

# ❏ KINGDOM WORK

*Week Five | May 26, 2019 | Kingdom Workers Have a Holy Ambition*

## PREPARATION

### ❏ GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's texts, Nehemiah 1–2, Philippians 2:3–4, and Esther 4:14. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

## THIS WEEK

### ❏ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God gives His people a holy ambition to build His kingdom on earth.

### ❏ THEOLOGY APPLIED

We reject our fleshly desires to build our own kingdoms and instead work to build His kingdom on earth.

### ❏ MEDITATE

*“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.’ Now I was cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:11).*

## GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.*

We are wired with ambition, the desire for success. It takes different forms for each of us, but success is something we all want. We seek it in our careers, our parenting, our grades, our weight-loss goals, and much more. The desire to see something succeed is good, but sin taints our desires. Often, instead of desiring God's success, we strive for our own. We want our names to be great instead of, or perhaps even along with, our King's. We are by nature glory seekers, but whose glory are we seeking?

Seeking God's glory on earth requires a holy ambition. When we seek our own glory, we work in opposition to the gospel. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). Selfish pursuits of glory are sinful, and we must repent. We must pray and ask our Father to do in our hearts what we cannot do on our own. We pray for a holy ambition. We ask Him to stir our hearts towards Him, His kingdom, and His glory. God alone has the power to transform us from seekers of our own glory to seekers of His glory. By His Spirit, we put to death our selfish ambitions and aspire to a holy ambition.

Building God's kingdom on earth brings Him glory. To bring Him glory, we must behold His glory. And beholding His glory changes us (2 Corinthians 3:18). It transforms what we want and value. When we behold the beauty of God's glory, we're no longer invested in our own greatness. We want the world to see the greatness of our God.

Nehemiah was a man who wanted others to know the greatness of God. The book of Nehemiah begins with his despair upon hearing the news that the returned exiles in Jerusalem were in "great trouble and shame" and that Jerusalem's wall was broken down and its gates destroyed by fire (Nehemiah 1:3). He wept and fasted for days. He prayed to "the great and awesome God" (Nehemiah 1:5). He sought the spread of God's glory so fiercely that the news of His people being shamed, and their city destroyed and unprotected, greatly grieved him.

Nehemiah was already a very successful man. His position as cupbearer to the king (Nehemiah 1:11) elevated his status because of his regular access to the king. But his ambition was not aimed at his own success, it was aimed at the Lord's. This holy ambition came from God and propelled him to seek the welfare of God's people (Nehemiah 1:2). It motivated him to leverage his influence over the king to benefit the mission of God to rebuild His temple and His people on earth. His holy ambition was the result of God directing Nehemiah's heart to build His kingdom on earth.

We are called to this same holy ambition in our day. To step into our calling, we must cease our labors to build our own kingdoms on earth. The world tempts us to build a platform; God invites us to build His kingdom. When we're building His kingdom, ours loses its attractiveness. His glory becomes our pursuit, our holy ambition. Let us aim our success at the fame of God's name on the earth. Let's be committed to the success of the mission of God. May we be a people with a holy ambition.

Q: Consider your own ambition. Is it holy or selfish? What evidence is there to suggest you have a holy ambition? What evidence exists of your faith family's holy ambition?

Q: In what ways are we tempted to build our own kingdoms on earth? What changes can you implement to aim your ambition at the spread of God's kingdom on earth?

## ▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In today's lesson we will learn from Nehemiah's example what a holy ambition looks like.

1. KINGDOM WORKERS SEEK THE WELFARE OF GOD'S PEOPLE
2. KINGDOM WORKERS LEVERAGE THEIR INFLUENCE AND SKILLS FOR THE MISSION
3. THE LORD DIRECTS THE HEARTS OF KINGDOM WORKERS

## GOING DEEPER

+ This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.

## KINGDOM WORKERS SEEK THE WELFARE OF GOD'S PEOPLE

▣ **NEHEMIAH 1:2; 2:10 AND PHILIPPIANS 2:4**

Q: Why did Hanani give a report of the welfare of the Israelites to Nehemiah?

## Q: *Why were Sanballat and Tobiah upset?*

The world will prompt you to only take care of you and yours, but God is glorified when we look to the interests of others. “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). It’s no coincidence that this command directly follows the command in verse three to do nothing out of selfish ambition. It’s impossible to have a holy ambition and only care about your own welfare. The Lord wants us to be motivated by more than a desire to benefit ourselves. He desires His people to reflect His concern for the welfare of others. We must reject the natural tendency to focus solely on our own interests.

