



WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD STUDIES IN NEHEMIAH LESSON 8

DEDICATION, BACKSLIDING AND RENEWAL Nehemiah 11:1 - 13:31

I. THE RESIDENTS OF THE LAND NEHEMIAH 11:1-12:26

A. The Residents of Jerusalem Nehemiah 11:1-24

1. The choosing

Living in Jerusalem was not an attractive alternative for the returnees because there was no temple, the city lay in ruins and was essentially unwalled and thus unprotected.

However with the rebuilding of the temple and restoring the walls the capital became a more desirable place to live. Nehemiah as governor wisely began populating Jerusalem with pureblooded Jews and set about to encourage the people to live within the city walls. Most of this section of the book (11:3-12:26) is a parenthetical interjection into the chronological progression of the narrative.

Actually, some leaders had already chosen to live in Jerusalem (v.1). Nehemiah initiated what we might call a “voluntary draft.” That sounds like an oxymoron but it was a plan to determine which one family in ten of those not living in the city would move into it (v.1). Verse 2 seems to imply that when a man was chosen to move into Jerusalem he was permitted to decline if he wanted to. That is because God wanted volunteers for this. So a man could be chosen, but could decide against moving. Then the lot would be cast again and another name chosen. Sooner or later someone would be found who consented freely to go. According to the account, those who chose to go were commended by the people. They honored them because they volunteered to do what God called them to do. (Verse 2 may also be taken to mean that additional immigrants volunteered to live there.) Thus there was a cross section of leaders who lived in Jerusalem and other leaders lived in the other towns of Judah (v. 3).

2. The people from four tribes

From verses 4-9 we learn that the residents of Jerusalem included Jews from the tribes of Judah (vs. 4-6) and Benjamin. 1 Chronicles 9:3 records that there were also men from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh living there. This is important because these two tribes did not belong to the nation of Judah, but were carried captive when Israel (the Northern Kingdom) was defeated by Assyria. This is another confirmation that the returning community included Israelites as well as Judeans.

3. The people of Judah

There were twice as many from Benjamin as from Judah. Verse 6 says, “*All the sons of Perez who dwelt at Jerusalem were four hundred and sixty eight valiant men.*” Perez was one of the sons of Judah, who was in turn the son of Jacob, one of the twelve patriarchs who fathered the twelve tribes. The story of his birth, in Genesis 38, is a rather lengthy, sordid account which relates how Judah conceived this son with his own daughter-in-law. Thus it was an illegitimate birth. At his birth it was found that the mother was about to bear twins,

and his brother started to emerge first. The midwife tied a scarlet string around his finger to indicate he would be the oldest of the twins, but then the baby pulled his arm back and the other twin came out. Because he broke out in that fashion he was named Perez, which means "breaking out." But following this rather shadowed beginning he went on to become one of the great heroes of Judah. His descendants are traced in almost every generation since. Even here in Nehemiah, some 400 years after Judah lived, Perez is regarded as one of the heroes of the nation. His descendants are called "the brave men of Perez." Zerubbabel was one of them. Perez was among the direct genealogical links between Adam and Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1-16, Luke 3:23-37).

4. The people of Benjamin

Then, with regard to the people of Benjamin, notice that they provided twice as many men from this small tribe as those from the larger tribe of Judah. The sordid history of Benjamin is given us in the book of Judges. The last few chapters of that book tell a sorry tale of people who fell into sexual sin and began to practice homosexuality. It was a terrible disgrace and stain on the life of Israel. But two important men came from this tribe:

One is called Saul, the first king of Israel. He is a great disappointment for though he began well he ends his forty years of reign in bitter, acrimonious, angry rebellion against God. He finally takes his own life on a battlefield. There is another Saul, however, in the New Testament, who also came from the tribe of Benjamin. This is Saul of Tarsus, who is better known to us, of course, as the Apostle Paul.

What is all this teaching us? I think it illustrates what the New Testament often tells us, that God is no respecter of persons. He does not care how you started out in life. You do not wreck your chances for success in his eyes by beginning at a very low level. God can cleanse people and use them in mighty and wonderful ways. He chooses, we are told, the obscure, the once tainted, the rejects of life. He loves to pick up those kinds of people and do wonderful things with them.

- Notes from Ray Stedman [1989] <http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/nehemiah/>

5. The priests

There were priests (vs.10-14) who carried out the services and sacrifices in the Temple.

