

SESSION THIRTY-TWO

NEHEMIAH

A Man With A Burden and Vision for God's Work

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Nehemiah takes its name from the man who plays the prominent role in the book. The name Nehemiah (נְהִמְיָא) means "the comfort of Yahweh." At one time, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra may have existed as one book. In the Hebrew Bible, there is no gap between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1 (i.e., the verse statistics for both are placed at the end of Nehemiah). With the Latin Vulgate, these appeared as 1 Ezra and 2 Ezra.

The book opens in the year 444 BC with Nehemiah serving as an important court official in the Persian city of Susa (east of the lower Tigris River in present day western Iran). Susa was one of several capitals, along with Persepolis, Ecbatana, and Babylon. Susa, however, was the diplomatic and administrative capital, especially where the king and his court resided during the winter months (when the temperature was pleasant). During six months of the year (especially July-Aug), temperatures could be as high as 60° C (= 140° F). In Neh 1:11, Nehemiah is introduced as the "cupbearer" (מַשְׁקֵה, *mašqeh*) to the king. In this position, he was responsible for tasting the king's wine before the king drank (to ensure it was not poisoned). Obviously, this was a person who had the king's confidence and trust. To be the "cupbearer" of the king was no insignificant position. The Persian court was splendid and magnificent. Campbell notes,

The king was surrounded by hundreds of personal attendants, and within the precincts of the palace as many as 15,000 persons were fed daily. The monarch, however, rarely dined with his guests but was normally served alone, and this is where the cupbearer came in.¹

George Rawlinson wrote,

The special duty of the cupbearers was to fill the royal winecup from the vase or flagon, which stood on or near the royal board, and to hand it daintily and gracefully to their august master, supporting it with three fingers, and presenting it in such a way that the king could readily take it from their hand without any danger of spilling a single drop. Before filling the cup they carefully washed it out, and before offering it to their master they ladled out a small quantity with their left hand, and swallowed it, to show that, so far as their knowledge went, it was not poisoned. When not engaged in this, their main duty, they guarded the entrance to the royal apartment, and allowed persons to enter, or forbade them, at their discretion. Even princes of the blood royal had to submit;

¹Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, Inc., 1979), 8.

and the power, thus practically exercised of allowing or preventing audiences, made the office one of high account, and probably enabled its holder, if he were so inclined, to greatly enrich himself.²

Nehemiah's important position was no accident. Like Daniel, he had been strategically placed by the hand of God in order to have access to the king and make request on behalf of Jerusalem. When Nehemiah was allowed to lead a group of Jews back to the land of Israel in 444 BC, he became "governor" of the territory (but still under the authority of the Persian king). The main contribution of Nehemiah is his leadership in seeing that the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt (ch 1–6) and that the people of Jerusalem in his day consecrate themselves to keep the Law of Moses (ch 7–13). The Temple itself had been rebuilt over seventy years before Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem (by 515 BC), but the walls of the city had never been properly rebuilt. Daniel 9:25 had predicted the complete rebuilding.

I. THE REBUILDING OF THE WALLS (1:1–6:19)

The first six chapters describe the challenge and details of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

A. Nehemiah's First Return to Rebuild (1:1–2:20)

1. The Sad Report to Nehemiah (1:1-3)

In the year 444 BC, word was brought to Nehemiah that things were not well at all in Jerusalem. The people were in great distress and the wall and gates of the city were still broken down. The rest of the book is about remedying these concerns.

2. A Prayer for God to Act (1:4-11)

Nehemiah sees the problem as primarily a spiritual one rather than political. Furthermore, he sees the starting point for resolving the problem with prayer! To understand his prayer, one needs to be familiar with God's plan of restoration for the nation that had been revealed in Deut 30:1-10. In the days of Moses, God had foretold that the nation would one day go into exile. But they could be regathered and restored on the basis of true repentance. Thus, Nehemiah is confessing on behalf of the nation, and in 1:8-9 he claims the promises that had been revealed in Deut 30. Just as God had promised that He would have compassion on His covenant people if they truly repented, so Nehemiah asks God for that compassion to be channeled through the Persian king Artaxerxes.

3. Artaxerxes' Permission to Rebuild (2:1-8)

We should keep in mind that this is the same Artaxerxes who had earlier issued a decree forbidding any more work on Jerusalem (Ezra 4:17-23). That helps explain why Nehemiah remained in a spirit of prayer as he made his request to the king.

