

Nehemiah: An Applied Overview

Stephen Dray

Following the overview of Ezra in the previous issue, the editor completes his survey with a look at Nehemiah

KEYWORDS: Jerusalem, glory, faith, praise, confession, petition, vision, hopelessness, enemy, opposition, discouragement, courage, threat, work, divisions, testimony, obedience, harmony, joy, leadership, organisation, purity, community, generosity, blessing, renewal, word of God, grace, spiritual decline, anti-climax, fulfilment

We know very little about Nehemiah. Indeed, all we know about him is found in his book. However, as cupbearer to the king he was a very important person since Ahikar, an earlier cupbearer, had also been the prime minister. With the responsibility to test the king's food and wine to demonstrate that it was not poisoned it is obvious how the cupbearer could become a person with great influence. The events described in this chapter probably took place in 445 BC. This was about thirteen years after Ezra had first appeared in Jerusalem and Ezra 4:7-23 is probably a sequel.

The first four verses of chapter 1 provide the key to understanding the whole of the book. Three words, in particular, are important.

- The word 'remnant' (2) was used by the prophets to describe the people of Israel who would return from the Exile in Babylon. They were the people through whom God would fulfil all his great promises (Isaiah 10:20-22).
- Moreover it was the walls of 'Jerusalem' (2) which God had promised to restore so as to bear testimony to his sovereignty and grace (Isaiah 54:11-12; 60:10ff, especially 14 and 15).
- Finally, 'reproach' was a term used by God for his people under judgement (Ezekiel 22:4): a judgement which he had promised to remove (Ezekiel 35:15, 30).

This all shows that *Nehemiah's burden was not to see a beautiful building restored or even a desire to see national pride re-established*. He longed to see God fulfil his promises and glorify his name. He was greatly burdened when God's cause was in decline. And he did something about it, as we shall see!

We all need to learn to be Nehemiahs, recognizing the signs of decline in the church and sufficiently concerned about it to do something ourselves. The book of Nehemiah will teach us some of the basic lessons we need to learn to do this effectively.

Nehemiah 1:4-11

Burdened with a great desire to see the glory of the LORD

established among his people, *Nehemiah turned to prayer*: a prayer which is an example to us. Immediately we are struck by several things:

- the fact that *central to his prayer was the grounding of all he said upon the great truths that God had revealed about both himself and his plans*.
- Moreover, we need to note that he did not just use biblical words but, in faith, he *used God's words to strengthen that faith* in the certainty that he sought those things which were part of God's plan and was himself the disciple of a God who could do what he asked.

Note that,

- *the prayer begins with praise* (5). This establishes the whole spirit of the prayer because it immediately rises to heaven from where difficulties and problems are best viewed. Moreover, it reflects upon the character of the One who dwells there and has all power at his disposal to help his people. There is nothing like this to encourage the LORD's people.
- *Confession follows* (6-7). When we begin to seek God as he truly is, confession is the most natural thing in the world. This is what Nehemiah experienced. Reflection upon God's character led to a heart-searching in which he became conscious of his own sin and that of his people. Helpless, he cast himself on the mercy of God. Yet empty handed he found himself the welcome guest of God. This is always, wonderfully true.
- This experience of the character, power and mercy of God *led naturally to petition* (8-11). This itself leads to confidence in the face of an impossible situation: Our difficulties are God's opportunities.
- Finally, we need to notice that *Nehemiah desires to be involved in God's answer to his prayer*. He was not a man to pray, 'Here am I, send someone else'. This showed his true concern. It makes the sequel almost inevitable.

Nehemiah 2:1-10

After four months (compare 1:1 with 2:1) which tested Nehemiah's burden, *the LORD began to act*. During that time *Nehemiah had not been idle*. He had been able to consider what needed to be done in some detail. Thus, when the opportunity came, he was ready to answer in a practical way the king's questions (4,7,8). During this time, he was also made aware of the greatness of the work to be done. Moreover, nothing less than a change of government policy was required to achieve his purpose (see Ezra 4:23) and it was very difficult to get release from the Persian court, especially for someone as important as himself.