6. The Levites 15-18

Some of the Levites took care of the maintenance and repair of the Temple. (Thank God for the men and women who are in charge of the outside work in the ministry of the church today! The New Testament calls them "deacons." These are men and women who are responsible to carry out various details, to take care of buildings and minister to the poor and the needy. Those who do this work correspond to the work of the Levites in the Old Testament.)

7. The gatekeepers

There were also gatekeepers (v. 19) (think "Parbar"). The rest lived in the outlying towns (v. 20) except for the temple servants (v. 21). The Ophel was apparently a low hill (the word means "filled in") between the City of David and the temple area.

8. The singers

The second group among the Levites, the musicians, are very interesting. If you will look carefully, you will see familiar names among them. One name is Asaph, who is called "*the director who led in thanksgiving and prayer.*" Another is called Jeduthun. These two names appear frequently in the Psalms. Many of the psalms are dedicated "to the Chief Musician," who is either Asaph, or, in some cases, Jeduthun. These two men, who lived in David's day, were chosen to set up the ministry of music within the congregation of Israel.

In 1 Chronicles 16:41 says that "*Heman and Jeduthun were designated by name to give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.*" That is the central theme of all thanksgiving. All the great hymns and praise choruses are really hymns of praise to God for his love that endures forever. Music in the church is not merely entertainment. It is a means by which we are strengthened, fed, and helped.

In 1 Chronicles 25 we are told that "*David ... set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals*" (1 Chronicles 25:1a). "*And Jeduthun prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the Lord,*" (1 Chronicles 25:3). "*Jeduthun and Heman were under the supervision of the King [David],*" (1 Chronicles 25:6). Then get this: "*They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets.*" That is even more than 76 trombones! 120 priests blowing trumpets! What a tremendous celebration they must have had! Who would have wanted to miss "church" in those days? These are the men who set up the ministry of music within the nation of Israel.

Now obviously, we follow in their steps. We have choirs, orchestras, pianists and organists and soloists. It is not merely entertainment. It is powerful, satisfying, teaching ministry. We ought to honor those who are involved in it.

B. The Residents of the Outlying Towns Nehemiah 11:25-36

The towns south of Jerusalem, from the Hinnom Valley just south of the city as far as Beersheba, were those in the territory belonging to the tribe of Judah. Those north of Jerusalem stretching to the neighboring province of Samaria were towns of Benjamin. These were the two sections of the Persian province of Yehud (Judah). Nehemiah mentioned 17 prominent towns in Judah here (vs. 25-30), and 15 in Benjamin (vs. 31- 35). The Levites lived among the other people, as when the Israelites first entered the Promised Land under Joshua, to be a good influence and to act as spiritual resource persons (v. 36).

C. The Priests and Levites Nehemiah 12:1-26

Verse 1 takes us back to the heroes of the past. Zerubbabel led the first return from captivity in Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., almost 100 years earlier than Nehemiah's day. Nehemiah is looking back at these men who led that procession. Zerubbabel was a priest and Jeshua was a Levite. They led a company of Israelites back to the city of Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Verse 7 says that they were the "*leaders of the priests and their associates in the days of Jeshua.*"

The priests and Levites were the most important people who returned from exile because they reestablished worship in the land. Verses 1-7 give the names of 22 leaders among them who had returned in 537 B.C. with Zerubbabel and Jeshua (cf. 1 Chronicles 24:7-19). The writer also mentioned eight Levites by name (vs. 8-9; cf. Ezra 2:40-42).

The genealogy of the high priest was especially important. Five succeeding descendants of Jeshua appear in the text (vs. 10-11). This list continues the one in 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 that ends with the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. The text also lists heads of 21 priestly families in the generation that followed Jeshua (vs.12-21). The names of the heads of the nine Levitical families Nehemiah referred to in verse 22 appear in verses 24-26.

The four high priests he mentioned in verse 22 evidently registered these names. Darius the Persian (v. 22) is probably Darius II (423-404 B.C.). The "Book of the Chronicles" (v. 23) is not the canonical Book of Chronicles but another record of names.

II. THE DEDICATION OF THE WALL NEHEMIAH 12:27-47

A. Preparations for the Dedication Nehemiah 12:27-30

Inasmuch as the Levites were scattered throughout Judah and Benjamin, as Nehemiah 11:36 states, it was necessary to bring them to Jerusalem for the dedication ceremonies in which they would play a prominent part.