4. The Inspection of Jerusalem (2:9-16)

²George Rawlinson, *Ezra and Nehemiah - Their Lives and Times* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), 86.

Because there were those in the area that were hostile to any attempt by the Jews to resume the rebuilding of Jerusalem (2:10), Nehemiah made an inspection of the city at night. He wanted to survey and assess the situation without any undue interference.

5. The Proposal and Decision to Rebuild (2:17-20)

The situation at Jerusalem was certainly despairing, but the fact that the Persian king himself had granted permission to Nehemiah to rebuild was a *divine signal* that they should attempt the project. Nehemiah knew that God worked through human channels of authority.

B. The 52-Day Building Project (3:1–6:19)

1. The Workmen and Their Tasks (3:1-32)

For an immense project like this, there was a need for maximum involvement and division of labor. All the people were organized to contribute a portion of the wall, thus lightening the burden. Notice that the chapter begins in 3:1 by mentioning the contribution of the high priest himself. It is important for spiritual leaders to set the example for the community.

2. The Conflicts of Building (4:1–6:14)

Beginning in chapter four, Nehemiah records the various conflicts that the people had to face. This is a reminder to all of us that those who attempt great things for God (even when God is in it) must expect to face opposition. There is no point undertaking a work of God if one is not prepared for battle. The difficulties will be both within and without.

a. The Opposition from Without (4:1-23)

The enemies of the Jews in the land used several different tactics in their attempt to defeat the rebuilding project:

(1) By Discouragement through Mockery (4:1-6)

The first line of attack by the enemy was simply to employ *mockery* (cf. 2:10,19; Ezra 4:1-3). The enemy knows that discouragement is often enough to derail a work of God. Nehemiah handled this attack, not by retaliating but by taking his feelings to the Lord in prayer (4:4-6).

(2) By Fear through Conspiracy and Violence (4:7-14)

When the enemy realized that mockery alone was not going to stop the Jews, they organized a conspiracy and sought to cause a disturbance (4:8). Now they were turning to violence! The response to this new level of opposition was both prayer and action in the form of setting up guards (4:9). Despite the posting of a guard for protection, however, Nehemiah had another problem to deal with. He noticed an internal problem with his people: they had become fearful (4:14). Yet he was wise enough to know that weapons alone do not eliminate fear. This is primarily a spiritual problem. Therefore, he pointed the people to the Lord "who is great and awesome." Only trust in the Lord can eliminate the fear of the heart.

(3) By Threats that Hindered the Work (4:15-23)

The enemy's threat persisted, and thus the Jews were forced to work at half-strength. Half the men would work, while the other half stood guard with weapons in hand. When the enemy cannot succeed in defeating the work of God, he still relishes the opportunity to hinder the work of God.

b. Threats From Within (5:1-19)

It is bad enough that the enemy attacks the work of God from without. Often, however, we have just as many problems from within the camp.

(1) Exploiting the Poor (5:1-5)

Chapter five begins with the words, "Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers." The Hebrew words for "great outcry" (צַעֲקָה . . . נְדוּלָה) reflect Ex 3:9 and the Egyptian oppression. These were difficult times financially. The land had been experiencing famine, prices were *sky-high*, and people were forced to pay taxes to the Persian king. In order to survive this situation, many of the poor were forced to borrow money from the wealthier Jews. Some had even been forced into slavery as a result (cf. Ex 21:2-11; Deut 15:12-18; Lev 25:39-41). This was a social injustice and abuse of usury. In a time of national crisis, the community needed to "pull together," not resort to opportunism. The strong need to help out the weak; those more blessed need to help out the struggling. Love needs to prevail in the community of God's people.

(2) Condemnation of the Nobles (5:6-13)

In 5:6, Nehemiah's anger is noted. This should not lessen the portrait of him as a leader, for this is a matter of righteous anger . . . an anger at the greed, selfishness and insensitivity among God's people. As a result, he has to take action against the social injustice. In particular, he is upset about *usury* . . . lending at excessive interest. People who are wealthy enough to make a loan to a poor and struggling brother should be gracious enough not to use the occasion to profit. Nehemiah set the example for them (5:10), and then made the nobles rectify the situation.

