

Nehemiah

A Man of Prayer and a Man of Action

by Arthur Goodwin

A little about the history of Nehemiah

I do not possess a copy of the Guinness Book of Records and I do not therefore know if there is such an entry for the shortest prayer ever sent up to heaven. Probably there is not, but if there were who would stand to hold the title? I have read of a well known preacher of bygone years who commenced his weekly ministry to his congregation with the prayer "Lord, we are all here", but the man who forms the subject of our meditation could, I think, have beaten even that. We shall refer to it again in a moment.

I would like to say something about Nehemiah, the man of prayer and the man of action, but first a little about his history. He was one of the Jewish nation who found himself a captive in the land of Babylon, but nevertheless one who had risen to a position of some importance in the court of King Artaxerxes. He was in fact the King's cupbearer.

In about the year 550BC a large number of the captive Jews, by the decree of King Cyrus had returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel for the purpose of rebuilding the temple. About 90 years later Nehemiah was permitted to return with a smaller company to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, he at that time being about 80 years of age. About 13 years before this Ezra the scribe had also gone up to join Zerubbabel. Scripture does not give us the exact dates and times of these events, but I think that by reference to secular history the figures that I have given would be proved substantially correct.

As a matter of interest we might note that this return of Nehemiah marks the commencement of the 70 weeks of Daniel that we read of in Daniel 9:25. Permission for the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem was given by Artaxerxes: the commission to build the temple was given by Cyrus.

The book of Nehemiah is historically almost the last book of the Old Testament; only Malachi being written later and that by a only a few years. We have then a description of the state of the Jewish nation only just prior to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, whilst we in our day are living just prior to the second coming of our blessed Lord. There are then surely lessons for ourselves to be learned from a consideration of this book and particularly from the life of the one who is predominant in it.

Just take note of the analogy. Here we have Nehemiah a faithful man of God, but sadly one of a nation that despite being God's people were in captivity because of their sins and over whom God had had to pronounce the sentence "Lo-Ammi, — not My people" (Hosea 1:9). God had given them up, they were totally unworthy of Him.

Now let us consider ourselves. I trust that we would be adjudged faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus, we are members of the Church of God, but what do we see when we look around us today? The Church for whom Christ died is in fragments. There has been wholesale departure from the truth, lukewarmness abounds fitting the description of the Church in Laodicea of which we read in Revelation chapter 3.

Why Nehemiah began the work

Now let us examine the circumstances, which caused Nehemiah to embark upon His great work for God. He is in the Palace at Shushan when he is visited by his brother who has recently returned from Jerusalem, who tells him that the Jews who have returned are in great distress and that the wall of the city is broken down and the gates are burned with fire.

This causes him great grief and he turns to the Lord in the first prayer of which we read in this book. He earnestly requests that the Lord God of heaven would hear his prayer and he confesses the sins of his people. But it is noteworthy that in such a confession he says, "we have sinned", and "we have dealt corruptly" (Nehemiah 1:6,7). His confession, although embracing all the people, includes himself.

We next read of him going about his duties as the King's cupbearer and on one such occasion the King notices that he is looking very sad, and asks the reason for such a disposition. Nehemiah tells him of the condition of things in his city of Jerusalem and the King immediately detects that he has an urge to do something about it, and asks him what request he would like to make.

Here Nehemiah makes the brief prayer to which we have already referred. It is recorded that Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven, and said unto the King" (Nehemiah 2:4,5). It is evident that God had heard his first prayer and has moved the King to give him the opportunity to do something about it, but despite the fact that an answer was immediately required Nehemiah realises that he needs the guidance of God and so he shoots a swift prayer to heaven and answers the King.

The largeness of his request as recorded in chapter 2 indicates that he was certainly a man of faith. He not only requests that permission be given him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild, but he asks for letters of introduction to the governors of the territories through which he must pass, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the King's forest that timber might be given him to carry out the work. And so we read: "the King granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me" (Nehemiah 2:8).

So in these few verses of Scripture we are introduced to this faithful man of God who by prayer ascertains his sphere of service and loses no time in embarking upon it, but who at all times is in touch with heaven to know what his next line of action must be.

So we read in verse 9 that Nehemiah is already beyond the river and by verse 11 he has arrived at Jerusalem. The Spirit of God makes no reference to the preparation which he surely must have made for his journey, and no doubt we should learn from this that when we receive a commission from Lord we are to embark upon it without delay always, of course, keeping in touch with the Master by prayer.

In verse 12 he begins an inspection of the wall. There is no ostentation, he goes by night with only a few men and he soon discovers that the condition of things is very discouraging. But despite this we read that the final decision of Nehemiah and his associates is: "Let us rise up and build" (Nehemiah 2:18).

The work under way

In chapter three we find the work under way and I am sure that there is much instruction in this chapter for the servant of the Lord today. Let us remember what Nehemiah was doing. He was repairing the wall of the city of Jerusalem, God's city and by so doing he was securing those who dwell therein. Enemies abounded outside it and would seek to harm God's people and God's Testimony.

