

Nehemiah - Volume 2

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Preface

This second volume on the book of Nehemiah underlines again the fact that he was a most remarkable and godly leader of the people of God. He has to deal with opposition from without as well as discouragement from within the Lord's people, but he remained steadfast and faithful to God through it all. Indeed, he had the privilege of witnessing a real revival of Biblical religion amongst the people through the instrumentality of the Word of God as lives were changed. While this gave him joy there was also much that caused him distress and disappointment. But he remained totally committed to the work of God which he undertook using the Bible as his compass and guide, and he served God with diligence to the very end.

Again I am indebted to Philip Grist for his help with the *Sound Words* radio programmes that this book is based on. Philip has been a close personal friend and colleague in the work of the gospel for almost 40 years and it is always a joy and a privilege to work alongside him in the Lord's service.

My prayer is that the Lord will use the contents of this book first to bring glory to his name, second to strengthen and direct Christian believers as they seek to serve Christ, and third to speak to those who do not yet know Christ and to bring them to trust in him.

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November 2011

Chapter 1: Nehemiah Helps the Needy amongst God's People: Nehemiah 5:1-19

Introduction

Both the Old Testament and the New emphasise the need to show compassion to the poor and needy. The commandment in Leviticus 19:18 to

"...love your neighbour as yourself..."

is repeated in the New Testament and expanded on in various ways, one of which is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians. We read in Galatians 6:10,

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

The Lord's people are to be known by their concern and care for all people, especially their fellow believers. Indeed, one of the early sayings that others used in the Roman empire of the early years of the Christian Church was, *“Those Christians, how they love one another.”* And it has always been the case that God expects all those who trust in and follow him to behave in this way, especially to those who belong to him. The company of God's people are to be a truly loving community. This is a great challenge to all believers, and we have to confess that we do not always do as the Lord has instructed us, and that was an issue which Nehemiah discovered during the building work of the walls of Jerusalem. While the people were working together as a united team, which was highly commendable, some were sadly lacking in other areas of their lives as a community of God's people and Nehemiah was called to do something about it.

By way of background we need to appreciate some of the pressures placed upon the Lord's people by virtue of the fact they were under Persian dominion led by king Artaxerxes whom we met in Nehemiah 1 & 2. There would be regular taxes to pay the king on their fields and vineyards with very little ever coming back to benefit their community. We also know that during the Persian period inflation was very high and it is estimated prices increased as much as 50%. We also know that the governor of each of the provinces of the empire also had the right to claim all the food he needed for himself and those working under him from the people. Life was to say the least

economically very tough. Then added to all of this there was a famine which placed even more burden on the people (v3). These were ideal situations for the people of God to work together to help relieve each other's difficulties because they brought opportunities for doing good. However, sadly for many, this was not happening and their circumstances were made worse, by of all people, their fellow countrymen, other Jews.

1) The Distress Many Were Experiencing. v1-5

News reached Nehemiah that deeply saddened his heart. Various numbers of the Lord's people were in great poverty and misery, and their wealthier brothers were exploiting this immensely. First we are told they needed to purchase grain to feed their families, but they did not have the money to do so. We read in v1-2,

“Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.’”

The seriousness of the situation is emphasized by the mention of the wives also feeling the difficulty so much that they joined their husbands in protesting their plight. They desperately needed help but were not receiving it from those who could have helped them. Then we are told that those who did possess some land were forced to

effectively sell it to feed their families because the famine was so severe. We read in v3,

“Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’”

It was a case of the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer during this time of economic crisis. We also need to remember that in the Old Testament such famines were considered a sign of God’s displeasure with the people (see Isa 51:19; Jer 14:13-18; Amos 4:6), but we have no more details. Then added to all this those who possessed fields and vineyards had to pay the king’s tax and the only way they had been able to do this was to sell their children into slavery. We are told in v4-5,

“Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.’”

Often when money was borrowed family members were used as a guarantee that the money would be paid back, but failure to do that meant they were sold into slavery. Those who had lent the money also had their own children (see

‘our sons are as good as theirs...’) so should have responded with considerable compassion, but they failed to do so. It was hardly the vision of a caring society and many families were in deep distress. Indeed, this situation struck right at the heart of their unity as the people of God. Whereas the persecution the people had previously experienced came from outside the people of God, this was an attack from within the people of God and posed a threat to the whole rebuilding work. We are reminded that sadly the devil can use believers to hinder the work the Lord has given his Church to do by breeding discontent and discouragement and division. If you for any reason question that the devil could work in this way remember how he did this using the apostle Peter when he disagreed with Jesus who had just told his disciples he was going to die. We are told what Jesus’ response to Peter was in Matthew 16:23,

“Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”

Therefore, how much Christian believers need to watch and guard their own hearts to ensure they are not like this.

2) The Action Nehemiah Took. v6-13

a. Nehemiah’s first response. v6

Nehemiah's immediate response to receiving this news is most instructive (v6),

“When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.”

This really disturbed him deeply. This is significant for a number of reasons. First, the picture we have of Nehemiah up to this point is that he was not an impulsive man but rather thoughtful and careful about anything he did, and so to find him reacting so rapidly with anger helps us to appreciate how wrong this situation was. It has been suggested and is probably correct that this situation almost certainly existed before Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, but he was not made aware of that initially. His anger also shows us the loving concern he had for those who were suffering. Secondly, we learn that not all anger is sinful. Indeed Paul taught the Ephesian believers concerning this when he quoted from Psalm 4:4. We read in Ephesians 4:26,

“In your anger do not sin...”

There is such a thing as righteous indignation. Indeed, we have examples of it in the Lord Jesus himself. Mark tells us how on one Sabbath day a man with a withered hand was there and some of those present were looking for a way to accuse Jesus of doing wrong on the Sabbath day by healing the man. This is what is recorded in Mark 3:4-5,

*“Then Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they remained silent. **He looked round at them in anger** and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.”*

Another example of righteous anger is seen when Jesus saw the necessity to cleanse the temple in Jerusalem. His actions were very strong, but clearly his response was so right because those in the temple were misusing it and therefore dishonouring God. In his Gospel John describes what happened in John 2:13-17,

“When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!’ His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

And it is exactly this kind of reaction we have from Nehemiah and it was so right as these dear people were being exploited. There are injustices in our world today

which should equally stir the hearts of Christian believers to be angry for the right reason. Here are some examples. When we hear of children being abused verbally, physically, sexually and emotionally, or the elderly being neglected, surely we must be angry. When we hear of those today who go hungry and face starvation when in other parts of the world vast quantities of food is wasted, surely again we must be angry. When we hear a disabled man in a wheelchair is brutally attacked and robbed, which I heard of recently, surely we must be angry. When we hear that in many places slavery is still practised, we must be angry. When we see the Lord's people lacking in care and compassion for their needy brothers and sisters in Christ, we must be angry. When we see the way that Satan has blinded the eyes of so many people so that they do not believe the gospel and follow Christ but continue down the broad road to destruction, surely we must be angry. And no doubt there are many other things we could add to this list.

We do, however, need to issue a word of warning and caution here. Anger, of course, is something we need to be very careful about because it is so easy to let our anger boil over into loss of temper which is never right. (See Proverbs 16:32.) If we are angry for the right reason then it should lead us to seek to rectify the situation as much as we can, and this is something Nehemiah did.

b. Nehemiah brings everything out into the open. v7-8

Nehemiah's initial righteous anger did not lead him to an outburst of uncontrollable and hasty words. It made him realise this problem had to be dealt with speedily as failure would only make matters worse. He did not lose his temper, but true to his character we are told in v7 that he pondered these things in his mind. He thought carefully and no doubt prayerfully about the situation. What was happening was clearly wrong, so he first gave time to consider what needed to be done to rectify the situation, and it appears it did not take him long to realise what the situation needed. And we must add it took considerable courage on Nehemiah's part to deal with the difficulty. We read in v7,

“I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them”

A number of additional pieces of information come out in this verse which help to give us a fuller picture of the situation. First, those with the most blame were the nobles and officials, the leaders of the people! Men who should have known better. Second, those who had lent money were charging interest – usury – on it, which was clearly prohibited among the people of God. We read in Exodus 22:25,

If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a money-lender; charge him no

interest.” (See also Leviticus 25:35-36, Deuteronomy 23:20)

The explicit instruction from the Lord could not have been clearer, but these commands had not been obeyed. The whole spiritual standing of those who had been guilty was in question for they should not have done this. But lest we be too quick to point a finger at others we need to consider our own hearts, because which of us has ever obeyed the Lord perfectly in all things, and perhaps have even selfishly used others for our own ends. However, this rebuke was not enough for Nehemiah, because this was such a large problem it needed widespread exposure and correction so he called a large meeting of the people (v7b). With the company gathered Nehemiah publicly exposed the wrong that was being done, and added even further details for us in v8,

“As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.”

What the law of God did permit was for a poor person to become the hired servant of another Israelite but not their slave. Leviticus 25:39-43,

“If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a

temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers. Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.”

