

A LOOK AT A BOOK: NEHEMIAH

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ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF NEHEMIAH

If Ezra accomplished the spiritual establishment of the new community, Nehemiah succeeded in giving it physical stability. Having learned, while in the high position of cupbearer to the king, that the community in Judah was “in great trouble and shame” (Neh. 1:3), he succeeded in having himself appointed governor in Judah with authority and resources to rebuild the city walls. Nehemiah acted with skill and daring. After surveying the walls at night to avoid detection by those who might oppose the work, he assembled a labor force and, dividing the walls into sections, supervised the building process, which was accomplished in the remarkably short time of fifty-two days. He faced determined opposition: mockery (2:19; 4:1-3); armed raids (vs. 7-12); a ruse to draw him outside the city, without doubt to murder him (6:1-4); threatened blackmail (vs. 5-9); and finally a prophet hired to foretell his death so he would retreat to the temple in fear of his life. All of these he met with courage, wisdom, and an invincible determination to complete the task.

With the wall completed he then took measures to increase the population of Jerusalem and to correct social, economic, and religious abuses. His prayers and piety reveal a man of strong religious conviction. Nehemiah thus provided the physical structure and social economic stability within which the religious community, formed by the zeal and erudition of Ezra, could grow. Their combined word was a most judicious uniting of Israel’s identity with its religious life and forms in such a way as to preserve the people of God, the oracles of God, and the promises of redemption against that day when God would fulfill all the old covenant yearnings and hopes in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCING NEHEMIAH

In considering the nature of leadership, few books speak more clearly than the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, which was originally the second half of the book of Ezra. In Ezra, the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, completing the work in 516 B.C., seventy years after the old temple was destroyed. And now in Nehemiah, the place where Old Testament history ends in about 440 B.C., God’s people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

In Nehemiah, we watch the people of God resettle the land, build Jerusalem's walls, and prepare to fight. In the foreground of the unfolding story, however, are the leaders: the priests who work in the temple and teach God's law – chief among whom is Ezra – and the governor himself, Nehemiah.

As we look at the portraits presented in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, we want to ask an always crucial question: What kind of leadership does the Bible present as exemplary?

1. A Godly Leader Prays

First we see that a godly leader prays. The book begins in Babylon with Nehemiah getting some bad news. Nehemiah recounts the story. (*Read 1:2-4*)

We do not think much about city walls these days, and so the news Nehemiah hears about the sad state of Jerusalem's walls may not seem like a big deal to you. But actually, a city's walls were arguably more important than its army. Without walls, a city would be at the mercy of whatever band of marauders came through. Thus the proverb: "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control" (Proverbs 25:28). Such a man is destroyed by any passing temptation or outside influence.

At the beginning of this book, Jerusalem was in such a state. Nehemiah's first act is to go to God, who is sovereign over all the empires that might descend upon Jerusalem. He prays. (*Read 1:5-11*)

Nehemiah reminds God of how his name is tied up with his people's name, and then asks God to move the king of Persia's heart. Adoration, confession, scriptural promise, honoring of God, the request itself – this is not a bad model for a prayer! If you are a leader in any capacity and you want to know how to pray, Nehemiah's brief prayer in chapter 1 is a good model.

Not only was Nehemiah moved to prayer in chapter 1, we find him praying throughout the book. In chapter 2, he shoots up an "arrow prayer," as some call it, when King Artaxerxes asks him a question and he wants to answer well: "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king...'" (2:4-5a). He utters brief prayers to God over everything that concerns him throughout the book: "Remember me in mercy, O God"; "Frustrate my enemies, O Lord"; and so on.

What is your first response to challenges”? To bad news? For that matter, what is your first response to good news? What stirs up your heart? When you hear anything of significance, you should respond in prayer.

