The Heart of the Matter
In his roles as cupbearer, builder, and governor, Nehemiah exemplified the qualities of a wise, godly leader. We can learn from Nehemiah’s example as we examine our own character and God-given place in life. Like the bricks and mortar of a solid, ancient city wall, the bricks of excellent leadership must be placed on a foundation of God’s Word and godly character with the mortar of faith and fortitude.

Discovering the Way
1. Historical Setting of Nehemiah (2 Chronicles 36:18–23)
The events described in the book of Nehemiah took place at a crucial turning point in Jewish history—when the people were restored to the land after decades of exile in Babylon. See the attached historical chart.

2. Nehemiah the Man (Survey of Nehemiah)
Throughout his life of leadership and service to God, Nehemiah filled many roles, including cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11), builder (2:11–6:19), and governor (7–13). See attached map of Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s leadership experiences provide several lessons for leaders today from every walk of life.

Starting Your Journey
Even if we are not engaged in a literal building project, each of us has a responsibility for building the spiritual walls of our lives, though they may lie in ruins. What can be done to repair your walls in preparation for a life of godly leadership?
The Heart of the Matter

Few Old Testament characters surpass Nehemiah in the potency of their leadership. God used him to motivate and direct a relatively small group of people in building a wall around the city of Jerusalem and then to establish a godly government. Nehemiah discovered Jerusalem’s desperate need and then brought it before God in prayer. It is highly significant that the first place we find this great leader is on his knees. Leadership requires prayer.

Discovering the Way

1. Orientation (Nehemiah 1:1, 11)
Nehemiah served as the king of Persia’s cupbearer, a high-ranking official with weighty responsibilities. This experience would prepare him for his later leadership roles.

2. Situation (Nehemiah 1:2–3)
Because he was a Jew, Nehemiah sought information about the condition of the city of Jerusalem and its residents. The news he received was not encouraging.

3. Reaction (Nehemiah 1:4–11)
Nehemiah’s reactions were neither negative nor critical. As a great leader, Nehemiah responded to the needs of Jerusalem and her people with clear recognition, personal concern, an appeal to God, and availability.

Starting Your Journey

Prayer was at the center of Nehemiah’s launch into leadership. Prayer is an essential discipline for leadership in four practical ways. It makes us wait, clears our vision, quiets our hearts, and activates our faith.
The Heart of the Matter

While carrying his great burden for the people and conditions in Jerusalem, Nehemiah began the tough job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem . . . by getting on his knees in prayer. He asked God for compassion and understanding to come to the heart of King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 1:3–4, 11). In the second chapter of Nehemiah, we see God’s gracious answer to Nehemiah’s prayer, an illustration of Proverbs 21:1, and we gain insight into how we should handle a difficult boss or authority figure today.

Discovering the Way

1. A Principle from Proverbs (Proverbs 21:1)
The best tool to affect change in an individual is prayer.

2. Nehemiah in Persia (Nehemiah 2:1–8)
Though he desired to leave his post and answer God’s call, Nehemiah waited four months for God to move the heart of the king. Stepping out in faith involves prayer, planning, and patience.

3. Nehemiah en Route to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:9–11)
Because Nehemiah prayed and waited, God provided special blessings for his journey that he would have missed had he acted rashly.

Starting Your Journey

Nehemiah’s preparation for a tough job surfaces four important principles for us today. First, changing the heart is God’s specialty. Second, prayer and waiting go hand-in-hand. Third, faith is not an excuse for disorder or failure to plan. Fourth, opposition often reinforces the will of God rather than hinders it.
The Heart of the Matter
When Nehemiah journeyed to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, he faced the immense task of inspiring those around him to pick up bricks and begin a grueling project. Some were young; others were old. They came from different walks of life with diverse expectations. It’s easy to see that motivating them was one of Nehemiah’s first challenges of leadership. Through Nehemiah’s example, we can learn how to motivate people to “get off dead center.”

Discovering the Way
1. Private Investigation of the Scene (Nehemiah 2:11–16)
In silence and solitude, Nehemiah sized up the task before him. Similarly, leaders today need to make a clear and objective appraisal of the facts.

2. Open Discussion of the Need (Nehemiah 2:17–19)
Nehemiah demonstrated insight and foresight about when to call people to action based on the facts. His example reveals the essential keys to proper motivation.

3. Direct Criticism of the Plan (Nehemiah 2:19–20)
Because opposition to the will of God is inevitable, leaders like Nehemiah must have courage to take a stand.

