

Nehemiah: Lessons in Leadership

By, Donald L. Tollefson

[October 23, 2003]

The Making of a Leader

What is it that makes someone a leader? Position? Power? Prominence? Depending upon whom you speak to will determine the answer you get. In the world where getting ahead is often the goal, the bottom line is frequently results. How much did you achieve? How many did you win? How far did you get?

While results are often the barometer used to determine a person's leadership skills—and this way of thinking has a way of influencing us and our perception of leadership—in the Biblical way of viewing things, results are not primary. Rather, *relationship* is the basis of what makes a person a leader—a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

For a leader in the church to know that before he is pastor, teacher, elder, congregational or board chairman, first he is an elect, redeemed child of God, chosen to be an heir of salvation by grace through faith in Christ—that knowledge will affect the ways he views his leadership position. Redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or defect, spiritual leaders in the home, in the church, in the world in which we live are the “salt of the earth,” the “light of the world.” Our Lord Jesus says through His apostles Peter and John that they are “kings” and “priests”. That tremendous privilege is what permits a leader to consider how he may carry out his God-given responsibility as a spiritual leader to those entrusted to him. For before God gives us something to do, first He gives us something!

For that reason, when the Lord leads His people to positions of leadership, He works in a way unlike our common way of thinking. Contrary to what we like to believe about ourselves, God doesn't take the most gifted, the most polished, those with the most potential and set them loose as leaders. Leaders in Christ's Church are made, not born. In the school of experience, nurtured by Law and Gospel, they are molded and shaped as they are fashioned by the skill of the Master Potter to rely less on themselves and more and more on the One into whose image they are being transformed. To say that is to say that this kind of thinking is not natural with us. It is not with anyone.

- The Lord gave His servant Moses a forty year lesson in humility to understand that leadership goes better God's way, or it doesn't go at all, after Moses had taken things into his own hands and had to run for his life after taking the life of another. (see Exodus 2 & 3)
- Elijah learned by experience that the Lord, who would provide by means of a jar of flour and oil in times of drought and famine, would also provide fire from heaven against an open challenge to God's jealous authority and selfless glory. This same prophet also learned by experience that the Lord is present *not only* on the mount of power, *but also* in the valley of despair when God's servant is overwhelmed with weakness, doubt and fear. (see 1 Kings 17 & 18)

Yes, God works in ways that are uncommon to our way of thinking. In our weakness, He displays His power. In our shortness of sight, He shows the vastness of His vision for eternity. In our lack, He shows His abundance. He gives what we need. He provides where we are wanting. He strengthens for the task at hand. He fits the back for the burden..

Nehemiah is one example of a man used by God for His purpose. His name נְחֵמְיָהוּ means, “The Lord comforts.” Concerned for a land and a people he loved; far removed from the place that needed protection, security, rebuilding; positioned to employ the services of a heathen king who was not inclined to see God’s purposes succeed; and facing obstacles from without and opposition from within, Nehemiah learned the meaning of his own name. He learned that where the Lord guides and directs, often quietly and without great fanfare, using resources He has positioned even under control of opposing forces, there is reason not only for hope of success but also the promise that God’s greater view of things will be fulfilled in a people to be re-gathered, a place for God’s Name and walls of protection to be rebuilt, so that from this faithful remnant a Savior yet to be born would come to atone for the sins of all and prepare a place where the walls will never again be torn down and the people of God will never again be scattered. Nehemiah learned the lesson he could pass on to his people, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Setting

Nehemiah holds a unique place in the history of God’s people. Already in 605 BC the first deportations of the second wave of judgment had begun. The remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin hadn’t learned the lesson so forcibly shown to their neighboring tribes to the north, when in 722 BC the Assyrians were used by God to execute judgment upon their sin of idolatry. The despised and disregarded voices of the prophets were shown to be true when the hand of God came down upon the people. Now several generations later the mighty hand of God was again showing the Lord is just and His judgments are true in all their ways. With the second tidal wave of God’s judgment rolling over His people, deportations from Judah/Jerusalem left this “promised land” desolate and deserted. A once proud people saw with their eyes what before they would not believe in their hearts—God is serious when He says, “I will not give my glory to another.”

