

Nehemiah Rebuilds the Wall

April 18, 2021

Nehemiah 2:11-20

The *Book of Nehemiah* is a continuation of *Chronicles – Ezra*, but with this difference. Much of the *Book of Nehemiah* was written by Nehemiah himself. This material is considered one of the most historically accurate sources in the *Old Testament*. The particulars that can be found in other historical sources are consistent. This material would seem to have been written as a “memorial.” That is, Nehemiah composed this material as a memorial document to be placed before God in the temple, and kept there. See 13:14, where Nehemiah writes, **“Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.”** The last words of Nehemiah are, **“Remember me, O my God, for good.”** (13:31b) This was especially important for Nehemiah. As the Persian King’s cupbearer and servant, he was most likely a eunuch, with no children or inheritance of his own. This was common at the time – kings depended on servants who would not put their own family interest ahead of the king’s. The employment of such servants continued even to a few centuries ago in the Ottoman Empire. The parts of *Nehemiah* that scholars generally attribute to Nehemiah himself are 1:1-7:73a, 11:1-2, 12:27-43, 13:4-31.

What stands out to me about Nehemiah is integrity. That’s true of him and his writing. He is conscientious and courageous, and puts others before himself. Obviously he was a leader who inspired confidence, first of the Persian King Artaxerxes I, and then of the Jews in and around Jerusalem. He is practical. Nehemiah carefully considered his actions, and was effective in carrying them out. Of course, he was faithful to God and to his people. As such, he is a good model for us to consider.

Nehemiah’s story starts with his hearing about the conditions in Judea, the region around Jerusalem where exiles under Zerubbabel had gone in the time of King Cyrus of Persia to restore the temple. **“I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They [the men from Judah] replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”** (1:2b-3)

Notice that Nehemiah refers to “Jews who escaped the captivity.” Not all those of Judah were carried away captive to Babylon. Many, taking Jeremiah with them, had fled to Egypt, and even established a Jewish temple on Elephantine Island on the Nile River. Some had stayed in Palestine. Nehemiah is inclusive of all of these, in addition to the band led by Zerubbabel that returned from exile in Babylon. He considers them all “survivors.” That’s indicative of people who are just barely hanging on, not triumphantly rebuilding. Those in and around Jerusalem were denied the security against attacks that a city wall could provide. The historian Josephus explains in his narrative, “The surrounding nations were inflicting many injuries on the Jews, overrunning the country and plundering it by day and doing mischief by night, so that many had been carried off as captives from the country and from Jerusalem itself; and every day the roads were found full of corpses.”

Nehemiah prepared to put the matter before his king carefully. He prayed over it. Nehemiah was in Susa, and the King has likely just recently returned there from his winter palace in Babylon. The dialog between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes is characteristic of court diplomacy, and yet there is also an intimacy between the King and his trusted servant. Nehemiah is careful not to mention Jerusalem by name. He refers to it as “the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves.” That concern for ancestors was important to all cultures of that time. Nehemiah doesn’t mention the wall immediately, just rebuilding the city in general. When he does get into detail, he makes sure that he has authorization to procure timber for the gates of the temple and wall and for his house. He’s not deceiving the king or misleading him, as Nehemiah’s opponents, in particular Sanballat and Tobiah, will assume.

In our scripture reading, Nehemiah 2:11-20, we see Nehemiah conduct his own personal inspection of the walls by night, then come and put the situation before the Jews, priests, nobles, and officials. **“Let us start building!”** Nehemiah was a man of action. He came to get something done, and wasted no time setting about it. Immediately afterward, in Chapter 3, we have Nehemiah’s detailed assignment of who was to repair what part of the wall. Likely his previous three days were spent getting to know the people in Jerusalem, and considering these assignments. Chapter 3 looks like a dry, dull listing. But, there are some points of interest. Many assignments are mentioned as being adjacent to the house of the party repairing that part of the wall. Many of those participating are from elsewhere. Jericho, Mizpah, Gibeon, and other districts are mentioned. Notably, **“Next to them [Zadok and sons] the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles**

would not put their shoulder to the work of the Lord.” Nehemiah would have repeated problems with “the nobles.” Nehemiah also mentions the professions of many who were doing the rebuilding, including goldsmiths and a perfumer. I thought it was quite interesting in v. 12: **“Next to him [him being Pahathmoab] Shallum, son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters.”** The name “Pahathmoab” means “governor of Moab”, an office from king David’s day when Moab was governed by Israel. This man must have been a descendant of that Davidic ear man.) This was a big effort! It needed cooperation in shared purpose. Perhaps Shallum didn’t have any sons, and so that’s why the daughters are mentioned here. Normally someone as important as a ruler of a district would have “people” to do things like this. But Nehemiah asked everyone to put their shoulder to the work, even the nobility, daughters, the priests, and the Levites.

