

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 8, Chapter 5 and 6

Nehemiah is nothing if not persistent. First he had to face the King of Persia and persuade him to release Nehemiah for an unknown amount of time from his responsibility in the King's court as cupbearer. Next Nehemiah had to venture the long journey down to Judah (a place he'd never been) and take stock of the poor condition of Jerusalem and Judah. After that he had to gain the co-operation of the Jews of Judah, rich and poor, to get behind his mission to rebuild not just the walls but the city of Jerusalem (something tried and failed by others numerous times). Then several local and regional gentile rulers determined that they didn't want Jerusalem rebuilt unless they were part of the process and were also given a share of the rule over the city. When they were unceremoniously refused, they began to threaten the Jews with acts of violence. And finally in Chapter 5 the Jewish laborers rose up and complained that the wealthy Jews were exploiting them by loaning them money and food at usurious rates, confiscating their land when they couldn't pay their debts because they were busy building the walls instead of farming their land, and some of the aristocratic Jews were even taking their children (especially the girls) as bond servants or even as forced wives.

What we're about to find out is that from the time Nehemiah heard of the decrepit condition of Jerusalem (while he was up in the Persian capital at Shushan), until the wall was rebuilt, was only about 6 months! This was a man who knew how to get things done. But of course, rightly so, at every opportunity Nehemiah made it known that it was the Lord's will being done, and the Lord had cleared the way and protected Nehemiah, and had orchestrated the situation from on high. Yet, Nehemiah couldn't just sit back and expect the walls to be supernaturally rebuilt; nor did he expect the Lord to supernaturally inhibit those hostile gentile rulers from harming and disrupting the Jews from their task. Rather Nehemiah had to get his hands dirty, take decisive action and demand that others do the same. This is a rather good picture of just how worshippers of the God of Israel are to conduct our lives and no less so when we face the many challenges (and perhaps enemies) that we'll encounter along the way.

When we left off last time, Nehemiah had asked the Priests to come and administer a vow to the aristocratic Jews that had admitted their wrong doing in burdening the common Jews with debt and confiscation of property and children, and had repented. The vow was that if they failed in their promise to return everything they had already taken from these poor Jews, then they agree that the Lord should take everything away from them and make them like an empty pocket. Evidence is that they followed through.

Let's re-read the final part of Nehemiah chapter 5.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 5:14 – end

We are given some succinct and pertinent historical data here. The exact time span of Nehemiah's tenure as Governor of Judah was 12 years. And that time in office was reckoned as starting in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes' reign and ending in the king's 32nd year. This would have been from 445 B.C. to 433 B.C. (plus or minus a year or two depending on if one uses the Nisan or Tishri based calendar year). And more, he was indeed the official Governor of Judah, and not merely a diplomat sent by the king or some kind of temporary advisor.

A Governor had the right (if not the duty) to collect taxes for the Empire, but also other taxes to support himself and his staff. It is not unlike in America where we have Federal taxes, state taxes, and local taxes that are collected independently and used for separate purposes by separate groups of government officials. However Nehemiah chose NOT to collect taxes to support himself or his staff, and also didn't demand a tax of produce to be taken from the local Jews to feed himself and others that were typically fed at the taxpayers' expense. It certainly would not have been wrong or heavy handed to have done so; however verse 15 explains that the previous Governors had taxed the people to an extreme thus putting a difficult and unfair burden on them.

Let's discuss this for a moment. The first thing to notice is that Nehemiah didn't show up in Judah to create a new office called Governor. This position had existed prior to him, and he was merely the latest. That said, it also appears that the office had been vacant for a time (which would explain Sanvallat, Toviya, and Geshem's irritation at having an official Persian Governor in control again since they had been able to lord over the people of Judah in the absence of one). Next we see that Nehemiah was wealthy in his own right. He used his own resources to care for himself and staff, at least as far as food and wine was concerned. This is proof in itself of Nehemiah's high character and shepherd attitude. And allow me to comment here that just because a leader is a no-nonsense, pragmatic, not easily deterred person who carries him or herself with an air of authority and confidence doesn't somehow mean that they aren't doing so with a submissive heart towards God and a mission to do what is best for those in his charge. Those two attributes aren't mutually exclusive and Nehemiah is exhibit number one to show how a great leader ought to conduct himself in a Godly manner. Weak leadership can be worse than none at all; wavering and ungodly leadership can be deadly.