Here is a lesson to be learned when hearts would be tempted to seek praise from men above praise from God; when we would be tempted to listen to what the “majority” say before we listen to what our God says; when heads are turned by a good word and a pat on the back and our hearts are no longer filled with the firm resolve to carry on God’s work in God’s way. We need to know that God means business when He says, “I am the Lord,—that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.”—not even of our own making! (Isaiah 42:8)

But the God who shows His justice did not abandon His people. He sent prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel to call them back to repentance. Though a generation would pass away in a distant land of captivity, another would grow up to hear God’s promise to preserve a faithful remnant and would live to see God fulfill His promise after a 70 year exile. God raised up a ruler like Cyrus in 539 BC to accomplish His purposes to bring a people back to the land of promise and rebuild the temple. Under leaders like Ezra the priest, Haggai the prophet, and Zerubbabel the governor, reconstruction of the

temple was begun just a few short years after Cyrus' decree. It was not quite the temple of glory and grandeur Solomon had built for God's Name, but it was a reminder that the Lord keeps His promises.

Jerusalem, however, was no longer the city it once was. The walls of the city had lain in ruins since 586 BC. It was then that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had breached them, entered Jerusalem, burned the temple, carried all but the poorest of the remaining people to Babylon, and knocked the walls down. (2 Kings 25) An attempt was made under Ezra to rebuild the walls for the protection of the city and its inhabitants, but the project never quite got off the ground as the enemies that infested the neighboring towns, villages and countryside saw to it that it never reached completion. They convinced the king to bring any such project to a halt. (Ezra 4:12, 23) The once darling city of God's possession was a faint image of its glorious past. Its people were dispirited and discouraged, unable to protect themselves. Faint was the hope that things would improve.

Rebuilding the Walls – Chapters 1-7

Nehemiah's Prayer - Chapter 1

More than one thousand miles to the east by caravan was the winter capital of the mighty Persian King, Artaxerxes. In late November/early December in the month of *Kislev*, the twentieth year of the king's reign (445 BC) news came to the royal cupbearer that things in Judah were not good. "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." (v. 3)

Whether by choice or by decree, it seems Nehemiah had never seen the city of Jerusalem. The nation that Artaxerxes ruled had become his adopted home. There he lived and served in the king's court—a civil servant yet a servant of the Most High God. As he grew he heard firsthand how God had worked behind the scenes some forty years earlier to raise an adopted girl named Esther to a position of prominence, and then put her to work to preserve the faithful remnant in Persia from Haman's evil intent and from extinction. She became an example and encouragement that in the midst of the most trying and desperate circumstances, God will never forsake those who look to Him in trust.

The Lord had a purpose for His people then, and He had a purpose for Nehemiah now. The line from which the Savior would come would not be wiped out. The place and the people would rather be strengthened and rebuilt to await His coming. Though the outward glory of the nation would never match the reign under David and Solomon, the true glory of God's people would shine brighter and reach beyond the borders of Judah/Jerusalem. Through this humble servant Nehemiah whom God would comfort and counsel, the Lord would once again work behind the scenes to use him and favorably dispose a heathen king for His purposes.

It is a reminder to us today that the Lord, whose power reaches beyond the heavens, has chosen to work quietly and without great fanfare through the channels He has chosen. He works today through simple means (water and the Word; bread and wine) in keeping with the sacred message of the Scriptures *and* through those who have been convicted by this word of judgment and comforted by God's Word of grace. His servants who serve Him today find a ready source of power in the message the Master has left us.

Nehemiah's reaction to the bad news from Jerusalem was that he made it the subject of prolonged, ongoing prayer. "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." (v. 4) His concern was for his people, the place God had chosen to reveal His Name, and the promise the God of free and faithful grace had made to His people. As a leader in the making, Nehemiah showed himself a *man of prayer*. (1:4-11)

His prayer in chapter 1 (the first of many in the book) begins with praise for God's greatness and His loyal love for His people. (v. 5) And as Ezra had done before him, we appreciate that Nehemiah freely acknowledged that he and his people had been guilty of sinning against God. They had disobeyed God's Law given through Moses. (v. 7) Yet, Nehemiah was not hesitant to remind God of His promise to restore His people to their land if they repented. (vv. 8-9) He took courage in the fact (and reminded God of it) that these were the people the Lord had redeemed from slavery in Egypt for a special purpose. (v. 10) With confidence that the Lord would hear the prayer of one who reveres His name, Nehemiah concluded his prayer with a petition that his planned appeal to the king be heard. (v. 11)

With the expression "this man" at the end of his prayer, Nehemiah showed the difference between his reverence for the Lord and his perception of his master, the Persian king. In the eyes of the world, Artaxerxes was a man of influence and power, who could decide life and death. In the eyes of Nehemiah, Artaxerxes was just a man like any other. The Lord of history makes the decisions, not Artaxerxes. Nehemiah's greatness comes from asking great things of a great God and attempting great things in reliance upon Him!