(3) Nehemiah's Good Conduct (5:14-19)

This section stands as a contrast to the preceding paragraph. Verses 14-19 show us how not to abuse a leadership position. Though he (as governor) had certain rights, he refused to use his position for personal gain at the expense of hardship on others. Why? Did he want people to admire him for being so exemplary? No. Verse 15 says, "I did not do so because of the fear of God." Nehemiah was not motivated by the opinions of the people, but by the fear of the Lord. He properly saw himself accountable to God. He says in verse 16 that he and his servants did not buy any land, i.e., they did not take advantage of the poor, some of whom were being forced to sell their land (their inheritance) to buy food and pay taxes. As a leader, Nehemiah knew that God had given him his position to help others . . . not exploit them. Rather, he trusted the Lord to reward him in

due time (5:19). Then he would have no guilt, and his gain (coming from God) would undoubtedly be even better.

c. Plots and Intrigue Against the Leader (6:1-14)

When other measures against the Jews failed to derail the work, the enemy sought to attack the leader himself. Most of this section looks at the assault against Nehemiah. He is too good a man . . . too good a leader. He is the enemy's target! This section reminds us that spiritual leaders pay a price . . . Satan will target them more than the average person. How they need our prayers and support!

(1) The Plot to Harm Nehemiah (6:1-4)

Time was getting late: the walls had been rebuilt . . . only the doors in the gates remained to be rebuilt (6:1). The enemy began by trying to draw Nehemiah into a trap they had laid for him. They wanted to harm him . . . they wanted to get rid of the leader.

(2) A False Accusation Against Nehemiah (6:5-9)

When they saw that Nehemiah was not going to fall for their trick, they resorted to plan B. If they could not get rid of him directly, perhaps they could get rid of him indirectly. They would try a political tactic to get him removed. Thus, they hurled a false accusation of rebellion against him, namely that Nehemiah intended to make himself king over Israel (in defiance of Persia). Nevertheless, Nehemiah did not allow himself to be intimidated. He kept his eyes on God: "But now, O God, strengthen my hands" (6:9).

(3) Shemaiah's Treachery to Discredit Nehemiah (6:10-14)

The enemy will stoop very low to get what it wants. In this paragraph, we see that the enemy managed to find a traitor among the Jews, one who would deceive Nehemiah and counsel him to do something that might discredit him before others. Trying to appear as his friend, Shemaiah counselled Nehemiah to hide with him in the Temple. Nehemiah quickly saw through this treachery: (1) he would appear to be cowardly before the populace who needed the example of a brave leader (especially at a time when the work was nearing completion and needed to be finished); and (2) this would cause him to violate the Law (cf. Num 3:10; 18:7), and thereby discredit him as leader before his people. The enemy wanted to create an "evil report" that would bring him into reproach . . . they wanted to ruin his reputation! The enemy had hoped that by frightening Nehemiah, they could hinder his better judgment. But it didn't work!

3. The Completion of the City Walls (6:15-19)

With the completion of the walls and gates, there was a clear victory for Nehemiah and God's people. Even the enemies "recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (6:16). Even when there is a victory, Satan likes to make the rejoicing short-lived (if he can't defeat God's work, he still seeks to rob God's people of the joy). In this instance, Nehemiah's joy of the completion of the project was tempered by the "mixed loyalties" of

some of the Jewish nobles. Tobiah (a relative of Eliashib the High Priest, but not of pure Jewish descent being an Ammonite) was an influential person in the community, and yet he remained a thorn in Nehemiah's side. He had consistently opposed Nehemiah during the project (cf. 2:19; 4:3), and now collaborated with the leaders in the community to undermine Nehemiah's leadership.

II. THE REFORMING OF THE PEOPLE (7:1–13:31)

With the city walls rebuilt as a first stage in the fulfillment of Dan 9:25, the remainder of the book focuses on the efforts to reform the people . . . directing them to submit to and obey the Mosaic Law. The latter project turns out to be more difficult than the rebuilding project!

A. The Assembly to Enroll the People (7:1-73a)

Most of this chapter provides the record of those who participated in the first return under Zerubbabel (cf. Ezra 2). Why is this information (which was already provided in Ezra 2) placed here? How is this relevant to the situation in Nehemiah's day, since some 94 years have passed since the first return? One clue is provided in 7:4—"Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few." The next verse says that God put it into Nehemiah's heart to enroll the people by genealogies. Hence, there was a divine purpose for establishing everyone's genealogy. It was very important at this early juncture to clarify who everyone was and what their genealogy was. There are two apparent reasons for this. First, foreigners had already begun to infiltrate the ranks of the Jews, and intermarriage had begun to contaminate the line. Second, it was imperative to know the genealogies in order to make assignments related to the Temple activities. Note the stress in the chapter on priests, Levites, temple servants, etc. If the community was to be obedient to the Law, then it was imperative that proper appointments for service be made. Hence, those whose genealogies were uncertain were excluded from the priesthood (note vv 61-65), as a safeguard to ensure that unqualified individuals did not end up serving as priests and thereby make the whole community guilty of violating the Mosaic Law.

