

# RESTORING YOUR VISION—WITH NEHEMIAH

Dr. Steve Brady

It is all too easy to become dispirited in the work of the gospel. The toll of the years saps the idealism of youth and vision is lost. The days are difficult, the work is endless, the labourers are few and the resources limited. Many servants of God are tired *in* the work if not *of* the work. What a tonic Nehemiah is for everyone who is 'weary in well-doing' (Gal. 6:9).

In this study we follow the 'traditional' dating that locates Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem in 445 BC. To sketch in the historical background briefly it goes something like this. After the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem in 587/6 BC a return took place in 538 BC under Joshua and Zurubabel amidst much enthusiasm (see Ezra 1-3). Sadly the momentum quickly dissipated and it took the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC to rekindle enthusiasm for the Temple's rebuilding, a task accomplished by 516 BC. So far so good. But there was still the 'little' problem of Jerusalem's rebuilding. Again, time passed by until the return of Ezra in 458 BC. According to Ezra 4:6-23 an attempt was made to rebuild Jerusalem. There is no certainty as to the precise date, though around 450 BC is probably correct. However local opposition and Persian decree quickly brought the rebuilding to a halt. So the scene is set for the events recorded in Nehemiah's first chapter.

## Regaining Your Vision Through Prayer

The foregoing rightly anchors Nehemiah in the flow of history both secular and biblical. And because it is the latter as much as the former the book is part of the flow of Israel's redemptive history and is thus a revelation of the ways of God with his people. On the one hand it is the stirring record of one man's tenacity and fortitude which transform a ruined city and a dispirited community into the city and people of God in the face of great odds. On the other it provides an abundance of spiritual lessons on faith, courage, prayer, organization, teamwork and sheer devotion to the work of God. As John Whitcomb has put it: 'No other portion of the Old Testament provides us with greater incentive to dedicated, discerning zeal for the work of God than the book of Nehemiah. Few other books emphasize so strongly the close link there is between such zeal in action publicly and such prayer privately. If our enthusiasm is low and our manner lackadaisical we need the lesson of this first chapter—regaining our vision through prayer! To recapture

such vision will either renew our zeal for our particular 'neck of the woods' or give us a growing sense of call for some other sector of God's world. The latter became Nehemiah's experience.

## God Often Gives Us A Burden For A Place

The book opens with Nehemiah in Susa, some 750 miles east of Jerusalem. Nehemiah does a rather 'dangerous' thing: he enquires about the welfare of God's people and God's work. The report he receives from, with others, Hanani, his 'brother', (a term that implies either a full uterine sibling or simply a male relative) fills him with despair. In all probability the news of broken walls and burned gates refers to the happenings of c. 450 BC rather than 586 BC, an event which was hardly 'news' 140 years on. There is no 'triumphalism' in this account. They simply 'tell it like it is'. A city without walls and gates in the fifth century BC was no city at all. What a far cry from the 'Glorious things of thee are spoken' of Ps. 87:3. Moreover those broken down walls testified not only to a physical problem but a spiritual one too. They were a witness to past disobedience, shattered dreams and present impotence. No wonder Nehemiah wept and gave himself to fasting and prayer. Yet this shocking news is part of the Lord's 'gameplan' to manoeuvre Nehemiah into his life's work. To reiterate, it is 'dangerous' to ask questions about the Lord's work. How many Christians find themselves involved in some aspect of that work because they failed to keep their mouths shut! How many more of us need to be likewise affected by the 'derelict' churches of our land, physically and spiritually. Places that once resonated with the praises of God are now deserted, or converted (!) into warehouses and temples to other gods. Churches that once sounded out the glorious gospel of Christ now sound forth a garbled mixture of secular humanism, 'pop' psychology and a politicized evangel. God help us, Nehemiah like, to weep.

There are two things to note about Nehemiah's weeping. First, it is purposeful. Then there's nothing 'parochial' about it. God's purpose is to incubate a 'burden' (now there's a good old-fashioned word!) in Nehemiah's heart for a city he has never seen and for a people he hardly knows. Well-known missionary statesman and author Michael Griffiths recalls his exposure to the missionary need of the world as an Oxford University undergraduate. Through a

missionary minded Christian Union he learned 'to know something about everywhere and everything about somewhere'. If we have not yet found our niche in God's world a daily plough and pray through Patrick Johnstone's *Operation World* would be a great start. This brings us naturally to Nehemiah's prayer.

## God Always Calls Us To A Battle in Prayer

One of the most influential Christian books of the last decade was Gordon MacDonald's *Ordering Your Private World*. If what we are before God is often revealed in our prayer lives then Nehemiah's prayer reveals a very well-ordered 'private world'. It is one of the great prayers of the Bible. A number of components may be isolated.

### Worship

Nehemiah does not start with his problem. He starts with God (5). There's no hint of folk religion here that merely tells a 'friendly star'. He addresses the God who has revealed himself, the great 'I am', the God of heaven, who is faithful to his covenant promises of love—his *hesed* love—the love that clings on in mercy and steadfastness to his people. The adoration Nehemiah pours forth is not mechanical, a sort of priming the pump to get the deity interested. It is a 'delight' (11) for him to worship such a God. A guide at Westminster Abbey was once asked where he worshipped personally. 'Oh, I am so busy showing folk around the Abbey,' he replied, 'that I never get to a place of worship myself.' Busyness in God's work is never a substitute for getting to a place of worship in our lives.

