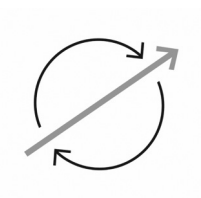


Nehemiah

I AM—TAKING AUTHORITY OVER IDENTITY



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PUBLISHING HOUSE
wphstore.com
Indianapolis, Indiana

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my wife, Tina, who has been my partner in life and ministry. I love you!

To our three boys, Robert, Stephen, and Joshua, thank you for taking this journey of ministry with us and having a great attitude about it along the way.

Thank you also to my spiritual family at New Life Church for giving me the freedom to grow as a leader and follower of Christ.

Most importantly, I want to thank and praise God!

About This Book

People sometimes ask why I would take the time to write a book. The answer is twofold. First, it's an opportunity to speak with my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren about this wonderful gospel that I've had the honor of working for all my life. I want them to see the joy and power of living a life guided and protected by God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's commands. In doing so, I hope to establish many generations of my family in the wonderful grace of our Lord. So I write as a father.

I also write as a pastor. New Life Church has become a rather large body of believers meeting in multiple services and multiple locations across multiple states. While this is a huge reason to praise God—and more of a blessing than any of us who work here could ever have hoped for—it creates its own set of challenges. It has become impossible for me to sit down individually with folks in the church, like I once did, to have deeper conversations about the power of God's Word and how it can be applied in their lives. This is the reason I decided to write a series of books called *Coffee with the Pastor*.

While I am neither a theologian nor a scholar, as a pastor, my job is to help people read and better understand the Word of God. His Word is powerful and life changing. If you read and understand it, you can see the God of heaven through the blood of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit—and that will change your life. Therefore, the goal of this series of books is not theological, but a practical application of life-changing, biblical truth. That is the purpose of my ministry and the ultimate goal of my life.

So, grab a cup of coffee, open up your Bible, and let's get you thinking about what God can do in your life.

Introduction

The life of Nehemiah, as recorded in the Bible, has been a great source of insight and encouragement for me for many years. When, as a young pastor, I first studied Nehemiah's story, his persistence and wisdom in the face of opposition and difficulty inspired me. That inspiration has returned many times throughout my career and my life.

Nehemiah's life is a clear example of God's providential power to have the right person in the right place at the right time. With Jerusalem under Syrian control, Nehemiah found himself at the side of the only man in the world who could give authority and provide resources to restore the city of God: King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah's journey from slave to builder of a city, and ultimately to builder of a nation is one of the great leadership stories in all of Scripture.

As we study the biblical book that bears Nehemiah's name, we find hope for all that God has planned for us. Nehemiah was certainly not the most obvious candidate to play the hero in the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. As a slave in the king's service, he was severely limited in his ability to secure

the change and leadership that was needed for his beloved homeland. As one who had lived his entire life in Syria, he was considered a foreigner by those who had remained in the homeland—those he would be called to lead. But God is not limited by our own self-image or by what others see as our potential. In this account, we will see that no matter how restricted your self-identity, God has the power to take you far beyond those restrictions. You just need to trust him. He has an identity set up for you, and his definition of you is the best definition. Though you may have a self-identity—or what I like to call an *I-am*—that is established through a lifetime of mistakes, miscues, and failures, God still sees all that he made you to be. And if you let him, he can make you all of that and more!



As we look at the life of Nehemiah, we will do so through the lens of six different identities that Nehemiah experienced in his life and work. By looking into these identities, both positive and negative, we can discover how he overcame the negative and destructive identities and worked effectively through the positive and constructive ones. We will also find clues to our own feelings of failure and inadequacy that will help us to move from a damaged, destructive *I-am* to a God-inspired *I-am*. Along the way, we will deal with our own short-sightedness and lack of faith when it comes to our personal identity.

Keep in mind as you read this that we are reading from the Old Testament. The Old Testament of our Bible is the covenant of God with the people of Israel and how that agreement played out between them throughout their history. Therefore, the Old Testament is best read as narrative in nature. While we often cannot draw direct instruction from the Old Testament, we can learn how our God leads, how our God views and works with us, and how we should follow.