Nehemiah 4

This would have destroyed men of lesser faith than Nehemiah. However, none of this discouraged him. Though a realist, he was also a man of deep faith and built his 'impossible' vision on what he knew to be God's will.

Yet the lesson that we all need to learn is that *Nehemiah's faith was vindicated*. God achieved this in a quite remarkable way. Despite the fact that some versions of the Bible suggest the contrary we are actually told that Nehemiah did not show any evidence of his sorrow. However, somehow, God put it into the king's mind that he looked sad: perhaps because he was fearful of a palace coup. The request might have suggested that the king suspected Nehemiah of being involved in treachery. However, Nehemiah's honesty was such that the king willingly agreed to all of his requests. *In a strange and unexpected way his prayer was answered.*

We need to learn that when our desires accord with that of the 'God of heaven' we should not doubt but remember that we are in the hands of one who can turn the heart even of kings. Though God may seem to delay, we are not to be discouraged but wait, plan and pray patiently for God to accomplish his promises. Then when he does answer we shall be ready and waiting . . .

Nehemiah 2:11-3;32

It is very sad to compare Nehemiah's great burden with the condition of the people in *Jerusalem*. He was scandalised and burdened by the abject condition of the people of God but they, for their part, were huddled contentedly behind the ruined walls and gates of the city of God in a state of hopeless inactivity. No wonder that the enemy of God's people showed no interest in them until Nehemiah arrived (10). Here was a group of people who were no threat to anyone. Sadly, we are all too often exactly like them: content with the disgrace, inactive in seeking its removal and blind to the contradiction of our condition.

When he arrived,

- *Nehemiah first acquainted himself with the people's 'disgrace' (11-15)*. Only when he knew the worst could anything be done to make things better. Moreover, no one could accuse him of being unaware of the seriousness of the situation. The same is true today. Temporary and partial actions only make the situation worse in the long run.
- *The next step was to bring the true situation before the people (17)*. What Nehemiah told the people actually stared them in the face. Perhaps they were frightened to face the whole truth as, so often, we are. Sometimes, too, we have our priorities out of focus and we do not see the real needs. Thus, Nehemiah acted, not to discourage them, but to arouse them to action (18). To their credit they did respond (3:1-32).

For many believers the first difficulty leads to discouragement when they seek to obey the LORD. Opposition, in particular, is inevitable (18-20). However, Nehemiah had the true perspective which led not to distress but greater confidence (20).

The best time to discourage anyone who has resolved to do something is immediately after they have decided on the new course of action and when the initial excitement has begun to wane. The enemies of God's people are always well aware of this. Thus, the people of Nehemiah's day soon found their enemies active against them (1-4). Though the *opposition was only words it was still a searching test*. The enemies pointed out:

- *Their weakness and contrasted their condition with the past glory of God's people (2a);*
- *The fewness of their numbers (2b).*
- *They also questioned God's ability (2c) and,*
- *Reminded the Jews of some of the immediate problems and difficulties that they had to face (2d).*

They were only words: but how powerful words sometimes are in discouraging the people of God.

But the *opposition was ineffective (4-6)*. The strength of the people's resolve and faith meant that opposition spurred them to action (6) and drove them more to prayer (4-5).

However, *the enemy did not go away*. They next sought to use 'every trick in the book' (7-14). An unlikely coalition of enemies from all around Jerusalem (see a Bible Atlas) threatened violence. They did this when the people were at the half way stage of the work: the time when strength was weakened by the work (10) and rubble clearance had lost its glamour. Moreover, initial courage was being undermined by the constant threat (12) and by the 'war of nerves' which the enemies were engaging in (11).

At length the *people were strengthened* by:

- a reminder of the *importance of the battle* and
- the *character and power of God (14)*
- as well as by *reviewing their tactics (13)*.

The last section of the chapter (15-23) describes a period free from opposition. However, the temptation to seek rest was resisted and the workload increased (21). Full advantage was taken as the people watchfully undertook the work.