Our enemy tempts us to be inwardly focused. He surrounds us with examples of people who prosper as they relentlessly pursue their own welfare. But, thankfully, we have a Father who relentlessly pursues us, calling us to follow Him. Our Father concerned Himself with our welfare and got involved. He saw our helpless state, that we were dead in our sins and without hope. And because of His great love, He made a way for us to be united with Him through His Son. Christ came to seek our welfare. And now we’ve been adopted into His family and given a beautiful inheritance of eternal life with Him. What grace! God is the ultimate seeker of His people’s welfare. We bear His image well when we seek the welfare of His people too. Looking out for others is counter-cultural in our “me first” society. What a witness of the great love of our King when we seek the good of our neighbors.

This powerful man, Nehemiah, happened upon his brother, Hanani, while in the capital city of Susa (Nehemiah 1:2). Hanani had just returned from Judah, and Nehemiah was interested in how the returned exiles were doing and how the city that hosted the temple of the Lord was. Thirteen years had passed since Ezra’s arrival in Jerusalem. Notice how he took the initiative to seek out the welfare of the people and the things that concerned the Lord. The report his brother gave distressed him greatly because God’s people were in trouble. The news that the Lord’s people were not thriving led him to pray and mourn and fast. Because of his concern for the welfare of the Israelites, Nehemiah planned to use the one thing he had, his access to the king, to help them. But this powerful man was a man of prayer, and before he acted, he prayed. He asked God to give him success and grant him mercy before the king (Nehemiah 1:11).

Later, we’ll discuss Nehemiah’s conversation with the king. But Nehemiah’s concern for the welfare of the Israelites was met with hostility from the enemies of the Lord. “But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel” (Nehemiah 2:10). God’s enemies are our enemies. And when we pursue kingdom work, we must be prepared to be met with opposition. Our enemy hates kingdom work. And while we seek the welfare of others, he seeks our

destruction. This was true for Nehemiah, and it's true for us.

We must be steadfast in our advancement of God's kingdom on earth. We follow our Father into the family business. We are His kingdom builders. He gives us the desire for this family business. He gives us the strength we need to reject the enemy's attempts to lure us away from our work with visions of our own kingdoms. With eyes locked on our good Father, we labor for a better kingdom. We thrive with holy ambition and seek the welfare of God's people.

Q: *Whose welfare do you seek? Whose welfare should you be seeking that you're not?*

Q: *What changes can you make to follow Christ in seeking the welfare of His people?*

## KINGDOM WORKERS LEVERAGE THEIR INFLUENCE AND SKILLS FOR THE MISSION GOD'S MISSION

### ■ NEHEMIAH 1:11 AND ESTHER 4:14

Q: *What did Nehemiah ask God for?*

Q: *Why was it suggested that Esther had come into her prominent position as queen?*

If we're not careful, we can easily become overwhelmed in our kingdom labors. When we see the scope of the work to be done, we can easily feel insufficient for the task. As we should. Awareness of our insufficiency is a good thing. It brings us to the feet of our all-sufficient God. He doesn't expect us to build His kingdom on earth alone. It's His

work. He gives us the great privilege of joining Him, and then He equips us to abound in it. “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

One of the ways He equips us to participate in His mission is by giving us influence and skills. He strategically places us and generously gives us skills to accomplish His work on earth. Consider Esther, the orphan queen, whom God used to save His people from genocide. How? Through her access to the king. Esther leveraged her position to advocate for her people, at great risk to herself (Esther 4:16). Advocacy, speaking up on behalf of someone else, originates with Christ. He is our advocate before the Father (1 John 2:1). We bear witness to the advocacy of Christ when we speak up for others.

We all have influence. Some have more than others, but we all have it. Whatever influence we have is a gift from God to be used for the good of His church and the spread of His glory. Nehemiah was in the presence of King Artaxerxes every day, several times a day. On one such day, Nehemiah’s countenance was sad because of his sorrow for his people. The king asked him why he was sad, so he told Artaxerxes about the plight of Jerusalem. “Then the king said to me, ‘What are you requesting?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 2:4). This man of holy ambition knew the source of his success. Before he made his request to the king, he prayed to the Most High King. He then asked the king to send him to Jerusalem to rebuild the city (Nehemiah 2:5). This is what leveraging our influence for the mission of God looks like. Imagine all the things Nehemiah could have requested of the king. He could have exploited his position for his own gain. But Nehemiah had a holy ambition. He used his influence to advance God’s kingdom on earth. Oh, that we might do the same.