Prayer remains a mark of the man of God still today. It is noted that there are more prayers per page in the book of Nehemiah than any other book of the Bible. Nehemiah reveals that his trust is not self-centered but God-centered. It also reveals that prayer—intentional, spontaneous, ongoing—had become a way of life with this man who sought great things from God. As time went on he would learn that dependence on God expressed through his prayer-life would stand him in good stead.

Before the King - Request and Response Chapter 2

After nearly four months (it was now early April in the twentieth year of the king's reign, 444 BC), preparing himself in prayer for the appropriate time to approach the king with his request, Nehemiah was finally given the opportunity. His dependence upon God would guide him through.

As he approached the king to make his request, he was at the same time in conversation with God. (v. 4) He realized a mistake or misunderstanding could mean *no* audience with the king. His sadness of heart could be misinterpreted to be dissatisfaction with the king. In addition, Nehemiah would be making a request of the king to revise his official policy toward Jerusalem that was established under Ezra (4:21) to halt the building of the walls. More than one man who made such requests of the King of Persia lost not only his audience but his position/head as well. There was more than one reason for Nehemiah to acknowledge, "I was very much afraid."

But Nehemiah's strength shows through. With prayer on his lips and courage worked in his heart by his dependence on God, Nehemiah makes his request. He shows that a first step toward attempting anything great for God and His kingdom is to

keep first things first. His *concern* for the things of God—God’s people; the place where God is worshiped, honored, revealed; the means for protecting the people and their worship life in the walls surrounding the city—all kept Nehemiah focused on his request and humbly beseeching the king to grant what he asked. “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it” (vv. 4-5).

Nehemiah also shows in approaching the king that he has already spent time with God. The prayer in verse 4 is one of the most spontaneous in the Scriptures, and it comes from a heart that has spent quality time with God. Nehemiah learned the lesson that spiritual strength comes not from what we do for God, but what He does for us. Growing in our relationship with Him through word and prayer strengthens the heart of God’s leaders for tasks yet to come, for walls remaining to be built, for relationships with others needing to be strengthened and fortified. Nehemiah reveals that his relationship with the Lord was personal, primary and a persistent part of his life. Nor was it one-sided. His thorough acquaintance with the Scriptures and his encouragement through Ezra to proclaim that word to the people later in the book (chapter 8) reveal that his spiritual life was built on solid ground.

That spiritual strength led Nehemiah to be willing to *take risks* for the good of God’s people, His kingdom. Nehemiah had much to lose personally—his position, his prominence, his power—by making the requests he did. But he also knew the greater loss would be if nothing were done, if he made no request, if he failed to step forward and seize this opportunity. Could Nehemiah fail? Yes. Could the Lord of heaven and earth? We know the answer.

Taking a risk for God’s kingdom is like Joseph and Nicodemus stepping forward and asking for the body of Jesus as it hung lifeless on the cross, when not long before they were hesitant to be publicly recognized with this Jesus of Nazareth. It was like Esther, weighing in her own mind and heart the daring words of her uncle, Mordecai, “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4).

Royal position for such a time as this! Isn’t that God’s word to us, as it was to Esther, and to Nehemiah? We are reminded that God’s people are “kings” and “priests” a royal priesthood. Despite the stain on our hearts, the uncleanness of our hands, the silence from our lips, the Lord has atoned for *our* sin and made us clean in the blood of the Lamb. He has called us to royal position *for such a time as this* when financially the checkbook may not be flush, when physical resources may not be as bountiful, but the needs of God’s people—of all people—are urgent; as they were in Nehemiah’s day.

And because it was God’s purpose and God’s people and God’s cause that was at stake, when Artaxerxes was willing to grant Nehemiah’s request, this man of God makes full use of the king’s generosity. In addition to being given permission to go back to the home of his people, he asks for letters of safe-conduct and for provisions from the king’s forest for timber for the city gates, the wall and even the residence he will occupy. Still, he realizes whose generosity is being shown here. “Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests” (v. 8).

Inspecting the Walls

Nehemiah was willing to take a risk, relying on God for the outcome. But Nehemiah also knew that dependence on God meant taking a realistic view of things when necessary.

After arriving in Jerusalem, he spent 3 days to rest, recuperate from his journey, and get a general layout of the city before he set out to make preparations for what God had given him to do. After the sun had set and darkness settled over the city, Nehemiah mounted his horse and with just a few men made his way out of the Valley Gate on the western side of the city. Without the attention of others to distract or divert him, slowly he made his way southward toward the King’s Pool and the Dung Gate, examining the condition of the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down and their gates burned by fire. Around the southern tip of the city he made his way northward toward the Water Gate, but had to dismount because he was unable to get through.