We do not know when exactly the dedication of the walls took place. It might have come in a few weeks, or at most several months, after the completion of the walls. On the basis of Nehemiah 13:6, however, some believe that a dozen years first elapsed. Why there may have been such a long delay, no one can say with certainty. The dedication of the wall would normally follow at a short interval after its restoration. Perhaps it was postponed while Nehemiah returned to Persia, as he had previously planned (Nehemiah 2:6); or perhaps he felt that Artaxerxes might not appreciate any event that emphasized the strength of Jerusalem. One should recall in this connection the rumor of treachery about Nehemiah which Sanballat had started earlier (Nehemiah 6:5-7). Remember a revival broke out at the completion of the wall (chapters 8-10). Then Nehemiah had to re-populate the city. These two acts may explain why the dedication was delayed.

In the Bible the term "dedication" is used to mean consecration or sanctification for holy purposes, that is, set apart for God, as was the case with the tabernacle (Numbers 7), one's home (Deuteronomy 20:5), and captured enemy wealth (2 Samuel 8:10-11), in addition to the temples of Solomon and Zerubbabel (Ezra 6:15-18). We have already seen that, at the very outset of the building of the wall, the priests had dedicated the first portion to God (Nehemiah 3:1).

More importantly, there are examples regarding the dedication of the people to God. Samuel was dedicated to the Lord by his mother (I Samuel 1:11, 24-28), Aaron was consecrated for his very special tasks as Israel's first high priest (Exodus 28:1-3), as were his sons (and descendants) in the priest's office (Exodus 29:8-9). The act of dedication involved one's possessions or oneself; God filled the picture.

Ceremonial and ethical purity is a Jewish mark of distinction throughout the Bible. God Himself had commanded through Moses certain prescribed purification ceremonies, and it was appropriate that these be observed as a part of the dedication of Jerusalem's wall.

The specific steps are not noted here, but there may have been a special offering, involving the shedding of blood (2 Chronicles 29:20-36), or the sprinkling of water (Leviticus 11:32; 16:4). The priests and Levites purified themselves first, then the people were purified, and lastly the gates and wall. All was to be clean, holy before the Lord.

B. The Dedication Ceremonies Nehemiah 12:31-47

In this section we have an account of a great procession around the top of the wall. There are choirs and musicians, and, of course, officials and politicians. There was great joy! The German philosopher Nietzsche said, "If the Christians expect me to believe in their Redeemer they have got to look a lot more redeemed!" There are times of sorrow and sadness, of course, but Christians ought frequently to exude a sense of joy because they have something to be joyful about.

The pattern followed for this ceremony was that of the dedication of Solomon's temple, five hundred years earlier (2 Chronicles 5:12-13; 7:1-5) and the re-dedication under Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29). If Ezra the priest and scribe wrote 2 Chronicles, he was no doubt the one who suggested it here. As a priest and Nehemiah's close associate, it would have been fitting for him to have laid down the guidelines for the occasion.

These two choirs marched in different directions around the wall, circumventing the city, and joined together again on the eastern side before the Temple. It must have been a wonderful sight, with colorful banners flying, instruments playing and choirs singing.

Probably it was inspired by the story of Joshua and the taking of Jericho. Joshua was told by the Lord to have the people march around the city of Jericho once a day. Then on the seventh day they were to go around seven times and the trumpets were to be blown. When they did so, the wall of the city collapsed and they were able to take it. I do not know whether that is what inspired this procession about the wall or not. It might also have been Nehemiah's memory of that moonlit ride he himself attempted around the city when he first arrived. He mounted his donkey but found it impossible to go clear around because the valley was strewn with rubble and ruin. That was when he saw the awesome task that lay before him. Perhaps as he remembers that he is determined to celebrate now by marching these choirs around the top of the rebuilt wall.

What a great occasion! All the members of the various families, men, women and children, rejoiced together at what God had accomplished in their midst. The sacrifices which they offered were "thank offerings" prescribed by the Law as an expression of thanksgiving. There is a correspondence to this in the life of believers today. It is spelled out in these words from the book of Hebrews,

"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Hebrews 13:15-16)

C. The Reforms Instituted by Nehemiah Nehemiah 13

To understand when the events described in this chapter took place it is necessary to read verses 1-7, not just verse 1. Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes in 433 B.C. (v. 6). It was customary in the ancient Near East for kings to require their servants to return to them periodically to reaffirm their allegiance. Nehemiah may have commuted between Jerusalem and the seat of the Empire.

