

Nehemiah 1-2

Lesson 4 Fall 2013 Series 5

Thus far in the Book of Ezra, the story line has run on the same general course as will be the case in Nehemiah. Three different projects have all received authorization from the Persian king at the instigation of the God of heaven. These projects began in the land of the exile and culminated in Jerusalem. The building of the altar and the temple were dealt with in the Book of Ezra with the story of the building of the community itself, and the walls of the city being told in Nehemiah. Each of these projects were begun in the exile and implemented in Judah through the medium of documents, and despite external conflict. Each of these projects ends in a solemn celebration, sometimes after a delay.¹

Just as at times the arrangement of material in the book of Ezra seemed puzzling, Nehemiah presents even

¹ Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Berit Olam series (Collegeville MI: The Liturgical Press,

greater difficulties. It begins clearly enough with what has usually been called the “memoir of Nehemiah”, but some have seen it as more appropriately a “memorial to Nehemiah”. There has long been a debate among scholars concerning the relationship of the chapters of this book to one another.² Despite the vast array of theories that have been put forward none has gained widespread acceptance. It must be remembered that the purpose of Nehemiah’s writings was to recount the mighty acts of God and not to give an account of human history.

The name Nehemiah (נְחֻמְיָהוּ) means “Yahweh has comforted”. This name is borne by two other men in the Old Testament (Ezra 2:2; Nehemiah 7:7 and in 3:16).³ The name is also found in extrabiblical sources, including the Samaria Papyri,⁴ Hebrew seals and ostraca.⁵ In contrast to the name Nehemiah being somewhat common, the name of

² R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, in *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 67.

³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the *Concordia Commentary series* (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), p. 371.

⁴ Frank Moore Cross Jr., “The Discovery of the Samaria Papyri”, *Biblical Archaeologist* 26:4 (1963), pp. 110-121.

⁵ Frank Moore Cross Jr., “Personal Names in the Samaria Papyri”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 344 (2006), pp. 75-90.

Nehemiah's father, Hacaliah (חַכְלִיָּה) is rare. It occurs only here and at 10:1 and probably means something like to “wait or yearn for Yahweh”. Hacaliah's family may have been a prominent family in Jerusalem since Nehemiah mentions the tombs of his ancestors in Jerusalem (2:3), but this could also simply be a reference to the tombs of his ancestors in a more general fashion. Beyond this there is very little helpful background that can be provided for this book.⁶

The first six chapters of Nehemiah deal with rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, but should not be viewed as just historical narrative. There is much more going on here as will become evident as one makes the journey through this text. It is apparent that Nehemiah is a great man of prayer. This is a major emphasis in this writing. Nehemiah is shown to be a good leader because of his wisdom, which manifests itself in a number of ways, but one very prominent way is through Nehemiah's trust in God. Wisdom is also demonstrated in Nehemiah's dealings with

⁶ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 371-375.

Artaxerxes and his ability to inspire the Judeans to trust God. Nehemiah also leads by example; he does not just expect people to follow his words. He leads from the front. In one instance Nehemiah carefully calculates his response to internal dissension and then challenges the wealthy to respond in Godly ways. All of this was done while being constantly attacked from those on the outside. He also recognizes that the success that they experience comes from God and is not something that they as humans can take credit for apart from God.⁷

It should be noted that in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are one book as if Nehemiah continues the story of Ezra. Originally Nehemiah appears to have stood by itself as a separate narrative as it does in our English Bibles. Part of the evidence for this is that it contains an introduction that sets the scene for the narrative that follows in much the way that one would expect of a standalone narrative. The introduction bears marked similarities to a prophet's call as verse one begins by describing what follows as "The words

⁷ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 375-380.

of Nehemiah”. There is a similar introduction in books such as Jeremiah (1:1), Amos (1:1), and Haggai (1:12).⁸

1:1-3 – The story begins by setting the scene in the capital city of Susa, which served as the winter capital for the Persian Empire. It is situated near the head of the Persian Gulf. From about the sixth century BC Israel came to accept the Babylonian practice of beginning the year in the spring instead of in the autumn, and they also took on the Babylonian names for the months. Kislev came in November-December in the twentieth year, which is taken by many to mean the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (446 BC).⁹ The fact that Nehemiah does not refer to this as such means that the twentieth year likely refers to some other important even in the life of Nehemiah.¹⁰

⁸ R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 69-70.