Nehemiah and others with him had been instrumental in buying back Jews who had been sold to Gentiles thus gaining their freedom from slavery. But these rich Jews were now selling their poorer brothers back into slavery and gaining financially from this transaction, and Nehemiah and others were having to buy their freedom again! The whole situation was outrageous. These were God’s people, who claimed to have been redeemed by the Lord, and yet they disregarded his clear instructions and also their fellow Jews for whom they should have cared deeply. They should have looked for ways to help their needy brothers, but instead only wanted to make money out of them. And Nehemiah publicly exposed this sin because it was a public sin being done openly. The response from those guilty is most telling – they were speechless. They did not have a single word to say for there was no defence they could bring because they were guilty for all to see. Their silence indicated their shame.

c. Nehemiah’s reasoning with the people. v9-11

Nehemiah had not finished with them yet as there was more that needed to be done. He did not berate them, but spoke plainly and with amazing graciousness. This did not mean he was going back on what he had already said, but he was wisely giving those concerned time to consider their wrong doing and to repent, putting it right. So he began with a clear statement in v9a,

“So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right.’”

He came straight to the point, they were wrong. He put his finger right on the spot so that they would fully appreciate their guilt. They should have been compassionate, but were cold hearted and indifferent to the obvious needs before them. But then he reasoned with them with much wisdom by asking them a searching question in v9b,

“Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?”

Like a careful doctor who exposes the tumour, Nehemiah also began to suggest the remedy, but he did so in a way that was designed to make them think through things for themselves. He questioned their whole relationship with God. It is significant to note that he did not treat them as outcasts but as brothers who knew the same God but who had erred. This is reminiscent of what Paul wrote many years after Nehemiah in Galatians 6:1,

“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”

Nehemiah’s point was that their love and respect and reverence (see v15) for the Lord should have really governed their behaviour and not their greed for money and self profit. They should have been aware of God’s majestic holiness, but they had clearly lost sight of that. Those who truly love and fear God will inevitably love their neighbour too. Sadly these people had little respect for the Lord and it was seen in their disrespect for their poorer brothers. Stan Evers has written:

“The person who possesses the ‘fear of God’ remembers that his treatment of other people will be assessed by God on the Day of Judgement.”

And Nehemiah added something which indicated their sinful behaviour had a much wider effect than they had realised because even the Gentiles who opposed the whole rebuilding work would criticise them. The unbelieving world is very quick to spot hypocrisy in the lives of those who profess to follow the Lord and will use that to ridicule the Lord’s people and dismiss our dear Saviour himself. To avoid this happening we need to seek the Lord’s help in prayer so that our lives will commend him to others and not repel them from him. There is an old saying which goes like this, ‘No man is an island.’ What it means is that all that we are and do has an effect on others, and therefore

the Lord's people especially need to watch all that we do with carefulness and pray for the Lord's grace not to dishonour his name.

Using his own example and that of others Nehemiah told them what they need to do in v10-11,

“I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.”

Nehemiah did not prohibit the giving of loans to needy Jews as he himself and others had been doing that, but they did not exact interest from them. The only right course of action was for those guilty to return all that they had taken from their brothers down to the hundredth part! Greed was something which grieved the heart of God, and so that needed to be replaced by an attitude of compassion and generosity.

d. The repentance produced. v12-13

Nehemiah's direct and wise instruction produced the positive effect that he had desired. We read in v12a,

“‘We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.’”

How good this was to see. To reinforce it, Nehemiah made them take an oath and he added a very graphic illustration in v12b-13a,

“Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!’”

All of this helped to reinforce the seriousness of the sin that had been committed and also the seriousness of the obedience that was being promised. Those taking the oath were putting themselves under God's judgement if they failed to be totally honest and compassionate in their behaviour from that time on. It was a complete turnaround that gladdened the hearts of all who witnessed it and which is recorded in v13b,

“At this the whole assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.”

What had been potentially a disastrous situation was rescued and all present acknowledged the Lord had brought this about. And we have that lovely closing sentence,

“And the people did as they had promised.”

How precious that is. Here were a people who, though through their carelessness had succumbed to greed and insensitivity, were none-the-less truly the Lord’s and who humbly repented and changed their lives accordingly. Their lives produced the evidence, the fruit, that they really did fear the Lord.

e. The Testimony Nehemiah Made. v14-19

This somewhat sad chapter ends with a testimonial about Nehemiah’s consistent behaviour over a long period of time. What it tells us is that Nehemiah was not the kind of leader who made demands on people he was not prepared to submit to himself. The story is told of a school teacher who had rebuked a pupil for saying something wrong. A short time later the boy heard the teacher speak in exactly the same way, so he protested. The answer he got back was not one designed to gain the pupil’s respect for his teacher because he said, ‘Boy, you do what I tell you, not what I do!’ – a clear case of hypocrisy if ever there was! Well, Nehemiah was not like that. He led from the front

and set a godly example. He was fully aware of the huge financial burden that lay upon the Jews from the Persian government and which had been the cause of the distress which was dealt with in the beginning of Nehemiah 5. We also learn from these closing verses that he was governor in the land of Judah for 12 years, so what is being described was not a momentary thing but his consistent practice. As governor he had the right to make his own demands on the people for his upkeep and that of his own workforce in running the country on behalf of the Persian king. Indeed he tells us that many previous governors had done just that, making the burden even greater to bear, taking 40 shekels of silver plus food and wine. But Nehemiah feared God himself and deliberately did not take the same approach. We read in v14-16,

“Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.”

What we have in these verses is the delightful testimony of a man who stood out as profoundly different from the world in which he lived. He was a truly godly man who did all in his power to lighten the burdens which his fellow Jews were under. And the reason for his course of action is simply described as (v15),

“...out of reverence for God...”

The relationship with God over which he questioned those who had previously exploited the poor, was something he took to heart in his own life. He loved and trusted in and served the Lord, and therefore he could not disregard the Word of God which was so clear about the need to show mercy and compassion to the Lord’s people in need. The challenge Nehemiah brings to us is this, do we stand out as different from the world around us which is self-centred and greedy and covetous? Are we kind and thoughtful and compassionate? Do we have the mind of Christ? Remember it was said of Jesus that he went about doing good (Acts 10:38). Nehemiah did just that. He devoted himself not to personal gain, but to doing the will of God by rebuilding and repairing the walls of Jerusalem, and beyond that he did not acquire any land for himself. He served the people and did not exploit them. This is made all the more striking when we consider that he was responsible for entertaining and providing for so many other officials and nobles and visitors, which was not inconsiderable. We are told in v17-18,

“Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.”

His food bill was an enormous one, but he paid it out of his own pocket and not from anything he could have exacted from his fellow Jews. This indicates that his time in royal service had made him a wealthy man, but he never once gave in to the temptation to make money his god. How he challenges all of us whether we have much or little; we should still have a generous heart that desires to use all that we possess for the glory of God. He used what God had given him for God’s glory and the good of others. Remember Jesus said in Mark 9:41 that even giving someone a cup of water in his name would not lose their reward.

The chapter closes with a brief prayer from Nehemiah to the Lord in v19,

“Remember me with favour, O my God, for all I have done for these people.”

Nehemiah knew he needed the Lord constantly and was utterly dependant on him and his grace each day of his life.

So he is found, as he is so often in this book, seeking the Lord's favour and mercy for without it he could not go on. How we need to have that same attitude of total dependence on the Lord, for without him we can do nothing. (See John 15:5)

Chapter 2: Further Opposition Overcome: Nehemiah 6:1-14

Introduction

One of the lessons the Bible teaches us about Satan, the great enemy of God and his people on earth, is that he is both a relentless enemy and a cunning foe. By relentless we mean that he never gives up in his attacks on the Lord's people and work in the world. He comes again and again, and does so as long as believers are alive. By cunning we mean that he will use all kinds of approaches to hinder and tempt the people of God from serving the Lord as they should. We see this in a number of the graphic descriptions the Bible uses to describe his attacks. Peter, who knew this only too well from his own experience, described the devil in this way in 1Peter 5:8,

“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

Whereas on a different occasion Paul gave us a completely different description in 2 Corinthians 11:14,

“And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”

These two descriptions – ‘a roaring lion’ and ‘an angel of light’ – help us to see that the devil will use a variety of means in his attempts to hinder the work of God in the world. While we know he cannot succeed and is already a defeated foe (see Heb 2:14-15 and 1 John 3:8), this does not stop him attempting to hinder us in all sorts of ways. We have already seen how Nehemiah and the people of God had come under attack from the opposition raised by men like Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and others (see Nehemiah 2 & 4). These individuals were really the agents of the devil in their opposition, although they were probably totally unaware that the devil was using them in that way. Those attacks were made against the whole company of the Lord's people to discourage their hearts and thus hinder and if possible stop the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. As we come to Nehemiah 6 we discover the opposition arising again. This illustrates the relentlessness of the devil's attacks through the human agencies mentioned. But this time the approach is different because it is targeted at Nehemiah himself, illustrating the different approaches that the enemy of souls uses to hinder God's work. We can see the reasoning behind this because Nehemiah was the leader of the work being done for the Lord. If the leader could be stopped then there was every

likelihood that the people would be so disheartened that they would give up the work also. We will also see that there was much cunning in the approaches made by these opponents of the Lord.

1) Nehemiah Resists the First Attack. v1-4

This phase of opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls came because of the success of the work. We read in v1-2,

“When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates— Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message...”

