

# Nehemiah 3-5

## *Lesson 5 Fall 2013 Series 5*

The story that began in the previous section continues quickly here in this section as we are told that Eliashib set to work with his fellow priests and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. This gate probably received this name because it was through this gate that the sheep were brought in for the sacrifices in the temple. This gate is mention in the New Testament at John 5:2, which states that the Pool of Bethesda was in the vicinity.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that even the priests are involved in the construction work. There is no sense that this work is in any way beneath them. It appears that they see this as ministry to the Lord, and not as some menial task. This ministry is recorded as something monumental and worth remembering for the future in the history of God's people. It stands as an example that should not be forgotten.

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), p. 426.

Note at verse 5 the display of petty pride demonstrated by the nobles who would not put their shoulders to the work of the Lord. We are not given the reason for their refusal to help but the language used seems to indicate some form of resentment toward the new leadership.<sup>2</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the attitude and actions of other people. The nobles, however, prove themselves to be anything but noble, they put their own views above the welfare of the community, which is an attitude that is all too prevalent among people. If they cannot have things their own way they simply refuse to participate at all as if that in some way that is helpful in bringing about the will of God?

In verse 12 we are told that not only did Shallum help with the repairs, but also his daughters helped as well. What a notable contrast between this response and that from the nobles. Later on in this section more information will come to light regarding

---

<sup>2</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 204.

the nature of the so-called nobles. The city, little by little is made secure. Overall there appears to have been widespread participation across the range of occupations and people to rebuild the city wall, with the exception of the nobles.

#### **Chapter 4**

All of this effort and cooperation draws a reaction from Sanballat, the governor of this province. He was “greatly enraged” and he “mocked” the Jews. He once again demonstrates the attitudes that we saw at Nehemiah’s first meeting with him. He appears to have performed his mockery before his “associates” and before the “army of Samaria.” He then continues to ridicule them and describe them as “feeble.” Verse 4 begins a prayer from the Jews where they petition God for intercession on their behalf. It is interesting that there is no complaint to the king of Persia who backed this enterprise and would have likely made a swift end of anyone who stood against them. Their

response was to ask God for justice and to plead with him not to blot out their guilt.

Verses 6-9 - We are told of some some level of victory with the wall being joined together though only to half height. This angers Sanballat, Tobiah and the Arabs even more. The Jews were being successful and this success angered the enemies of the Jews. They were losing their power over them and so now they begin to plot together. They were even willing to fight against the Jews in order to get what they wanted. They were empowered by the confusion and disorder that had reigned before the coming of Nehemiah, but now with his leadership the people were turning to God, joining together and progress was being made. Confusion and turning from God places people in a position of powerlessness, shame, and danger. The Jews had been in that place, but now they had tasted the sweetness of victory and the security of unity and they resisted any return to their former state by praying to God, because they

understood the source of their victory and it rested in their unity before God and not in the hands of men.

Verses 10-14 - Then come those from within who are naysayers, those for whom the glass is always half-empty, those who fail to recognize the hand of God in what is happening. They point out all that is wrong. There is nothing bad in seeing what is wrong if in seeing it a positive solution is sought prayerfully before God. So often finding what is wrong is an excuse to stop progress, to bring confusion and to destroy unity. Often too, there is some truth in the negativity of those who would find fault. This is why often they are so terribly affective in destroying progress, unity, and faith.

Nehemiah acts as a great leader by taking consideration of the criticism and finding a positive solution that will allow positive progress to continue. Nehemiah stations armed guards to protect the people from the dangers that they face and thus wins the confidence of the people and he calls them to faith

in God as their true protector. At the same time he calls upon them to not be afraid and remember who God is, and in remembering this to fight for their “kin” and their “homes.” This strategy is designed to draw the Israelites back together in faith and in unity of purpose. It is for these things that Nehemiah has left us the legacy of his name and his story. It is because of these things that he is remembered as a great man of faith in God and as a great leader before God. This should stand as a challenge for us today as we live our lives and work out our faith with “fear and trembling” before God.