The statistics in this chapter differ slightly from those in Ezra 2. For instance, Nehemiah's grand total came to 49,942 whereas Ezra's came to 49,897, a difference of 45. But notice that Nehemiah records 245 singers in 7:67, whereas Ezra had noted 200. The differences could be due to scribal errors in copying the documents, but there could also be reasons that are not available to us today.

B. The Religious Convocation and Repentance in the 7th Month (7:73b–10:39)

The first day of the seventh month was a special occasion, as this was the time for the Feast of Trumpets (followed by the Day of Atonement) when every male Israelite was required to appear in Jerusalem.

1. Ezra's Ministry (7:73b–8:18)

Nehemiah saw this as a fitting occasion to turn the people's hearts to the Word of God. It was not enough to rebuild the city walls; the convicting work of the Holy Spirit through His Word was also needed. The individual chosen to read and explain the Word was Ezra . . . an appropriate choice since he was a priest who had been back in the land teaching the Word for 14 years (see Ezra 7:6-10). Verses 7:73b–8:12 record the reading of the Word, and verses

8:13-18 show that this resulted in a revival among the people. It is possible that verse 8 means that Ezra (and his assistants) were making the Word clear to the people by translating it into Aramaic, which was now the first language for those who had come out of the exile. The people's ignorance of the Word is attested in their lack of understanding about the Feast of Tabernacles (which had been disregarded since Joshua's day). During the time of celebrating Tabernacles, Ezra taught the Word daily (8:18). The people were spiritually starved, and were hungry for the Word.

2. The Special Assembly (9:1–10:39)

Tabernacles was the last required feast of the year. But in this particular year, the people held a special assembly following Tabernacles. Ezra's "Bible Conference" in the previous chapter had struck a note in the hearts of God's people. One mark of this being a genuine revival was that the teaching of the Word brought a heightened awareness of sin. The people were now experiencing a desire to be obedient.

a. Historical Review and Confession (9:1-31)

This special assembly was characterized by more reading of the Word along with confession of sin. This included a historical review of the nation's history, confessing where they had historically gone wrong. They acknowledged that it was only because of God's grace and compassion that He had not obliterated them (9:31).

b. Plea for Pity and Written Agreement (9:32-38)

They also acknowledged that God's discipline of sending them into exile had been just (9:32-33). To reflect that they have indeed learned their lesson, they even determined to make a special document in which they agree in writing to recommit themselves to the Mosaic Covenant (9:38).

c. Signers of the Written Agreement (10:1-27)

Now it was time for the civil and religious leaders to "step up to the plate" and publicly commit themselves. As governor, Nehemiah, was the first on the list. The priests, Levites and other leaders followed suit.

d. Obligations of the Written Agreement (10:28-39)

This written agreement is important, because until the leadership of the nation agrees that their goal is to be faithful to the Word (*their standard!*), they won't be able to agree among themselves what expectations they are to impose upon the people. Notice in this section that they agree to make a priority on supporting the Temple ministry and to get behind the work of God financially.

C. Lists of Inhabitants (11:1–12:26)

Not everyone wished to live in Jerusalem. This may be due to the fact that much of the city still lay in rubble. Many of the people would want to reclaim the land belonging to their tribal inheritance, so that they could farm the land. Since the spiritual interests of the nation were inherently connected with Jerusalem, volunteers were needed to live in Jerusalem . . . to build it up and make

it suitable as the center of the nation's worship. There was also the need to have qualified priests and Levites living in Jerusalem to care for the worship center.

1. Citizens for Jerusalem (11:1-24)

Volunteers from Benjamin and Judah stepped forward to live at Jerusalem, as well as priests and Levites.

2. Occupants throughout Judah and Benjamin (11:25-36)

These verses record the names of those who settled in the other areas of Judah and Benjamin.

3. Register of Priests and Levites (12:1-26)

It was particularly important to keep track of the priests and those of the Levitical line, so that future generations could be served by qualified individuals. First, the author records the names of the priests and Levites who had returned under Zerubbabel. The line of the high priesthood is recorded in 12:10-11, beginning with Jeshua (=Joshua), the high priest at the time of the first return. Eliashib was the high priest in Nehemiah's day (3:1; 13:4), and he is legitimately linked with Jeshua.