### Intensity

Twice Nehemiah asks for God's ear to be attentive (6, 11). Three times the little Hebrew particle *na* appears, omitted by the NIV, translated by the AV's 'I beseech', a phrase used by a person seeking to beg a favour from someone in a position to answer the request. There is therefore an element of pleading and earnestness, a sense that only God can help. Much of our praying fails just here. If God does not show up—well, we will have to do it some other way! God help us!

### Confession

Though comparatively brief it is panoramic. National, ancestral and personal sins of omission ('we have not obeyed') and commission ('we have acted very wickedly towards you') are freely owned and confessed. Genuine confession is not only a 'coming clean with God' but the intention to forsake the wrong also (see Proverbs 28:13).

### Request

This is the element that causes most of the 'philosophical' difficulties about prayer. There is a growth industry of 'spirituality' that is strong on meditation

and weak on supplication. However, petitionary prayer is at the heart of biblical praying. And how biblical this petition is! It reverberates with Scripture (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 9:29; 30:2-7). For the general will of God we need to know the Word of God. When we do there are things we don't ever need to enquire about, since God already says they are wrong! And there are promises to claim repeatedly because they are always right. Here then is no address to bind fate but a cry to a redeemer God who has brought his people into relationship with himself ('your servants', 10). Around the axis of God's revelation in Scripture, his redemption in Christ and our personal relationship with him most of the difficulties of petitionary prayer can be resolved. In answer to whether petitionary prayer is mere coincidence, to Archbishop Trench, amongst others, has been attributed the delightful maxim: 'when I pray I have lots of coincidences; when I don't pray I have none.'

### Patience

'Day and night' does not indicate that Nehemiah was praying twenty-four hours a day every day. Rather in the apostolic spirit of 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thes. 5:17) his morning and evening prayers were focused on one great objective, the welfare of Jerusalem. The element of persistence is indicated by a comparison of the dating of 1:1, *Kislev*, with 2:1, *Nisan*, i.e. a four month period. Some prayers are a long time in being answered. A man in my church had the joy of seeing his wife converted fairly recently after praying for her for over forty years. Delays, as we know, are not necessarily denials.

### Sacrifice

Sometimes our praying stops at the merely devotional. We feel better. There's nothing wrong with that of course (so Ps. 55:22, 1 Peter 5:7). Nehemiah went further. He 'mourned and fasted'. The only obligatory fast for Israel was on the day of atonement ('deny yourselves', Lev. 16:29) though others were added (Zech. 8:19). Although the Lord warned about potential hypocrisy in this area, the assumption is that fasting will take place ('when you fast', Matt. 6:16). Too busy to pray? Ever thought of skipping a meal to do so?

### Faith

Faith-healing, snake-handling, name-it-claim-it enthusiasts are more than enough to give faith a bad name. Yet without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Faith puts the world in focus. The most powerful man of the day, Artaxerxes, is only 'this man' in prayer (11). Nehemiah asks God to give him success with the king. That's risky since royal policy had only comparatively recently stopped Jerusalem's rebuilding (Ezra 4:21). Still, there are times when faith must be spelt 'r-i-s-k'. Such a time had arrived.

### Availability

One can almost imagine Nehemiah's prayers along

these lines: 'Lord, that work needs a man of vision and drive. They are like a ship without a rudder there in Jerusalem'. *Pray on, Nehemiah!* 'Lord, they need someone to approach the King and alter royal policy'. *That's correct, Nehemiah.* 'Lord, please prepare and raise him up soon.' *I have, Nehemiah.* 'Who, Lord?' *You!* 'Whooo? Meee?' *Yes, you!* Nehemiah quite simply was willing to be the answer to his own prayer. Often the person who gets the vision gets the job. Perhaps our prayer has not been answered because we are unwilling to be the answer to it. *Genuine faith works.*

A seemingly insignificant sentence pulls the whole chapter together, 'I was cupbearer to the king' (11). Many of us feel powerless to change the situation around us. We are not well-connected. We are not particularly clever. But we are concerned for the welfare of our particular 'Jerusalem'. We do well to pray. Some Christians, however, do find themselves by birth, or gift or sheer effort, or a combination of all three, in positions of authority and influence. Nehemiah was such a man. He was the king's cupbearer, a position of great trust, since the king's life depended upon him. This provides us with our final section in this study.

### God Never Leaves Us Without The Benefit Of Preparation

If royal policy was to be overturned then Nehemiah was the right man to attempt to do it. Moreover, as we know from the book itself, he was the right man for the job back there in Jerusalem. 'Cupbearing' may seem a far cry from 'wall building' but the distance is not nearly so great as may initially be imagined. After all Nehemiah hardly walked into Artaxerxes' palace one day and simply applied for the post of cupbearer. The 'untold story' of Nehemiah's rise to high office can only be guessed at. But a humble beginning supplemented by a thorough education, a 'fast track' entry as a 'starred-first graduate' to the Persian civil service and hard work, loyalty and service had paid dividends. He had been 'faithful in little'. He had been well-trained in much. He now had a great deal to offer his king—and his God.