⁹ R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 386.



It appears that Nehemiah was interested in how his countrymen and family were doing back in Judah and one of his brothers traveled to Susa from Judah. The report that he receives is indeed grim with the indication that they are in great trouble and indeed in great “shame” (חֲרָפָה). They are vulnerable and at the mercy of those around them. The indication here is that this report refers to more than the destruction of Jerusalem as the result of the Babylonian conquest in 587 BC. That was 140 years ago and it seems

highly unlikely that Nehemiah would not have been aware of that destruction. Many scholars believe that Nehemiah's reaction indicates that the breaching of the walls and the burning of the gates as described in this report were the results of more recent action. Such news had not yet reached Susa.¹¹

After the return from exile work began on the rebuilding of the city wall (Ezra 4:23-24). It appears that any reconstructed parts of the wall and the gates had now been destroyed again. Nehemiah's brother was commander of the temple fortress in Jerusalem (7:2), and would have been aware of the work that had started some years previously and now had been undone by additional violence.

1:4-11 – When Nehemiah hears this report his response is to sit down, to weep, to mourn, to fast and to pray (verse 4). The prayer is then recorded which begins with Nehemiah praising God and describing the great attributes he has such as keeping covenant and steadfast

¹¹ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 388-389.

love. It is also noteworthy that those he loves and keeps covenant with are described as those who “love him” and “keep his commandments”. It is noteworthy that this expression of the nature of God leads Nehemiah into confession before God as he calls upon God to be attentive and listen to his prayer (verse 6). He begins by confessing that the people have sinned, moves to confessing that his family has sinned and then, finally, confesses his own individual sin. Surely there is a great deal for us to learn from this prayer regarding how we should pray today.

He moves to more detail expounding not only a general knowledge of the nature of the sin that he is confessing, but specifically what the sin entails. The list includes the fact that they have “offended” God deeply by failing to keep his commandments, statutes and ordinances that were given to Israel through Moses. The nature of the offenses is that they have failed to keep the covenant: they have broken covenant with this faithful and loving God (verse 7). He then moves to another level of confession that demonstrates that he is aware of the consequences of

breaking the covenant with God. The consequences are that the people will be scattered as a result of their unfaithfulness. This is exactly what took place when Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom and sent the people into exile and what happened when Babylon destroyed the Southern Kingdom and deported the inhabitants to other parts of the Empire.

It is noteworthy how Nehemiah accepts blame for his and his people's current situation before God. He does not seek to blame God, deflect blame, or make an excuse. He accepts it squarely and forthrightly. He uses this then as a launchpad to move to the source of his hope. That hope is based upon the fact that there was the promise that if Israel returned to God, and kept his commandments, God would gather them once again and bring them to a place which he had chosen, a place he had chosen to establish his name (verse 9).

Notice then how he moves into verse 10 ascribing greatness to the people based upon the greatness of God. God is the source of the people's greatness. He redeemed

them by his great power and strong hand. The truth and majesty of this prayer surely stand as an example to us today of the attitude and heart we should have as we approach God. There is a clear recognition that God is God and we are not and anything we might hope to expect from God is based on who he is, what he has chosen to promise to us, and his position of power (verse 10).

Finally, (verse 11) Nehemiah moves to his petition before God asking for the blessing of God in giving success to God's slave and to grant him "mercy" in the sight of men. So often we fail to recognize the hand of God moving even among ungodly and unrighteous men. This is a theme that is often repeated in biblical literature as God grants for his people to have favor among even ungodly rulers. This is the case with Joseph in Egypt, when Israel leaves Egypt in the Exodus account, with Daniel and so on.