In verse 16 Nehemiah continues in critique of himself that he kept his head down and stayed focused on finishing the wall; this was a man with tunnel vision. And that same tunnel vision cut both ways: it allowed him to do the impossible and rebuild the wall rapidly and under difficult conditions. But it also caused him to overlook the obvious plight of the poor Jewish laborers until they rose up along with their wives to level a withering list of social injustices at not just the aristocrats but Nehemiah as well. There is a reality that is often overlooked about humans who accomplish great things, or become some of our greatest heroes (including great Bible heroes): it is often their flaws that allow them to do what others couldn't. And it will be those same flaws that will often become their downfall in another and different setting. That is why the little phrase we heard in the Book of Esther about her having been put into her position before the king for "just such a time as this" has always meant a great deal to me. What this means is that **this** is the time for which she was prepared and set in place, unaware, by God for a special service to Him; not another time. This also means that there likely would **not** be later opportunities for her to save her people, and that under different circumstances those same personal attributes should **not** be expected to lead to similar results. An unlikely intersection of time, space, circumstance and opportunity usually has to happen for great people to emerge and great things to be accomplished. What does that mean for us as disciples of Christ? It means that when Yeshua opens a door and beckons us to come, He may never ask us again if we refuse to step through it. It means that we likely won't have opportunity after opportunity to serve Him in the same meaningful way if when He calls, we say no and wait for another opportunity to come along, one we're more comfortable with. But it also means that God can use us exactly as we are, especially when He has ordained the time, place and circumstance, even if we think our flaws and deficiencies make us ineligible. In fact I think the reason that folks like Elijah and David and Moses were so surprised at the Lord calling them (Who ME, Lord!?) was because they well knew their own inadequacies and fears and it was beyond belief not only that the God of the Universe might reach out to them, but also to assign them to do something that they could not imagine themselves being able or worthy to do. Nonetheless, they said yes to God and the rest (as they say) is history.

Nehemiah says he bought no land in Judah, and neither did his inner circle. So even though these were all men with authority (and likely of some financial means) none used it for personal gain. But I also suspect that in the context of this chapter whereby rich men, including Nehemiah, had loaned money against the farm land of common Jews, that this is a declaration that although some of the wealthy Jews may have forcibly taken land from the common Jews by forfeiture, he did not. But perhaps the most descriptive statement of who Nehemiah is as a man, and why his leadership led to success, is at the end of verse 15 when he says the reason he did what he did, and refrained from taking from the people, is because he feared God.

It has perplexed me for many years why so many Christians and Christian institutions honestly believe (and teach) that the coming of Messiah Yeshua was the end of the need to fear God. That essentially the best part of being a Believer is that no matter what we do, no matter how much we disregard His laws and commandments, God will not harm us, and He will always be on our side. Scripture does not agree with that assessment. Therefore I tell you: fear God. He will be on your side only so long as you are on His side. He will measure us all by the hidden things of what we truly believe in our minds, our zeal to know Him and follow His ways, and in our deeds and actions. Fear Him, because He is the law giver and the judge and there is no appeal. But fearing God does not mean to be in terror of Him for we know exactly what pleases and displeases Him. We know precisely His instructions to His worshippers and He doesn't change those instructions because He doesn't change. Nehemiah was the wisest of men who knew that while the end result (a rebuilt wall) was the goal, the process mattered. And that process had to be according to the Lord's precepts, regardless of the difficulties and challenges that arose. A great lesson for us all in every era.

This chapter closes by giving us some further logistical information that Nehemiah provided for the food needs for 150 leaders of Judah plus various others. In fact it took an Ox, 6 sheep, and some amount of fowl every day, plus and a constant supply of wine. Yet, as he said, not once did he ever draw upon the Governor's allowance (meaning tax money) to buy these items. Rather he provided them out of his own generosity, using his own personal wealth, as it must have seemed wrong to him to have been given such abundance by Yehoveh, only to turn around and take from those who had so little. Thus he finishes his narrative by asking God to see him in a favorable light because of his decisions and his actions. He asks that his labors, his moral motives, and His complete devotion to God and to helping His fellow Jews would be an eternal legacy. The fact that we are studying a Book of the Bible named after Him is proof enough that God answered his prayer as he had hoped.

Let's move on to Chapter 6.