Verses 15 - 20 - It is noteworthy to see where credit is given for the victory of returning to working on the wall and for discovering the plot against the Jews. They do not ascribe it to Nehemiah, their great spy network, their bravery, their willingness to sacrifice, or any of the other things that we might think of that give credit to man; they ascribe their success to God. They claim that God had frustrated

the enemy's plot. Then comes this great passage of faith that demonstrates some unique aspects of faith. Faith is not a sitting down and totally relying upon God to do everything. Genuine faith recognizes that God has given us breath, strength and skills. We were created for work and service, this is a part of our worship, maybe even our primary form of worship, at least if we serve God with all the skills and traits that God gives us.

We are told that from that day forward half the servants worked on construction while half provided protection. Even those who worked carried a sword in one hand and worked with the other. They were determined not to be stopped. They were determined to continue this sacred task before God. They fought the battle of faith and won and now they were prepared to fight those who sought to destroy their faith and even to take their lives. The man who sounded the trumpet (verse 18) stood ready to sound the call for all the armed men of Israel to rally to repel

their enemies and once again Nehemiah shows his great leadership abilities by developing a plan in case of attack. Often enemies will note whether or not those that they seek to attack are well ordered and prepared and that in itself will thwart even an attempted attack.

Verses 21 -23 - The people were willing to put up with great discomfort and dire measures in order to accomplish the task that was set before them. They all moved to a position of safety inside the walls of Jerusalem, some stood guard and they remained prepared to fight at a moments notice. They stood in a state of constant readiness during this time of extreme danger. The danger continued to draw them together as a unit. This could have been a time of fragmentation and dissension but instead it would become a monument to these great people of faith performing a sacred task before God and probably not feeling very sacred in the stench of their dirty clothing and in the tiredness of their aching muscles and sleep



deprived bodies. They let none of this deter them from their sacred task. Maybe a huge part of this picture is that they truly saw what they were doing as a sacred task in service of God on top of protecting their families and their own property and not something ordinary and mundane.

## **Chapter 5**

The story is far from over however, and there are a great many things that drive people to become disillusioned and stop what they know to be good and right before God. Chapter 5 begins with the “great outcry” of the people and their wives against their own kin. Disunity once more rears its ugly head and they begin to complain because of the hardship caused by working on the wall. There appears to have also been a famine in the land that was adding to the hardship faced by the people. In order to get the grain that they needed to survive they were having to borrow money on their fields and vineyards in order not simply to buy their food, but to pay the taxes of

king. They complained of the hardship that they faced and the fact that they were making their children slaves in a way just like they had been slaves and not only this but some of their daughters were being raped. They were powerless to seek justice and they were losing also their land to others.

Verses 6 -13 - At this point Nehemiah loses patience with the people and becomes very angry because of their outcry and their complaints. He has wisely and patiently dealt with each of their previous complaints but at this point his patience has run out. He responds by bringing charges against the nobles and the officials. You have to wonder if this is not the same group that was previously mentioned as not working to build the wall. Some people are far more interested in using all of their talents and vast energy to tear down the work of others. Such people are very often highly motivated and skilled. Nehemiah, as a wise leader does not vent his anger in a precipitous

fashion, but through careful planning and calculation responds.<sup>3</sup>

The nobles were breaking the Law of Moses by lending money at interest to their fellow Israelites (Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; 24:10-13). Nehemiah very carefully and clearly accuses them of wrongdoing before a great assembly<sup>4</sup> (Greek Septuagint - ἐκκλησίαν μεγάλην – “great church”). It is interesting that this great assembly is called the “great ekklesia (church).” It is within the context of this great assembly that Nehemiah chooses to confront these nobles. Surely this stands as part of the background for how we today are to deal with problems rather than change our membership to another congregation. It is interesting that in the passages from the Law of Moses mentioned above the consequence of failing to keep this aspect of the Law is spelled out. God will hear those who have been wronged and he will act.

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 456.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 456.

At one time this stood behind the practice of having people in court swear that they were telling the truth with their hand on the Bible. The understanding was that lying with your hand on the Bible would bring about a consequence from God. So often today, we fail to recognize that God will still act in case of injustice. This makes us a society that is less than those that have gone before in so many ways. We fail to recognize the power of God at work in our lives day by day. We also fail to recognize that we will be held accountable for the things that we do wrong. We also fail to recognize that God will bless us for following him in obedience and faith.