2. A Godly Leader Acts

If this book is anything, it is a book of action, which brings us to the second characteristic of a godly leader: a godly leader acts. What emerges in these memoirs is a skillful political actor, whose concern for his own people apparently coincides with the desires of his king, Artaxerxes. It is Artaxerxes who commissions Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem. (*Read 2:1-6*)

What an interesting account! Nehemiah is “very much afraid” of this absolute monarch’s power to deal with him simply for looking sad in his presence, yet he continues with his plea despite his fear. He prays, as we mentioned before, and he acts! He speaks to the king about his troubles! Nehemiah is a man of action. “And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me,” he says, “the king granted my requests” (2:8; cf. 2:18). Before you know it – the next verse, in fact (2:9) – Nehemiah is off with permission letters from the king in hand.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah again takes the initiative by setting out on a fact-finding mission. (*Read 2:12-13*)

Now, Nehemiah does not wrap up his work after collecting facts. He takes on the challenge of caring for Jerusalem and, in chapter 3, leading the people to rebuild the wall.

And he does it skillfully! He divides up the work between various groups of people, giving them responsibility for the parts of the wall near their own homes, so that they would have an obvious interest in it (3:23, 28-30; cf. 7:3). Throughout chapter 3, we find the people zealously repairing the wall.

By the end of chapter 6, the wall is completed, but Nehemiah continues to be a man of action throughout the book. In chapter 7, he deals with the problems created by a city population that was too small. In chapter 12, he orchestrates the celebrations for dedicating the completed walls. By God’s providence, no significant part of Jerusalem’s rehabilitation was accomplished apart from the activity of this one leader, Nehemiah! It is a striking story.

3. A Godly Leader Faces Opposition

Third, a godly leader will face opposition. The first stirrings of opposition emerge in chapter 2 when Nehemiah announces his plans to return to Jerusalem (2:10, 19). But the opposition really begins to dominate the story in chapter 4, after Nehemiah has led the people to begin rebuilding the walls. (*Read 4:1-3*)

The rebuilding continues amid mockery and opposition. But then the stakes rise. (*Read 4:7-18a*)

When the opposition increases, Nehemiah prays and posts a guard. He both invokes God's aid and acts. I hope you realize there is nothing inconsistent about doing these two things together. When his fellow citizens become discouraged, likewise, Nehemiah exhorts them not to fear these people, to trust in the Lord, and, if need be, to fight them.

The opposition continues into chapter 6, yet here the Jews' opponents begin to focus on slandering and intimidating Nehemiah himself. Nehemiah turns to God in prayer, and God gives him the wisdom he needs to respond to this opposition (6:9-13).

The adversary of God's people will always go for the leaders. Discredit and manipulate the leaders, and the flock will be disorganized, confused, and ineffectual (see Zech. 13:7).

The wall is completed in fifty-two days, despite the opposition (6:15)!

When you are having a conversation with yourself, how important do you find other people's thoughts of you to be? How much do you care what others think about you? The only liberation we will ever find from a debilitating fear of man is a real, true, and correct fear of God. He is the One whose respect we should desire. He is the One whose opinion we should cherish. Everyone from our best friends to our most determined opponents can misunderstand us. But God knows the truth.

Jesus Christ faced opposition, and so will we if we follow him. Remember Jesus' words, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Peter, who was present when Jesus uttered these words, later wrote to a group of Christians, "To this you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

4. A Godly Leader Cares

Fourth, a godly leader cares. This comes to the forefront of the story in chapter 5.

When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, broken walls are not the only problem he finds. A number of the weaker people in the community are being abused. Wealthier citizens are taking economic advantage of the poor, so that the poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer. (*Read 5:1-5*)

Once again, Nehemiah acts, and this time to stop the usury. He exhorts the wealthier citizens to fear the Lord and stop extorting money from the poor, to which they respond, “We will give it back.... And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say” (5:12).

In short, Nehemiah cares. He is a godly leader who cares enough to act against abuse. More than that, he turns down some of the privileges he could have exercised as governor for the sake of feeding the people. He perceives their needs and he pours himself out for them (5:14-15). Do you have a way in which you live out God’s concern for others, particularly for those who are poor?