In spite of the previous opposition and the internal problems amongst the Jews we saw in Nehemiah 5, the work steadily progressed until all the breaches of the wall were closed. This was a remarkable indication of the Lord's blessing on those who laboured so faithfully and who had done so in complete dependence on the Lord (see 2:20 & 4:20). Those previous attempts to ridicule and demoralize the workers into ceasing failed. Remember some of the taunts these enemies had made previously. They had claimed the builders were weak and feeble and that the damage done to the wall would be too much for the Jews to correct (4:2). They had also said that even if they did rebuild, their work would be so poor that a fox would be able to topple the wall they were attempting to build

(4:3). Well, these opponents were proved to be thoroughly wrong, to their great embarrassment. It is not surprising then to discover they were not at all pleased with the progress made. Two of the men, Sanballat and Geshem sent a message direct to Nehemiah, but it was a rather vague message. We read in v2a,

“Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: ‘Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.’”

Ono was an area about 7 miles south east of the coastal town of Joppa in the most western area that had been repopulated by those exiles who had returned to the land. On the surface the request seems harmless enough, but no reason was given as to why he should meet with them in this place. Some have suggested that under the guise of making a peace treaty with him their real intention was to kidnap and kill him. While the text does not specifically say this it is highly likely because of the reason Nehemiah gives us for refusing to comply with their invitation in v2b,

“But they were scheming to harm me...”

Nehemiah realized what their evil purpose was behind this invitation and so he took appropriate action by replying very firmly in v2b-3,

“But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: ‘I am carrying on a

great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?’”

Precisely how Nehemiah came to the conclusion about their evil design we are not told. It could have been that someone heard of this and warned him, or it may have been his own assessment knowing how they had responded on previous occasions. The way he came to this conclusion is in some ways immaterial, the most important point is that the Lord overruled so that Nehemiah knew what they were planning. And Nehemiah’s reply shows us how committed he continued to be to the task the Lord had given him to do. He resolutely refused to desert this important work even though it was nearing completion – only the gates needed to be hung. He also spoke very firmly to these two men showing he considered the Lord’s work far more important than the distraction they were attempting to be. That commitment and dedication to the Lord’s work is something all Christian believers should display in their lives, and not be distracted from serving God by things of lesser importance. We need to remember the challenges Jesus has made upon us. We read in Luke 9:23,

“Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”

And this challenge is found in Luke 9:62,

“Jesus replied, ‘No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.’”

Discipleship means being totally committed to the Lord Jesus Christ because he was totally committed to saving us, as his death on the cross clearly indicates. We owe him so much that full commitment is the only fitting response to him. How this rebukes the excuses we sometimes make for not serving him. It might be refusing to attend our Church prayer meeting or the times of worship and the study of the Bible, or being unwilling to share the gospel with others. There are a whole host of things we can easily neglect to our shame. Well, Nehemiah really does challenge us because his life was under threat but he did not give up the work the Lord had given him to do until it was complete.

Now with such a response from Nehemiah you would have thought Sanballat and Geshem would have left him alone, but to think like that we would be wrong. We are told in v4,

“Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave the same answer.”

They were relentless and determined not to give up easily. But equally, Nehemiah was even more resolute than they were because he was serving the Lord, so refused to give in

to them. All this reminds us again of the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. We find these words in Matthew 10:22,

“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

Nehemiah stood firm to the end, even though these enemies tried to divert him from his God given task.

2) Nehemiah Resists The Second Attack. v5-9

Having failed to get Nehemiah to give up the work, they then tried to intimidate him by rumour and false accusation. Sanballat sent his messenger a fifth time to Nehemiah, but this time he had an open letter from him. Normally letters were written on scrolls of papyrus or leather and when rolled up were tied and sealed which indicated their authenticity and confidentiality. Being an open letter it was available for anyone to read, and that was quite intentional because Sanballat was spreading a false rumour hoping to discredit Nehemiah with his accusations. The contents of the letter really accused him of treason against the king (v6-7),

“It is reported among the nations — and Geshem says it is true — that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a

king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.”

We know already that this was completely wrong because in actual fact the king had authorised Nehemiah to conduct this building work and he had letters to that effect. Nehemiah had no intention whatsoever of taking the throne of Judah and neither did any of the Lord’s people working with him. The whole approach was a fabrication and a lie, but therein lay its subtlety, because Sanballat knew that if such a thing got back to king Artaxerxes then those guilty would be executed. Again we can see behind all of this lay the devil’s malice, because Jesus described him as the father of lies in John 8:44. We must say that even though it was totally unfounded, to receive such an accusation would have been most unsettling to say the least. Many of the Lord’s people have suffered from unjust accusations, and again that reminds us of another description the Bible gives us of the devil in Revelation 12:10, namely, that he is the accuser of the brethren. However, again we see Nehemiah’s complete determination not to be side tracked by this false accusation because he knew the truth and had committed his way to the Lord. Nothing would make him forsake the task the Lord had entrusted to him. Knowing this makes Nehemiah’s response in v8 something we have come to expect of this godly man,

“I sent them this reply: ‘Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.’”

Nehemiah tells us what was obvious to him about this in v9,

“They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.’”

This shows us the measure of his godly discernment, and that he fully understood their intimidation tactics and was not going to be distracted by them. Interestingly and importantly Paul wrote in two of his letters about the scheming approach of Satan whose influence lay behind these attacks, the first of which was in his second letter to the Church at Corinth where he was dealing with the need to forgive a Church member who had sinned but subsequently repented. Satan was trying to make a division in the Church over this, but Paul recognised that and intervened by urging the Church to show forgiveness. This is what he wrote to the Church in 2 Corinthians 2:10-11,

“If you have forgiven anyone, I also forgave him. And what I have forgiven – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

The second reference is in his letter to the Ephesians when he wrote about the spiritual warfare that all Christian believers are engaged in against the powers of darkness under the leadership of Satan. We read in Ephesians 6:11,

“Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”

The devil is a very crafty enemy, but God is greater and wiser and more powerful, and here in Nehemiah he completely frustrated all the opposition that was raised against his people and himself. As so often through this book Nehemiah turns to the Lord in prayer as at this time and it is recorded in v9c,

“But I prayed, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’”

It is only a short prayer but a delightful prayer none-the-less because it tells us so much about Nehemiah. First, he knew he was completely dependent on the Lord for the ability to accomplish this great task God had entrusted to him. All the success so far experienced in the rebuilding work and the ability to overcome their enemies was all down to the Lord and his grace and mercy and help. Nehemiah was not a man full of his own importance nor a proud boaster of his own achievements, but a humble servant of the Lord who gave all the glory to God. Second, as Nehemiah considered the work still to be done, his desire to finish the work was undiminished and so he sought the Lord’s strength to continue. This reminds us of something Jesus once taught his disciples in John 15:5,

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Without Christ, no Christian believer today can accomplish anything that will bring glory to God, and so we also need to depend on him every single day, just as Nehemiah did.

3) Nehemiah Resists The Third Attack. v10-14

By now we might be tempted to think that because these different attempts to hinder God's work had been so clearly defeated that the Lord's people would be left alone to carry on the work. However, that was not the case and to think like this would be to make a big mistake. A new opponent comes on the scene whose name was Shemaiah. We know little about him except his father and grandfather's names. The fact that he had access to the temple may indicate he was a priest, which would certainly be the case if he is the same man named in Nehemiah 10:8. However what it does tell us is that he was a friend of Tobiah and Sanballat (see v12) which helps us to see what lay behind his approach which is described in v10,

“One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, ‘Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.’”

We need to note that it was Nehemiah who went to Shemaiah's home because he was shut in. The precise

reason why this was so is not revealed, he may have been unwell. Some have suggested he was pretending to be in danger himself from Nehemiah's enemies to make what he was to tell Nehemiah sound more plausible. If he was a priest or spiritual leader among the people there was no reason for Nehemiah to feel in any danger. Again on the surface what Shemaiah said to him appears to be a quite innocent approach that had Nehemiah's best interests at heart to secure his safety, but it was all a devious trick. Shemaiah was no friend but an agent of the enemy as we shall discover. Nehemiah, however, was aware immediately that there was more to this than first appeared and he responded accordingly. We read in v11,

“But I said, ‘Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!’”

It would be quite permissible for Nehemiah to enter the temple area to take asylum at the altar according to Exodus 21:13-14. However, it was only permissible for the priests to enter the very house of God, often called the holy place and not an area where others were permitted to go. So immediately Nehemiah was aware that what Shemaiah suggested was in itself wrong, hence he refused to break the clear instructions of the Lord. He had no right whatsoever to enter this part of the temple. Indeed, such an action was punishable by death according to Numbers 1:51 and 3:10. So Nehemiah refused because he feared God rather than men. He again is quite clear and firm,

“I will not go!”

And we see here his great love for God and his humility as he submits his life to God’s Lordship. It is not always easy to do what God requires of us but it is always right. Nehemiah then tells us all that he was aware of what lay behind this subtle ploy to get him to disobey the Lord his God in v12-13,

“I realised that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.”

Clearly Nehemiah’s enemies intended to make him look both a coward and breaker of God’s law, but the Lord kept and protected his faithful servant and preserved him. The Lord has promised that he will always honour those who honour him (1 Samuel 2:30). Again Nehemiah turned to the Lord in prayer in v14,

“Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.”

He realised his life continued to be in danger and therefore he fled to the Lord for refuge.

You notice Nehemiah made reference to others who were opposed to him in the person of the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets. This is really a very sad addition because these were people who claimed to be the servants of the Lord, because that is what prophets and prophetesses were supposed to be. Sadly, all of these people had become opponents of the cause of God. This is a solemn warning to us today. Just because someone claims to be a leader in the Church of Christ using the title of pastor or minister or elder or whatever, if they are not faithful to the Bible, the Word of God, then they are not genuine servants of the Lord. Those who deny parts of the Scriptures, or undermine the gospel of God’s grace in Christ alone, or refuse to faithfully believe and teach the Bible’s doctrines are in fact enemies of God. Such people will solemnly have to answer to God on the Day of Judgement. May the Lord help us all to remain faithful to him to the very end.