Returning through what is known to us as the Kidron Valley, he again made his way around the southern tip of the city walls and re-entered through the Valley Gate. His entire journey was probably no more than an hour, but what he saw would occupy his immediate attention for the next 7 ½ weeks, and permit him to serve as Governor for the next 12 years.

Perhaps it was his attention to detail, or maybe it was his desire to see the evidence for himself that he went alone by night. More likely, Nehemiah didn't want to jump to hasty conclusions or have others draw their own conclusions for him. In any case, a man who had the desire to undertake a project of this size wanted to evaluate the evidence for himself. He wanted to know what he was facing so he could confront the task with all the resources he had at his disposal, without wasting time or resources. He knew the opposition was already gathering to see this project fail—Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab—and he wanted to get it off the ground as quickly as possible and have it complete before they could demoralize the people, or worse, convince the king that it was in his best interests to shut the project down once again.

In the church today, what is it that keeps us from seeing our projects through to fruition? Is it our failure to take a step back and get a realistic view of things when there are voices proposing that we go in many different directions—all at the same time? Have we taken the time to get down off our horse and view what needs rebuilding, restoring, shoring up so the foundation for future projects is firmly established?

Or is our problem that we lose sight of the goal? We get so wrapped up in the minutiae and detail we can no longer see the big picture. We lose sight of our mission. We scramble to do what's necessary and have little or no time to do what's important.

Is it time we get back to the basics, review what God and the congregation has called us to do, sink our noses into our Bibles, get on our knees in prayer, do the work of an evangelist, proclaim the Gospel, comfort the troubled, console the despairing, and equip God's people for works of ministry/service in the kingdom of God?

Take a look around. What "walls" in your ministry need rebuilding? Where are they weak, faltering, in need of reconstruction and renewal?

Where there is weakness, let's look for God's strength. Where there is sin, let's seek His forgiveness and pardon. Where there is blessing, let us rejoice in the gifts God has given and make full use of them to the glory of His name!

They Began This Good Work

Where there is repentance and renewal due to an honest appraisal—and that always starts with me—then God will also plant a desire to share His truth, to see that His will is done, to work in partnership with my fellow believers to plant, strengthen and extend His kingdom. But for God’s believing sons and daughters in this life, it is always a beginning—a new beginning. Raised to new life in Christ means each day, each service, each task is a new opportunity to glorify God and serve for the good of others.

When Nehemiah’s midnight ride was complete, he wasted no time to report to his people, the priests, nobles, officials and any others who would be doing the work. After gathering the hard evidence he needed, now was the time to gather the troops, be honest in his appraisal of the situation, show them what it meant for the people and their city, and rally them to begin the project God was calling them to do. “Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace’” (2:17).

It’s amazing what an honest appraisal will do to steel the will, to strengthen resolve, to give God’s people opportunity to express their God-given faith and the love He has planted in them for His kingdom. Half-hearted measures always remain just that—half-hearted. Where the heart of God’s people is not in a project, we soon see the results. But where God has worked through honest appraisal, through a realistic view of the situation, and a no cover-up policy of how things really are, then He will also use faithful and godly leaders to spur His people on to action. For like Nehemiah, they perceive “the gracious hand of my God upon me” (v. 18).

And like God’s servant, they also perceive that in the face of opposition, obstacles, challenges, effort and time involved, “the God of heaven will give us success”—as He defines it, according to His timetable, and in keeping with His good and gracious will.

Donald Campbell identifies 21 principles of effective leadership that Nehemiah demonstrated in chapter 2:

- “He established a reasonable and attainable goal
- He had a clear sense of mission
- He was willing to get involved
- He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal
- He patiently waited for God’s timing
- He showed respect to his superior
- He prayed at crucial times
- He made his request with tact and graciousness
- He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance
- He went through proper channels
- He took time (three days) to rest, pray and plan
- He investigated the situation firsthand
- He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem
- He identified himself with the people
- He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal
- He assured them God was in the project
- He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles
- He displayed God’s confidence in facing obstacles
- He did not argue with opponents He was not discouraged by opposition
- He courageously used the authority of his position”

The Workers and Their Work – Chapter 3

Once it was decided to begin the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem for the protection of the people and the safety of the city that housed God's temple, the workers set to work at once. Crews were established that repaired the wall and gates in a vicinity near their home or places of work or business. Eliashib the high priest, for example, and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate near the temple. In that way, the builders would have a special interest in seeing that the wall was secure, firmly anchored, and the gates were fully functional, able to open to welcome those who had an interest in the city but able to shut out those who sought its harm.