What we're going to see is that although persistence accompanied with the right attitude can be a virtue, as it was with Nehemiah, it can also be used wrongly and become nothing more than stubborn rebellion against the Lord and His purposes. Thus as the work on the wall nears completion, and the 4 gentile leaders who have done everything to stop it short of all out war against the Jews, they now change their tactics and decides to try to subvert Nehemiah personally. Let's read chapter 6 together.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 6 all

Chapter 5 was sort of a time-out from the wall building report to deal with some matters of internal affairs and administration problems. But now we return to the issue of dealing with Judah's enemies and their determination to wreck Nehemiah's efforts to revitalize Jerusalem, the hub of Jewish life and center of Yehoveh worship. As the chapter opens, the wall was rebuilt, to a point, and the various segments assigned to various groups and families were completed and joined together. What remained was for some of the enormous wooden gates to be hung.

In hindsight we can readily see that both chapters 4 and 5 sort of detoured away from the actual wall building to inform us of the political and social challenges that of course accompanied such a monumental community effort, by noticing that the final words of chapter 3 were: ***“So we kept building the wall, which was soon joined together and completed to half its height all the way around: because the people worked with a will”***. So those final words of Chapter 3 connect now with the opening words of Chapter 6 explaining that the wall was rebuilt and there were no gaps. My point is twofold: First, Bible narratives often have a “main story” that examines the most outstanding aspect of an event (in this case, rebuilding the walls) and then the story pauses and the narrative goes back to explain a different aspect of the same event to help give us additional context. And then shortly the main story resumes. My second point is that even though Chapter 6 reports that the wall was rebuilt and had no gaps, it was by no means a completed wall at this time. Rather it was only half the height that it was before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it, and only half the height it needed to be to afford proper protection. However it was now high enough to offer considerable protection against

thieves and marauders, and to allow a reasonable defense of the city provided there were sufficient watchmen to be on guard. How high was it? Probably around 15 feet.

This firsthand information is given to us in the context of the primary enemies of Judah, Sanvallat, Toviyah, and Geshem, having learned that the wall now had no gaps. And we also hear that “other enemies” noticed it as well, so we begin to understand that for reasons unmentioned, Judah was surrounded by enemies who hated them. And that for all these enemies, the reconstruction of the protective walls around Jerusalem was bad news. The bottom line is that the Jews had pulled off the impossible. And they had done it against the strongest political pressure of their enemies, at a time when they weren’t a sovereign nation. But for these enemies, they may have lost but it was only round 1. Round 2 would see a change of tactics in which the goal would be to render Nehemiah ineffective or perhaps, as I think, dead. Once again pointing up the importance of leadership. The enemies knew that without Nehemiah at the helm, the results would be what they had always been; a zealous start to rebuild followed quickly by disinterest and failure.

So in verse 2 these enemies propose a meeting between themselves and Nehemiah. They didn’t give a reason, but Nehemiah smelled a rat. Since we are not given their reason for wanting to meet, and we have only Nehemiah’s response, then some Bible scholars think that there may have been a sincere desire from Sanvallat and the others to find a way to reconcile. However, there are always those who ignore what God tells us in His Word about the nature of humans and continues to believe instead in a supposed inherent goodness within humanity. When we follow Nehemiah’s story from beginning to end, and we comprehend the inexplicable hatred of the Jews by Arabs and others who lived nearby to Judah (a hatred that has only increased until this very day), and when we believe the Scriptures that show us that this hatred was prophetic and it was spiritual in its source, I find it ludicrous to consider any possibility other than these enemies fully intended on luring Nehemiah to a meeting and assassinating him.

No doubt Nehemiah figured out their malicious intent if nothing else by the proposed location of the meeting: the Ono Valley. The latest archeological findings seem to point to Ono being in the coastal plain up near Phoenicia. If these enemies were so intent on reconciliation, why not meet in Jerusalem where Nehemiah would feel safe and have a reasonable chance of being protected? After all, who were the aggressors? It certainly had not been Nehemiah and the Jewish people. They just wanted to build a protective wall and left to live and let live. But even suspecting the evil that was meant against him, the royally trained Nehemiah didn’t answer harshly. He merely said that he was too busy working on the wall; he didn’t accuse of them of

anything. But he did ask the question of why they wanted this meeting when he says in verse 3: ***“I am busy with an important task, I cannot go down. Why should the work stop to go down to you?”*** This might sound even a bit sarcastic to us, but it was not. It was simply matter of fact. He’s busy, his task is important, and they haven’t even given him a purpose for the meeting. But they wouldn’t take no for an answer and kept sending him this same message 4 times, and each time he replied in the same way.