Nehemiah 5

The Book of Nehemiah is concerned with the burden of one man to see the glory of God once again with the people of God. But *no amount of work for the LORD can establish his glory if the people themselves are a poor testimony*. This is the important lesson of the present chapter.

The chapter begins by describing the *division* between various members of God's people (1-5). Wisely, Nehemiah realized that this was a bad testimony before unbelievers (9). In addition to this, some people were in danger of having to leave God's people (5). *A people whose conduct is likely to drive some of its members away and to lead to unbelievers ridiculing its hypocrisy is hardly likely to display God's glory to a needy world*. Strong walls would be no antidote to such conduct.

In particular, there was stress between the members of God's people and, while all were acting within their rights they were *more concerned with those rights than the care and well-being of his people*. The church is no place for people to demand their rights. Those who have received mercy and grace should show the same attitude to others.

Nehemiah recognized that the *attitudes* of the people (and

himself) had been *wrong and sinful* (14-17). Painful steps were immediately taken to put the matter right. Moreover, Nehemiah showed by his own example what was expected of others. We, who have a greater example than Nehemiah in the Lord Jesus, can do no less.

The *result of obedience* is also described in the chapter. The people experienced *joy* in doing the right thing at last (12-13) and the *harmony and co-operation* which they enjoyed *led to the victory* of chapter 6.

Nehemiah 6

This chapter describes the fulfilment of Nehemiah's vision: *the work was completed in the most remarkably quick time* (15) *and immediately had the effect of bringing glory to God* (16). *The impossible had become reality through faith* in God's word. God has not changed. Christians have always had the same experience when they have ventured on the LORD.

However, the chapter is also a very sad one. It describes the constant personal battles Nehemiah had to face throughout the entire time the wall was being built. Those in Christian leadership know that *spiritual warfare always rages most fiercely around the standard bearer*. Thus, though Nehemiah experienced the same difficulties as the rest of the people, the opposition from Sanballat and his supporters (1-9), there were also added burdens which he had to bear.

Sadly, he discovered that *other leaders among the people of God were the greatest hindrance of all* (10, 14, 17-19). Without the same vision and faith as Nehemiah they were a constant problem to him. All too often the same is true today. Influential groups, families and officers more concerned for themselves than God remain a tremendous burden on the leadership of many churches.

It would have been easy for Nehemiah to have given in. But such a path would have dishonoured God and achieved nothing. *Churches need leaders who are not carpets to be trodden down but men of faith and vision who will sometimes painfully challenge our lack of true spirituality*. Living under such leadership can sometimes be uncomfortable but is, invariably, exhilarating (as this chapter proves).

Nehemiah 7

Nehemiah's great burden had been to see the wall of Jerusalem rebuilt. But like any other spiritual man or woman he did not rest content when his vision was realized. He recognized that *a truly spiritual work must always be progressing*: never static. Thus, he set about the next task of ensuring that the people of God were properly prepared and organized for their role as the people of God (1-6). There is nothing spiritual about chaos. Nor is the independent spirit of much modern Christianity biblical. Nehemiah knew the people to be the people of God. Accordingly, he *set about ensuring that they were an organized and united body*. Modern church life needs to rediscover his perspective.

The remainder of the chapter is a copy of Ezra 2. Many modern readers find lists of names uninteresting. When we find such lists in the Bible we tend to 'skip' over them. This is a mistake. None of the lists is recorded without an impor-

tant purpose. This is true here.

God had predicted that only a 'remnant' would return from the judgement of Exile. This is clearly shown here. Of the original 24 priestly families only 4 came back (39-42) and yet they still outnumbered the once more numerous Levites (43). Indeed only 42,000 people returned from a people once numbered in millions. Despite this, however, they are described as 'Israel' (7) and were led by twelve leaders (6-7): just as the Israel of old had included twelve tribes. Small in number, they were yet the people through whom God would bring to pass his promises.

On their return the *greatest priority was to establish their purity*. This is the main point of this whole chapter (64, 65). It is a mistake to think that the reason for this was their desire to maintain their racial purity. In fact their concern was religious. They sought to ensure that only those who really were the people of God were united together. Anything else was a recipe for disaster.