Did he have to overcome adversity in the form of racial and religious prejudice? Probably. Many people feel tremendously hampered by their background. Some, of course, are born with a 'silver spoon' in their mouths. But if the 'spoon' was a substitute for parental love and closeness they may battle with an inability to be in touch with their emotions well on into mature years. Others have been born in poverty, graduated from the college of 'hard knocks' and carry chips on their shoulders for their poor start in life. Nehemiah is an encouragement to all. His name means 'whom the Lord has comforted'. After all if

'redemption' means anything it means that God redeems *people*, with all their backgrounds, idiosyncrasies, prejudices and foibles. It seems to me as a pastor that those who find the art of successful Christian living have stopped making their backgrounds the foreground. If I am a Christian then I am a child of God, called to be different since in and because of Jesus I am *different*. My positive prospects far outweigh my negative retrospects. I am *comforted* indeed.

Nehemiah's position of course was not fortuitous. He was the right man in the right place at the right time for one simple reason. As he puts it in another context it was 'because the gracious hand of my God was upon me' (2:8). Though the book bears his name it ultimately is not about Nehemiah. It is about the Lord and his ways with mankind. When God has a piece of work that needs to be done those he calls to it will inevitably find that he has been preparing them in all sorts of ways for the task. Perhaps I may be permitted a personal illustration. Upon leaving school at sixteen I entered local government as a clerk in the passenger transport department. The administrative training has been useful in the pastoral ministry, though not nearly so useful as the 'personnel' training. When you have sorted out an irate Liverpool 'docket' who wants to know what happened to his 4:55 a.m. number '33' bus, because its non-arrival cost him his bonus, well, the average church member is child's play! So, when the work goes well and there is an element of 'success' what wise Christians we are to attribute that to the 'good hand' of our God rather than to mere human giftedness, wisdom and training. Thank God he never leaves us in the lurch for what *he* wants us to do: 'the good works that God prepared in advance for us' (Eph. 2:10).

### Conclusion

Lost your vision of God, of his work? Ask God for a new or renewed burden for your 'somewhere'. After all if we are in the place, or headed for the place the Lord wants us in, then *nowhere* is insignificant. But be ready for the call to arms in prayer. Too busy? Well, feel free to fast and save your money on that lunch-time sandwich. We may be hungry. We dare not be prayerless. Otherwise we will lose our sense and vision of God. Finally, thank God that if he is calling you to a task as different as wall-building is from cupbearing, he has probably equipped you already more than you realize. And do remember that even if the work seems beyond your capability it certainly is not beyond the 'God of heaven's'. Ask Nehemiah.

**Dr. Steve Brady is Senior Minister of Lansdowne Baptist Church, Bournemouth.**

Eden' argues on other issues) 'male hegemony' can accommodate itself to the feminist challenge while remaining fundamentally unchanged.

One is struck by the wider relevance of these observations. It is not just on the issue of the feminist challenge that evangelicals have resorted to talking past one another, failing to listen and denying the integrity of those who disagree. It is not only on this issue that Scripture is used and abused by an

inadequately wholistic hermeneutic. There are other issues where our 'biblical' answers sound more like our own sub-culture speaking back to us than truly scriptural. And we too, can so easily be deflected from the central to the peripheral!

So there is much to reflect on as we engage with the feminist challenge as evangelicals.... and some major changes of attitude and practices between the sexes that all the contributors to these two books agree on!

# RESTORING YOUR VISION—WITH NEHEMIAH (2)

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## The Story So Far

In our first article we drew attention to the absolute necessity for prayer if the work of God is to advance. The first chapter of Nehemiah provides one of the great 'pattern' prayers of the Bible. During the course of Nehemiah's praying over the parlous state of Jerusalem God incubated a conviction in his heart that he was the ideal man for the job. How that heart conviction is practically worked through becomes the focus of the following chapters of the book. If we need to regain our vision through prayer we also need to communicate that vision to others who can help bring it to reality.

## Sharing Your Vision Through Teamwork

The internal combustion engine has revolutionized the world! Many of us however simply take it for granted as we turn the ignition and our car engine fires into life. What then? Well, on most vehicles, we depress the clutch, engage the gear, increase the acceleration and away we go. Have you ever stopped to consider how all that power generated in the engine actually turns your car's wheels? Simple, really. A network of mechanical relationships called 'the transmission' does it all for you. Likewise, prayer is God's internal combustion engine. It generates tremendous 'power' that is intended, through a network of relationships, to turn the wheels of progress for the kingdom of God. These second and third chapters give us an insight into the 'spiritual transmission' that converts prayer into action. We concentrate on four elements.