Since Sanvallat (and no doubt his allies) finally figured out that Nehemiah wasn’t going to be intimidated into coming, they tried another approach. We’re told in verse 5 that another letter was sent to try and accomplish the same purpose: get Nehemiah to leave the safety and security of Jerusalem and to essentially place himself into the hands of his enemies. The latest message came in the form of an “open” letter. What exactly that means is unclear. Likely it just means it was unsealed and all who handled it had the opportunity to read it. When we see that the contents of the letter are false accusations against Nehemiah that he was intending to use the city of Jerusalem as a place to rebel and that he wanted to become the king over Judah, the hope was that this rumor would spread. And once a rumor is widespread enough, it becomes a fact that is hard to overturn.

The message goes on to say that Nehemiah had even appointed prophets to proclaim him king, and so it was Sanvallat’s duty to inform King Artaxerxes of these developments. Unless, of course, Nehemiah finally agreed to come to Ono and have a meeting. Once again Sanvallat betrays his true intentions. After all, if Sanvallat actually thought Nehemiah was a rebel, the last thing he’d want is to have a secret meeting with him; it would appear as if they were conspiring together. But, would Artaxerxes believe such a thing about his trusted cupbearer, Nehemiah, even if he was told? It was entirely possible. Extra-Biblical sources explain that he was regularly putting down rebellions around the Persian Empire, and some were even led by family members. So it would hardly be beyond the realm of possibility that Nehemiah would turn against the King. Even so, Nehemiah remained firm. He responded by simply stating that what they accuse him of is false, and that they’re just fabricating it in their imaginations. Interestingly the literal Hebrew is that “from your heart you are imagining these things”. The Hebrew word for heart, **lev**, is used and as with almost all Bible scholars in the past 50 years, I join them in recognizing that while **lev** indeed meant heart, it was thought in that era and on through the close of the New Testament era that the heart organ was the seat of the human intellect...the mind. So the meaning of this statement is that “you are just making this up in your mind”.

Nehemiah fully understood what was happening and records that this was just another scare

tactic hoping to draw Nehemiah's focus away from his mission, and causing other Jews and Jewish civic leaders to be frightened into thinking that they were about to be unwillingly dragged into a rebellion against Artaxerxes in order for Nehemiah to become their local king! And these suspicions and turmoil would stop progress not just on the wall but in the general rebuilding of the city (which was happening simultaneously). Nehemiah remarks "and now strengthen my hands". This is a Hebrew expression that is variously translated to try and attain a meaning. Our CJB says, "God, increase my strength". And that pretty well captures it, since what this is, is indeed just a short impulsive prayer (even though the word "God" isn't actually there, since it is a prayer that it is directed towards God is obvious).

So this latest attempt to trap Nehemiah also didn't work and now another tactic is tried. Starting in verse 10 we hear of a scheme to try to get a false prophet to convince Nehemiah to commit an act of criminal trespass against the Lord, or to simply flee the area, and thus discredit himself. What must not be missed is that this would attempt to use Nehemiah's own people against him in the plot. This can only happen if some Jews in Jerusalem didn't share Nehemiah's vision, and didn't want him as their Governor. Rather they had a useful relationship with these various enemies; they had their own agendas and intended on keeping their loyalty with them and not switching to Nehemiah.

A fellow named **Shemaiah** is introduced and he makes a suggestion to Nehemiah to meet at the Temple and go inside to hide. There they would lock the doors to protect themselves against the hit men hired by Toviyah and Sanvallat, with the assumption that even these gentiles wouldn't enter. Nehemiah was not allowed by the Law of Moses to do such a thing. Only priests could enter the interior of the Temple, and Nehemiah was a layman. However it was also a law that a layman could flee to the Temple Altar, hang onto its horns, and be given sanctuary. Be that as it may, the Altar is located outside the Temple, in the courtyard. Therefore while those Jews who were unfamiliar with the Torah (almost everybody in Nehemiah's time) might have seen Shemaiah's suggestion as lawful and logical, Nehemiah knew the Torah and knew he couldn't do such a thing, even if it indeed meant losing his life.