We need to note also that Nehemiah’s enemies were a considerable number of people. Therefore how wonderful is his faithfulness to God, and how even more wonderful is the Lord’s protection of his dear servant. So we see the opposition to the work of God was overcome. This is an illustration of the old saying, ‘Man proposes, but God disposes.’ Then let our trust and confidence be in him, because he is the God who never fails those who commit their lives to him.

Chapter 3: The Building Work Completed And Established: Nehemiah 6:15-19

Introduction

There are times when the work of God in the world makes extraordinary advances in a very short period of time. Perhaps an obvious example from the Bible itself was the day of Pentecost when Peter preached to the large crowd in Jerusalem. Acts 2:41 tells us that three thousand people became Christian believers on that one day. Also there are numerous examples in the history of the Church when the Lord has sent revival to different parts of the world, where hundreds of people have come to repent of their sins and trust in Christ in a very short period of time. Whereas previously in an area conversions to Christ were relatively few and the work was hard, the Holy Spirit of God descended on a town and large numbers became believers in weeks. Such times of extraordinary blessing testify to the fact that God has been at work in a very special way. Well, we find a similar thing in the book of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

1) A Testimony to the Help of God. v15-16

You may recall Nehemiah 1 tells us how derelict the walls of Jerusalem were. Nehemiah's brother Hanani had visited Judah and Jerusalem and had come back to the Persian citadel of Susa. We read in Nehemiah 1:2-3,

“Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’”

The walls of Jerusalem were devastated and the gates of the city had been destroyed by fire. Then in Nehemiah 4 both Sanballat and the people of Judah graphically spoke of the large quantities of ‘*rubble*’. The work of rebuilding the city walls was a huge undertaking, and even more so when we remember that they had none of the modern machinery we have today to help in moving the large stones. So this whole project was an enormous undertaking. When we add to that the constant opposition they received this task was going to be far from easy. But we have noted all along in our studies that the rebuilding work to which Nehemiah and the people of God had committed themselves was viewed in two ways. First, it was considered as God's work and therefore they all worked very hard. Second, it was done in complete dependence on God for the strength and skill to accomplish the task. The frequent mention of prayer to God throughout helps us to realise this. Then it is all the more amazing and thrilling to see what we discover in Nehemiah 6:15,

“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.”

This massive civil engineering work was done in record time, just 52 days! These walls which had been in ruins for almost 150 years were finished in this remarkably short period of time. The date for this was 2nd October 445 BC. How do we account for such a successful and speedy outcome? The answer is that Nehemiah and those working with him received the help of God for which they had prayed. Indeed, this fact is stated for us in the next verse, and significantly it was those who had opposed the work who testified to this being done with God’s help (v16),

“When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of our God.”

This was an extraordinary advance in the work of God on earth, and unbelievers and ungodly people were compelled to acknowledge that fact. Previously these people had been so arrogant as they belittled the work being done and poured scorn on the builders, even threatening them at times, but they failed completely because God was at work. And no one is able to resist God and succeed, however powerful and influential they may be. Indeed, we are told that all of their self-confidence, all their arrogant pride, all their boasting wilted away as fear gripped their hearts as they saw for themselves how the work had been completed.

We have here a picture of how it will be for many on the Day of Judgement. Those who have opposed the work of God and boasted of their own achievements, and who have refused to submit their lives to him will find their self-confidence to be utterly useless, and fear will grip their hearts such as they have never felt before and it will last for eternity. Some dare to shake their fist at God now and claim they are going to argue with him when they meet him, but that could not be further from the truth. They will be utterly silent and will quiver with fear. Reader, if you are not yet a believer then you need to turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and mercy before it is too late and while you have the opportunity.

For the Lord’s people this is such an encouragement. We are reminded of Paul’s words in Romans 8:31,

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

And we are also reminded of Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18,

“...I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Yes, today there are those who oppose the work of the gospel of Christ, and who persecute and ridicule and assault Christian believers, but they will not succeed in the end. They may cause much grief and pain to the Lord’s children and do all manner of evil and wicked things, even

sometimes murdering those who follow Christ, but in the end they will see those whom they persecuted in the glory and joy of heaven, while they will be cast out into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. (See Luke 16:19-31.) Returning to Nehemiah the completion of the wall was a remarkable testimony to the goodness and help of God.

2) A Testimony to the Wickedness of Men. v17-19

Having seen the impression the rebuilding work had made on the enemies of Nehemiah we would have thought that having been thoroughly defeated in their feeble attempts to stop the work they would cease all of their opposition. Unfortunately that was not the case, and our attention is drawn in particular to the man Tobiah whom we have met previously in Nehemiah chapters two and four. We read in v17-19,

“Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

What is described here goes well beyond the initial opposition during the rebuilding work so Nehemiah

becomes like a perpetual target for attack, but this time in a very subtle way. We need to break this down a little to see just how pernicious Tobiah the Ammonite was in his opposition to Nehemiah. Tobiah had relatives inside Jerusalem as well as without. We are told that Tobiah had married into an influential family for his wife was the daughter of Shecaniah, and his son married the daughter of Meshullam who had himself helped in the rebuilding work according to Nehemiah 3:4 and 30. Already Nehemiah had learned that many of Jerusalem’s prophets were against him (Nehemiah 6:14) and now he discovers many of Judah’s nobles were also against him. Tobiah had infiltrated the ranks of those in leadership position amongst the Jews, so Nehemiah faced opposition from within the Lord’s people and from outside them. These nobles had sided with Tobiah and were under oath to him. The precise nature of this oath we are not told, but it may have been a pledge of loyalty to him because of business ties, or because of his connection by marriage to these influential families. Whatever the reason, they promised their allegiance to Tobiah, and either forgot, or perhaps more seriously, they ignored the trouble he had been to Nehemiah previously, the result being they reported to Tobiah every conversation Nehemiah had with them, acting as spies within the camp. They in turn used propaganda in Tobiah’s favour against Nehemiah claiming how good he was. How sad that those who were in leadership positions amongst the Lord’s people had been so easily led astray. It is a situation that teaches us all to guard our heart with constant vigilance lest we are led

astray by compromising allegiances with the enemies of the Lord's servants.

This chapter closes by Nehemiah telling us,

“And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.”

Again the precise content of these letters is not revealed, but from what we already know about Tobiah they would undoubtedly be full of false accusations and malicious innuendos. The fact that Nehemiah tells us these were intended to intimidate him, makes it clear that the Lord had enabled him to recognise Tobiah's aims and then resist them firmly. Again the Lord triumphed over the evil intended.

Another lesson that we discover from this chapter is that the enemy of souls is not only a relentless enemy who keeps on attacking the Lord's people, but he changes his tactics. When a direct confrontation did not succeed, he tried the more subtle letters of Tobiah to undermine Nehemiah. How much we therefore need to be aware of this and be watchful over our own souls lest we are led astray by the devil's numerous devices. Let us also not lose heart, because the God who protected and sustained Nehemiah is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be forever, our Father in heaven. Then let us determine to stay close to him, to be constantly prayerful, and to be those who read and obey the instructions of his word the Bible, and to walk closely with the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 4: Consolidating the Work: Nehemiah 7:1-73

Introduction

Having successfully rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, there was now the need to use the city for its primary purpose – namely the worship of God in the temple - and to protect it from any further enemy attacks. Nehemiah has already shown himself to be a man with considerable skills in administration, but he was much more than an administrator because he was a man dedicated to the service of the Lord. He was a man with spiritual priorities as well as practical abilities. We have already seen this in our studies so far, and it comes out again as he realised the need to consolidate and strengthen the work already done.

1) First Things First. v1

You may recall these words of Jesus in his famous sermon on the mount recorded in Matthew 6:33,

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...”

Jesus was teaching us always to put God first in our lives, and to centre all that we say and do and think around him. You may also remember on another occasion Jesus put this same principle like this in Mark 8:34,

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he

must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

The Lord and his will and purposes and his honour and glory should be the priority in everyone’s life, especially those who profess to be true believers. With this in mind as we come to Nehemiah 7 it is not at all surprising to discover that this is exactly what Nehemiah did. We read in Nehemiah 7:1,

“After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed.”

He appointed the right spiritual leaders over the people. The reason for this is that the main purpose of the restoration of Jerusalem was so that God could be worshipped in his temple. The adoration and praise of God came first before any other necessary and important aspect of their lives. Initially the gatekeepers were appointed to open and close the gates of the temple courts (see 1 Chronicles 9:17-19 and 26:12-19) and this is extended here to include the gates of the city (v3). The singers were those set apart to lead the singing of God’s praise, and the Levites were the tribe from whom the priests came and who shared in the teaching and pastoral work amongst God’s people. This aspect of their work when they assisted Ezra in teaching the law of God is mentioned in Nehemiah 8:7-8

“The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”

This itself is a reminder of how important it is to study the Bible and to be based on its teaching as it is the Word of God, and for us not to be governed by the mere ideas of men. What Nehemiah was doing in making all of these appointments was to show to the people of Israel that there is more to life than work. There is a vital spiritual dimension that we ignore to our peril. We all need a relationship with God that glorifies and honours him. So what was true in his own life, Nehemiah sought to encourage in the nation’s life. The Lord was to be first, and adequate time was to be devoted to praising and learning from him through those he had appointed to this task. So their lives were constantly lifted above the mundane things of this life to the eternal realities of knowing God and delighting in him and submitting to his Word. How important it is for us to maintain this same priority. Raymond Brown has helpfully put it like this:

“As they (i.e. The people of God) worshipped together, they could reflect on the meaning of life, the confidence of faith, the assurance of forgiveness, the primacy of love, the guarantee of strength, the horizons of hope –

treasures not available for purchase in Jerusalem's market places but, in the temple, their reality was confirmed."