## Present Responsibility and Future Service are Related

In footballing terms, there is a most definite 'midfield role' for the phrase that appears at the end of chapter one, 'I was cupbearer to the king'. It helps to explain the link between the chapters and why Nehemiah happened to be the right man in the right place at the right time. In our previous study we noted the principle *God never leaves us without the benefit of preparation* for what he wants us to do for him. For Nehemiah, as for many of us, God prepared and equipped him for 'spiritual' work through his 'secular' calling. He certainly had disadvantages to contend with. He was of immigrant stock for a start. He had no first-hand knowledge of Jerusalem hundreds of miles away. Some believe he was probably a 'eunuch' and therefore somewhat disqualified from divine service (Deut. 23:1). Yet here he is in a position of great trust and authority. He had clearly overcome various background obstacles. Just as importantly, to attain the office he had, he surely demonstrated the principle that 'He who is faithful in little is faithful in much' (Lk. 16:10). Ability wedded to reliability and availability are not only hallmarks of good 'cupbearers' but of any would-be servant of God too. A little time ago a missionary working in a church-planting situation in Europe asked for prayer for a young man with a number of fine qualities and a desire to serve God. But there was one sticking point: *'as yet he must learn to fit in and work cheerfully in the inconspicuous'*. The *inconspicuous*. Perhaps, as we suggested in our first article, Nehemiah's was 'fast-track graduate' entrance into royal service. It is just as possible that he received his initial 'training' washing pots and pans in the royal kitchens. We cannot be sure. But he

fulfilled the old maxim, 'bloom where you are planted'. 'Our man in Jerusalem' belonged to his majesty's senior service—the RFA—*ready for anything*—to the glory of God. 'To work cheerfully in the inconspicuous'. Do you? If not, may that be why God cannot yet use you in a more significant ministry? Do remember that actually nothing is inconspicuous or insignificant if it is done out of love for the Lord—whether it be cups of wine or cold water (Mk. 9:41).

### Prayer and Action are Great Friends

The opening verses of chapter two could well be entitled *pace* Dale Carnegie, *How to win friends and influence people*. The four months of Nehemiah's praying, indicated by the dating at 1:1 and 2:1, had driven him to one conclusion: he was the man to plead for Jerusalem, hence the prayer, 'Give your servant success today' (1:11). The presence of the queen (6), as the second chapter opens, suggests that some form of banquet was in progress. Suddenly opportunity kindly knocks, for the king enquires about Nehemiah's sad appearance. To put a positive complexion (!) on the king's enquiry would suggest his concern and compassion for one of his servants. Accordingly Nehemiah's 'fear' (2) would be that of failure to capitalize on his opportunity. Negatively interpreted, the king may have suspected an attempt on his life via poisoning. Either way Nehemiah simply explains his sadness in terms of his 'home' city. Of course Artaxerxes is no fool. There is a hidden agenda in there somewhere. His 'what is it you want?' is greeted by Nehemiah's silent telegram prayer and a direct request that the king send him officially to do something about it (4,5).

It will be recalled that 'Jerusalem' had become a dirty word around the palace of Artaxerxes, as events recorded in Ezra 4:6–22 make clear. It was a politically volatile expression. It is therefore interesting to note how many times Nehemiah uses the word in his conversation with the king. How many? Not once! Now there's a lesson in tact. Indeed the opening verses portray the sheer courtesy and gracious demeanour of Nehemiah before Artaxerxes. In common parlance there is nothing 'bolshy' about his approach. Although in prayer Artaxerxes is only 'this man' (1:11), in life he is the one to whom honour is due, however much Nehemiah believed 'the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it . . . wherever he pleases' (Prov. 21:1). Respect in the home, especially for not-yet-Christian parents, win-someness in the workplace, particularly with irascible employers, and tact and courtesy when we approach people in authority in our communities, are still ways to win friends for the gospel and influence them for Jesus Christ.

### Progress and Problems Go Hand in Hand

Verses 6–9 record considerable progress. Nehemiah had certainly been praying. Indeed we might say he was 'dreaming' about what he might accomplish for God. But he had also been doing some hard thinking. He has therefore a veritable shopping list of requests for the task ahead—safe passage, building materials,

a governor's residence. What a sight it must have been to see the cavalry coming to the rescue! (9) There are some vital lessons here.

The Christian world has never been short of dreamers. In the second World War, for instance, the comedian Will Rogers was listening to an American admiral as he outlined the threat that the German 'U' boats were posing to allied shipping in the Atlantic. 'Excuse me, Admiral, but could these 'U' boats operate in boiling water?' he asked. 'No, I don't believe they could', came the bemused reply. 'Well, there's your solution!' added Rogers, 'Boil the ocean!' 'And how do you propose I do that?' came the confused Admiral's reply. 'Oh, that's your problem', said Rogers, 'I gave you the idea. You work out the details!' On the other hand there have been many faithful 'plodders' in God's work who somewhere along the line lost their vision. We have all met the missionary who has become a 'stationary' because the 'work' has ground out the last ounce of vision. Nehemiah is a healthy corrective to both. For a dream without a plan quickly becomes a nightmare; a task without a dream rapidly becomes a drudgery. Nehemiah seems to have combined both amazingly well. A dream to rebuild Jerusalem. A plan to see it through to fulfilment. And it appears that he unashamedly enlisted what 'secular' support for the cause of God he could: rendering to God the things that some would account as 'Caesar's'. Clever fellow!

All's well that ends well! Indeed. But this is only the beginning and alongside the undoubted progress there are bound to be problems. We will meet the full hurricane force of such in our next article. Already, however, this second chapter gives an early warning in verses 10 and 19. One thing is for sure. If you are going to please God you are bound to upset some people. For many years I have taken great encouragement from the Lord's censure, 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you' (Lk. 6:26). Have you? You ought to if you are facing opposition. You have attempted something significant for God. You have gone to a run-down, rural or inner-city church. You have, Nehemiah-like, a vision to rebuild. Yet in your particular Jerusalem you have your Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem 'reception committee'. Surprised? It's par for the course. Welcome to the club—'through many hardships we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). Whatever you do, however, don't go hot-footing it back to 'Susa' before your work is even begun. Progress and problems go hand in hand.