We also live in difficult days when Satan is attacking the children of God and the testimony that they should be maintaining for Him. Just think of the onslaught that is being made against the Holy Scriptures. Their divine inspiration is being questioned even by those, who because of their religious position, should be defending it.

Look at the Church, the one body of Christ and the house of God, fragmented into hundreds of divisions and this being added to almost week by week. Think of Satan's attack against the God-given institution of marriage and, where even here we find that he is having success among the Christian company.

Repairing the walls of Jerusalem

What was Nehemiah's modus operandi in repairing the wall? Let us look at some of the specific actions of those who repaired the wall. For instance we read in verses 1 and 3 of chapter 3 that there were those who set up the gates, others who not only set up the gates but provided locks and bars. Among the Tekoites there were nobles who "put not their necks to the work of their Lord" (Nehemiah 3:5).

Then we read that Jedaiah repaired that part of the wall that was even over against his house (verse 10). In contrast to Jedaiah, Meshullam built over against his chamber (verse 30). Apparently he had but a lodging rather than a house and consequently his sphere of responsibility narrower. Nevertheless he was found faithful. Shallum had the help of his daughters in the work that he carried out (verse 12).

There are many other details set out in this chapter and it certainly deserves a more detailed study. From the few observations to which we have referred, we can see how applications may be made to our spiritual reality, our families and homes, large or small and even a reminder that women have a responsible place in the local Church.

As we have stated the purpose of the wall suggests separation from evil, by a complete obedience to the Word of God. This is what Nehemiah encouraged and surely this should be our responsibility today.

Opposition to the Lord's work

You can be sure that if you are engaged on a genuine work for the Lord then you will very soon experience opposition, and it was not very long before Nehemiah came under attack.

First of all the weapon used was ridicule. "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish, seeing they are burned?" (Nehemiah 4:2). But Nehemiah had a weapon far more powerful than ridicule — he immediately turned to God in prayer and the work goes on.

So Satan turns to his second weapon as we read in chapter 4 verse 8, actual hostility. The enemy conspires to fight against Jerusalem and to hinder the work. Again, as we read in verse 9 Nehemiah prays to his God and then, as the man of action, sets a watch against the enemy.

All this is very similar to that which the early Church had to endure. The first three chapters of the Acts are chapters recording the blessing which followed the formation of the Church, but in chapter 4 we read of opposition and of how the early disciples had recourse to the Lord in prayer. The last verses of that chapter speak of God's response.

But Nehemiah not only had to contend with outside assault but also from brethren within. In chapter four Judah becomes discouraged and complains, and in chapter five the richer Jews are burdening their less fortunate brethren by lending to them and then charging extortionate rates of interest. All this is very distressing to Nehemiah.

But he is a true leader and a man of action. In the former case he arranges his workforce, arming them with spears, shields and bows and the people turned all to the wall every one to his work. His words of encouragement to them are: "Remember the Lord who is great" (Nehemiah 4:14), and: "Our God shall fight for us" (Nehemiah 4:20). The exhortation to us in First Thessalonians 5:11 is to "encourage one another, and build up each one the other".

In the latter case he shows a real concern for his distressed brethren, for they were all children of Abraham. Additionally there was also positive disobedience on the part of these rich Jews towards their poorer brethren, for their actions were a clear violation of the law as it is recorded in Deuteronomy 15:7-8 and chapter 23:19. Nehemiah solemnly reproves the extortioners and makes them restore that which they had unjustly taken from their poorer brethren. In fairness we must say that the wealthy Jews readily agreed. A suitable New Testament passage outlining similar but Christian principles would be James 2:1-3.

In this passage of Nehemiah, chapters four and five, we find Nehemiah very much alone in his service for God. In chapter 5:7 we read "I consulted with myself"; even his consultants seemed to be amongst the extortioners and Nehemiah is left shut up to God. This is surely a blessed position when we find ourselves in circumstances similar to this.

As the man of action he set a fine example, for after he was appointed governor he refused to accept the privileges of such a position. He not only provided for his own needs but for 150 of the Jews and rulers, besides those who came to them from among the nations who were entertained at his expense. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to be "followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Isaiah writing long before both Nehemiah and Paul says: "Cease to do it evil, learn to do well" (Isaiah 1:16,17).

The six attempts to hinder the work

We read of six attempts by the enemy to hinder this work of God:

- (1) in chapter 2:19 we have ridicule,
- (2) in chapter 4:2 further ridicule,
- (3) in chapter 4:8 conspiracy,
- (4) in chapter 4:10 discouragement by brethren,
- (5) in chapter 6 vv. 2,4 four attempts by craft to cause the work to cease,
- (6) in chapter 6 vv. 5,6 false accusation.

Nehemiah's overall response was: "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease?" (Nehemiah 6:3). He had an appreciation of the task in hand: the glory of God was involved in it. Such was the man of prayer and action.