At verse 8 Nehemiah begins to lay out his charges and he basically accuses the nobles of enslaving their brothers and they must be bought back. They stood silent before Nehemiah and could not find a word to say before him in their own defense. They knew they were wrong. He then issues a challenge for them to walk in the “fear of our God” in

order to prevent the “taunts” of the nations regarding God. This concept of shame once again comes to the forefront. Their actions are bringing shame upon God. Shame is a major motivator in this time and it is used in this instance to illicit a positive response.

They are challenged (verse 10) to stop taking interest and to restore (verse 11) their property to them along with any interest that has been charged. The response to the accusations of Nehemiah are truly miraculous and surely at least part of the reason that his monumental writing has been retained through all the centuries by the Jews. They respond by agreeing to restore land, interest and oil; all that they had been exacting from them. They also agreed not to demand anything from them in the future (verse 12). Nehemiah then calls the priests and made them take an oath to keep their promise. In this oath, notice also the curse that would be inflicted on those that broke it (verse 13). The whole of the assembly here responds by saying *amen* (let it be so).

Verses 14 - 19 - In this section we are given further indication of the character of Nehemiah as we are told of all the personal privileges that he refuses to accept. They had a right to eat the food of the governor but they refused. It was his right and it was expected, but he would not because of "fear of God." He lived his life understanding his place before God. He must not lord it over them and he did not profit from his position. How much could other politicians learn from Nehemiah? He did not acquire land and he even worked on his own wall and did not expect it to be done by others. He went beyond not just accepting the allowance that had been taken by previous governors, he paid out of his own pocket for those guests who ate at his own table. Truly no one will have been able to accuse him of profiteering.

His motivation for all that he did was to seek the pleasure of God. He did not seek the glory of men, nor their praise. Oh for all of us to live such a life devoted to God in a fearful reverence and humility. This

chapter ends with the prayer for God to remember  
him for these things.

# Synopsis

This section sees work actually undertaken on the mission of Nehemiah highlighted as the goal in the first section. There is a tremendous contrast shown between those who are a part of the solution and those that are a hindrance to the solution. On the one hand there are those that help, i.e. the priests and even women doing construction and those that prove to be an obstacle to progress, unity and faith, i.e. the nobles. That there are these opposing groups is far from unexpected, that is most often the case. What is remarkable in this narrative is how they overcome these obstacles. This is what still stands as a monument to best practice.

These people focused their attention on the source of true success, God. This did not mean that they did not work, sweat, toil and use all the gifts God gave them. They did all of this, but they recognized that even with all of this, the most



important key to success was God. When problems arose they sought solutions, but most of all they sought the favor of God. They did not simply complain and wring their hands, they worked, sweat, and sought the will of God in wisdom and faith. They did not seek the help of earthly authorities that were at their disposal. Perhaps they understood that credit should go to God and if he chose to use those authorities he would, but they understood it was better for God to find the solution than for them to propose one to God. How much could we learn from them?

They were willing to sacrifice greatly for what was right and just before God. When there was a problem they sought the face of God. Note how even their law was from God and not from the opinions of the masses. They understand that they are to live as members of a Theocracy. God is in charge and not man. Nehemiah works with great transparency and makes it clear for all to see when

the problem is widespread and pervasive.

Nehemiah demonstrates that he is a man of integrity and truly fears God in his actions and in his lifestyle.

## **Main Points**

1. God is the true source of true justice and success.
2. Sin should be openly rebuked.
3. The word of God is the source of administering our relationships with each other.
4. Worship of God is to serve God.

# Questions

1. When you think of priests, what kind of work do you think of them doing?
2. How significant do you think it is for it to be recorded that the priests worked on the wall? What message are we to get from this?
3. Why do you think Nehemiah reports that the nobles would not help in the rebuilding of the wall?
4. What do you think this part of scripture teaches us about how to handle problems?
5. What do you think the significance of Shallum's daughters helping with the rebuilding of the wall is?
6. Why do you think the rebuilding of the wall so enraged Sanballat?
7. How should we deal with people today who react in a way similar to Sanballat?

8. How should we deal with confusion in the church?
9. How important is unity in serving God?
10. When the church is victorious in something how should we glorify God?
11. When we encounter obstacles what should be our first response?
12. How should the church deal with danger?
13. What role should wisdom play in the church?
14. What do we learn about the role of scripture among the people of God from this section?
15. How should this story affect our daily life?