

“DEEP WATERS” – A Men’s Leadership Study in Nehemiah

Lesson One – An Introduction

The Book of Nehemiah is among a handful of Old Testament Historical books that few believers have ever read let alone spent some serious study in. Somehow, in recent years, the Book of Esther has gotten most of the publicity. Yet, if I were to identify just one book of the Bible whose contribution to the workings of the Church was invaluable, it would be the Book of Nehemiah.

Here is what we know about Nehemiah’s background: his father’s name was Hacaliah. That’s it...period. No reference about his mother. No reference as to which tribe he belonged. No identification as to when he was born or how old he was. No record as to how he came to his present position as the cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. (By the way, Artaxerxes’ father was the husband to Queen Esther). Did Nehemiah know of the Queen? Don’t know.

The only comment Nehemiah makes about himself is found at the close of chapter 1: *I was cupbearer to the king.* This is the Hebrew word *mashqeh* which literally means “one who gives someone something to drink.” It is the same word used of one of those in prison with Joseph. Most translators use the term “butler” there, but that word comes from the Middle English “boteler,” which means “someone who attends to wine bottles.”

We read this interesting statement in Tobit 1:22 – *Ahiker interceded for me, and I returned to Ninevah. Now Ahikar was cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts, for Esarhaddon had appointed him second to himself. He was my nephew.*

From a variety of sources we can discern the following about the position of cupbearer within the Persian courts:

1. Nehemiah would have been well trained in court etiquette
2. He was probably a handsome individual
3. He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king
4. He would have to be a convivial companion, willing to lend an ear at all times.
5. He would have great influence as one with the closest access to the king, able to determine who was able to see his master
6. He had to be one who enjoyed the undeserved confidence of the king. The great need for trustworthy court attendants is underscored by the intrigues endemic to the Achaemenid court. Xerxes, father of Artaxerxes I, was killed in his own bedchamber by Artabanus, a courtier. (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 4, page 683).

It is also interesting to know that the Book of Nehemiah is never quoted in the New Testament. And, another interesting fact about the Book of Nehemiah is that there are no prophecies referred to within its pages.

This book seems to have had only one significant purpose: To show us the qualities of leadership that bring results, even in the midst of great difficulties.

Some writers believe this book was written by Ezra, who is a participant in much of what occurs within the pages of Nehemiah. But, I believe this book was written by Nehemiah himself. There are simply too many references to the first-person personal pronoun “I” within the book, as well as too many examples of what Nehemiah was thinking. Usually a third person writing a story does not use first person language.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra were originally considered as two separate documents, but by the late first century AD, they had been compiled as one book...probably a consequences of the Greek Septuagint combining them into one book. By the early part of the third century AD, the Church Father Origen had divided them into two books, which is named First and Second Ezra.

I think we can outline the book in this fashion:

NEHEMIAH, THE GOVERNOR - Nehemiah 1-13

I. Background

- A. Came in the 20th year of Artaxerxes (444 BC.)
- B. A thwarted attempt at wall building (see Ezra 4:6-23)
 - 1. The Samaritans had written a letter to Artaxerxes asking that it stop
 - 2. Work did cease
 - 3. Fell during the 13 year interval between Ezra's return and the coming of Nehemiah (458-445 BC.)
 - 4. Hanani had returned to Persia to seek the aid of his brother Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:1-4)

II. Nehemiah

- A. His background
 - 1. Was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes
 - 2. The king appointed him as Judah's governor
 - 3. The king asked him to return to his position as cupbearer after the task in Judah was completed
 - 4. Nehemiah had waited 4 months before seeking the king's permission to go.
- B. Nehemiah builds the wall (see Nehemiah 2:11-6:19)
 - 1. Preparation
 - a. Made a tour of Jerusalem at night
 - b. Work was assigned and begun
 - 2. Opposition
 - a. Sanballat, governor of Samaria
 - b. Tobiah, governor of Ammon
 - c. Geshem, the Arab
 - d. At first, they mocked the workers (Nehemiah 2:19-20; Nehemiah 4:1-3)
 - e. Next, the Arabians, Ashdodites, and Ammonites were to attack Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4:7-8)
 - (1) Nehemiah divides into 2 groups: workers and army
 - (2) Work done around the clock to finish as soon as possible
 - f. Tried to lure Nehemiah away 4 times (see Nehemiah 6:1-4)
 - g. Threatened to bring to the Persian king an accusation of disloyalty on Nehemiah's part (Nehemiah 6:5-9)
 - h. Sought to bring reproach on Nehemiah in the sight of his own people through a false prophet Shemaiah (Nehemiah 6:10-14)
 - i. In spite of the opposition, the rebuilding was completed in 52 days
- C. Nehemiah as governor (Nehemiah 7-12)
 - 1. Size of Judah: smaller than before the captivity
 - a. Southern boundary just north of Hebron instead of at Beersheba
 - b. North about the same: includes Gibeon and Mizpah
 - c. Eastern about the same: includes Jericho
 - d. Western about the same
 - e. 25 miles north and south by 32 miles east and west: 800 square miles

