

## A Brief Reflection on the Book of Nehemiah

We did verse-by-verse exposition of Nehemiah many years ago in Sunday School. For this lesson, I'd like simply to call attention to a few important ideas that jump off its pages that should instruct us in our walk with the Lord. Our focus here is the theological message of Nehemiah. The Church has the Old Testament as necessary Scripture for us to learn from the history of the Nation of Israel. That's because, although the Church Age is a different dispensation, and the elect of the church has the benefit of surpassing grace and blessing, the God of Israel is also the God of the church and His relationship with His beloved, elect people doesn't change.

The historical and canonical context of this Book is exceedingly important. The Nation of Israel had been thrown into exile because of persistent, unrepentant disobedience to God. Their idolatries and unrighteousness excited the wrath of God, so first the Northern Tribes were thrown off the Land (by Assyria, 722 BC), then the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (by Babylonians, 586 BC). The Exile reversed the Exodus, returning the people into the grip of the Gentile nations, into the midst of the Gentiles. The Book of Deuteronomy had predicted this would happen: That because of failure, the people of Israel would not be permitted to dwell in the Land in the presence of their God. Biblically, Israel is still in Exile, and will remain in Exile until the people call out to their Messiah to come and deliver them from near-certain extinction. That is yet future. But a small number of faithful Jews, termed a "remnant," was allowed to return to and re-populate the land so that there would be a people there to receive the Messiah at His (first) advent. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah narrate this return. The vast majority of Jews did not return; they remained in the Gentile nations, to various degrees having become assimilated to Gentile culture. And those who returned to the land under Ezra and Nehemiah did not regain sovereignty. This era is the "Times of the Gentiles," during which "Jerusalem is trodden down by the Gentiles," meaning the land and people were still ruled by the great empires of the Daniel 2 statue, Babylon, Persia, Greece and then Rome. Let's now look at a few passages.

**"Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace"** (1:3; the word "disgrace" reappears in 2:17). The word translated by the NIV as "disgrace" is better "reproach." I already am in awe at Nehemiah's faith. He is one of the great, heroic giants of Scripture. The great undertaking narrated in this Book is because this man is deeply troubled by the reproach brought on the God he loved by the ruined city He had taken to dwell in and the sorry plight of His people. Nehemiah's deep concern is not that the city lacks security by its ruined walls, but its disgrace, that is, the reputation of the city, the people and, more ultimately, their God. In those days (as well as today but we don't recognize it), a people represented their God. So if they were prosperous or militarily strong, it was because they had a great god. If a people were vanquished, impoverished or whatever, it was because of their weak, inadequate god. And Nehemiah cared about God's honor! Moses did the same (Exodus 32:11-14). Sadly, we don't. If we did, we'd be committed to the pursuit of righteousness and holiness reflecting the greatness of the God who indwells us. We just attend Sunday morning services and put some money in a plate. The rebuilding of the walls of the city were to bring honor to their God. But there's something subtle between the lines: Why were the walls broken down in the first place? The reader should recall that the city was in ruins because the people of God weren't the obedient, faithful people they should have been. So the question here in these early chapters is, Will the people of this returning remnant be different? The rest of the book answers that.

**"When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites"** (2:10). The events in this book occur after the prophecies of Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It is 444 BC, and this return is NOT to bring in the Millennial Kingdom. These are still the times of the Gentiles, and the surrounding Gentile people want nothing to do with the Israelites or their God. They care nothing about God's honor, nor His will, His purposes or His Person. This persecution of the Jews (and Christians) must continue until Christ returns and establishes His Kingdom. It reflects the hopelessly fallen nature of humanity apart from the testimony of Israel (or the Church). The opposition to the rebuilding of the walls serves as a subplot of the book. It's not the main theme though. Satan's incessant tempting the Church to do evil are likewise only a subplot of this era; we need to stay focused on what God is doing in and with the Church, which is the main theme of the Church era.

**"Our God will fight for us"** (4:20b). Nehemiah stationed soldiers to guard the builders of the wall from those Gentiles who might have attempted to forcefully stop the rebuilding. The text doesn't say that there was any actual violence however. The rebuilding went on under God's effective protection; this was His will. And when the walls were completed, the surrounding Gentile people, those enemies of Israel, realized that God had protected His people and so were filled with fear (6:16). We cannot generalize from this use of weaponry that it's OK to use lethal force to protect us as we carry out God's commission. We're in a different dispensation with different principles. We are followers of Jesus, the suffering, rejected Servant of God who, in humility and weakness invited and prepared people to enter the Kingdom of God. We identify with Him and express Him, the Lamb of God, as we continue His ministry.

**"So the wall was completed . . ."** (6:15). The wall, once again, was not for security. God would provide the people with the security they need. A wall made the city a real city and gave the people a sense of identity. Mainly, though, the wall was a boundary marker, a barrier between two realms. It was to separate different kinds of people. Inside, God would, thru His beloved, obedient people, express His perfections and goodness, and outside was . . . evil. Inside, God resided with His people in peace and holiness. Outside, the Gentile nations were like the sea, tumultuous and turbulent, violent and cruel. Those outside were not to mingle with those

inside because that would contaminate those inside with pagan beliefs. It was, however, God's intent that the inside dwellers, filled with love and desire to serve their God, would take the knowledge of their God outside to the pagan Gentiles so that they too might enter into the knowledge and love of the Creator. Sadly, that didn't happen. That would have to wait for a future people to do. The celebration and the joy experienced by completing their building project is told in Chapter 12, just before the dreadful last chapter.

