath rest, a seventy-year Sabbath rest making up for all the unkept Sabbaths.” He was quoting from 2 Chronicles 36.<sup>8</sup>

*“Sixth, there were once in a lifetime celebrations. The dedication of the wall was one of these. The biggest one God described the year of Jubilee, every fifty years. It was a sabbath of Sabbath years. It was supposed to be huge. I’m not sure we ever did it.*

“But I tried to help us celebrate these ways. I spent the rest of my life routinely reminding our people of the stories of God.”

“Wasn’t that how you ended your account of your life?”

He walked away. “I’m not ready for that conversation yet,” he said.

I understood. “But what about my friends,” I said.

“I’m not sure what to tell you,” he said. “You have to sort out the best way to offer counsel. You have to decide whether they are ready for reconciliation. But for me, calling people to return to God’s way, to follow confession and repentance with a return to the routines God laid out for us, makes sense. We can’t make up for bad living, but we can live right from now on.”

8. But Nehemiah could have gone even further back. In Leviticus 26:33-39 God warns that there will be exile so the land can have its rest.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Swanson is passionate about helping people emotionally understand God's work.

He is a husband, father, and associate pastor living in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has worked in higher education in Texas and Indiana. He and Nancy have been married more than thirty years and have two children, Andrew (married with Allie) and Hope. Jon is ordained by the Missionary Church and has a PhD in communication studies (UT-Austin). He writes regularly at <http://300wordsaday.com>.

Since 2000, Jon has worked as an associate pastor at two churches. He has produced videos, talked with people needing financial help, married and buried people, and helped other people understand how to accomplish their work.

Since 1995, he has taught in many settings. He taught communication and management courses for college credit. He has taught many Sunday school classes and small groups and preached. Rather than teaching from study guides, he walks people through books of the Bible, including extensive studies of Malachi, Nehemiah, Philippians, Psalms, Colossians, the Sermon on the Mount, and 1 John.

During the past two years, he has taught an online course for pastors studying church administration and is developing two more.

Jon is the author of three ebooks: *Lent for non-Lent People*, *Learning a New Routine*, and *Anticipation: an Advent Reader*.