Starting Your Journey
Nehemiah demonstrated that when alone, in public, or under attack, godly leaders must always keep their eyes on the Lord.
The Heart of the Matter
As soon as Nehemiah and his crew began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, opposition and criticism bombarded them from all sides. Yet through Nehemiah’s response we discover how a leader should handle the inevitable and unavoidable criticism that comes from the outside. It is possible not only to stay at our task in the face of opposition but also to deepen our walk with God at the same time. Criticism may knock you down, but it doesn’t have to knock you out!

Discovering the Way
People in leadership inevitably become a target for criticism and opposition, which often increases with God’s blessing.

2. Illustration: Old Testament Example (Nehemiah 4:1–9)
As God blessed the rebuilding of the walls, the angry opposition from others grew (Nehemiah 4:1–3). Nehemiah countered the opposition by speaking with God and staying at the task (4:4–6). But as the opposition intensified, so did Nehemiah’s response (4:6–9).

Starting Your Journey
Nehemiah gives us three simple principles for dealing with opposition in leadership today:

1. It is impossible to lead anyone without facing opposition.
2. It is essential to face opposition first by prayer.
3. It is questionable that prayer is all that is necessary when opposition intensifies.
The Heart of the Matter
The farther we travel through the pages of Nehemiah, the more we discover the value and relevance of its instruction for every level of leadership. As we turn to Nehemiah 4:9–23, we find Nehemiah’s work crew discouraged for the first time since the project of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem began. But what caused the discouragement? How did Nehemiah handle it? The answers to these questions apply directly to the discouragement many leaders face today.

Discovering the Way
1. The Cause of Discouragement (Nehemiah 4:9–12)
Discouragement among a staff or team is often caused by loss of strength, loss of vision, loss of confidence, and loss of security.

2. The Cure for Discouragement (Nehemiah 4:13–23)
Nehemiah cured discouragement among his people in five important ways. He unified them around the same goal (Nehemiah 4:13). He directed their attention to the Lord (4:14). He encouraged them to maintain a balance (4:14–18). He provided a rallying point (4:19–20). And he occupied them in serving others (4:21–23).

Starting Your Journey
Nehemiah knew the causes of discouragement . . . and how to handle them. What’s causing discouragement for you or those under your leadership today? Which of the five ways of dealing with discouragement can you apply?
The Heart of the Matter

Every worthy task contains its share of challenges, and Nehemiah’s God-given work was no exception. The first thirteen verses of Nehemiah 5 shine a spotlight on a dismal financial fiasco involving the workers. This problem caused the project to grind to a temporary halt while their leader guided them to a godly solution. Though our own tasks today are different, problems and difficulties will surely find us, and wise leaders will need to know how to handle them.

Discovering the Way

1. The Historical Situation (Nehemiah 5:1–5)
On the heels of discouragement, the people began to complain about problems caused by money.

2. The Leader’s Reaction (Nehemiah 5:6–7)
Nehemiah responded by consulting God’s law about the proper handling of money.

3. The Practical Solution and People’s Response (Nehemiah 5:7–13)
Nehemiah rebuked those who caused the problems, then set forth a plan to correct them.

Starting Your Journey

The money problems and Nehemiah’s solution surface four practical principles.
1. God is pleased with wise handling of our money.

2. Prolonged, personal sin takes a heavy toll on the public work of God.

3. Correcting wrong in our lives begins with facing it head on.

4. Correction is carried out most effectively when a promise is made to God.
Hand Me Another Brick: Timeless Lessons on Leadership
How to Handle a Promotion
Nehemiah 5:14–19

The Heart of the Matter
We’ve all experienced or witnessed demotions, cutbacks, downsizing, or layoffs—dreadful realities that prompt a run on self-help books. Occasionally, God promotes His people in a marked fashion, but we seldom hear messages or read books about what God says to those who have experienced a promotion. Using Nehemiah’s own experience as the basis of our study, we learn how to pass the tests of integrity that come with a promotion.

Discovering the Way
1. Promotion: An Axiom to Remember (Psalm 75:5–7)
Behind the promotion of every believer is the Lord, a timely axiom that is illustrated over and over again in the Bible.

2. Promotion: An Example to Follow (Nehemiah 5:14–19)
When Nehemiah was promoted from builder to governor, he humbly accepted the responsibility as being from the Lord (5:14). With God’s help he avoided the dangerous perils that come with privileges, policies, projects, and people (5:14–18). He handled all of this without spoiling his relationship with the Lord (5:19).

Starting Your Journey
Nehemiah exhibited absolute integrity in his promotion. There was no credibility gap, no cause for suspicion or wondering. In what areas of your life and leadership do you need to examine your integrity?
The Heart of the Matter
For months Nehemiah led the project of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls in spite of constant opposition. As the walls neared completion, foes once again assailed this leader. But this time the attacks were more insidious—the enemy attempted to intimidate him. Nehemiah’s discernment helped him frustrate the plots of his adversaries. In the same way, God-given discernment can help us face intimidating circumstances in our own realms of leadership.

