

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK

Timeless Lessons on Leadership

STUDY FOURTEEN

The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

If you are gifted in an area that will never reach the spotlight, don't worry about it. The public may never know of your ministry, but that has nothing to do with final rewards. God sees you, and He will reward you.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WE love our heroes—those women and men who take center stage and whose lives tell never-to-be-forgotten stories. Whether they're pastors, performers, or politicians, these stars wow the world with their skill and strength, their wisdom and wit, their charisma and character. When these heroes act as a force for good, they receive a chorus of well-deserved applause.

While the spotlight illumines these remarkable people and their heroic deeds, the performance would ring hollow without the massive cast and crew working behind the scenes. Pastors lean on their mentors and families. Performers rely on their trainers and instructors. Politicians depend on their cabinets and constituents.

These supporters choose to reject the spotlight in order to contribute to something beyond themselves. These “willing unknowns” find joy in working hard, in serving others, in doing the job no one wants to do—even if they receive no recognition or praise.

Many followers of Jesus feel inadequate if they don't teach the Bible or work in a church or serve as an evangelist. Yet God doesn't call everyone to serve in these kinds of public roles. He does, however, call all of us to labor for Jesus using the resources and abilities He has given us. Doing so may not earn us applause from people, but such heroic acts please our heavenly Father.



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11



PREPARE YOUR HEART

John the Baptizer recited the motto for the willing unknowns who work for the kingdom of God: “He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less” ([John 3:30](#)). As you reflect on these words, write a prayer expressing your desire to serve God as a willing unknown.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

If you were simply to look at the title of the book of Nehemiah, you would naturally assume he was the hero of the story. In reality, though, the book celebrates *all* the people of God who willingly participated in His work. Though the spotlight follows some of these people more closely than others, Nehemiah pays honor to all those who enabled such remarkable tasks.

After Nehemiah concluded his role as the foreman of the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, the city’s residents faced a new problem. According to [Nehemiah 7:4](#), what was this problem?

Nehemiah wouldn’t be able to solve this problem on his own. He needed some willing unknowns. In [Nehemiah 11](#), they entered the scene.



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11



Observation: Volunteering to Serve

At first, *Nehemiah 11* may seem like a pointless list of names, but it shows how the people of Jerusalem chose to participate in the work of God. Without observing the text and carefully determining what it says, the beautiful truths of the passage would never emerge.¹ Read *Nehemiah 11* slowly and carefully. Pay special attention to what these willing unknowns did.

According to *11:1–2*, how did the Israelites repopulate the city of Jerusalem? What group of people were commended in *11:2*?

Nehemiah 11:3–9 lists the names of the people who uprooted their lives to resettle in Jerusalem. We know very little of these volunteers, but Nehemiah chose to include their names in this account to honor their faithfulness to God. Imagine being related to one of these willing unknowns and being able to say, “That was my great-grandfather!” *What a privilege it is to play a part in God’s drama!*

According to *11:10–14*, what particular roles did the priests who resettled in Jerusalem play? See especially *11:12*.



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

According to *Nehemiah 11:15–18*, what particular roles did the Levites who resettled in Jerusalem play? See especially *11:16* and *11:17*.

According to *11:19* and *11:22*, what additional role did these willing unknowns play?

Those who moved into the city willingly gave themselves to the ministry of the Lord. They faithfully supported His work with their talents and gifts. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11



Interpretation: Serving One Another

The new citizens of Jerusalem made great sacrifices to participate in God's plan, even though no one sounded the trumpet for them. To summarize, these willing unknowns chose to . . .

- Move into the city (*Nehemiah 11:2*).
- Work within the temple (*11:12*).
- Work outside the temple (*11:16*).
- Support the ministry in prayer (*11:17*).
- Guard the city's gates (*11:19*).
- Serve through singing (*11:22*).

Though Nehemiah is the main character of this account, the restoration of Jerusalem couldn't have happened without the contribution of these great-hearted people. Why were each of the above contributions essential to the renewal of the city of God?

The willing unknowns of Nehemiah's day lived the lives of *servants*. They volunteered to set aside their own desires and comforts to meet the needs of others and to participate in the plan of God.



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

Look up the term *servant* in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, and summarize what you learn. Then, read *Mark 10:42–45* and *Philippians 2:3–11* and describe how the willing unknowns who resettled in Jerusalem embodied a spirit of Christlike service.

Using the following template, write two or three timeless truths based on this passage: *A godly leader can serve as a willing unknown by . . . because . . .*

Your name may never make it in the lights, but if you're a follower of Jesus, you're a leader in the work of God. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Recognition from God

When Jesus took on human form and entered the drama of God's creation, He revealed Himself to be the true hero of history. So those who follow Him receive the spotlight of glory from Him and reflect it back to Him. He is the originator of it all and the purpose for it all—even when doing good deeds. Jesus addressed this issue in His Sermon on the Mount.



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

According to [Matthew 6:2](#), in what manner do the “hypocrites” carry out the noble act of giving to the needy? What kind of *present* reward do they receive?

According to [6:3–4](#), in what manner are faithful followers of Jesus to give to the needy? What kind of *eternal* reward will they receive?

The apostle Paul demonstrated the importance of willing unknowns through the image of the body of Christ. What theological principle does [1 Corinthians 12:18–22](#) reveal about the necessity of willingly serving Jesus as a member of His body?

Jesus is the head of the body. Without the hands and feet, the body of Christ can't move and work in the world. That's where we come in. We serve, and Jesus gets the glory.



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

Application: Willingly Entering the Unknown

If Nehemiah could speak to us today, he might highlight three points from *Nehemiah 11* for us to apply:

- A person's gift makes him or her valuable but not necessarily popular.
- Every labor done in love is remembered by God—never forgotten.
- A believer's final reward in heaven will be based on personal faithfulness, not public applause.

Do you ever wonder, *Can God really use me?* The answer is *absolutely!* You may not have a public skill like teaching, but God has still given you distinct spiritual gifts that He wants you to use to serve Him and others. In what areas has God uniquely gifted you? In what ways can you use these God-given abilities to serve Him—even if you don't receive any recognition for it?

Who are the willing unknowns in your life? Write down the names of some of the people in your home, at your church, at your work, or in your neighborhood. What can you do to practically acknowledge their work and thank them for their necessary contributions?



The Willing Unknowns

Nehemiah 7:1–4; 11

Do you want to be a willing unknown? Those who don't know Jesus would usually say no. The flesh loves the recognition, the praise, the spotlight. But the applause of people is temporary. For those who serve Jesus behind the scenes, God bestows rewards that will last for eternity.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for preserving the example of these willing unknowns in Your Word. Give me the humility to serve You from the background for Your glory. Though the call of human praise is strong, give me the desire only to hear You say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (*Matthew 25:21*). I pray these things in Jesus’ glorious name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the web page, “*How to Study the Bible for Yourself*.”