Take inventory of your own life. What strategic positions has God placed you in? What skills has He given you? Do you use these gifts of influence and talent for His kingdom or your own? Aim your success at the glory of God. Launch your energy towards the building of His kingdom on earth. You are a kingdom worker. Your King desires you to have a holy ambition. Pray for it. If your ambition has been selfish, repent. God will grant His kingdom workers a holy ambition. Use your influence, no matter how small, and your talents, no matter how weak, for kingdom work.

**Q:** *Consider your own influence. How can you use it for the mission of God?*

**Q:** *What skills do you have that could be used in service of your King?*

# THE LORD DIRECTS THE HEARTS OF KINGDOM WORKERS

## NEHEMIAH 2:12

Q: *Who directed Nehemiah's work?*

Nehemiah requested that Artaxerxes send him to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. He asked the king to supply the needed materials as well. And the king granted him all that he asked, “for the good hand of the Lord” was upon him (Nehemiah 2:8). Nehemiah set out to perform his task, but not without opposition from some of the regional governors, Sanballat and Tobiah (Nehemiah 2:10). This opposition inspired Nehemiah to do some secret, night-time surveillance. Nehemiah tells us that three days after he arrived in Jerusalem, he gathered a few men for this clandestine reconnaissance mission and told no one “what my God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem” (Nehemiah 2:12). Why would this powerful man in the Persian empire sneak around at night to inspect the walls of Jerusalem? Because this man had a holy ambition. Because his heart was the property of God. Because Nehemiah was a kingdom worker and God directs the hearts of kingdom workers.

The wall around Jerusalem was in ruins. God desired for it to be rebuilt and He sent His servant to do it. After he gathered his information about the walls, Nehemiah called the officials together and told them, “Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem” (Nehemiah 2:17). Just as the Lord stirred Nehemiah’s heart to do this work, the people’s hearts desired the same. Their response to Nehemiah was simple. “Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work” (Nehemiah 2:18). With hearts stirred and hands strengthened, they began their kingdom work.

Our hearts belong to our King. Because we know His great love for us, we can be confident of His great work through us. Kingdom work is heart work. Both Ezra and Nehemiah acknowledged the Lord’s directing of their hearts to do kingdom work. Submit your heart to the Lord. Only when our hearts are joyfully submitted to our good King will we reject our sinful desires to build our own kingdoms on earth, seek our own welfare, and leverage our influence for our own plans. Our flesh and the Spirit wage war against each other (Galatians 5:17). Reject the devil and embrace Christ.

As the Lord directs our hearts, our holy ambition will increase. The Lord always positions our hearts towards Christ and His kingdom. Aim your success at the mission of God. Desire a better kingdom. Join Christ in His work of

building His kingdom on earth. A vision of this better kingdom life captures our hearts and launches our flourishing in community with His church. May we thrive in holy ambition for the glory of Christ on earth.

♀: *What other examples do we see in Scripture of the Lord directing the hearts of His people?*

♀: *What is the Lord directing your heart to do?*

## NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

♀: *List examples within your own faith family of people who seek the welfare of others. Do they inspire you to do the same? How so?*

♀: *Spend some time repenting of your selfish ambition. Ask God to transform your desires into a holy ambition. Consider ways you can join Him in His kingdom work and encourage others to do the same.*

## PRAY

+ *Use this prayer point to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*



*O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, we humbly ask You to direct our hearts into a holy ambition. Forgive us for pursuing our own glory. Give us a passion for Your glory in the earth. Bless Your holy name through us. Strengthen our hands for the kingdom work you've prepared for us to do before we were even born. Be glorified in us, Father.*

## COMMENTARY

**NEHEMIAH 1:3** — The report about the wall of Jerusalem might mean that the wall had never been successfully rebuilt since the first return of exiles or that an attempt to rebuild it had been thwarted, perhaps by command of the reigning king, Artaxerxes.

**NEHEMIAH 2:20** — “but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.” Nehemiah clearly distinguishes between God’s people and the enemies of God who oppose the work. Once he is convinced that they are opposing the work of the Lord, he makes no effort to include them or even to pursue further discussions with them.

*\*All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes.*

