

Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)

Nehemiah Rebuilds the Wall

Readings: *Nehemiah 4:1-6:19*

Reflections:

- The story continues with the opponents of Israel mounting a more organized approach to discouraging their work. The goal is to sabotage the effort to restore the security and prosperity of Jerusalem.
- There is a great line: “Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are?” Many times communities living in failure and broken conditions are a complete mess in their physical structures and practical forms of organization. Everything from their facilities to their printed materials to their ways of doing things is dead and lifeless. They are like rocks piled up, burned and lifeless. People will ask, can this mess of an organization ever be turned around. The answer we see in Nehemiah is, “yes, if the people are willing to do the work.”
- Rather than responding to the opposition and engaging it, Nehemiah engages God and sees God as his solution.” This is another important lesson. Good leaders need to keep their focus. If you are serving God, then your focus must remain on God, even through the tough times. People sometimes talk about good leaders digging down deep and finding within themselves what they need to stick out the tough times. If you are following Christ, the challenge is rest in your relationship with Christ and find in God the resources and strength you need to endure. In this way, his power is perfected in our weakness and we find that his grace is sufficient for every challenge we will face (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).
- Progress on the project was clearly measured. “So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached its half height, for the people worked with all their hearts.” They measured both the performance of the people as well as the progress on the project.
- The opposition threatened to become more violent and so Nehemiah takes action to post guards. He calls the people together and gives them a speech to encourage them and to fortify their will to complete the project and restore the city walls. Again, in the story of “what doesn’t work” the physical kingdom of Israel relied on physical defenses. In the story of “what does work to change the human heart” the spiritual kingdom of Christ requires we are on guard spiritually (See 1 Peter 5:8-11; Ephesians 6:10-18). What would be the

spiritualized form of Christ-followers living out the example we see in Nehemiah: “Half of my men did the work, while the other were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor...each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked... Our god will fight for us!” We see them being organized, ready and equipped to respond to any attack. Some Christ-followers take these images of fighting spiritual battles to a significant degree and see praying as a form of spiritual battle. We don’t see Jesus or the early Christ-follower movement obsessed with a form of prayer that emphasizes fighting against the devil and demons through prayer. It appears that the “roaring lion” simply makes a lot of noise and that our primary role is to be well armored by the spiritual protection God provides us so that we are not distracted by the fiery darts (opposition, persecution and sufferings) that the enemy may throw at us.

- A second serious problem unfolds. A famine begins and the nobles who are in control of the area are taking advantage of this crisis by charging huge interest on the people who need to borrow money to buy food. Nehemiah confronts the problem and these leaders directly. He calls a meeting and challenges them to their faces to give it all back and to stop their wrongful behavior. Nehemiah demonstrates decisive and courageous leadership. To be an effective leader, at times you will need to deal not only with issues that are crises but also the actual character problems within your leadership. Confronting other leaders can be difficult and some of the most fearful work a leader does. Yet, it is vital to success that every person or issue that is hindering the mission God has given you be lovingly confronted with truth. We see this modeled in the early Christ-movement when Paul needed to confront Peter, a fellow leader (see Galatians 2:11-14).
- Nehemiah models to us leadership that doesn’t take advantage of their position for selfish ends. He could have tried to skim off some wealth for himself but he refused to do this. Again this is a real temptation many leaders face and must address within their hearts. Are they inappropriately using personal expense accounts? Charging as much as they can to the organization? Taking more time off than they should? Nehemiah challenges us to be generous, not greedy as a leader.
- Nehemiah’s enemies attempt to distract him and he refuses to play their games. He keeps his focus on completing the task before him. At times, we will be tempted to be distracted, especially when we are tired or starting to get bored with the routine of the work. The temptation came in the form of, “Just take a break!” Nehemiah refused that kind of break because it was not to rest but to retreat from the goal God had given him. The enemies then try intimidation but again Nehemiah refuses to back down. Instead he asks God, “Now strengthen my hands.” He also simply draws God’s attention to the enemies in prayer. He says to God, “Remember...” them. Here is another great lesson. Good leaders take the struggles and opposition they get to motivate them towards greater commitment to and dependence on God. Problems provide us with a fundamental choice. Will these strengthen us or discourage us? Nehemiah models how problems can actually bring out the best in leaders.

- The completion of the wall is one of those brief statements in Scripture that captured the incredible success of Nehemiah and the people: “So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.” Fourteen years of failure and struggle was resolved with fifty two days of decisive leadership, good organization, hard work and unshakable resolve. A history of failure does not need to predicate potential future success. This account ends with a wonderful conclusion: “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 God.” God inspired leaders radically changes just about everything. We see again God’s firm commitment to partnership with humble people as we learn from the example of God working in and through Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king.