5. A Godly Leader Turns People to God’s Word

Fifth, a godly leader turns people to God’s Word. We see this particularly in chapter 8, where Ezra the priest reads the Law of God. (*Read 7:73b-8:8*)

The people are gathered at the Water Gate, the gate through which the townspeople would exit the city to get to their nearest source of water. They have come to hear Ezra read the Law from daybreak till noon. It’s a dramatic scene: Ezra stands on the platform with an open book; the people respond by standing and lifting their hands, then bow down; and the Levites instruct the people so that they “could understand what was being read.” Notice how Nehemiah leads the people to respond to God’s Word. He says: (*Read 8:9-10*).

Undoubtedly, the people are convicted of their sins, as we saw in Ezra 10. But here, interestingly, Nehemiah forbids them from responding with weeping, because “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” So, quite simply, they depart in order “to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy” (8:12).

Ezra then proceeds to read God’s law to God’s people for seven straight days (8:18)! A godly leader turns people to God’s Word.

Christians do not believe that ultimate truth is something human beings can figure out through the hard work of the intellect. God has taken the initiative of revealing himself to us in the Bible, which means the Bible is ultimate truth. God has spoken, and so we will call the Bible God's Word. But not only that: God went a step further and sent his Word in the flesh! Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1, 14).

God's Word alone generates life. As the apostle Paul said to the Romans, "faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 10:17). People who hear God's Word and believe it have their lives changed.

This is how God has always done it. He created the world by his word. He created Abraham by calling him out. And he created his people at Mount Sinai by giving them his commands.

6. A Godly Leader Confesses Sins

Sixth, a godly leader confesses sins. As we saw, the people celebrated the reading of God's Word. Two days after the people finished feasting, the leaders turned their attention to the sins of the people and led them in confession. The text does not tell us if the following prayer was prayed by Nehemiah, Ezra, or the Levites. But everyone stood, listened, and – we assume – agreed with this leader's prayer. (*Read 9:5-37*)

So there they stood, confessing their own sins and the sins of their fathers. But notice, this prayer of confession begins with praising God: "Blessed be your glorious name" (9:5). Really, the whole prayer is cast in the form of praise to God: *you saw, you came, you are, you sent*, and so forth. At the same time, the prayer is both a confession and a summary of Old Testament history. It is awful to observe, isn't it, that a nation's history is well-summarized as a confession of sin? But so it was (cf. Ezra 9).

7. A Godly Leader Leads People in Specific Commitments

Seventh, a godly leader leads people in making specific commitments.

Right after chapter 9's Scripture reading and prayer of confession, the people take an oath to keep God's law: "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it" (9:38). The content of this pledge is then found in chapter 10. (*Read 10:28-31*)

All the pledges continue through the end of the chapter, all of them promising, basically, to follow the laws God gave to Moses (10:32-39).

A church will help you not to be a person who picks and chooses which of God's commands to obey.

8. A Godly Leader Keeps Leading

Finally, a godly leader keeps leading.

We are at the end of Old Testament history. Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem for a time – probably not months, but years. We read in chapter 13, “I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem” (13:6-7). Then he returns to this place into which he has poured so much of his life, and what does he find? The temple is being used for nonreligious purposes (13:7-9). The singers, priests, and other temple servants have gone back to farming because they were not being paid (13:10-11). The Sabbath is being forgotten and desecrated (13:15-22). What's worse, look at verses 23 and following. Here is the last chapter of Nehemiah. Here is the end of Old Testament history. (*Read 13:23-27*).

Nehemiah has been gone for maybe a few years; he comes back, and what are they doing? The same thing that Solomon did, which eventually led the people into worshipping other gods! You read this and think to yourself, what's the point of all this history! What else can be done! These people are hopeless!

So the Word would come. And he would come to convict God's people of sin and give them new life through the preaching of his good news. You must be prepared to continue to battle against sin throughout this life.

William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 655.

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 416-436.