

## SESSION #52

### NEHEMIAH

#### 1. Context

With reference again to the timeline chart, you will see that Nehemiah led the third group of returnees back from exile to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. But unlike other leaders who were prominent in these groups returning from exile – Ezra, Zerubbabel, Haggai, Zechariah – this man Nehemiah was not a priest nor a prophet.

He was a government worker much like Daniel though not quite as high a position. Specifically, his job was cup-bearer to the current Persian king, Artaxerxes, the successor to King Xerxes. This was a very important position in the Persian Empire. It wasn't just that he brought the wine for the king to drink with his meals. He had to taste the wine before giving it to the king so that the king would be protected from the favorite method of assassination in those days: poison in the wine. If the cup-bearer fell over dead, then of course the king knew the wine was poisoned.

This role, then, was a very dangerous one, but it also meant that the cup-bearer was very close to the king, trusted by him, and having the king's confidence. Nehemiah was therefore a very influential person in the Persian court.

Ezra's focus had been the restoration of worship in the new temple, as you may recall.

Esther's story highlighted God's preservation of the people of God.

And Nehemiah's role would be reconstruction, specifically of the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem, but also a spiritual 'reconstruction' – if you will – of the people themselves. Reconstruction and reinstruction.

#### 2. The wall

A small group of Jews had come from Judah to see Nehemiah in the Persian city of Shushan. They reported that the people back home were "*in great distress and reproach*" and that "*the wall of Jerusalem is also broken down*".

This news broke Nehemiah's heart. Even though he personally was certainly comfortable in his high-ranking job in the opulent, prosperous capital city of the Empire, the news about Jerusalem and God's people deeply affected him. He *"wept...he mourned...he fasted...he prayed."* His response reminds me of Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, who famously said, *"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God."*

Nehemiah had that kind of heart. And you and I need a similar compassion and identification with God in His concern for so many people and situations in our broken world.

In chapter two, the king gives Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem and repair the walls. The temple had been completed by now, but the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem were not rebuilt yet. There were still heaps of rubble which meant that the temple was exposed to danger. The wall of Jerusalem was a symbol of security, strength and salvation. Isaiah 60:18 says, *"you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise."* But these have been broken down and the result is that the people are in difficulty and disgrace.

In our personal lives, the wall of standards and behavior separate us from the corrupting values of the world and protect our "temple", our spiritual lives. This wall can be eroded slowly, stone by stone, through a rebellious attitude, selfishness, immorality, no time for God or a lack of discipline. Prov. 25:28 tells us, *"Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control."*

When the wall of Jerusalem was down, the temple was in danger. When walls are down, precious things are always in danger.

### **3. Nehemiah, the Man**

The characteristics of this man are quite interesting. In one sense, he is an ordinary citizen – he's not a prophet, priest or king. However, when you examine him further you will discover that he was an extraordinary person indeed. Wonderful skills, sharp mind, strong leadership abilities. He has an unusual mix of traits. As someone said, he's intensely spiritual, perfectly natural but thoroughly practical.

As you read his story you will find that he seemed to have a habit of what might be called “instant prayers”. These have great appeal for people in our modern age with our short attention spans and need for instant results. For example, in 2:2 he goes into the presence of the king and there follows a quick back-and-forth conversation for the next six verses: *“the king said to me”* ... *“I said to the king”* ... *“the king said”* ... *“I said”*.

And in the midst of this dialogue we read in verse 4b, *“So I prayed to the God of heaven.”* It’s like he sent an immediate text message to the Lord: *“Help!”* We see this kind of rapid prayer again in 4:4, 6:9, 13:14, 22, 29. And perhaps we might be tempted to think this is a great model for a prayer life – just pepper our days with such tweet-length appeals to God.

But this is not the full picture of Nehemiah’s prayer life. Most of chapter one is the substance of a prayer which Nehemiah prayed over many months, along with fasting. His prayer connection with God was a deep one. And those instant prayers only arose out of this very solid foundation of much time spent with God. In fact, two of the seven full prayers recorded in the OT are in the book of Nehemiah. He had God’s ear because he was a man of great spirituality.

He was also a man who was able to blend the spiritual and the practical in wonderful ways. Chapter 4:9 is an example: *“...we made our prayer to God, and ...we set a watch against [our enemies] day and night.”* A great balance of the spiritual and the practical.

Someone said, *“Faith is trusting God enough to believe that you can make goals and plans to use the gifts He has given you.”* This balance is something Nehemiah did all the time, making his book a gold-mine of management principles, including the old standby of management: PLOC – planning, leading, organizing, controlling. His leadership includes all of that. Coordinating, inspiring, motivating, communicating, making decisions, growing, building, trouble-shooting, overcoming problems... practically any area of management you can name, Nehemiah shows us how to do it because he was a terrific manager.

## 4. Structure

His job, as we noted earlier, was to reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem, covered in the first 6 chapters. That was his main focus at the beginning of this project, in order to provide physical security for the people.

It wasn't an easy task. There was lots of opposition. Nehemiah and his workers were scorned and mocked by people standing around watching them. Others used physical force to try and stop the work. Still others used deceit and craftiness, bluff and treachery...all sorts of ways in an effort to halt the work from without.

But not only were there problems on the outside; there are problems on the inside as the people of God are faced with many discouraging elements and are getting worn out. The city is full of rubble and debris – everything is in a mess. You may know how this can happen in the smaller confines of a room in your house which just seems to get messier and messier every passing week. Facing the task of cleaning up such a room can be very daunting and discouraging. That's what Nehemiah's people felt like: highly discouraged by fatigue, by frustration, by failure and by fear even of death threats.

As if that wasn't bad enough, there are also people within the city who are motivated by greed. There were people around who were always on the lookout to see what they could gain from this situation. All of these things meant that Nehemiah's job was exceptionally difficult.

Nevertheless, they manage to complete the walls and gates in record-breaking time – just 52 days! – because of God's good hand upon them.

At this point, Nehemiah's role changes to being the governor of Jerusalem as we see in chapters 7 - 13. In this new capacity, he reinstructs the people along with Ezra who now shows up in chapter 8. They reinstruct the people in the laws of God, in order to rebuild the people in spiritual security. This meant dealing especially with some very difficult relationship problems. We don't have time to dig into these in this overview course.

## 5. Application

Nehemiah's book is illustrative and instructive of various areas of the Christian life. Such things as service and working for God, and spiritual restoration. How do you build back again walls that have been broken down which endanger spiritual temples, spiritual life? How do you rebuild those protective areas of life? And the need for revival and restoration. Nehemiah shows us numerous principles relating to these aspects of life. I encourage you to read his book yourself, looking for and applying these principles.

In his life and leadership, Nehemiah was a godly man who knew how to prayer and how to plan; he had a sensitive heart and a sensible mind. He faced tests of conviction, of character, and of courage and came shining through because he feared nothing but God, hated nothing but sin, knew his priorities, stood on his principles and knelt often in his prayers.

His book points us to God's restorative grace. Karen Mains talked about this kind of grace when she wrote: *"Nature shouts of this beginning-again-God, this God who can make all our failures regenerative, the One who is God of risings again, who never tires of fresh starts, nativities, renaissances in persons or in culture. God is a God of starting over, of genesis and re-genesis. He freshens the world with dew; he hydrates withered human hearts with his downpouring spirit."* May you know His restorative grace today!

Our next session will be the final one in this course as we look at the last book in the Old Testament, the book of Malachi.

\*\*\*