This chapter ends with the notation that Nehemiah serves as the "cupbearer" (חֲשִׁבָּה) to the king. This small notation speaks volumes about the man Nehemiah. He was a trusted royal official, who was often responsible for

serving the king his wine. The duties of cupbearer went beyond simply ensuring that the king's wine was fit for drinking. Such a person would often exercise administrative duties on behalf of the king. It should be noted that despite this position of power and authority that Nehemiah does not rely upon his position, but upon God to grant his petition.

2:1-10 – The mention of the month *Nisan*, which corresponds roughly to April and is the beginning of the Persian and Jewish year, reveals how long Nehemiah had persisted in fasting in prayer (cf. 1:4). It had been four months since the news regarding Jerusalem had reached him.¹² Nehemiah carries the wine to the king and the king notices that he is sad and questions him regarding this sadness that was so apparent (verse 2) that it brought the king's attention. This questioning on the part of the king elicits a fear response from Nehemiah, but in spite of his fear he lays out his problem before the king (verse 3). At

¹² Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), pp. 86-87.

this point this amazing moment comes when the door is opened to Nehemiah for his request.

The king asks him “What do you request”? The immediate response of Nehemiah is to pray to God. I am not sure if the prayer comes because he is afraid or maybe it comes because in this moment he sees the hand of God at work and seeks to praise God. There were a lot of responses that could have been anticipated from the king with regard to a sad and impertinent slave, but this request probably was not one that should have normally been expected. We are not given the content of Nehemiah’s prayer, but the bold response that follows leads me to believe that the prayer was primarily praise in recognizing the hand of God at work here. Oh how great it is when in the moment of exhilaration we stop at that very moment and lift our heart to God in praise.

With boldness, but with due deference, Nehemiah lays out his petition before the king (verse 5). He asks to be sent to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem. The response of the king is once again amazing, he asks how long he will be gone and

when he would return (verse 6). We are not informed here as to how long he told the king he would be gone, but Nehemiah would serve for twelve years as governor of Judah (Nehemiah 5:14; 13:6). The king was “pleased” and set him a date. The power of God is so great as to affect what pleases a king. Nehemiah then asks for letters to be given him for the governors of the province “Beyond the River” that he might be granted passage to Judah (verse 7). He also requests a letter to the keeper of the king’s forest for lumber to build the gates of the temple fortress, the city wall and his house. The king granted all of this, why, because “the gracious hand of my God was upon” Nehemiah. God granted him favor with this foreign king.

This little exchange here is huge in consequence and as a demonstration of the power of God and of the power of a faithful follower of God seeking to do God’s will. Just as God can direct the route of stars and planets so he can also direct the actions of men, even those who do not realize that they are directed by the hand of God.

Nehemiah travels to the province “Beyond the River” and delivers his letters. Traveling with Nehemiah are officers of the army and cavalry just to insure that the letters are received as the king intended. Can you imagine receiving those letters overlooked by members of the king’s army and cavalry? It is here that we are introduced to Sanballat and Tobiah, who are greatly displeased to hear of the king’s assistance on behalf of the people of Israel. These two Persian officials would constantly oppose the work of Nehemiah. Sanballat was the governor of Babylon. Tobiah appears to have been of Judean ancestry, but he was now the Persian official over the territory of Ammon.¹³

Here we see what always appears to be true, that wherever you have faithful servants of God seeking to follow him, opposition will arise to threaten the advances. We often fail to recognize that resistance from the forces of evil are a sign that we are moving in the right direction.

2:11-16 – Nehemiah travels on to Jerusalem and was there for three days (verse 11). After this he gets up during

¹³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 402-403.

the night, and there is the statement that he told no one what “God had put into my heart”. Notice that Nehemiah even ascribes the great passion that he has in his own heart to God (verse 12). We are then told of the specific route that he takes though today we are unable to identify with any real certainty these locations (verses 13 – 15). At this juncture the Jews living in the city were still unaware of what Nehemiah intended to do.