Nehemiah was above everything else a godly man and he encouraged similar godliness in the lives of the Lord's people. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly secular and materialistic and we need to safeguard our relationship with God above all others.

2) Appointing and Instructing Leaders. v2-3

We saw in Nehemiah 3 that Jerusalem had leaders over some of its districts: Rephaiah in Nehemiah 3:9 and Shallum in Nehemiah 3:12. However, Nehemiah realised the need to appoint men over the whole city, and this he did. In Nehemiah 7:2 he tells us,

"I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do."

We met Nehemiah's brother Hanani in chapter one when he brought news of the plight of Jerusalem and its people to him, but we know virtually nothing about the man Hananiah, unless he is the man bearing that name who was one of the builders in Nehemiah 3:20. Choosing his brother might sound that Nehemiah was guilty of favouritism, but that would be quite wrong. His reason for

choosing him was because of his godly character. We note first he was a man of integrity, and how vital a quality that was and still is today. He was not corrupt, dishonest, open to bribery, nor self-centred or unjust in his dealings with others. He was so different from the other leaders in Israel who were exploiting their fellow Jews in Nehemiah 5. He was a reliable man who would not abuse his position of trust in order to make himself wealthy. We note second that he was a man who feared God more than most men do. Unlike those rich people in chapter 5 who oppressed the poor because they did not fear God (5:9, 15). He was the man who revered God in his heart and whose life corresponded to that in holiness and obedience to God's Word. What an important quality that should characterise all who are in positions of leadership among God's people. How the Church of Christ needs similar men today. Not men appointed because they are related to us so we favour them, but men of evident godliness and faithful character who love God dearly and serve him willingly and obey him thoroughly. Stan Evers writes:

"These verses alert us to the need of caution in the choice of men and women for service in the local church. Personal holiness is more important than eloquence or gifts. A holy Christian with few talents can have a good influence in a neighbourhood and be useful in the work of God. Christians in positions of authority should excel in godliness."

Then Nehemiah gave careful instruction to these leaders and gatekeepers about the opening and closing of the city gates in v3,

“I said to them, ‘The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, make them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses.’”

Nehemiah knew that they had not seen the last of their enemies so this instruction was very wise counsel. By waiting until the sun was high in the sky they would avoid the danger of enemies lurking in the darkness of early morning or late evening in order to make a surprise attack on the city when it was ill prepared. In addition those that did dwell in Jerusalem were responsible for keeping watch where they lived or worked. Thus the city was protected. Again we are taught to be alert and on the lookout for attacks that the enemy of souls would make on our own hearts, and to ensure we do not give the devil a foothold by our spiritual carelessness.

3) The Registration of the Lord’s People. v4-69

One thing that became obvious to Nehemiah now that the walls of Jerusalem were secure was that there were large areas that were still uninhabited. Some people were already living there but there was room for many more. We read in v4,

“Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.”

Nehemiah realized the need to rectify this situation which he does when we come to Nehemiah 11. However, as a first step he was guided to take a census of the people in v5,

“So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return.”

Then we are given a list of names which is almost identical to the list in Ezra 2, outlining the different people who returned after the Babylonian exile in the company of Zerubbabel. The purpose of this was to ensure that new inhabitants of the city were descended from its original inhabitants, but also that there would be no doubt at all that the Lord Jesus Christ was a genuine descendant of the tribe of Judah as prophesied (see Gen 49:10; Micah 5:2). A further reason was to maintain the Lord’s high demand for holiness among his people. This comes out in verses 64-65 where because some could not find any family records including them amongst those who served as priests, were excluded. This was not a vindictive decision against those affected, but a desire to ensure the priesthood was pure and not corrupt, thus ensuring their ministry was acceptable to God. All of this was to ensure the people obeyed God as

he had directed in the Scriptures, and to ensure that the nation remained separate from the ungodly peoples around them. All this was a vital preparation for the first coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we apply this to ourselves today who live after his first coming, we see the need for the Church of Christ and the individual Christian believer to live a holy and pure life as we prepare for his return. Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3:10-14,

*“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? **You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.**”*

4) The Support for the Lord’s Work. v70-73

God has ordained that those who serve the Lord are to be supported financially by the Lord’s people. Nehemiah tells us that in his time some of the heads of the families among God’s people, plus the governor himself – that is Nehemiah

- gave extremely generously for the support of the priests and those who would serve God in the temple. There was an overwhelming willingness to do this and they gave a considerable amount of gold and silver and garments for the priests. The items are listed in v70-72,

“Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 drachmas of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work 20,000 drachmas of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 drachmas of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests.”

Such generosity is similar to the gift Jesus received when he was anointed with expensive perfume in Luke 7:37-38,

“When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.”

She and Jesus were criticized for this as she was known as a sinful woman, but then Jesus told a parable about two debtors, one owing a lot of money the other only a little. Their master cancelled both debts and Jesus asked which of the two men would have loved him most, and the answer

was obviously the one whose debt was the greater. Jesus then applied this to the woman and gave the reason for her generosity in Luke 7:47,

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven— for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

This should be the same for all of God’s people. When we consider that it cost the death of God’s dearly loved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to obtain our forgiveness, surely any response to him that is not generous is demeaning to say the least. We owe him so much.

Returning to Nehemiah we have to say that it is sad that it only says ‘some’ of the heads of families gave in this generous way and not all. If we know Christ as our Saviour let us pray that God will give us generous hearts to support his work to the best of our ability. It is worth pointing out that we may not have any money ourselves, and no silver or gold like those mentioned here, but we can still be generous in the giving of our crops and our time and our abilities and our prayers. However if we do have money the Lord does expect us to use it wisely and generously in the support of his servants. We are told in Galatians 6:6,

“Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.”

Remember also the words of 2 Corinthians 2:7,

“...for God loves a cheerful giver...”

Chapter 5: The Ministry Of Ezra: Nehemiah 7:73-8:18

Introduction

The New Testament tells us that right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil. Throughout that time he had fasted and was very hungry, and the devil exploited this need to try and make Jesus sin and thereby be unable to save his people from their sins. This is how Matthew recorded this temptation, and we need to note carefully the answer which Jesus gave to the devil. We read in Matthew 4:3-4,

“The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’”

Jesus said that living by the Word of God is of far more importance than even eating food which we also need. In other words, doing the will of God is to be our priority. To make this possible the Lord has given us the Bible as a precious gift which tells us what his will is. The Bible is

also known as the Holy Scriptures (see 2 Timothy 3:15-16). So the people of God are to be diligent students of the Word of God. We are to be those who read the Bible and then obey it, or ‘live’ by it, to use the words of Jesus. What is significant is that Jesus was quoting some words from the Old Testament when he answered the devil’s temptation, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3. So this centrality of the Word of God was true for both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers, which includes God’s people today. It is not surprising then to discover, as we come in our studies in the book of Nehemiah to Chapter 8, that God’s Word was central to God’s people then. A great assembly of all the Jews was called so that the law of God could be read and explained to the people so they could live according to its instructions.

1) The People’s Request. 7:73b-8:1

This is what we read in Nehemiah 7:73b-8:1,

“When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.”

What is so encouraging about this gathering was that it was not something forced on the people, but something they did willingly and gladly and by their own initiative. They had

realised that they themselves needed to know what God’s Word required of them. They clearly loved God and desired to serve God for he had done so much for them. They wanted their lives to be pleasing to him, and they knew this could only be so if they knew and understood and obeyed God’s Word. They did this collectively, as well as in their individual lives. Indeed, we see here why in the Church of Jesus Christ today the Bible is to have a central part in all that we do. This is why the preaching and teaching of God’s Word is to be an essential part of our gathering together as God’s people. This is also why in our own personal walk with God we are to devote time to the reading and obeying the Bible.

In Nehemiah 8 we are introduced for the first time to Ezra the scribe. Ezra is first mentioned to us in Ezra 7 where he was a prominent leader amongst the exiles who first returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. The description we have of him in the book of Ezra tells us why his help was called for on this day described in Nehemiah 8. We read in Ezra 7:6 and 10,

“...this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given....For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”

He was well qualified to teach the Scriptures to the people, and really there was no one better they could have asked to

bring the Scriptures to them. We need to note that the part of the Bible referred to here was described as ‘*the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.*’ This was the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Today, we are in a much more favoured position because much more of the Bible has been given to us by God since then, but the principle is the same. God’s people today are to be those who discover the things that God has commanded us, so that we may obey them. We need to ask ourselves some very searching questions.

- i. Do you have such an eager desire to learn from God’s Word?
- ii. Are you someone who delights to read the Bible and hear it preached?
- iii. Are you a believer who neglects the Bible?

The people of Nehemiah’s day surely both challenge and encourage us to be those who love God’s Word and let it govern our lives. In fact, it should be our delight to discover what God has to say to us.