They also *sought to establish a true community*: a people whose various, God-given, responsibilities and skills were woven together in such a way as to bring glory to God.

Finally (70-72), they were *characterised by their generosity and by their united concern that the Temple, the symbol of God's presence with them, be re-built*.

We, too, ought to be no less concerned for God's glory and equally zealous to establish the purity, community and generosity of his people.

Nehemiah 8

The concern expressed by the people in chapter 7 quickly led to the LORD's blessing. Thus, in chapters 8-10, we have a description of the spiritual renewal that followed the attempts by the people to order their lives to the glory of God. These chapters have, therefore, been seen as providing Christians with a description of church life as it should be.

Central to the people's renewed life was the written word of God. This is seen in the royal reception the people gave to it (they stood, verse 5); in the attention they gave to hearing and understanding it (4) and in their great desire not only to know the Word but to understand its application (7). This commitment to the Word of God was also seen as groups and families spent every available moment in studying God's words (13).

Four things resulted from such wholehearted commitment to the words of God.

- Firstly, they *knew both sorrow and joy* (9, 17). This is always the inevitable result of genuine Bible study. Sorrow for sin and rejoicing in the God of salvation cannot but follow a true understanding of the Scriptures.
- Secondly, the people *made the words of God the rule which governed their entire lives* (13). It is clear from the people's comments that fresh study of Leviticus 23:40-43; Numbers 29:35 and Deuteronomy 16:13-15 and 31:10-13 had taken place.
- This, thirdly, *led to reformation because they found to their surprise aspects of truth that had been long forgotten*. The Feast of Tabernacles had been celebrated (see Ezra 3:5)

but now fresh truth came to light.

- Lastly, *obedience led to great joy* (17).

Unless we, too, have placed the Scriptures at the heart of our lives we fail to live up to our calling and miss out on the experience of such blessings from God.

Nehemiah 9,10

The renewal of true religion described in chapter 8 continues in these two chapters in the deepened prayer life (9:1-37) and the practical godliness (9:38-10:39) of the people.

A deeper knowledge of God is always a characteristic mark of a true work of God. This is seen here.

- There is a *fresh vision and delight in the majesty and the power of God and especially in his faithfulness and grace in redemption* (5-6, 7-15).
- The people show a *new understanding of the LORD's generosity and patience*. Thus, 'they' alternates with 'you' throughout 16-25. This same contrast is grasped in their reflection upon the period of the judges (26-31).
- Finally, a *recognition that the LORD is just to judge* his people leads to a desire to see his glory and for their desires to be conformed to his will (32-37). Those of us who know Jesus should find even more than the Old Testament believers did to arouse our devotion to the LORD.

Both the people's prayer and their subsequent conduct emphasize how much they had read and re-read the Scriptures. Thus, they promise together (9:38) to obey the Word of God (10:28) and are sensitive to both the demands of God that refer particularly to their own situation and to how God's word applies to all their conduct. Their experience of renewing grace thus left them with more than a sweet taste in their mouths. Detailed faithfulness to God's word, a real concern for the purity of his people and a recognition of their responsibility to the LORD and his work is seen in all they did.

Nehemiah 11:1-13:3

These chapters which are so full of names were recorded to *teach us three great truths*. In particular, they describe to us the way in which the great visions of both Nehemiah and Ezra came to fulfilment.

- Firstly (13:1-3), they tell us how *the people were established as a separate community, conformed to the word of God as a 'kingdom of priests' in the service of the LORD* (compare Exodus 19:6 with 12:1-26, 44-47).
- Secondly, they show that, *because the people were once again in fellowship with God, the place where he had promised his presence to dwell was once again a testimony to his glory* (11:1-24; 12:27-43 and especially verse 43. Compare Psalm 48:1,2).
- Thirdly, the people *gradually reclaimed the land of promise for God* (11:25-36). It is clear that they were not making an attempt to establish a Jewish state since some went to live in Kiriath-Arba or Hebron which was in Idumea (11:25). However, these and other places had been declared as places where God would appoint his presence (see Genesis 22:18) for the blessing of the

world. Thus, these people were *driven on by a desire for the salvation of God to reach the nations of the world*.