So, let's get started.

THE POWER OF I-AM



Your “I-am” will determine your “I will” every time.

Most people’s level of achievement is consistent with their personal definition and understanding of their own self-worth, ability, and identity. While occasional outliers may achieve beyond these self-imposed limitations, most will never even attempt to strive for anything perceived to be outside the boundaries of their own self-definition. These limitations are based on a person’s I-am—their sense of identity. A person’s I-am sets the direction and path of that individual’s future and potential.

The problem is not in the *existence* of a person’s I-am, but in the *source* of their I-am. Most people allow their circle of friends or their culture to define their I-am.

As a pastor, I seek to challenge our culture's practice of labeling individuals and groups with broad, sweeping generalizations. Such labels are often unhelpful and even downright unhealthy. By labeling others, our society limits people's God-given, God-ordained potential, instead allowing a set of shallow, surface characteristics to define a person's entire life. In most cases, our friends and family, even our culture, are trying to be helpful by sorting people into categories. They may think, "If she can just accept who she is, life will be easier, and she will be able to find peace." Unfortunately, those labels and categories are often allowed to solidify to the point that they become an entrapment. Much like having one's feet hardened into concrete, these hardened identities hold us back, slow us down, and, depending on the circumstances, can even drown us. Once this hardened I-am is firmly set, it is believed by culture and by most individuals to be permanent and irrevocable.

Many of us are trapped inside of our own I-am.

This can lead to anger, depression, and dangerous behavior, as individuals who are unhappy with their declared and hardened identity begin to blame themselves, family, friends, culture, or even God for the mess that they have become. Individuals are trapped in a victimhood that cannot be overcome. Once this I-am is firmly set, even those who love us will insist that we need to just accept it for what it is and move on with life in our "new normal."

One example of this problem is clearly spelled out by Warren Farrell in his book *The Boy Crisis*:



Historically, a boy's journey to prove himself is what gave him that sense of purpose. Most cultures, to survive, assigned each sex Mars/Venus-type roles that were "sold" to each sex as its purpose in life. These underlying goals of both parents' roles-as-purpose were to optimize their children's chance of survival and make their children's lives better than theirs.

But . . . as developed countries had the luxury to permit divorce, they responded by creating the "era of the multi-option woman" (raise children, raise money, or some combination of both) while continuing the historic "era of the no-option man." That is, a dad's "three options" were still raise money, raise money, or raise money. However, with women often sharing the breadwinner role, a young man could no longer find his purpose as a man by being a sole breadwinner. And, as fewer warriors were needed, boys began experiencing a "purpose void."¹

In his book, Farrell points out that this "purpose void leads to increasing levels of suicide, crime, mass shootings, depression, and unemployment."² The hardened concrete of male identity markers that no longer work is causing many males to simply drown in the waters of societal and personal expectations.

There seems to be no hope. But that is not how God sees the situation!

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17). There is hope for a new I-am in Christ Jesus. This is a truth that our culture desperately needs to learn and understand. This truth can bring hope and freedom to so many. While we may live in a culture that questions its need for forgiveness from sin—and even questions the existence of anything called *sin* at all—it is also a culture that is desperate for personal, internal, and even miraculous change! Our culture seems to be open to spiritual pathways to internal change in greater ways than I have seen in my lifetime. Culture may well be hesitant to trust the church or any institutional religion, but people are hungry for a spiritual experience that gives hope and power to their lives.

This book is about that hope.

Notes

1. Warren Farrell and John Gray, *The Boy Crisis: Why Our Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2019), 46.
2. Farrell and Gray, *The Boy Crisis*, 46.
3. Kenneth Barker, ed., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 696.
4. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: Complete and Unabridged*, 3rd ed., vol. 11, *Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 367.
5. David B. Guralink, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1970), 43.



Books in Coffee with the Pastor Series

- Mike Hilson, *King David* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2019).
- Mike Hilson, *The Book of James* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2019).
- Mike Hilson, *Nehemiah* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2020).
- Mike Hilson, *The Book of Colossians* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, coming in 2020).
- Mike Hilson, *The Books of 1–3 John* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, coming soon).

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