2) Ezra’s Response. 8:2-4

Simply put, Ezra did as the people requested. We read in Nehemiah 8:2-3,

“So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was

made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.”

It must have been a most encouraging time for Ezra to see so many people wanting to receive the Word of God. We note that in addition to men and women in the gathering, there were also

‘all those who were able to understand.’

This must refer to young people and children as well. Further, this crowd listened to the proclamation of God’s Word from daybreak until midday, around 6 hours. This was a most extraordinary gathering of so many who were eager to discover God’s will. How do we account for this? This was nothing but a work of the Holy Spirit of God in these people’s lives, and an indication of how much they really did love God. We need to make special note of the fact that Ezra faithfully presented to them the Word of God. And there is an absolutely vital lesson in his actions. He brought the people God’s Word – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else. He was faithful to declare what God had said. That is something we need to take on board into our own lives and Churches. We should only follow teaching which is faithful to the Scriptures, and must avoid adding to, subtracting from or substituting

instead anything else in the place of God’s Word. There are sadly today many who would do otherwise. There are those who claim to be leaders among the people of God who do not faithfully teach the Scriptures. Some deliberately attack its teaching by denying major doctrines, such as creation, miracles, the virgin birth, and the deity of Christ. We need to reject such and not follow them. This has been a problem down through the centuries. Many years before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah the prophet Isaiah had to speak out against such individuals and warn God’s people. We read in Isaiah 8:20,

“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”

And the New Testament warns us with just as much force about those who try to creep into the Church of Christ to lead his people astray. Consider 1Timothy 6:3-4,

“If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing.”

Peter warns us about false prophets in 2 Peter 2:1,

“But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even

denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.”

We also read in 1John 4:1,

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

The way to test if someone is a faithful servant of God is to compare what they say with what the Bible says. If they agree then we can rejoice, but if they do not we must lovingly but firmly reject their teaching and wherever possible seek to show them where they have erred. This needs much discernment because sometimes false teachers will actually use the Bible and quote from it, but usually they fail to place their quotations in the context in which they are found in the Bible. But Ezra was a true servant of the Lord who faithfully taught God’s Word alone.

3) The People’s Approach to Ezra’s Ministry. v4-8

a. They came to hear the Word of God in a spirit of worship.

We are told that a high wooden platform was built for Ezra to stand on so that all the people could see him and hear him. Such was the high regard the people had for the Lord and his Word, none of them wanted to miss anything that

Ezra was going to read to them. Ezra was also supported by men who stood by his side. We read in v4,

“Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.”

How good today when faithful pastors and teachers of God’s Word in the Churches of Christ have reliable men who stand with them, to support them and encourage the people to receive the teaching that Scripture brings to us. Ezra then began his great task, and the response of the people was quite remarkable and delightful. It is described in v5-6,

“Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”

Their whole approach was one of submission, delight, joy, and humility in the presence of God. They realised that the Scripture that was going to be brought to them came from the very throne of God itself. Therefore they were not to

take this in a careless or casual way, but with great earnestness and complete surrender. They both praised God and adored his name, bowing before him in reverence and godly fear.

We live at a time when the word ‘worship’ is often limited to the time when Christians sing God’s praises. Now that is, of course, an aspect of worship but only a very small part of worship. True worship centres not so much on what we say to God, but what he has to say to us and how we respond to that. When a Church gathers together if the singing takes up more time than the preaching from the Scriptures, then the priority is not Biblical. It is significant that when this great assembly of God’s people gathered there is no mention of singing at all, simply that they praised God and submitted to his Word. There is a very significant parallel to this in something Paul wrote in the New Testament. I am referring to Romans 12:1-2 which says,

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Worship is considered as the whole response of our lives to God by living holy and obedient lives, wherein even the

way we think is renewed by thinking Biblically, and by our entire lives being lived for God.

b. They came to hear the Word of God applied to their hearts. v7-8

As the Scriptures were read, there were capable men who then explained it carefully to the people, showing them what it means to live lives that were obedient to God's Word. Those given this task were the Levites who were set apart to help the people to understand and respond to the Word of God in the right way (v7-8),

“The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”

We do not have Levites today, but the Lord has raised up those in eldership positions in our Churches, known as pastors and teachers (see Ephesians 4:11) whose task it is to study and teach God's Word to his people. How thankful we should be when such gifted men are given to us by the Lord, and how we should pray for them and submit to the teaching they share from God's Word. Consider the exhortation of Hebrews 13:17,

“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

How careful such leaders need to be to make sure that they teach God's Word correctly. Writing to Timothy, Paul gave him this important instruction in 2 Timothy 2:2,

“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”

4) This Was To Be A Time Of Joy And Submission. v9-18

As so often happens when the Law of God is read, those who hear it find it exposes the wrong in their lives. People respond to this in different ways. Some get angry and rebel against what God has said to them through his Word and refuse to repent. A number try quickly to make excuses for their wrong behaviour, and try to diminish the significance of their sin and pretend it does not really matter at all, and they also refuse to repent. But others not only feel their guilt, but realise they have grieved God by their conduct and this causes them deep sorrow which leads to repentance. For them it is not sorrow because they have been exposed or caught out, but deep distress that they have offended God who is holy and just and gracious, and they long to put things right with him. It is this response

that we find amongst the Lord's people when Ezra brought God's Law to the people. Indeed, we are told that they began to weep which constrained Nehemiah and others to bring a word of encouragement to the people (v9).

“Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”

We may ask why they could rejoice when God's Word had made them aware of their sin? Stan Evers has put it like this,

“The weeping of contrition preceded the rejoicing of pardon.”

Although this day was a solemn and serious day that was ‘sacred to the Lord’; it was not to be a day of misery but gladness because the Lord God is a pardoning God. Indeed the people were encouraged to rejoice with great gladness and to share what they had with those who were poor. We read in v10,

“Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’”

And we must say there is nothing quite like the joy of knowing God has pardoned you, and it is right and fitting that we express that joy to him. Sometimes the Lord's people are slower to forgive themselves than God is to forgive them. We can so feel the weight of our guilt that we can find it hard to recognize that God has forgiven us, with the result we remain cast down. But this and many other passages of the Bible teach us that it is right and honouring to God when we praise and rejoice in his mercy and goodness to us. Remember Paul considered himself to be the very worst sinner, yet was able to rejoice that Christ Jesus was sent into the world to save him (see 1 Timothy 1:15). And it is the joy of the Lord which gives us the strength to overcome our sense of guilt because of his great grace to us, that grace seen supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. It is interesting that not only did Nehemiah and Ezra encourage the people to rejoice, but so did the Levites (v11),

“The Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.’”

So we can see that the Lord really did want them to be glad. And the people obeyed (v12),

“Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.”

How this experience continues to be enjoyed by the people of God today as he teaches us from his Word and gives us an understanding of it. Indeed, this is a mark of being a true child of God, in that prior to turning to Christ the Bible was in many ways a closed book to us. We may have read it but did not understand its spiritual significance, but after coming to Christ that is all changed and the Bible comes alive as God speaks to us when we read it. The Jews of Nehemiah's day did likewise and gave thanks to the Lord accordingly.

As they met on the second day again God's Word was central and they discovered something that they had neglected to do (v13-15),

“On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered round Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: ‘Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths’— as it is written.”

The feast of booths, or tabernacles as it is also called, was commanded by the Lord through Moses in Deuteronomy 16:13-5,

“Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing-floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your Feast— you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the Feast to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.” (See also Leviticus 23:33-44)

It was a feast that looked back to their deliverance from Egypt at the exodus, and also reminded them of the way their forefathers had wandered in the desert for 40 years. While the first Jews who returned from Babylon kept this feast (Ezra 3:4) it seems they did not build these temporary shelters called booths. Therefore the people began to put this right and submitted their lives to the Word of God. They had two weeks before the feast was to begin and so they made preparations throughout the land and built shelters in their streets and on their roofs, and in the courts of the temple (v16-17),

“So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their

courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.”

It was a very special time indeed, and another lesson that we see from this is that obedience to the commands of God does not bring misery but joy. This is something the New Testament reinforces in 1 John 5:3,

“This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome...”

As the people continued in this seven day feast again we find that the Word of God was central (v18),

“Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.”

The Scriptures became the guiding principle among them, and through these extra seven days of readings from them the people were thoroughly grounded in the fundamentals of their faith. And it is still the same today. We are taught in 2 Timothy 3:16-17,

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

So we see that the Bible is to be the at the centre of our personal lives and in our Churches. We move away from or neglect Scripture at our peril. As already mentioned we are to test every teaching we hear with the Scriptures and reject that which does not correspond to it. And we need to be careful to respond to God’s Word as the people did in Nehemiah 8. What better exhortation can we end this chapter on than the words of James 1:22,

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

Chapter 6: National Confession Of Sin And Promise Of Devotion: Nehemiah 9 & 10

Introduction

Chapters 9 and 10 of Nehemiah help us to see the remarkable revival that was taking place amongst the people of God of Nehemiah’s day. In chapter 8 Ezra read the Law of God to the people that is the first five books of the Bible. They had all gathered to learn what God had to

say to them. While, initially they were grief stricken as they realised how sinful they had been (8:9f), they were none-the-less encouraged to rejoice because this was a day in which they had come understand the Word of God, and that he is a forgiving God to his people. This was followed by them celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, and again Ezra read and expounded the book of the law to them.