2. Remission of debts (Nehemiah 5:1-19)
 - a. Many of the poor people had sold themselves as slaves
 - b. This was stopped and all debts canceled
3. Security measures (Nehemiah 7:1-4; Nehemiah 11:1-36)
 - a. In charge were Hanani and Hananiah
 - b. Singers and other Levites helped the gatekeepers in watching the gates and walls
 - c. 1/10 of the rest of Judah moved into Jerusalem to fill it up
4. Reading God's Law (Nehemiah 8-10)
 - a. Done in the fall of 444 BC.
 - b. Ezra did the reading
 - c. Feast of Tabernacles observed
 - d. Public confession of sin by the people
 - e. A new covenant was signed by Nehemiah and others to faithfully keep God's laws
5. Dedication of the walls (Nehemiah 12:27-47): in the year 444 BC.
 - a. 2 groups: one led by Ezra, one led by Nehemiah
 - b. March around the walls
 - c. Dedication observed when the 2 groups met

D. Nehemiah's second term (Nehemiah 13)

1. Goes back to Persia in 432 BC.
2. Comes back to Judah a year or two later
3. Reforms
 - a. People had become lax toward God's laws
 - b. Eliashib, the high priest, had allowed Tobiah to live in the temple
 - c. Nehemiah kicks Tobiah out
 - d. Orders a careful collection of the tithes
 - e. Lax about observing the Sabbath
 - (1) Working, buying, and selling were being done
 - (2) Nehemiah closes the city gates
 - f. Dealt with mixed marriages
 - a grandson of Eliashib had married the daughter of Sanballat and was expelled from Judah
4. Duration unknown: Nehemiah was not governor by 407 BC.
5. Malachi: ministered during the days of Nehemiah

Now let's look at that first chapter:

Verse 1: Month Kislev + November/December of 446/445 BC
 Susa was the capitol (the winter resort) of the Medo-Persian Empire

Verse 2: How long Hanani had been gone from Susa we do not know, but while gone, Nehemiah had been focused on what was happening in Jerusalem (I believe we have here the seedlings of his vision and concern for Jerusalem)

Two lessons here in this verse for us:

1. Nehemiah was concerned about the needs of the people
 - How cognizant are we of the needs of those around us, whether perceived or actual?
 - Do you know what the needs are of your wife?
 - Do you know what the needs are of your children?
 - Do you know what the needs are of your neighbors?
 - Do you know what the needs are of your employer, if you are an employee?
 - Do you know what the needs are of your employees, if you are an employer?
2. Visions begin as small things:
 - Most of us when we got married did not move into a big house, but into a small apartment – that was all we could afford
 - Most of us, when we got that first job, it was not exactly what we had dreamed it would be, but it was a start
 - My role, as a parent first, was to help my children understand that it is okay to start with a small vision of who they could become; yes I wanted them to be successful – that is the wish of every parent – but I knew the value of starting small
 - As pastor, I am to do the same thing with the Church – let’s start with a small vision and let it grow

Verse 3: After being back in Jerusalem for 92 years, the people still had done nothing about security – no walls built. What does this say about their priorities?

“Great trouble” – Word means “misery, calamity” – they were in a vulnerable position
“Reproach” – Word means “sharp, cutting, penetrating, piercing” – they were bearing the brunt of slanderous words by their enemies

Verse 4: Nehemiah was concerned with the needs around him; he wept and fasted.

Perhaps it was during this time that his vision to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem became more clear

I appreciate this statement by J. Alan Redpath – *Let us learn this lesson from Nehemiah: you never lighten the load unless first you have felt the pressure in your own soul. You are never used of God to bring blessing until God has opened your eyes and made you see things as they are.*

As men, we usually don’t consider it very “manly” to weep, or perhaps even to fast. Yet, until we are broken by the “need” I am not convinced we can properly respond to the “need.”

Verses 5-10: Nehemiah prayed about how to meet the need

1. Verse 5 – Adoration for God – we need to begin by ascribing worth to God
2. Verses 6-7 – Confession of sin – we need to confess both the sins of commission and omission; there is something very cleansing about a time of prayer that begins with intense adoration of God

Individual and corporate guilt – the people have not kept that covenant of love that God had made with them.

3. Verses 8-10 – Rooted in the past – Nehemiah drew comfort and strength from the past; he cited the promises of God; I rather think that God appreciates it when we remind Him of what He has said

Verse 8b – is quoted from Deuteronomy 28:64 – *Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods – gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.*

Verse 9 – quoted from Deuteronomy 30:1-4 and Deuteronomy 12:5

Deuteronomy 30:1-4 – When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.

Deuteronomy 12:5 – But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go...

Verse 10 – quoted from Deuteronomy 9:29 – *But they are your people, your inheritance that you brought out by your great power and your outstretched arm.*

Verse 11: Nehemiah volunteered to meet the need himself; he desired to get involved to help answer his own prayer

“Pray as if everything depended on God, work as if everything depended on you.” – that old saying has some strong truths associated with it.

ASSIGNMENT: Read through Nehemiah 1 and list at least five character traits of this man as found in this chapter. Then write at least five character traits about yourself. How do those two lists compare? How could you become more like Nehemiah? What would it take?

Nehemiah was:

1. A man of God
2. A man of intelligence
3. A man of the Spirit
4. A man of vision
5. A man of prayer
6. A man of resolution – he was obsessed with one idea

I am:

1. A man of principles
2. A man of intelligence, eager to learn
3. A man committed to ideals
4. Desire to be a man of God; striving toward it
5. A man committed to family