"Some time" later Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem (v. 6). The text does not say how much later this was. Undoubtedly he would have wished to return as soon as possible. Some think it is as much as 12 years and others as little as one year. Each of the following reforms dealt with a violation of the covenant these people had made with God (cf. 10:29-32).

1. The exclusion of foreigners 13:1-3

In Chapter 10, the Israelites, after a very solemn time of rededication of their lives, took a vow that they would not intermarry with the members of these oth-

er races. They bound themselves with a curse and an oath to obey the commands of the Law of God. And yet here, some ten years later, that covenant has already been broken. Many Ammonites and Moabites are found in the congregation of Israel. They got there because Israelite men married the daughters of Ammonite and Moabite families, something which God had strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses.

Discovery of the law that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever receive citizenship in Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3-4) led the leaders to exclude all foreigners from the restoration community.

There are two explanations for Ruth's inclusion. The better one is that unbelieving immigrants from these nations were those denied citizenship. This would explain why Rahab, a Canaanite, and Ruth, a Moabite, became citizens. They were both believers. Another explanation is that the use of the Hebrew masculine nouns, Ammonite and Moabite, refer to males exclusively.

2. The expulsion of Tobiah 13:4-9

Eliashib was the high priest (3:1, 20; 13:28). He was evidently a close relative of Tobiah, the Jewish Ammonite leader who had opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls (2:19; 6:1, 17-18).

This involved political intrigue sounds very much like what goes on in Washington, DC. The high priest had allowed his grandson to marry into this Ammonite family. We learn later in this chapter that he had married the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, who was an ally of Tobiah the Ammonite. Both of these were vitriolic, bitter enemies of Nehemiah. This cozy alliance led to an invitation to Tobiah to actually move into the temple itself.

To make room for him the high priest took over the storeroom that was set apart for the grain, oil, and incense used by the Levites in their purification and ritual ceremonies. So there were two wrongs involved. An Ammonite and his family were actually living in the temple of God, contrary to the Law of Moses; and second, in order to permit that they had deliberately defrauded the Levites of their rights of storage.

When Nehemiah returned he went into prompt and passionate action. He threw the baggage out, fumigated the room, and returned the oil, grain and incense to their proper place. Many people feel that he overreacted. Today we do not get upset by the presence of evil and think it strange that a man should act like Nehemiah did. We have lost to a great degree our ability to express outrage and public indignation over things that are wrong.

This is similar to the incident in the New Testament when Jesus came into the temple and found it filled with money-changers making extravagant income off the sale of the sacrifices and offerings required in the temple. It was a sordid scene of commercializing the worship of Israel. Jesus reacted in a way similar to Nehemiah's response here. He made a whip and went slashing and flashing around the Temple, upsetting tables and driving the moneychangers out -- much to the distress of many pacifists ever since! It indicates that there is a time for drastic action. There is a time for strong stands against evil which others have indifferently accepted.

3. The revival of tithing 13:10-14

This neglect of the Temple is a result of the practice of intermarrying with Ammonites and Moabites. When Tobiah moved into the temple and they had to throw out the grain and oil and incense that the Levites needed, it meant that the Levites had no supplies to work with. Since they could not perform their

ministry, they could not even be adequately supported, so they went to work in the fields to earn a living for themselves. As a result, the services of the temple were sorely neglected. The prophet Malachi inveighs against this same thing. He calls the people to face the fact that the temple was being neglected. The center of their life as a nation was not being maintained.

Because the people had failed to bring their tithes to the temple the Levites had to abandon their service in the temple to provide for their own physical needs. Thus far all of Nehemiah's reforms, following his return to Jerusalem, involved temple service. Verse 14 records his prayer in view of these reforms (cf. 5:19).

4. The observance of the Sabbath 13:15-22

Even today in Israel you cannot get a hot meal in a Jewish hotel from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. The elevators will not be operating. You must use the stairs to get to your room. The shops are closed. Buses quit running, all because it is the Sabbath. This causes a great deal of inconvenience to tourists. Even many Jews do not like it. But the orthodox Jewish groups are powerful enough that they can require the whole country to observe the Sabbath Day whether they like it or not.