Once again, the application to each one of us is clear. We are called to be a people separated to God and enjoying his presence in order that we might reach the unbelieving world with the gospel.

Nehemiah 13:4-31

After 12 years as governor of Jerusalem (445-433 BC) Nehemiah returned to Babylon. Later, after an unspecified time, he returned for a second spell in office (6). These verses give us an account of his second governorship.

Chapters 8-12 described a people stirred up by the Spirit of God to make a covenant declaring their intention to be faithful to the LORD. They also described the blessing of God upon them while they remained faithful to Him. Sadly, *this chapter shows us how short their memories and how weak their wills were*. For all their fine words and their encouraging deeds they quickly capitulated to the enemies of God's people.

Thus,

- Tobiah had gained a foothold even in the Temple and had forced the religious authorities to *clear out the equipment which was vital for the worship of God and necessary for the support of his servants* (4-9).
- They had also *begun to neglect the support of God's servants*: forcing them out of their ministry through poverty. Nehemiah understood that this was to neglect not only the worship of God but also God himself (10-14).
- Then, they had *allowed their daily activities to crowd out time which should have been dedicated to God* (15-22).
- Finally, they had *allowed their attitudes and actions to slip away from the standards God had set them* (23-31).

Today, the marks of spiritual decline are no different. Disobedience to God's word, neglect in giving him what is rightfully his of our time and money, and a willingness to harbour sin and the Devil in preference to the LORD himself are sure signs of a people whose love for the LORD has grown cold: a people who have forgotten the blessedness of fellowship and obedience.

The story of the book of Nehemiah (and that of Ezra, which preceded it) is a remarkable and wonderful one. Over a period of 100 years Israel had returned from Exile in Babylon and had established themselves according to the promises of God. Jerusalem was once again 'the joy of the whole earth' (Psalm 48:2). Gradually, amid much opposition, the land had been re-occupied, the Temple rebuilt, the community made subject to the Word of God, Jerusalem's wall rebuilt and the city and the land re-populated. The return from the Exile had been what the prophets had promised: a new Exodus.

Yet the story ends in anti-climax.

- The *glory of the Temple never equalled that of Solomon's* and did not enjoy the Shekinah glory at its dedication,
- The *city was still a poor copy of what it had once been,*
- the *people a mere shadow of their past glories,*
- The *land was occupied by a 'remnant'* and was under the

rule of pagan kings; there was no one to occupy the throne of David and

- Though the people had become the people of the Book they were *still spiritually and morally weak*, as chapter 13 shows.

So the story ends with a 'tension' between the promises of God (see, for example, *Ezekiel 40-48, Isaiah 40-66, Zechariah and, especially Genesis 12:1-3*) and the experience of the people in the days of *Ezra and Nehemiah*. It encourages the reader to look further forward to the final fulfilment of all the promises of God.

Not until Jesus came were they fulfilled. Thus, Jesus:

- Broke the power of sin (Romans 8:3,4 and Jeremiah 31:31-34). He did this by,
- Bringing to an end all the Old Testament rituals which had pointed forward to his great work (Hebrews 7-10), establishing permanent forgiveness (Hebrews 9:11-15)

and a better access to God (Hebrews 4:14-16; Matthew 27:51).

- His was the Kingdom of great David's greater son: a kingdom not of this world (Matthew 12:35-37; John 18:36) which began in his ministry (Mark 1:4) but will one day be gloriously established (Revelation 11:5).
- The land was but a shadow which pointed to the eternal rest in Jesus (Hebrews 4:1) and the renewal of the world through him (Romans 8:18-22).
- Jerusalem itself pointed to the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-4; Isaiah 60:11, 13) and
- Believers in Jesus are the true Temple (Revelation 3:12 and Ephesians 2:21) in whom the glory of God dwells (Ephesians 1:4) as a guarantee of their final inheritance.

As those who have seen the fulfilment of all that Ezra and Nehemiah sought may we prove worthy of our privilege in a devoted service to God which is at least the equal of theirs.