Nehemiah shows the trait of being able to see the big picture of what it's going to take to get the wall rebuilt, but at the same time to break that big picture down into pieces and bring together people with common interests to work on a part of the project of interest to them. If you scan through the third chapter, you quickly see that it was not just the work that Nehemiah was interested in but also the workers. The list of names would seem to indicate that just about everyone with any involvement in the work is mentioned. Nehemiah had the knack of involving people.

It's no secret that the church today also needs leaders who have the ability and skill to involve people. That's not an easy, nor necessarily a common gift, but it is one that can be learned, and also one that seems to be contagious once a leader shows how it is done—gently, consistently, involving as many people as possible for a project. It means that first a leader needs to gain the trust of those he seeks to involve and lead, but once trust is gained it's also a matter of setting workers free to do their work unhindered, without giving the impression that an ever-watchful eye is on them to correct their work. Outlining, planning and preparing for the work beforehand is of tremendous value. Once begun, consistent words of praise serve to keep the task moving ahead.

Opposition to the Rebuilding - Chapter 4

Every leader knows that anything worthwhile done for God and His kingdom will face opposition. (If there are *no* obstacles or opposition to overcome, either God has provided a rather unique blessing that may occur only once in a leader's lifetime, or there may be question that what is being done is really worthwhile after all.) Opposition, obstacles to overcome, challenges remain part of the fallen world in which we find ourselves.

Nehemiah could've rolled over and said, "It's not worth it!" when Sanballat and Tobiah began ridiculing the workers in an attempt to undermine their courage and their will to see the project through to completion. "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? ... Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?" (v. 2).

Breaking the will remains a subtle yet ever-present ploy that Satan uses to keep God's church from moving ahead with a planned project. If he can't stop it altogether, he'll undermine it, ridicule it, convince people it's not worth the time, effort, working together. There's been more than one project that's been proposed, decided upon, planned, even begun, but that's where it ended . . . because of opposition.

In Nehemiah's case, opposition was coming from Sanballat and Tobiah on the outside, but their ridicule and plot to prevent the project from moving ahead was also having an effect upon the workers and the people. They began to feel their own weakness; their strength and resolve to continue was beginning to give out. They feared the opposition would threaten their very lives.

Rather than cave in to their requests and their fears, Nehemiah, the man of God, resorted to his first line of defense: "Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders" (v. 5).

Nehemiah would not let hardship or opposition turn him away from the project God had called him to carry out. He had a task from God and he would not let the opposition control the playing field. In dependence on God he prayed. And depending on God he then armed a portion of the people with "swords, spears and bows" and positioned them along the wall. He reassured them, "Don't be afraid. . . Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers and your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." Nehemiah appealed to their concern for their families and their homes. In response, they continued the work they had been given to do in spite of the opposition. Soon, some were working with one hand and holding a weapon with another. Whatever it took to see the project through!

Keeping one eye on the task at hand and one eye looking out for obstacles or opposition that may derail a "well-planned" project may also be what's needed in our day. Seeking to understand how Satan can undermine the best of plans may also give opportunity to confront the opposition before it grows. Understanding whether that opposition is from "the outside" or from "within" may also help in understanding the way we deal with it—whether the Law is needed to do its work first, or whether the prominence needs to be given to the promises of the Gospel.

Like Nehemiah we also need to remember in facing obstacles and opposition that the battle is not ours alone. Bending our knees in prayer will help us to keep just such a proper perspective, as well as enlisting the encouragement and aid of fellow warriors in the fight. The almost endless listing of names in his book was not just a matter of good record-keeping on the governor's part. It was also a reminder to him in this fight that he was not alone. But with the joint effort on the part of an army of workers, Nehemiah found comfort for himself and for them in knowing, "Our God will fight for us!" (v. 20).

It's what Peter forgot when he faced the taunt of a young servant girl, but what young David remembered when he faced the taunts of a Goliath many-times his superior. It's what gives courage to a Sunday School child who remembers, but leaves the leaders of God's church fearful, cringing inside when they forget and get too full of themselves, of their plans, of their vision, of their—and their people's—strength to carry out that vision.