Who was this **Shemaiah** and why did Nehemiah go to see him? We know nothing of this man and there is no use speculating. Obviously he carried some importance or Nehemiah wouldn't have gone to his home. And what does this mean that **Shemaiah** seemed to have been restricted to his house? Some think that perhaps he was currently ritually unclean. I don't buy that because if he was unclean the Torah observant Nehemiah certainly wouldn't have gone to him and risked defilement himself. Was it perhaps some sort of symbolic act, as other scholars claim? Maybe. I suspect that we are encountering a little known Hebrew expression

whose meaning and intent has been lost to history.

Nehemiah, courageous and Godly, responds to the proposal by saying that a man like him can't run away. And further a man like him cannot go into the Temple. Saying that a man "like me" can't run away is no doubt referring to his leadership role. If he flees in the face of a rumor of danger, what are the other people to think or do? And if he flees and the people are left leaderless, it will be Sanvallat and Toviyah, gentile enemies, who will rule over God's people. When I read this I cannot help but recall the tragedy of the Costa Concordia cruise ship in 2012, when an incompetent crew accidentally ran this ship aground off the coast of Italy where it began to sink and list badly. The captain and crew were quick to abandon ship and leave the terrified passengers to fend for themselves; many drowned. Essentially Shemaiah's hope was for Nehemiah to abandon ship to save his own skin and leave the terrified and confused Jewish citizens to fend for themselves. Thankfully Nehemiah's Godly character would never allow him to cut and run and abandon his people, even if it meant losing his own life.

But this same character would also not allow Nehemiah to knowingly violate God's law and hide, along with Shemaiah, inside the Temple. I suspect that most of the Jewish people and the leaders would have actually been rather accepting if he had elected to do that. After all, who was Nehemiah hurting by hiding inside the Temple? It may have upset the Priests, but it would have caused them no personal harm. Wouldn't it be better for all of the Jews of Jerusalem if Nehemiah was able to save himself and remain their leader? This is another one of those situations in which no fellow human is harmed or affected; the only person who is affected is God and He is merely offended. So, doesn't it seem like a no-brainer to just go ahead, hide in the Temple, save yourself, and then go and make a sacrifice of atonement later for breaking His commandment? I'm being a bit tongue-in-cheek, of course, but I wonder how often we have thought processes like this when we come up against a serious problem, maybe even something that is dangerous. And this is the thought process that Shemaiah was hoping Nehemiah would adopt. He didn't and he emphatically stated that he would not flee and he certainly would not enter the Temple.

Verse 12 shows how Nehemiah quickly figured out the nature of the plot. Shemaiah was a false prophet hired by the enemy to draw Nehemiah into cowardice and sin. Since Nehemiah knew the Torah, and He knew God's laws, he also knew that God does not contradict Himself. God would NEVER send a true prophet to tell him to violate His sacred commandments. And folks, this is a great lesson and warning to end our session today. If we ever hear a Pastor, Rabbi, or Christian leader of any sort explain why doing something that we know is against God's laws, is a good thing to do under the circumstances, be skeptical. Especially if it is

something that could be self serving, be skeptical.

And now I'll meddle a bit more and likely draw some fire for it. It is against God's laws for Israel to give up land to the Palestinians. It is against God's laws for there to be the so-called Two State Solution because the pagan state will inhabit part of the Promised Land. It is against God's laws for Israel to allow Islam to control the Temple Mount and to worship their false god Allah and to have shrines and a mosque up there on the holy sight of His Temple. It is against God's laws to divide Jerusalem and give part of it to Muslims (or anybody for that matter). And yet Jewish leaders, one after the other, do so and are applauded for it often by Jewish religious leaders. American political leaders who claim to be Christians, and Church leaders who claim to speak for Christianity, are also sometimes among those who do the applauding in the name of love, peace and Jesus.

It was not easy for Nehemiah to stand against the plots and efforts to get him to submit to fear, self interest, and to turn a blind eye to God's laws and commandments for the sake of peace and compromise and agreeing with the majority. As we learn here, it wasn't only Nehemiah's enemies but many of his own people who sided against him and were happy to trespass against God, and to violate the Lord's commandments, and to share control of Jerusalem with pagans if it brought quiet, easier living, and maybe even a measure of prosperity to the land.

We'll continue with chapter 6 next time.