D. Dedication Ceremony for the Walls (12:27-47)

Nehemiah was not only a skilled administrator, but he was also a man of worship. Once record had been made of those qualified to serve at the Temple and staffing assignments had been made, the people could now have a proper ceremony to dedicate the walls. Two great choirs were appointed for the occasion (vv 31-43). This worship-oriented occasion was a fitting time to think of the ongoing care and provision of those who served the Temple (vv 44-47). This included the singers and gatekeepers, as well as the priests and Levites. Store-rooms were prepared for collecting the contributions of the people so that those who served full-time could be continually provided for. Nehemiah was faithful to see that "God's workers" (those in vocational ministry) were cared for.

E. Nehemiah's 2nd Return to Reform (13:1-31)

In 432 BC (the 32nd year of Artaxerxes; see 13:6), Nehemiah left Jerusalem to return to the king of Persia. This would imply that he had spent some 12 years after the rebuilding of the city walls living at Jerusalem and seeing that progress continued. After some unspecified period of time, he then returned again to Jerusalem with the king's permission. Unfortunately, there were some serious problems awaiting him when he arrived in Jerusalem.

1. Removal of Foreigners from the Assembly (13:1-3)

The reading of the Word of God had resulted in the discovery (or reminder) that foreigners were not to have a part in Israel's temple worship (see Deut 23:3-5). Hence, they were excluded.

2. Chambers of the Temple Cleansed (13:4-9)

The preceding paragraph is related to the present one. If the people had publicly affirmed that foreigners were not to have any part in the temple matters, then such a policy ought to have been uniformly applied. Unfortunately, it was not. The high priest himself (Eliashib) was compromising. Tobiah (an Ammonite!) was a relative of Eliashib, and the latter gave

him preferential treatment. Tobiah had been furnished a place in one of the rooms intended for the temple contributions, and even after the other foreigners had been evicted he was allowed to stay on. Keep in mind that this is the same Tobiah who had ardently opposed Nehemiah years earlier during the rebuilding project. Nehemiah probably took great pleasure in personally evicting Tobiah from the temple premises. But this section is not primarily about revenge. There are three clear lessons we ought to notice. First, obedience to God comes above all earthly relationships (and Eliashib should have known that). Second, there comes a time to act when we must take a stand no matter who is involved. Nehemiah's action was probably embarrassing to Eliashib, but it had to be done. Third, we always need to be on the lookout, for the enemy wants to creep in among us (an Ammonite among the people of God). We must beware of intruders!

3. Provision Made for the Levites (13:10-14)

Another problem was the negligence of those who served at the temple. Because the people had not been faithful in giving to the Lord, those who served the temple had become discouraged and abandoned their duties. This was especially shameful, since the leaders had promised not to fail in this area (10:37-39; cf. 12:44-47). Nehemiah quickly remedied the situation. Even though the country was in a time of economic hardship, this was no excuse to neglect God's work. Worship of Him is always more important than personal needs! Nehemiah wisely looked for some reliable men to be in charge of the temple storehouses to see that the needs of the spiritual workers were met (13:13). Nehemiah did not seek any earthly reward for this service, but he did ask that God remember him (i.e., he desired a heavenly reward).

4. Honoring the Sabbath (13:15-22)

Nehemiah was still living at a time when God's people were responsible for keeping the Mosaic Law. This included the commandment about not working on the Sabbath. Nehemiah sought to enforce this, because neglect of the Sabbath could bring about God's discipline on the nation as a whole (as it had for the earlier generations; note 13:18). In light of Romans 14:5-10 and Col 2:16, we should be cautious about how we apply this part of Nehemiah for today.

5. The Problem of Intermarriage (13:23-31)

Despite the fact that the people had sworn not to intermarry with foreigners (note 10:30), some of them were doing so. This was also a prohibition of the Mosaic Law (Ex 34:12-16; Deut 7:1-5), and therefore could result in God's discipline upon the whole nation. God did not dislike foreigners, but such a practice of intermarriage was bound to result in cases where one embraced the pagan deities and idols of the foreigner. Not even Solomon could walk such a tightrope. This practice had even infected the priestly line (13:28-29), in spite of the fact that Lev 21:14 had clearly instructed priests to only marry a virgin of Israel. If the priests (the spiritual leaders) were not willing to set the right example, how could the general populace be expected to be obedient? Today, we need not insist on marriage along racial lines, but we should insist that believers only marry believers . . . no exceptions!