As we come into chapter 9, the date is given to us as the 24th day of the same month, which was 30th October 445 B.C. The Day of Atonement would have taken place on the 10th day of the month and so the time was now right for the people to make confession of their sin to the Lord in humble sorrow and repentance, and this is what they did. In fact they went further, for they publicly committed themselves to serve the Lord with all their hearts. It was a most solemn day for it was a day of spiritual devotion and commitment to the Lord in true humility and earnestness. Chapter 9 records their confession of sin and chapter 10 their pledge of devotion to the Lord.

1) The People of God Confess their Sins. 9:1-37

Two issues stand out in this chapter as the people survey their whole history from the time of Abraham down to their own day. The first is just how regularly over the centuries the people of Israel forsook God by turning to a life of sinful disobedience to his revealed Word. The second is just how amazingly merciful God had been to them to forgive them again and again and again. As the chapter

opens we are told the people of Israel gathered together in Nehemiah 9:1

“...fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.”

This to us is perhaps not very familiar, so a short word of explanation will help. We know that often in the Bible fasting was associated with prayer and indicated the earnestness of the people approaching God in this way. The fasting and the wearing of sackcloth was a sign of mourning and deep sadness. This may be over the loss of a dear one as Jacob did in Genesis 37:34 when he thought Joseph was dead, or over the sins of the people as Ezra mourned in Ezra 10:6 and is called for in Joel 1:13-14. In Nehemiah 9 it was deep sorrow over the sins the Israelites had committed. The use of ashes served to accentuate this deeply felt grief, and Stan Evers suggests it was also a reminder of their mortality quoting Genesis 3:19,

“Dust you are and to dust you will return.”

All this was a sign of their deep humility before the Lord as they confessed their disobedience to God. These were not people pretending to be penitent, but people for whom genuine sorrow at having grieved God compelled them to approach him in this repentant manner. We read in v2,

“They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.”

There was no trying to hide their sin or disguise it or belittle it. Many try to do that because they have no real concept of who God is and what he is like, but Israel knew God as the Holy One of Israel, therefore it would have been an insult to his name if they had failed to confess their sins genuinely. There was plain, honest, contrite confession of it all. Verse 2 also tells us they had separated themselves from all foreigners. Now this was not a form of racism, but rather of spiritual purity because the foreigners around them did not worship the only true and living God, but various false gods and so could have no part in their worship. And there was a very significant order in the events of that day, for we read in Nehemiah 9:3,

“They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.”

The reading of the Scriptures made them aware of who God is and what he is like – that he is a holy God who cannot tolerate sin – and what they themselves were like, namely, guilty sinners. Those same Scriptures also taught them that God is a forgiving God to those who truly repent. The seriousness and genuineness of their confession was seen in that they stood for a quarter of a day to listen to the Scriptures – that is three hours – and they stood a further three hours to confess their sins and worship God. This was something that deeply affected the hearts of all involved, and preceded the prayer of the Levites from verse

5 onwards. One cannot help but think of others in Scripture who felt their sin greatly. Peter comes to mind when he denied his relationship with Jesus. We are told in Matthew 26:75,

“Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

Then there was David’s confession after his sin with Bathsheba in Psalm 51:1ff,

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

All of this teaches us what a serious thing sin is and how we should never consider it lightly as if it did not matter. It matters profoundly to God, and Christ’s death on the cross to deal with our sin tells us this more than anything. Therefore we should do all in our power to avoid it, relying on the help of the Holy Spirit, and when we do fall into sin to repent of it immediately. This was a revival of true godliness amongst the people of Israel that is a joy to read about. It is at this point that the Levites lead the people in

prayer. It is one of the longest prayers recorded in Scripture and although it makes a detailed confession of Israel's sins it begins on a note of assurance in Nehemiah 9:5,

“Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.”

They were called to praise God because although he is holy and cannot look on sin, he is also merciful to the repentant.

Really both of these qualities in God call us to be profoundly thankful to him.

The prayer itself is a summary of the history of Israel up to that present time which we shall simply survey.

- i. God is God alone and our Creator, and to be worshipped and praised v5-6.
- ii. God chose Abraham and promised him the land and kept that promise v7-8.
- iii. God is the God of the exodus from Egypt and led and guided his people v9-12.
- iv. God gave them his good law, especially the Sabbath and provided food and water for them in the wilderness and told them to enter the land v13-15.
- v. Israel rebelled, wanting in their arrogance to return to their slavery, but amazingly God forgave them and did not desert them even when they made the golden calf and worshipped it v16-

18. The reason is in v17 *“...you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”*

- vi. God sustained them through the 40 years of the wilderness wanderings, leading them, feeding them, clothing and protecting them v19-21.
- vii. God gave them the Promised Land, overcoming their enemies and giving them fertile land and plenty of crops v22-25.
- viii. But Israel rebelled again, rejected God's Word, killing his prophets who admonished them, so God gave them over to their enemies but when they called to God for help he rescued them v26-27.
- ix. Israel rebelled again, and were handed over to their enemies, but when they cried to God he heard them time after time and delivered them v28
- x. God warned them to keep his commands but they disobeyed persistently ignoring the prophets whom God sent in his patience to call them back to him and again they were handed over to their enemies the Assyrians and Babylonians, but God did not destroy them but was gracious and merciful v29-31.
- xi. They pleaded with God to view them with great pity for they were in great distress which they knew they deserved, God having been just in all that happened to them for their sins had brought

this on them, therefore they pleaded with God to be merciful to them v32-37.

This was the prayer of a people who were truly broken hearted and contrite in spirit. Years earlier Isaiah the prophet had written about this in Isaiah 57:15,

“For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives for ever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”

Stan Evers has written: *“When we feel the weight of our sin on our consciences we would do well to reflect on God’s promises to forgive our sins found in such passages as 1 John 1:9.”*

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

2) The People of God Commit Themselves to Serving God. 9:38-10:39

To reinforce the genuineness of their confession of sin the people also entered into a covenant with God to serve him faithfully. Their commitment is recorded in Nehemiah 9:38

“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.”

The names of all those who signed this agreement are listed in Nehemiah 10:1-28 with Nehemiah at the very top, again demonstrating his godly leadership and the consistency of his testimony. The people then bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Lord and his law in obedience. The promises they made to the Lord were in three main areas.

i. In the area of mixed marriages they made a promise.

They said in Nehemiah 10:30,

“We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.”

Again this was not racial discrimination but a spiritual requirement because the nations surrounding the Jews were idolatrous and did not worship the Lord. Therefore the instruction in God’s law about this was aimed at ensuring their faithfulness to him.

ii. In the area of the Sabbath they made a promise.

We read in Nehemiah 10:31,

“When the neighbouring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.”

In accord with Exodus 20:8 they were setting apart one day in seven for the cessation of work and to be dedicated to the Lord in worship and praise and giving heed to his Word. They even included the earlier commands in Leviticus 25:1-7, 20-22 and Deuteronomy 15:1-11 to give the land a rest for a year and to cancel all debts which was a generous provision from the Lord. They were promising to be merciful, and although Christians do not observe a seventh day Sabbath we still remember the Lord’s Day and we should certainly be merciful which is exactly what Jesus expects from his followers according to Matthew 5:7.

iii. In the area of maintaining the worship of God and the temple (Nehemiah 10:32-39).

These were areas which had suffered great neglect in previous generations and now the people were promising to give both generously, consistently and willingly to ensure the Lord was honoured as he should be. Money and provisions would be given from their crops and livestock etc. For believers today we learn that we ought also to give systematic support for the Lord’s work, especially in our own Church. Our pastors need to be supported as they give

of their time to the study of the Scriptures and to prayer and the visitation of the flock of God.

Putting these three areas together we see how dedicated the Jews were as they gave sacrificially to the Lord. Their commitment to him was very real and very precious. How they challenge Christian believers today to be truly committed to the Lord, even sacrificially as the people of Nehemiah’s day certainly were. Consider Paul’s exhortations:

Romans 12:1-2 *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.”*

May we be found faithful in these things, ever remembering that Christ gave his all for us when he died on the cross – such love demands my life, my soul, my all.

Chapter 7: Concluding Issues – Nehemiah 11-13

Introduction

The book of Nehemiah closes with three chapters detailing a number of issues that needed Nehemiah's attention. Some of these were very practical yet they all had spiritual significance.

1) Populating Jerusalem. Nehemiah 11

Up to this time it appears from Nehemiah 11:1 that the population of Jerusalem was quite sparse. This made the city very vulnerable from attack, and this was particularly important when we remember that the worship of God centred there because of the temple. This is brought out by the description of Jerusalem in v1 as the *'holy city'*. We are told that the leaders of the people settled there, and that this meant there was the need for others to live in the city. This would help in the city's protection and also help to maintain the spiritual life of the nation centred at the temple. The solution was to cast lots so that one in ten from the rest of the people could move into the city. This was a considerable sacrifice for them to up root their families and make this move. Precisely what these lots were is not disclosed, but we know from Proverbs 16:33 that in Old Testament times they indicated the trust the people had in the Lord.

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”

Here were a people who were eager and ready to submit to the will of God.