Discovering the Way
1. When Did the Attacks Occur? (Nehemiah 6:1)
The walls of Jerusalem were nearly complete and the people were just about to begin a well-deserved celebration when the attacks began.

2. What Were the Attacks? (Nehemiah 6:2–14, 16–19)
First, Nehemiah’s enemies sent a personal request, intending to lure him into a trap (6:2–4). Second, his opponents circulated a public letter defaming Nehemiah’s character (6:5–9). Third, they formed a subtle conspiracy, seeking to frighten him (6:10–14). And finally, Nehemiah’s greatest enemy, Tobiah, sent threatening communication (6:16–19).

3. Did the Attacks Affect the Situation? (Nehemiah 6:15)
Nehemiah refused to be intimidated, instead trusting God for the discernment he needed to continue to survive the attacks of his enemies and complete the task.

Starting Your Journey
It is impossible to do the will of God without experiencing opposition. Like Nehemiah, we need discernment to persevere through the inevitable challenges in our own realms of leadership.
The Heart of the Matter
Once the walls and gates were completed, Nehemiah immediately made plans to revive the citizens spiritually with the authoritative Scriptures. The testimony of God’s Word had been kept silent for far too long, and the beginnings of spiritual revival were about to take place. The potential for revival is always present in our own lives, if we will return to the Word of God.

Discovering the Way
1. The Setting of Revival (Nehemiah 8:1–2)
The wall was complete, the city was protected, the people were organized, and the government was running smoothly. But a very important ingredient was missing . . . a meaningful spiritual life.

2. The Event of Revival (Nehemiah 8:3–8)
The people gathered at the Water Gate to hear Ezra read God’s Word (8:3–5). They responded with an outpouring of praise for the Lord (8:6). Then, Ezra and the Levites carefully explained the meaning of each passage of Scripture (8:7–8).

3. The Mobilization of God’s People (Nehemiah 8:9–12)
With great guilt, the people wept over the sins of their forefathers (8:9). Then, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites reminded the people of God’s grace and forgiveness (8:10–12).

Starting Your Journey
As we observe the revival of God’s people, four practical lessons are apparent:
1. No life is complete without the spiritual dimension.
2. No spiritual dimension is complete without scriptural input.
3. No scriptural input is complete without personal obedience.
4. No personal obedience is complete without great rejoicing.
The Heart of the Matter
The revival led by Ezra was just the beginning of the Israelites’ desire to renovate their lives. In search of a solid foundation in the Law, they returned to Ezra, seeking insight that could be built into their daily lives. They committed to clear away the rubble of wrong thinking and their old patterns of living, replacing them with obedience to the Lord and His Law. This biblical method for spiritual renovation is an excellent model for rebuilding our spiritual lives today.

Discovering the Way
1. The Pursuit of Insight (Nehemiah 8:13–15)
The people of Israel sought insight into the Scriptures, returning to Ezra for further instruction. They came with a humble attitude and teachable hearts, responding immediately to God’s Word.

2. The Products of Insight (Nehemiah 8:16–18)
The insight the Israelites received from Ezra’s teaching led to three specific responses: personal effort in spite of difficulty, a willingness to change in spite of tradition, and great rejoicing in spite of the newness of this experience.

Starting Your Journey
In order to preserve the benefits of insight, we need to commit to two specific spiritual disciplines: consistent time studying the Word of God and regular gatherings with other believers for worship and celebration.
Tools for Digging Deeper

The Heart of the Matter

After God’s people observed the Feast of Tabernacles, they met for a time of corporate prayer. Together they offered up sincere confession as well as thanksgiving and praise, bringing them to an understanding of the holiness of God and the depth of their sins. The Israelites’ example provides guidelines for the discipline of prayer that are meaningful, logical, and relevant for us today.

Discovering the Way

1. General Observations (Nehemiah 9:1–5)
The longest prayer recorded in the Bible was offered by the Israelites in a context of humility and purity.

The Israelites illustrated four important dimensions to prayer. They looked up, offering praise and adoration to the Lord for who He is (9:5–6). They looked back, reflecting on the past and thanking God for what He had done (9:7–31). They looked at the present, confessing their sin and petitioning God regarding their needs (9:32–37). And they looked ahead, seeking the Lord’s direction for their lives and committing to follow Him in the future (9:38). They signed a document to commemorate this vow before the Lord (10:29–31, 39).