2:17-20 – Whether for dramatic affect or for another reason Nehemiah lays out his intent. It is important to note how he emphasizes the “hand of God” and God being gracious to him as he begins to speak to them. Their response is immediate. “Let us start building!” They committed themselves to the “common good”. There seems to be an emphasis on that which is selfless and related to the people as a whole rather than upon the individual’s welfare here (verse 18).

The response of Sanballat and his two lackeys is also immediate and they begin to use one of the favorite tools of those who are more interested in themselves and in tearing

down rather than building; they mock and ridicule. These are tools that are always kept sharp by Satan and his minions ready to slice into the heart of any and all who would seek the face of God and his will. Note also their use of misdirection and twisting of words like a knife intended to strike fear into the heart of God's people (verse 19).

It is interesting to note the response of Nehemiah: rather than whipping out the letters from the king and using them immediately he instead directs praise and faith to the genuine source of his power and authority, to the "God of heaven". He indicates that their success will come because God gives it and that they are his slaves and as such they are going to start building. Then come some harsh and cutting words indicating that Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem have share or claim in Jerusalem. The reasons for this are not expounded here, but would have been obvious to the original readers. These people worship pagan gods and have no covenant with the God of Israel. There is no political correctness or politicking here. The lines are drawn and the battle will commence between God and his

people and the forces of evil represented by all the nations of the earth; those that stand outside covenant relationship with God. Not only are they not in covenant relationship with God, they also attack those who are in covenant relationship with God. They pursue a course that makes them enemies of God.

Synopsis

This narrative begins with Nehemiah receiving a report from his brother regarding the state of the city of Jerusalem and those living there. This report is extremely distressing to Nehemiah who responds with weeping, mourning, fasting and prayer before God. The prayer stands as a model for us even today as it begins with praise of God, followed by confession of sin, and then calling upon God to remember his words of promise to Israel. He calls upon God for mercy from the king. It is after this prayer that we are informed of the powerful political position occupied by Nehemiah in the Persian Empire.

Chapter 2 begins with Nehemiah serving wine to the king who notices Nehemiah's sad disposition and challenges him with regard to his sadness. This response from the king strikes Nehemiah with fear, but after prayer, in spite of this fear, he articulates his distress because of the state of Jerusalem and asks to rebuild it. The request is bold and courageous with the expectation that God will grant favor

with the king to Nehemiah. The king grants the request to go and rebuild the city and so with letters he receives from the king Nehemiah begins his journey to Jerusalem.

Upon arrival in the province “Beyond the River” the letters from the king are presented to Sanballat and Tobiah who are not in the least pleased that someone had come to aid the people of Israel. Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem and after a period inspects the walls by night and then discloses his plan to rebuild the city to the inhabitants. They agree, but Sanballat and his minions are displeased and begin their campaign against the rebuilding of Jerusalem with mocking and ridicule. Nehemiah responds that God will give them success in this venture.

This section demonstrates the great power of a man of faith, prayer and wisdom. All of these come together in Nehemiah and they will ultimately be instrumental in the plan of God to rebuild Jerusalem.

Main Points

1. Godly people can change the world.
2. Prayer and humility before God are critical attributes for the leaders of God's people.
3. Following God can bring a backlash from those that are opposed to God.
4. Faith in God is critical to genuine success.

Questions

1. Why do you think Nehemiah was concerned for the people of Jerusalem?
2. Why do you think Nehemiah responded in the way that he did to the news about Jerusalem?
3. What is the purpose of prayer?
4. How is confession an important element in prayer?
5. Why is keeping commandments important to God?
6. Why are the statutes of Moses of any relevance to us today?
7. What promises has God given to us today?
8. Are there any conditions to God's promises?
9. How do you acknowledge God for the good things in your life?
10. What does this narrative teach us about our relationship with the government today?
11. What do we learn about the forces opposed to God from this narrative?
12. What would it take to unite the people of Broadway today in a single cause?

13. How do you know what the will of God is for your life today?

14. Do you see ridicule and mocking used in the world today?

15. What is success?