"Our God will fight for us!" We forget that truth to our own peril. Prayer, sticking with it, self-defense—all are important, as Nehemiah found out, to keep a project from coming to a halt. But only God, working through the means and instruments and people He has chosen, will permit us to say in the end to the glory of God, "It is finished!"

Strife Among the Workers - Chapter 5

While Sanballat and Tobiah had made some inroads in undermining the confidence of the people, with God's help Nehemiah had successfully combated them. But now, an even greater threat served to undermine the project. It's what every spiritual leader will have to face sometime—problems within.

The underlying problem presented in this chapter sprang from *pride*. Instead of putting God's interests first and seeking what's best for their people, there were some among them putting their own interests first and taking advantage of their own people. The Israelites had been forbidden by civil law to charge interest when they made loans to their poorer brothers. (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-38) When returning to Jerusalem, Nehemiah and some of his companions had paid to release some of their fellow Jews from slavery, so they too could return to their homeland. How inconsistent then for the Jews in Jerusalem to enslave them all over again!

Nehemiah called for a stop to the practice of charging exorbitant interest to their fellow people. He believed the "haves" should not make money off the "have nots." Rather, out of love for God and for their fellow people, they should give back what they had taken. This the people agreed to do. The "hundredth part" (v. 11) was the interest rate. If calculated on a monthly basis, it would amount to 12 per cent per year.

Nehemiah showed his own unselfish example by refusing to accept from the people the allotment of silver, food and wine that was due him as governor. Instead, he devoted himself to his work on the wall and even provided from his own pocket for the 150 Jews and officials who ate at his table. The plans of God and the welfare of His people were more important to him.

Attacks against Nehemiah - Chapter 6

Opposition from without. Strife from within. And now attacks against the leader himself.

The first was a plot to *distract* Nehemiah (v. 1-4). The plain of Ono, to which Nehemiah's adversaries invited him for a meeting, lay about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem near Judah's border with Samaria. It was a kind of no-man's land. If Nehemiah accepted this invitation, he would have been many miles from Jerusalem for two days. This would have given the people of the land ample opportunity to attack the Jewish workmen. Four times Nehemiah turned down separate invitations to this meeting.

Distraction remains a weapon in the hands of the adversary still today. If he can't get what he wants outright, he'll change the subject and use it to make an end-around. If he can't get through the defensive line head-on, there's always a way around to distract the inattentive leader into dealing with other issues that carry little or no weight, while the real issue is being attacked.

The second attack was a plot to *discredit* Nehemiah. (v. 5-9) Sanballat sends an "unsealed letter" to Nehemiah. Its purpose is to create division among the people,

who might begin to wonder if their leader's motives really are as Sanballat suggests. An unsealed letter could easily be read by anyone on the way. So Sanballat was responsible for further spreading the rumor.

Nehemiah's response is quick and to the point. He flatly denies the charge. Because he has a reputation as a man of integrity among his people, this seed of doubt does not take root. When his opponents are thinking they would undermine the project and weaken the people's resolve to work, Nehemiah looks to the One who can give him what he needs: "Now strengthen my hands" (v. 9).

The third attack was a plot to *deceive* Nehemiah. (v. 10-14) Shemaiah claimed to have received a prophecy from God. (v. 12) He tried to frighten Nehemiah into thinking that assassins were after him so that he would seek refuge inside the temple. Nehemiah was not the kind of man his enemies could terrify with a death threat, however. He saw through this "prophecy", that it was another in a long line of attempts to deceive him and discredit him before his own people. After all, if their leader were not willing to face the dangers confronting those building the wall, then why should they?

Every leader is to some degree a target. There will always be attempts to derail a project, dominate an agenda or undermine the unity of God's people. A leader has to determine how to respond. He has to weigh whether an accusation is best confronted head on because it will undermine the project, or whether it should be ignored because it is a distraction. For that he needs wisdom from God. Like Nehemiah he needs to stay close to God.

Distract. Discredit. Deceive. The master Tempter works through his emissaries still today to thwart God's plan, to keep His people from expressing their faith in love, to plot through intrigue, innuendo, intimidation—all with an effort to destroy the effectiveness of spiritual leaders and prevent God's people from working together for the good of God's kingdom.

The words of another who learned the master Deceiver's tactics first hand serve us in our battles: "Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1 Peter 5: 9,10)

Completion of the Walls - 6:15-7:4

"So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God." (v. 15, 16)

The best answer to opposition is to keep on working in order to carry out God's plan. In that way, others will see the blessing of God upon the efforts of those who trust Him.