The question that often arises from this is should Christian believers today use lots to determine the Lord's will in our lives? There is only one reference to the use of lots in the New Testament and significantly it took place before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 1:26 and is never mentioned again. What seems evident from this was that the casting of lots was not something the early Church engaged in, and the reason was that the Holy Spirit clearly guided the Church and that he did so through the living and enduring Word of God. We now have the completed Scriptures so are in a much better position than the people in Nehemiah's day and this is where the Lord gives us instruction for holy living. Therefore it is to the Bible we should turn when seeking God's guidance, praying for the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Returning to Nehemiah 11, we are told of men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. It is not clear if this described only the one in ten men who were chosen by lots, or if it included them and others in addition. What we can say is that they were eager to serve the Lord in whatever way he wanted and seeing the need they were willing to make the move. These men did not have to be forced to do

this and did not grumble when the lot fell on them, but gladly gave themselves to do this for the Lord's sake. How they challenge us to serve Christ with a similar eagerness and willingness. We have so much more to motivate us than was available for these people because we have the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ as he laid down his life for us. What amazing love he has shown us, and surely the only fitting way to respond to his lavish mercy is to be eager to serve him. In a recent conversation with someone about their Church they explained how difficult it was to get anyone to do any of the jobs that the work of the Lord there required. Thankfully, these men of Nehemiah's day were not like that at all for they volunteered. We must ask ourselves this question: Do we show similar commitment to the Lord and his people? (See 1 Cor 16:15 & 2 Cor 8:5)

The remainder of Nehemiah 10 gives us the names of the different groups of people who settled in Jerusalem. These included the descendants of Benjamin and Judah (v4-7), a number of the priests who were responsible for the worship of God at Jerusalem (v10-14), Levites who assisted the priests and looked after the repair of the building (v15-18), and the gatekeepers (v19). In addition other priests and Levites lived in other towns and villages so as to ensure the people were instructed in the Word of God in these outlying places. It seems that the Persian king was particularly interested in maintaining the ministry of the singers in the temple (v22-23) and had regular reports of the state of affairs in the land (v24). Details of the other surrounding towns and villages follow (v25-36).

What is delightful to realise is that though there was this huge mixture of people from different tribes in Israel, they still served God together. This reminds us of some words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:9,

“For we God's fellow-workers.”

How good it is when brethren serve the Lord together, out of hearts that love him and each other deeply. Psalm 133:1 puts it like this,

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”

2) The Worship of God and Dedication of the Walls. Nehemiah 12

Chapter 12 opens with the names of the priests and Levites who had returned to the land some 90 years earlier in 537BC with Zerubbabel, verses 8-9 give us the names of the Levites at the time of the return from exile and verses 10-21 lists the priests of the next generation. Verses 22-26 gives us the names of the Levites in the days of Eliashib who was high priest when Nehemiah was governor of Judah (see 3:1). Special mention is made of the singers amongst the Levites and how their responsibility was to give praise and thanksgiving to God in the temple worship (see v8 and v24) and other duties. Quite clearly the worship of God was not some haphazard matter but something that was engaged in with care and thoughtfulness, being aware of the majesty and glory of

God. This ensured the people drew near to God with reverence and godly fear.

These lists of names were important to ensure the purity of the priestly line and also to engender the proper respect for these servants of the Lord in the people's hearts. A similar response is encouraged from Christian believers in Hebrews 13:7 & 17,

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith... Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

The time was now set for the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem in a ceremony of great praise to the Lord v27-47. The Levites from the entire country were brought to Jerusalem and a time of great joy in the presence of God followed. The first thing to note about this great event is that purification preceded anything else. We read in Nehemiah 12:30,

“When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.”

The reason for this is that God is infinitely holy but his people are contaminated with sin, and therefore those sins need to be washed away and God's people made clean in his sight. From the purification which took place in the time of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29 we can see that atonement for sin was made as animals were sacrificed and the people sprinkled with their blood. Only then could they approach the Lord to worship and serve him. It was only then that the praise that was due to the Lord was given.

Under Nehemiah's instructions the company assembled divided into two groups each with its own choir and musicians and half of the people in each group giving thanks to the Lord. As they ascended the city walls one group turned to the right while the other to the left. Eventually they all entered the Temple called the 'house of God' (v40f) where great sacrifices were offered and great thanksgiving to God was made. Nehemiah 12:43 tells us,

“And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”

It was a marvellous occasion where the Lord was praised for all the help he had given since the people had returned from exile and particularly during the hard work of rebuilding the city walls. The response of the people was to bring in their gifts for the Lord so that his work could

continue and his name honoured. We read in Nehemiah 12:44-47,

“At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.”

What a wonderful reaction to the Lord this was from the hearts of the people. His work could continue unabated as his servants were being properly supported to devote their time to this vital task. So both their worship and praise and their giving was done in accord with the Word of the Lord. Praise and provision went together. So today the Lord’s servants should be supported financially by the Lord’s people. A people who truly praise God will as a practical

outcome of such praise provide for those who minister to us in the Lord’s name. Stan Evers has written,

“The balanced Christian does not separate sound doctrine from good deeds.”

And that was certainly the case in Jerusalem on this day of great thanksgiving and dedication.

3) Decline and Reformation. Nehemiah 13

Nehemiah received a summons to return to Babylon (v6) after serving as governor for 12 years. We receive more details earlier in Nehemiah 5:14 which dates his return to Persia in 432/433 B.C.

There is an old proverb which states, *“While the cats away the mice will play.”* Cats are expert killers of mice and so when a cat is present mice usually stay out of the way, hidden from its sight and claws. However, when a cat is away the mice consider it safe to come out of hiding and they run about in broad daylight and do whatever they want to without fear of feline reprisals. The proverb is really applying that same principle to people. While there are certain figures present people behave well, but when those people are away they do what they like without restraint. Ask any school teacher and they will tell you that a normally well behaved class of students can erupt into an uproar when the teacher is out of the room! Well, sadly it was like that with Nehemiah and his absence from

Jerusalem. While he had been in the city great advances had been made for the cause of God. The city walls had been rebuilt and re-populated, the worship of God had resumed and the whole nation covenanted together to serve the Lord. Part of this was seen in what we noted above in that they provided for the priests and Levites so they could concentrate on the worship of God and the teaching of his people. As he returned to Persia, Nehemiah left Judah in a much healthier condition than when he first arrived. Exactly how long Nehemiah was back in Persia we cannot say, but what we can say was that in that short period of his absence things went downhill fast. He was away so some of the people did play, or more accurately sinned. So when he returned (13:6-7) he found a sad state of affairs again.

- i. Tobiah, his great enemy, had been given lodgings in the very temple itself (v4) and Eliashib the priest had colluded in this sinful arrangement (v5).
- ii. The offerings which were for the provision for the Levites had not been brought in so the Levites had been forced to leave their place of service in the Temple to go back to their own fields in order to provide for their support (v10).
- iii. The Sabbath Day had been seriously broken with wine presses operating and trading being carried on making the Sabbath like any other day instead of a day devoted to the worship of the Lord and rest (v15ff).
- iv. Many others had married wives from the ungodly surrounding nations which was strictly forbidden by the Word of God (v23-24) so that many of the children of

those marriages did not even speak the language of Judah so could not understand the Word of God.

All of this was quite disastrous and had occurred in such a short space of time, and stands as a great warning to us to guard our own hearts. Remember Paul's words in 1Corinthians 10:12,

“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!”

The whole nation was in a sad spiritual decline.

When Nehemiah returned, instead of being overcome with grief and depression, he set about reforming the situation.

- i. He threw Tobiah's belongings out of the temple and ordered the room to be purified (v8-9).
- ii. He rebuked the officials who had not ensured the offerings were collected and stored, and so the tithes of grain, new wine and oil were brought into the storerooms and Nehemiah placed trustworthy men to administer these (v11-13) ensuring the Levites could serve the Lord in the temple again.
- iii. He rebuked the nobles who had allowed the desecration of the Sabbath day, reminding them it was this very same sin which led to the judgement of God seen in the exile. Then he ensured the city gates were closed before the Sabbath began and warned those merchants who arrived to sell their wares that he would lay his

hands on them if they came again, giving charge to the Levites to purify themselves and to guard the gates to keep the Sabbath day holy (v17-22).

- iv. He rebuked those who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, even physically beating some and pulling their hair out (v25)! He clearly forbade any such marriages and reminded them that this was where king Solomon had sinned as he was led astray by foreign women (v26-27). Nehemiah exposed their terrible wickedness. They had been unfaithful to God. Even one of the sons of the priest Joiada who had married the daughter of Sanballat was rebuked and driven away because of his unfaithfulness to God. Then Nehemiah purified the priests of everything foreign, reassigning them to their jobs, and from his own pocket he provided wood and the firstfruits offering (v30-31).

Throughout this chapter we find Nehemiah praying. The first instance is in v14,

“Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.”

Again we see Nehemiah’s close relationship with the Lord who is ‘my God’. And really his prayers are a cry for the Lord’s help and approval of what he had done. Praying like this indicates that Nehemiah sought to put God at the centre of his own life and also of the people’s. His second prayer is in v22,

“Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.”

Here Nehemiah appeals for God’s compassion and pity, for he realises his own need of God’s mercy and strength to continue to put matters right amongst the people of God. His third prayer is different in v29,

“Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.”

This was his prayer after dealing with those who had married ungodly wives. He was simply asking God to deal with them as they deserved because of the great damage they had inflicted on the Lord’s work and people. Then finally he prays in v31,

“Remember me with favour, O my God.”

He ends his book with a plea to God for grace. And so the book which had prayer in Chapter 1 ends with prayer in this last verse. Nehemiah clearly was a consistent godly man who served God with integrity and who depended on God completely. May we know that same grace of God so that our lives will display the same faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ and his people.

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