Chapter 4 describes the opposition to the rebuilding of the wall. First came belittling (vs. 1-4), then threats and plots of violence. Nehemiah had planned well – the wall seems to have been rebuilt with the worst part repaired first, so that the wall was to half its height before enemies could mobilize. People had worked diligently. The threat was attacks that could come by day or night, so Nehemiah had a guard organized and set prepared to defend. **“So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from break of dawn until the stars came out. I also said to the people at that time, ‘Let every man and his servant pass the night inside Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.’ So neither I nor my brothers or my servants nor the men of the guard who followed never took off our clothes; each kept his weapon in his right hand.”** (*Nehemiah* 4:21-23) The rebuilding of the wall was completed in just 52 days (6:15). That is an astoundingly short time.

Keeping the work going on the wall was just one challenge. Nehemiah also had to deal with injustice among the Jews. We read in Chapter 5, “Now there was a great deal of outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin.” (v. 1) The outcry seems to have been specifically against the Jewish nobility that lived in Jerusalem. There was a famine (v.3) and the poor had been forced to mortgage their land for sustenance. In real estate loans, the creditor took over the property until the loan could be repaid, driving the poor even more into debt and distress.

Here is Nehemiah’s answer. **“After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, ‘You are all taking interest**

from your own people.’ And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, “As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!’ They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and their interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.’”

(Nehemiah 5: 7-11)

Later Nehemiah describes how he did not take the payments and taxes of food and money that would normally be his due as governor (5: 14-19). Indeed, he had generously provided for numerous others. After twelve years of benevolent rule as governor, Nehemiah returned to Persia.

When he later returned (Chapter 13, starting at verse 4), he found that things had come off the rails. The high priest Eliashib had installed the Jews’ enemy Tobiah in an apartment in the temple. He and his cronies had been appropriating the resources meant for the priests and Levites and other temple people such as the singers had needed to return to their fields in order to sustain themselves. Nehemiah again had to straighten things up and clean up the corruption he found.

This trouble with the Jewish nobility and priesthood was connected to trouble with the hostile peoples of the land. We read in Nehemiah 13:28 we read, “**And one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of the high priest Eliashib, was the son in law of Sanballat the Horonite.**” Sanballat had been an opponent of rebuilding from the beginning! This was part of the “foreign wives” problem we considered last week. Nehemiah comments on this in 13:23-24: “**In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples.**” Nehemiah’s concern is practical – if they can’t speak to other Jews, they can hardly be considered part of the community. Yet, this was the priesthood which was doing this! While Ezra sought to purify the entire Jewish nation, Nehemiah focused on this issue within the priesthood. In verse 30, just before the end of his memorial, Nehemiah writes of the priests and Levites, “**Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I**

established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits.”

Later Ezra extended this to all the peoples, although that is portrayed as being simultaneous with Nehemiah in the chapters of the book that were not authored by Nehemiah. Nehemiah, by God’s grace, appeared at a very important point for the Jewish people. The rebirth of the Jewish nation after the exile was in peril. He came to Jerusalem with the authority, the resources, and the initiative to restore not just the wall, but integrity to his people and their history as God’s chosen.

The returned exiles would continue to have problems. The Persians were relatively benevolent rulers – as long as subject peoples paid their taxes, they were allowed considerable autonomy, as we see for the Jews in the time of Nehemiah. But, about a century later, Alexander the Great burst onto the scene and conquered the Persian empire. The Greeks had a different way of doing things. They intended not just military and political domination, but cultural domination as well, including their religion. Eventually the Jews were persecuted for not being compliant with Greek ideals, leading to the turmoil and revolt of the Maccabean period, and later Roman domination that we see present in Jesus’s time.

We, too, have to expect the world to keep changing. Through it all there will be challenges and temptations and powerful parties seeking their own interests through various forms of corruption. We can thank God for those who, like Nehemiah, govern with integrity. Nehemiah’s integrity was linked to his faithfulness to God. The world could certainly use more leaders of that character.

Prayer: God of action, may Nehemiah teach us about getting things done and staying the course in spite of setbacks. Amen.