### Preaching and Planning Should Be Well-Aquainted

The second half of chapter two and all of chapter three emphasize the need for planning. To fail to plan is to plan to fail. Failure, however, is not on Nehemiah's agenda. First, he assesses the situation for himself.

*Always assess the situation first-hand*

Logistical decisions in either warfare or building cannot usually be made from a distance of hundreds

of miles. Verses 11–16 record Nehemiah's covert operation: ('I set out . . . with a few men. I had told no-one what God had put in my heart' . . . 'during the night' . . . 'by night', 'the officials did not know where I had gone' (12, 13, 15, 16). There's brilliant strategy here, practically and psychologically. Practically he needed to know the true extent of the damage and have opportunity to work out a plan, without the prying eyes of both friends and foes. Psychologically he needed ammunition for the vision killers, the 'it-can't-be-done' brigade. One can almost hear them: 'What's he know about it? He's only been here five minutes! As if we haven't enough to do already!'. How will he overcome such latent inertia? He appeals for help.

*Regularly enlist people's help*

I always find the comment 'I had said nothing to the Jews . . . or any others who would be doing the work' (16) rather humorous. He gets the vision, they get the job! But there's little to amuse when he actually confronts his people with their situation: 'you see the trouble we are in' (17). Did they? I expect they saw nothing. They had grown accustomed to the rubble. The stroke of genius is sometimes to point out the obvious. One of the benefits of an 'outsider' coming into our church is that he or she sometimes sees clearly what is opaque to us. We may think we have great worship and a friendly church. Arnold, however, found the worship incomprehensible and welcome tepid. Nehemiah therefore calls on them to do something about it (17). He addresses their minds with facts ('You see . . . Jerusalem lies in ruins'), their hearts with feeling ('in disgrace') and their wills with a call to action ('let us rebuild the wall'). He does not ignore the 'YBH' factor either—'Yes, but how?'. He has a plan that is backed by heaven and earth (18). 'Let us start rebuilding' is the response. It is one thing to preach a stirring message on the need for evangelism. It is quite another to show church members how. Nehemiah plans to mobilize his people. Chapter three is the result.

*Generally allocate the work-load*

How do you cope with the mammoth task of rebuilding city walls without heavy earth-moving equipment and a paid work-force? And just how do you manage it in fifty-two days (6:16)? Indeed, how do you cope with any overwhelming task? Simple. You imitate Nehemiah.

Some sections of the wall were by now completely missing or needed to be resited. After all, since Jerusalem was razed to the ground 140 years before,

the present needs of the city were not identical to those that pertained in 586 BC. So some sections had to be 'built' (2). Other sections of the wall needed to be 'rebuilt' (1), 'repaired' (6) or 'restored' (8). Where does one begin? On the presumption that some three or four miles of wall needed attention, Nehemiah does what we ever need to do when faced by a mammoth task. He organized and mobilized the people, breaking the project up into small, manageable proportions. Think of it this way. Four miles of wall, allocated to the forty-two groups of workers recorded in chapter three, spread over a fifty-two day period comes out at a mere three or four yards per day per section. There were many parts to be played in this building operation: organizers, foremen, rubble clearers, hod carriers, stone masons etc. And the sheer variety of people involved is interesting: priests and levites (1, 17), nobles and rulers (5, 9), gifted goldsmiths and delicate-handed perfumers and merchants (8, 32), women along with men (12). Some appear to have had a vested interest in repairing in front of their homes (23) whilst others gladly travelled up from Jericho and Tekoa (2, 27). Some would do more ('five hundred yards' (12)), others less ('their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work' (5)). Together they accomplished a great deal.

'Wall-building' in God's kingdom likewise requires a lot of people doing their 'bit' rather than a few virtuoso performers doing it all. Indeed too often the church appears to be like a football match: twenty-two players needing a rest and thirty thousand spectators needing exercise! How the lessons of total mobilization for the kingdom's work need to be learned in many of our churches. We too soon forget that the very faith that saves us without works, since it is a living faith, gives birth to good works 'which God prepared in advance for us to do' (Eph. 2:10). One of the forgotten marks of grace is hard work: 'I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me' (1 Cor. 15:10).

One cannot leave this chapter without wondering why God should deem it important that thirty-two verses of his canon of Scripture should be devoted to what is seemingly a list of 'employees' on an ancient building site. Is it just 'for the record'? Yes, God's record: 'God is not unjust, he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them' (Heb. 6:10). The reward for being a 'city of God' builder, ancient or modern, will outshine the sun and outlast the stars.

**Dr. Steve Brady is Senior Minister of Lansdowne Baptist Church, Bournemouth.**

# Restoring Your Vision —With Nehemiah [3]

DR STEVE BRADY

There are no demilitarized zones in God's world. This earth has been, is and will be the scene of the cosmic battle between God's kingdom and Satan's. No person is neutral, no church immune, no Christian exempt when it comes to the battle. Just when you surmise all is going well with Nehemiah's rebuilding operation, a pregnant little phrase injects itself into the narrative: 'But it came to pass' (4:1 AV). These next three chapters illustrate one large principle of Scripture: the work of God is always opposed.