There are a number of lessons in leadership from Nehemiah chapters 1-6:

1. A leader is a person of prayer (ch 1)
2. A leader has a vision of what can be (2:1-3)
3. A leader must be a wise planner (2:4-8)

4. A leader is called upon to inspire his followers (2:11-20)
5. A leader has to organize his task (ch 3)
6. A leader combines faith and common sense (ch 4)
7. A leader needs to be compassionate (5:1-13)
8. A leader possesses personal integrity (5:14-19)
9. A leader must be impartial (ch 5)
10. A leader displays a sense of mission (ch 6)

Rebuilding the Spiritual Walls of Jerusalem – Chapters 8-13

Gathering the People / Reading the Law- Chapter 8

After the wall is complete and the city is secured, the fact that Nehemiah did not immediately return to Susa shows that those projects were not his first concern. His larger goal was to re-gather the people of God in the land to which God had instructed them to return after the exile. (Jer 50:8; 51:6) He wanted to see God's will done. He put God's interests before his own.

The Law of Moses had specified that once every seven years the people of Israel were to assemble and listen to the reading of the Law. This was to take place during the Feast of Tabernacles (also called Feast of Booths, Deut 31:10-13). This occasion provided an opportunity for the people to renew their commitment to the Lord and His Law. Earlier in Israel's history, the people had submitted to such renewal of the covenant. (see Joshua 8; Joshua 24)

We see a pattern of worship in chapter 8: 1) The people assembled 2) there was a request for the reading of the Law (Torah) 3) someone opened the scroll 4) the people stood 5) someone (Ezra) offered praise 6) the people responded 7) they received instruction (sermon) 8) the Law was read 9) explanation and encouragement followed 10) the people departed for a fellowship meal.

Even though Ezra apparently read for several hours, the people remained attentive (!). Their perseverance along with standing on their feet out of respect for the Law reveals the attitude they had toward the Lord and His Word. A wooden platform (v. 4) accommodated Israel's leaders who stood on this raised platform with Ezra. Lifting hands toward heaven, with palms upward, was a common way the people expressed their desire to receive a blessing from God. Bowing with faces to the ground reflected their sense of humility before God.

Not only was the Word of God read, it was also likely that it was translated "so that the people could understand what was being read." For many Jews returning from the Persian Empire, Aramaic, not Hebrew, was their mother tongue. Therefore, translation was important and helpful to them as they sought to learn the will of God for their lives.

As the Law was being read, the people were convicted of their departure from God's will. Their initial reaction was to mourn and weep. (v. 9) The Law was showing its effect. Because the Feast of Trumpets was to be a joyous occasion, however, Nehemiah urged the people to rejoice in the Lord. Then he reminded them of their reason to rejoice: The God of free and faithful grace, who had revealed Himself to their

forefathers many years before as the “LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”— this God was their God. Nehemiah could tell them, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” (v. 10) The reading and exposition of Scripture taught the Israelites God’s will, convicted them of their shortcomings, pointed them to their Savior, and prepared them for righteous and godly living.

In the reading of the Law, apparently what Ezra read to the people, or at least to their leaders, included Leviticus 23, where God called upon His people to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) for 8 days during the seventh month of the year. This was a joyful celebration that looked back to the Israelite’s years of wandering in the wilderness when they lived in booths that they made out of branches. It also looked forward to their entrance into and residence in the Promised Land. It would have had special significance for the returned exiles, who came through a wilderness experience of their own, to re-enter the land God had given them. For that reason, “their joy was very great.” (v. 17)

Day after day, for 7 days, Ezra read from the Book of the Law. And the Word had a tremendous effect upon the people. It pointed out their sin (v. 9), led them to worship the Lord, (v. 12) and gave them great joy. (v. 17)

The Prayer of the People - Chapter 9

Two days after the solemn assembly, the people were still mourning over their sins. (v. 1) They separated themselves from all foreigners, as God had commanded to show they were set apart for Him, and they confessed their sins and the sins of their forefathers. (v. 2) For a fourth of the day they spent listening to the Book of the Law, and for another fourth they spent in confession and worshipping the LORD their God.

The Levites led the people in the prayer of praise included in this chapter (vv. 538). The prayer is also a prayer of instruction that gives a survey of the history of Israel with emphasis on certain events in the life of God’s chosen people. This approach is similar to Psalm 78, 105, 106, 135, 136.

It is especially helpful to read the prayer through the eyes of the returned exiles. They experienced many of the same things their forefathers had. We too can identify with their appreciation of God’s grace.