Even in Nehemiah's day we can see that this was a burdensome requirement to the people. No work was to be done and no business to be carried out, making trade very inconvenient. On his return from Babylon, Nehemiah found that in the twelve years he was away people had begun again to ignore the Sabbath day requirements. The streets were full of traffic. The stores were wide open.

His reaction is one of shock, not so much at what was happening, because this had happened before, but at the ease with which the people seemed to forget the lessons of the past. He reminds them that this violation is a serious thing. "What are you doing?" he cries. "Don't you know that God takes the Sabbath seriously? All the hurt, calamity, and disaster which we have been going through has been caused, according to the Scripture, by the failure of our forefathers to observe the Sabbath regulations."

Then, using his full authority as the governor, Nehemiah immediately orders some changes. He rebuked both the merchants and the Jewish nobles (cf. 10:31). Furthermore, he locked the city gates on the Sabbath and kept traders from gathering outside and tempting the Jews to buy and sell. He asked God to remember him for his fidelity to the Mosaic Law (v. 22b).

5. The rebuke of mixed marriages 13:23-29

Nehemiah confronted this problem as Ezra had several years earlier (Ezra 9-10). The text records only Nehemiah's words to the people, but since we know what kind of person he was we can safely assume that he followed up his words with action. Evidently some of these Jews had divorced their Jewish wives to marry foreigners (Malachi 2:10-16). Plucking the beard (v. 25) was a form of punishment (cf. Isaiah 50:6), and it was a public disgrace (2 Samuel 10:4). The marriage of Joiada's son to a foreigner (v. 28) was especially bad since he was the grandson of the high priest, and priests were to marry only Jewish virgins (Leviticus 21:14). In the ancient East marriages involving prominent families were often arranged to secure political advantage and to form alliances. Probably this was the case in the marriage of the high priest's grandson and Sanballat's daughter.

Again, a similar prayer by Nehemiah marks off this significant reform (v. 29; cf. v. 14).

6. The summary of Nehemiah's reforms 13:30-31

Probably we should understand these verses as summarizing Nehemiah's reforms after he returned to Jerusalem, namely, those described in this chapter. He behaved in this chapter as though he still had the power of a Persian governor.

CONCLUSION

Nehemiah is one of the most important (and colorful) persons in the Bible. His book is full of leadership principles, great moral concepts and action, and much that the church today can learn from.

Again we learn that there is no winning without warfare, no opportunity without opposition, no victory without vigilance. We must constantly be on guard against the snare of the world's friendship (6:1-4), the smear of the world's slander (6:5-9), and the subtlety of the world's religion (6:10-14).

The besetting sins of Israel are much like ours today: an encroaching secularism (13:7), self indulgence at the expense of service to God (13:10-14), putting business before our Christianity (13:15-22) and a breaking down of separation (13:23-28).

Every type of obstacle and every form of opposition that Nehemiah faced in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem is an illustration from God's Word of the obstacles and opposition that we can expect to face as Christians: threats - from Sanballat and Tobiah (4: 7-8); discouraged workers - "the work is too hard" (4:10); fearful people (4:11); distractions (Chapter 6) - Nehemiah was asked to come meet Sanballat and others; threats of "reports" to the government (6:5-7); tricks to try to get him to disobey God's law - false prophets warned him to flee to the temple (6:10).

We learn that we must know that opposition will come; trust God as we move ahead; refuse to be distracted; be focused; be confident in God, not in our own ability; trust God - that cannot be said too much!

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES FROM NEHEMIAH

Scripture presents numerous role models for leadership. Few, however, are as fully developed as the example of Nehemiah. Numerous principles of effective leadership stand out in the account, including the following:

- Leaders Have a Sense of Mission (Nehemiah 1:5)
- Leaders Leverage Their Power (2:5)
- Leaders Conduct Research (2:12)
- Leaders Build Community (2:17-18)
- Leaders Adapt to Adversity (4:8-9)
- Leaders Resist Underhanded Politics (6:5-9)
- Leaders Serve People (7:1)
- Leaders Celebrate Often (8:1)
- Leaders Recognize Leadership
- Leaders Impart Their Vision to Others
- Leaders Know The Importance of Delegation
- Leaders Overcome Opposition
- Leaders Lead With Integrity
- Leaders Understand the Power of Persistence