## *Maintaining Your Vision Through Difficulties*

Say what you will about Satan. He sure is a clever devil. One moment he's an angel of light, the next a roaring lion. Here he works by terror, there by insinuation. The stern warning found in Nehemiah 2:9, 10, 19, 20 was no false alarm. These following three chapters first from without, next from within, then a 'surgical strike' at Nehemiah himself, remind us of an enemy who constantly and cleverly changes his tactics to frustrate and hinder the work of God. 'Not unaware of his schemes' states the apostle (2 Cor. 2:11). These three chapters enable us to be forewarned and forearmed.

## *God's Will Usually Has Difficulties*

Although God's hand and the king's permission were clearly behind this rebuilding work (2:18), the enemy is not so easily defeated. A very powerful weapon is employed by Sanballat and Tobiah in the fourth chapter—ridicule (1–3). Whoever said 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me' needed his head examining! Words can help and heal or hinder and hurt. Derision for the work of God is nothing new and it is spawned from an angry heart (1). The Jews' evident zeal (6) did not impress Sanballat and Tobiah overmuch—why, even the stealthy, light pawed fox could knock the wall down (3). Not all of us have the quickness of wit that the Salvation Army lass speaking in the open air demonstrated. A heckler was making a nuisance of himself, pointing at his head to intimate the

stupidity of what she was saying. At just the right moment she quipped, 'I see it's your own head you're pointing at!' Whether quick-witted or no, when the work of God is insulted we need to follow Nehemiah's lesson: he prayed and continued the work (4–6).

The situation in verses 7 and 8 is dire. Sanballat is in the North, Tobiah and the Ammonites in the East, Geshem and the Arabs in the South and Ashdod in the West. There's a tactical phrase for that—surrounded! This time the answer is not only prayer but the wise precaution of setting a guard (9). As Cromwell reputedly urged his troops, 'Trust God and keep your powder dry.'

How correct was the hymnwriter when he wrote 'My foes are ever near me, around me and within'. The last category is vividly illustrated by the state of near exhaustion that verse 10 draws to our attention. Here's a familiar, twentieth century problem—overwork, pressure, 'burnout', stress, call it what you will. The symptoms are all too common. Strength fails, the rubble seems to increase and the work threatens to grind to a halt. Sometime ago Luis Palau, the Argentinian evangelist, was drawing attention to the three major temptations the Christian worker reputedly faces—money, sex and pride. 'My greatest temptation' he confessed 'is none of these things. Mine is simply to want to give up!' That's how these folk felt—just at the half way stage too (6). The rest of the passage suggests various solutions for 'burnout'.

The first thing to say is that rarely is the answer a complete cessation from what we are doing. Nehemiah sizes up the problem and realizes that the enemy will take advantage of these flagging workers (11, 12). The reminder to the people to 'remember the Lord' and an encouragement 'to fight for your brothers' etc. is not only positive thinking. It is matched by God's willingness to 'fight for us' (20). Note this, it is not either God or us. It is both God and us—100%/100%—his part and our part. Thank God for the part others play too, especially leaders strategically posted (16) to encourage and assist. Since the enemy we face has no Geneva Convention nor fights according to the Marquis of Queensberry rules, Nehemiah reorganizes the troops. The most vulnerable parts of the wall are given

particular attention (13) and as the immediate crisis subsides (15) the work progresses (16–20). The tools for such progress are worth noting. By implication ‘the trowel’ (17, 18) is necessary for building. Of necessity the sword is required for defence (18). In 1865 C. H. Spurgeon founded his magazine ‘The Sword and Trowel’. How necessary both are. Some Christians are very positive and keen on ‘building’, but they never defend the gospel. Other believers see the enemy around every corner and are so busy defending the gospel they never have time to propagate it. We need both, ‘sword’ and ‘trowel’. Moreover a third implement is equally necessary, the trumpet (18, 20). Here was the ancient world’s equivalent to the portable ‘phone. Communication is ever vital in God’s work. ‘Pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up’ (Ecc. 4:10) because he has gone it alone and failed to keep in touch with others building on the same wall. How fellow-believers need to keep in touch with each other to avoid duplication in God’s work and help defend one another when attacked. Two gospel believing churches within a stone’s throw of each other in a needy inner-city area I know illustrate the text: ‘the Jews have no dealing with the Samaritans’. What a pity they have yet to discover, despite their minor differences, that God has placed them in the same kingdom! So on they go with their independent programmes, duplicating the effort and barely impacting their community.

We can’t leave this chapter without noting the sheer dogged determination of Nehemiah. Long hours and sacrifice of personal comfort (21–23) were the name of the game. According to Josephus Nehemiah ‘went about the compass of the city by night, being never discouraged, neither about the work itself, nor about his own diet and sleep, for he made no use of those things for his pleasure, but out of necessity’ (*Antiquities* 11.5.8). Few servants of God have not wanted to quit at some time—Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah for a start. This chapter vividly reminds us that it is always too soon to quit. Despite many struggles and setbacks, in his diary for 25th March 1873, David Livingstone wrote, ‘Nothing earthly will make me give up my work in despair. I encourage myself in the Lord my God and go forward.’ He did. So did Nehemiah. The rest is history!