This prayer is one of the great prayers of the Old Testament. It praises God for His character and conduct. It describes God’s greatness seen in His creation, (v. 6) and His grace and faithfulness in calling Abraham, promising him the land of Canaan and fulfilling that promise. (vv. 7-8)

The returned exiles could identify with God’s miraculous deliverance of their forefathers when they were slaves in Egypt. (vv. 9-11) They could appreciate God’s supernatural guidance of them and His faithful provision for them until He brought them to the Promised Land. (vv. 12-15)

In spite of their forefather’s rebellion, (vv. 16-17) God forgave them and graciously guided them, (v. 19) provided for their physical needs, (vv. 20-21) and gave them victory over their enemies. (v. 22) He also multiplied them, (v. 23) brought them into the Promised Land, (vv. 24-25) and established them there.

Israel disobeyed and rebelled many times during their history. Nevertheless God delivered them whenever they repented (vv. 26-29) and sent the prophets to turn them back to Himself. (v. 30) This shows God's continuing grace and compassion toward His people. (v. 31)

The returned exiles asked God to remember their sufferings. They acknowledged the exile was a consequence of their disobedience. (vv. 33-34) Even though most of the Israelites did not return to the Lord even in exile, (v. 35) and many remained under bondage in Persia, (vv. 36-37) nonetheless a faithful remnant of returnees, preserved by the Lord, were ready to make formal commitment to the Lord once again. (v. 38)

Renewed Commitment of the People - Chapter 10

Conviction of sin (ch 8) led to confession of sin (ch 9) and resulted in a covenant/agreement with God (ch 10) See verses 28-39 for the agreement the people made with the Lord.

Residents of the Land - Chapter 11 to 12:26

When the exiles returned to the Promised Land, living in Jerusalem was not an attractive prospect because the city lay in ruins. With the rebuilding of the temple and the walls, however, the capital became a more desirable place to live. As governor, Nehemiah saw the wisdom of populating Jerusalem with pure-blooded Jews and set about to encourage the people to live within the walls. (Most of this section is parenthetical to the progression of the story.)

Dedication of the Wall - Chapter 12:27-47

Nehemiah enlisted Levites from all over Judah to guarantee that the dedication service would be appropriately grand. The people separated from uncleanness as they anticipated the sacrifices and worship that would take place.

One large choir mounted the city wall and walked around it counterclockwise, beginning at the Valley Gate (vv. 31-37). Another choir mounted presumably at the same place and proceeded in a clockwise direction (vv. 38-39). They sang as they walked. They met at the temple (vv. 40-42). There the priests offered many sacrifices and the people rejoiced greatly (v. 43). This is the same wall that Tobiah had claimed earlier would be so weak that even a fox walking on it would break it down! (4:3)

So, the final consummation of Nehemiah's work had been reached. The city was protected by a wall and could resist any attempt of neighboring nations to attack it. This is one of the main reasons for all their joy. The other was that the people demonstrated they could perform a major task together.

This was the greatest day for the returned exiles. Israel was now back in the land more safely and securely than the first exiles had been. Nehemiah had succeeded in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, reestablishing the Law as Israel's authority, and reorganizing the temple ministry in keeping with God's will. The people came to know, "The joy of the Lord is our strength."

Nehemiah's Final Reforms - Chapter 13

Each of the reforms in chapter 13 deal with a violation of the covenant the people had made with God in chapter 10:29-39.

1. The exclusion of foreigners 13:1-3
2. The expulsion of Tobiah 13:4-9
3. The revival of tithing 13:10-14
4. The observance of the Sabbath 13:15-22
5. The rebuke of mixed marriages 13:23-29
6. The summary of Nehemiah's reforms 13:30-31

Conclusion

The book of Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the restoration of God's people to their homeland, two steps God used to reestablish His people so that one day they might see the Savior come from their line.

Nehemiah continued the good work that Zerubbabel, Jeshua and Ezra had begun. Zerubbabel's great contribution had been the rebuilding of the temple and Ezra's was the reformation of the people. Ezra and Nehemiah worked together in the latter task.

The book of Nehemiah provides a wonderful illustration of how the Lord can use His people for the purpose He has intended, and how through prayer and hard work great things can be accomplished when a person determines to trust and rely on God. As a leader, Nehemiah was a man of responsibility, prayer, action, cooperation, and compassion who triumphed over opposition with proper motivation.

Although these were some of the bleakest days in the history of the nation of Israel, the Lord used Nehemiah to restore His people to their land in safety and security. He showed He was true to His promises and that those who attempt great things relying upon Him can expect great things from such a great God.