What an example to us all! So we read in chapter 6 verses 15 and 16 that the wall was finished in 52 days, and moreover the enemy had to acknowledge that it was a work of God. Is God any less powerful in 2003 than he was in a Nehemiah's day?

Nehemiah's vigilance

In chapter seven we have further examples of Nehemiah as the man of action. Verse one tells us that the wall was built, the doors had been set up and the porters, the singers and Levites were in their place. Passages such as this demonstrate the vigilance that Nehemiah showed in carrying out the work God that had given him to do, not only in matters temporal but also in matters spiritual.

The doorkeepers were responsible for those who entered the temple, the singers were those who led in the service of song in the Temple as recorded in First Chronicles 6:31-32, whilst the Levites were those whose duty it was to assist in the various activities in the Temple.

But he recognised also that proper administration would be necessary in the City and so he appointed his brother Hanani to be its ruler, a man who had an excellent qualification: "He was a faithful man, and feared God above many" (Nehemiah 7:2).

In verse 5 Nehemiah recorded: "My God put into mine heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy". The way in which Nehemiah was able to address God was indicative of his intimacy with Jehovah.

The genealogy of all was duly examined and an exact register was made of those priests, Levites, Nethinim and children of Solomon's servants who had returned from Babylon. The Nethinim whose name means 'given' appear to have been subordinate servants in the temple and may have been descendants of the Gibeonites, of whom Joshua said "there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God" (Joshua 9:23).

Information about the children of Solomon's servants is even more scarce, but the passage in First Kings 9:19-21 may throw some light on it. Of the Amorites, Hittites and others Solomon levied a tribute of bond-service unto this day. Additionally all the names of the people who returned from Babylon are recorded.

I think that perhaps the chief lesson that we, as Christians, may learn from this chapter is found in verses 63-65. Here we learn that those priests who could not establish their genealogy were barred from participating as priests. The temple was the house of God and Psalm 93:5 tells us: "Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord for ever".

All who served the Lord as priests had to have an impeccable record and so it surely should be today. The Church today is made up of those who are true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, their sins have been cleansed by His precious blood and these themselves have been made priests according to First Peter 2:5. But how many are there today who week by week present themselves at their place of worship ostensibly offering their sacrifice of praise, but who know nothing of the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God.

Listening to the Word of the Lord

From chapter eight until the end of the book Nehemiah becomes less prominent and Ezra the scribe comes into the forefront. As we are chiefly concerned with the former, I will just mention the important matters that are referred to in this passage.

The first and perhaps the most important event is the gathering together of the people to hear the Word of the Lord read. This was undertaken by Ezra, and when he opened the book all the people stood up; after the reading the people answered: "Amen, Amen", and bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground (Nehemiah 8:6).

Additionally we are told that the book was read distinctly and the sense was given that the people could understand the reading. Here we have clear principles for revival, and they are as pertinent today as they were in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra.

The Feast of Tabernacles was reinstated, they were times of both joy but also of fasting, repentance and confession. Then a covenant was made with Jehovah promising future faithfulness to Him. Although this covenant was signed by the priests, Levites and other high dignitaries, it is specifically stated that those who were included were "their wives, their sons, their daughters, every one having knowledge and having understanding" (Nehemiah 10:28).

Another important undertaking entered into, and certainly so very important and applicable for us today, was a promise to separate themselves from all that was unclean and contrary to the law of their God. What strikes me in all of this is that there is a return to first principles and that, dear fellow believer, is what is required today.

Nehemiah's return

About this time it would seem that Nehemiah returned to Shushan and then after an unspecified period went back to Jerusalem. What he found on his return must have grieved him to his heart. Firstly Eliashib the priest had permitted a relative of his named Tobiah and who was an Ammonite to take up residence in a chamber in the courts of the house of God.

In Deuteronomy 23:3 God had clearly stated: "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their 10th generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever, because they met you not with bread and with water in the way when ye came forth out of Egypt".

Then he discovered that the Levites and the singers were not being provided for and had to work in the fields. They should, of course, have been supported by the people. The Sabbath was being desecrated, and intermarriage was taking place between the Jews and other tribes. First principles had been given up. Once again Nehemiah proved himself a man of action by severely reprimanding the wrongdoing and restoring the godly order.

Lessons for us

What then are we, as Christians, to learn from the life of this man of old? May I suggest the following points:

- (1) Firstly we must remember that we live in a different dispensation. Nehemiah was a Jew serving amongst his own people. We are Christians, part of the Church of God and serving our Lord both among His people and also preaching the gospel to unconverted souls of all nations. Whilst we might not be able to make hard and fast analogies we must remember that the principles of God remain unchanged.
- (2) In Nehemiah we have the example of a faithful servant of God, who responded immediately to His call and who maintained activate links with his Master through prayer.
- (3) As a result he was continually guided and supported by his God.
- (4) He established everything upon the Word of God.