When the enemy is frustrated one way he tries another. Enter chapter five and internal strife.

***God’s Work Often Faces Division***

One word adequately sums up the feelings expressed in these opening verses by the landless, mortgaged-up-to-the-hilt and exorbitantly taxed classes—injustice! As it inevitably does, this particular injustice was breeding profound resentment. In a politically volatile situation

like Jerusalem, that would be bad enough news for Nehemiah. What if that became the breeding ground for insurrection? However it was something closer to home so far as he was concerned. The Jewish nobles and officials were responsible for the financial exploitation being perpetrated (7). His fellow Jews and leaders to boot! That stings. The ‘blind spots’ of our fellow believers are often painful indeed. We so easily mistake the imputation of spiritual *life* that the new birth brings for the possession of advanced spiritual *sight*. They are not synonyms. The pages of the New Testament are replete with calls to grow up in our faith, to become mature, to train ourselves ‘to distinguish good from evil’ (Heb. 5:14). New believers not only need the Holy Spirit’s grace and vitality. They equally need the Holy Scriptures’ teaching and training. The apostle who commands believers to ‘be filled with the Spirit’ (Eph. 5:18) equally lays on them the precise ethical demands of Christian discipleship. For instance, and germane to Nehemiah 5, he states, ‘He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need’ (Eph. 4:28). The Holy Spirit and the Holy Scripture need no reconciliation. Who reconciles friends?

So the root of the problem Nehemiah faces is familiar and contemporary enough. As the sage put it, ‘When a man tells you it is the principle of the thing, not the money, you can be certain of one thing: it’s the money!’ Perhaps that is why Scripture has so very much to say about its wise use on the one hand for the glory of God, and on the other its heinous power to blind our hearts to compassion and bind our souls to its destructive force. The love of it, according to the apostle, is still a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). And all kinds of evil are here in Nehemiah 5, right down to slavery (5, 8). So what is to be done?

Thankfully Nehemiah is not one of those ‘peace-at-any-price-turn-a-blind-eye’ types. As we have noted, it may have been political suicide to ignore such injustice because of the resentment it bred. For Nehemiah, however, it was more personal still for he was ‘very angry’ over the affair, though wisely took time to think before acting (7). A whole-scale ‘racket’ was being conducted. Nehemiah was redeeming Jewish slaves one day and discovering he had bought them a second time the next, since they had been resold in the interval. ‘A nice little earner’ indeed for someone! Personal rebuke in this situation, though administered is not sufficient (7). A public meeting and reprimand is also necessary. The perpetrators are shamed into silence (8), and a promise of compensation for financial irregularities and a commitment not to repeat their practices is extracted (12). Nehemiah recognizes the deceitfulness of the heart, especially where money is concerned. So, ever the wise man, he ensures the

promises made are legally binding (12). No wonder there was a fervent 'Amen' and praise offered to God (13). Presumably those who had been sinned against forgave willingly too. Presumably. Sad to say, some believers nurse grudges against their 'abusers' for years, grudges that gnaw at the soul and grieve the Spirit. All a million miles away from 'forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you' (Eph. 4:32). Thankfully such believers are generally the exception. Nehemiah in the rest of the chapter demonstrates the rule: total integrity in my walk with God.

At first reading 14–19 could be misinterpreted as a piece of religious 'ego-tripping'. Such is not the case. Nehemiah simply records for posterity his foregoing of personal rights as Governor (14, 18), his revulsion at financial exploitation of the people by previous governors and their aides (15) and his generous hospitality at personal cost (17, 18). One word sums up the picture—'instead' (16). The stark contrast that is painted is not accidental. It is the result of deliberate decision to be different 'out of reverence for God' (15). If his prayer 'Remember me with favour, O my God' (19) rings an unfamiliar note in our twentieth century evangelical ears, it may not be Nehemiah's fault. For it is we who may be erring. In our right desire to emphasize salvation by grace through faith alone, we have all but forgotten the incessant New Testament doctrine of 'rewards'. You remember the type of thing: 'Well done, good and faithful servant'; 'if you do these things . . . you will receive a rich welcome'; 'to him who overcomes, I will give . . .' etc. My esteemed predecessor at my present church, the late Francis Dixon, had a memorable way of summing up the Christian's 'judgements'. There is a judgement on sin that is forever *past*. I am justified. There is a judgement on sonship that is now *present*. Step out of line and I get disciplined. There's a judgement on stewardship that is *future*. That's rewards. Can you improve on that for simple profundity? By the way, this nineteenth verse doubtless kept Nehemiah both sane and sweet when he was in danger of losing perspective or feeling a little sore that no-one ever bothered to thank him for what he was doing. Try it.

The flow of the book at this juncture is similar to that of part of the Acts of the apostles. There is outward opposition here (the apostles, Acts 5), internal strife there (the neglected widows, Acts 6) and then personal attack (Stephen's martyrdom, Acts 7). Hence our final section finds Nehemiah in the firing line.