Starting Your Journey

God designed prayer to be a top priority in our lives. Memorize the four dimensions of prayer and commit to spend time engaging in this vital spiritual discipline.
The Heart of the Matter
In Nehemiah’s day, when the people of Jerusalem prayed, they meant business! They did not offer mere words—they signed their names to a sealed document (Nehemiah 9:38). The document contained an agreement that was prepared and established before God. They promised to pattern their lives according to His truth, to put first things first. Through this episode in the life of Nehemiah, we will consider the impact our priorities have on our lives.

Discovering the Way
1. The Document of Promise (Nehemiah 10:28–29)
The people of Israel came together to sign a binding written document commemorating their renewed commitment to the Lord and their vow to follow His law.

2. The Promise (Nehemiah 10:29–39)
Within the sealed document, the Israelites pledged to pattern their lives according to the Word of God. They promised to remain distinct from the surrounding culture in their homes and in their work. And they agreed to worship the Lord faithfully according to the Law of Moses.

Starting Your Journey
Principles for putting first things first:
1. Serious thought precedes significant change.
2. Written plans confirm right priorities.
3. A loss of distinction and conformity to the world go hand in hand.
The Heart of the Matter
Because our pace is so often accelerated, we miss many of the hidden treasures God has stored up for us in His Word. One such treasure is in Nehemiah 11. A very special group of people, the “willing unknowns,” served a vital function in Jerusalem but never saw their names in lights. Their story will encourage us to consider our own sacrificial service and learn to appreciate those who work behind-the-scenes in our homes, workplaces, and realms of leadership.

Discovering the Way
1. Historical Background (Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11:1–3)
Though Jerusalem’s walls had been rebuilt, the city itself remained in shambles (7:1–4). One tenth of the people were required to move back into the city, and many more volunteered to return and begin the rebuilding process (11:1–3).

2. The “Willing Unknowns” (Nehemiah 11)
The “willing unknowns” included those who volunteered to move into the city (11:2), those who faithfully worked within the temple (11:10–12), those who worked outside the place of worship in civil service (11:15–16), those who spent significant time in prayer (11:17), and those who served the Lord by singing (11:22–23).

Starting Your Journey
If you serve as one of the “willing unknowns,” remember:
1. Your gift makes you valuable, though not necessarily popular.
2. Every labor done in love is remembered by God, never forgotten.
3. Our final rewards will be determined on the basis of personal faithfulness, not public applause.
The Heart of the Matter
The book of Nehemiah is filled with challenges, setbacks, criticisms, and sorrows as the returning Jews rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. But following the completion of their immense task, the Jews responded with intense happiness. The city overflowed with music, and the triumphant tone of rejoicing was heard from afar (Nehemiah 12:43). Through this uplifting scene, we glean several practical lessons about joy and the celebration of God’s mighty works.

Discovering the Way
1. Dedication of the Wall (Nehemiah 12:27–43)
The people of Israel gathered to celebrate the dedication of Jerusalem’s wall with song (12:27–28). But before they began, they purified themselves before the Lord (12:30). Then Ezra and Nehemiah each led a group of people as they walked the length of the wall, singing, playing instruments, and praising God (12:31–43).

2. Dedication of the People (Nehemiah 12:44–47)
The people consecrated their money, their hearts, and their lives to the Lord, worshiping Him with great joy.

Starting Your Journey
As we celebrate the Lord’s mighty works in our own lives, we should keep the following principles in mind:
1. An atmosphere of happiness should surround God’s people.
2. Music is one of the most expressive ways to communicate joy.
3. A joyful spirit will have far-reaching effects.
4. Joy is not dependent upon outward circumstances, but upon inward focus.
The Heart of the Matter

One of the occupational hazards of leadership is the need to face, analyze, and solve problems. While supervising the construction of the wall and, later, while governing the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah faced and wisely dealt with many knotty, complicated problems. In the final chapter, we observe Nehemiah as he addressed four more critical issues. From his example, we will draw several timely, applicable principles for our own realms of leadership.

Discovering the Way

1. Four Critical Problems (Nehemiah 13:1–31)

2. Analyzing Nehemiah’s Solutions
Nehemiah followed four basic steps as he dealt with Israel’s problems. First, he faced the sin head-on. Second, he condemned it severely. Third, he worked toward a permanent correction. Fourth, he followed up the situation with prayer.

Starting Your Journey

Nehemiah’s example provides us with three helpful principles for solving problems.
1. Dealing with problems begins with honest observation.
2. Correcting what is honestly observed demands fearless conviction.
3. Honest observation and fearless conviction must be tempered by consistent devotion.