**"Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand"** (8:2). At the center of the narration is this episode of the re-introduction of the Mosaic Law. The Book of Nehemiah is really all about holiness. Not building things, like the wall, but personal obedience to God's revealed will. It was precisely because of the failure to obey God's will that the city was destroyed and the nation was thrown into exile. For this new beginning, there must be a deep-seated commitment to be obedient to God. Or else there'll be failure again. The word, "understand" recurs again and again. Why? I suggest it's because for this new beginning to be successful, the people absolutely must understand that obedience to the Law, to their God, is central to their remaining in the Land – the message of Deuteronomy. They aren't there to pursue happiness according to their own lights. The long review of Israel's sordid history in Chapter 9 highlights the problem: God is gracious to His people, but they don't love Him in return sufficiently to obey Him, so they suffer His righteous indignation. In the O.T. as well as in the N.T., there must be – *must be* – a demonstration of love by means of obedience, or suffer discipline.

**"[I] came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil . . ."** (13:7). Bam, bam, bam. Chapter 13 hurts. It's one failure, one disobedient act after another. The book ends with this sad commentary. Several lessons here: (1) When Nehemiah was there with them, there was glorious faithfulness to God. The people went astray during his absence. Their holiness and obedience depended on the presence of a holy and obedient leader, a committed servant of God. So, a King/Messiah is anticipated who will lead His people into holiness and obedience. (2) Nehemiah's offense at this people's failure reflects the offense it causes God. They are simply stiff-necked and hard-hearted, and they need to be transformed. They need to be a totally different *kind* of person. That'll be in the future. Then, filled with God's own Spirit, they will be able to obey and to glorify their God. The message of Nehemiah is the message of the O.T., humans cannot do it on their own. Regardless the grace and the blessings received, only the regenerating work of God can make us to be as God intends us to be. (3) This Chapter 13 is just like the Golden Calf episode in the Book of the Exodus. (That occurred also when Moses was absent from their midst.) This return to the land is like another Exodus, but it will be a failure, as was the first Exodus. There needs to be a future, greater, successful Exodus. (4) The people may be able to build a wall, but they cannot obey God. Walls separate, but walls are inadequate; they don't meet the need. What really separates is obedience. It's obedience to God's revealed will that separates good from evil, holiness from sinfulness. (5) The people went astray for lack of a sense of purpose. In Exodus 19, Israel was called to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." That was their commission, their purpose, and they would accomplish this *if* they obeyed God. Nowhere in this Book of Nehemiah is there any reason given what the people are there in the land to do, other than simply be there. OK, they're there to be a "holy nation," a testimony or witness to the existence of the holy God who called them and took them to be His own. But what about being "a kingdom of priests"? The absence of a sense of purpose, I suggest, led them into sin. The book's ending highlights a failure of character and of purpose. Something greater has to come in the future. In all these ways, the Book of Nehemiah anticipates the Person and work of Jesus, the Messiah.

Other obvious theological themes in Nehemiah that we needn't discuss here include the focus on individuals (as opposed to pagan and Marxist notions of a collective humanity), the very major role of prayer, and the necessity of repentance.

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Why does the Church have the O.T. as necessary Scripture? Because it's loaded with lessons such as these from Nehemiah. We need these lessons because they apply equally to us. That's why Paul instructed Timothy to "preach the word" (that is, the O.T.). We cannot ignore God's will and our responsibilities just because we're elect. Israel was also elect. They supposed that because they were elect, God's chosen, they could take Him for granted, be smug, and live as they pleased. We do the same. So as Israel was denied the privilege of having God with them, of being in His presence, we risk the same. We're not immune from discipline! The forgiveness of sins does not mean we're safe living however we want, apart from God's revealed will, which is His Word. If we're identified with the holy Creator God, there's an absolute necessity of holiness, obedience, sanctification and mortification of sin that, if anything, is *heightened* by our election and salvation.

The Church has Jesus' clear, explicit and repeated instruction for what we're to be doing. The Church is purpose-full in the way that Israel of O.T. times wasn't (and still isn't, but will be in the future). We're to be taking the Gospel of Jesus into all the world. It's our "priestly" function (see Romans 15:16). In the Upper Room Discourse in the Gospel of John, Jesus emphasized that, although He was going away, Another would come to be with His followers, One just like Himself. That's because we must have a faithful and obedient Person with us to enable us and encourage us to do His will. But we must yield to, and not quench, the Spirit. We yield to the Spirit by knowing and obeying God's Word. The Book of Acts dramatically narrates how that Holy Spirit was present with those obedient early believers, leading them to fulfill the Great Commission. But Acts is incomplete! We're to be continuing that work today. Also, the Church is commanded to be separate from wicked unbelievers. That's part of what holiness means. We, however, like Nehemiah rely on our church walls to keep us separate from the ungodly people who surround us. We're pious and worshipful when we're safely inside our church buildings. What we should have learned from Nehemiah is that it's our obedience to the Word of God that enables us to be separate, that is, holy, and to glorify God. Let's be diligent and committed so that we don't fail too.