### ***God's Worker Always Meets Diversions***

One of the principles of spiritual warfare which our Lord refers to on the night of his betrayal is focused for us in this chapter. 'Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be

scattered' (Matt. 26:31 cf Zech 13:7). It should therefore be no surprise to us, if we are in Christian leadership, to discover that we are prime targets of the enemy. How could it be otherwise? Perhaps it should surprise us less than it does when a leader here or there capitulates under great pressure. Such capitulation is not, thank God, inevitable. The apostle's desire is for Christians to put on the full armour of God 'so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground' (Eph. 6:13). Stand Nehemiah does. Let's learn how.

### **Don't Get Side-Track**

The invitation for a 'pow-wow' with his enemies in a village some twenty miles from Jerusalem was hardly subtle. However there may have been a touch of flattery involved: 'You are really important, Nehemiah, we need you at this meeting!' The average Christian worker is likewise bombarded by a myriad of seemingly innocuous invitations and well-meaning but distracting committees. Some inevitably flatter. You are seen in the 'right company', at the 'right conferences', saying all the 'right things'. 'Hmm, definitely a rising star—one of tomorrow's men!' subtle voices seem to whisper as they mortgage today. How do you cope?

Nehemiah thankfully had a very clear idea of what his priorities were to be: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down' (3). The tyranny of the urgent in his case was justified. The urgent was to finish the job God had given him (1) and until that was complete other things must wait. Indeed the repeated invitation (4) merely seems to fortify Nehemiah. 'Meet in the plain of ONO? Oh! No!!!' we almost hear him reply. Happy the leader who knows what God has built him for and called her to and simply gets on with the often unspectacular but real work of the kingdom. What is my chief task? Which is my particular 'wall'? Does my schedule and diary reflect that? Truly?

Having declined the 'train ride' of distraction, Nehemiah now faces a 'roller coaster' ride of personal intimidation.

### **Don't Be Too Sensitive**

We have already learned something of Nehemiah's personal integrity from chapter five. So now a direct assault is made on that reputation in the 'tabloid press' of the day—'an unsealed letter' (5). You know the type: 'Top Secret', 'Confidential', 'Personal', 'Registered Mail'. In other words the kind of letter every Tom, Dick and Harriet wishes to read. That indeed may be the inference from the 'Gashmu says it is true' (6) marginal reading, i.e. 'everyone is saying it, Nehemiah!' Very clever this one. Far more subtle. Jerusalem's politically volatile past would add credibility to the allegation that Nehemiah had had himself proclaimed King and was in the process of leading a revolt (6, 7). Plausibility is often used by Satan to square circles that common-sense told

everyone were triangles in the first place. Innuendo has ruined many good men and women.

How should one respond? First, a curt, if not too courteous reply: 'You are just making it up out of your head' (8). Second, a recognition that the purpose was to sap vital energy so that 'their hands will get too weak for the work' (9). The opposition has simply made him even more determined to finish the job. No 'quitting' just further teeth 'gritting' and on with the wall. The foregoing rests, of course, on the sheer beauty and substantial reality of a godly character. Some time ago a leading tabloid committed a fulltime reporter to a 'muck-raking' piece of investigative journalism on a well-known Christian. After four months the investigation was called off. The Christian was 'squeaky clean'. 'How would I have fared?' is quite a question.

Still Nehemiah is not yet out of the wood. Enter the 'word from God' merchant.

### Don't Become 'Over-Spiritual'

What was said of Daniel applies equally well to Nehemiah: 'We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God' (Dan. 6:5). This seems to be the kind of attack that lies behind Shemaiah's word to meet in the house of God. The phrase 'shut in at his home' that is used of Shemaiah may suggest either a state of prophetic ecstasy or was meant to act as a parable for Nehemiah's imminent danger. Nehemiah likewise needed to be 'shut in', though it would need to be in the Temple according to Shemaiah.

Some Christians seem particularly gullible when it comes to assessing 'words from the Lord'. If one accepts the possibility of a 'direct word' today, then the tests referred to in this passage are indeed crucial. First, there is the test of Scripture itself. Numbers 18:7 clearly forbade on pain of death the kind of going into the Temple that Shemaiah's words imply. Although Nehemiah would hardly have such a sentence 'officially' carried out against him—presumably he would have to have signed his own death warrant—he would clearly be compromised by such disobedience and lose credibility (13). Secondly, the message itself did not have the right 'feel'. It clearly peddled the kind of soft option to which Jeremiah alludes in speaking of false prophets: 'They speak visions of their own minds . . . They keep saying to those who despise me "You will have peace . . . No harm will come to you"' (Jer. 23:16–17).

Thirdly, the 'fruit' of such a message needs to be assessed or predicted. Nehemiah clearly saw that such a course of action as suggested would only demean him: 'Should a man like me run away?' (11) and clearly lead him into sin (13). Finally the source of such 'words' needs always to be checked out. Gener-

ally the character of the bringer of the word needs to be known and trusted. In Shemaiah's case he was simply a prophetic charlatan who mused for the money (12).

As we have come to expect Nehemiah again prays, mentioning his well, along with lesser known enemies (14). The whole episode had been an attempt at intimidation with a view to stopping the work. At the end of yet another battle he is still standing firm. The more 'spiritual' temptation has been rebuffed by clear-headed, biblically-based, no-nonsense godliness. What sanity compared to some of the silly extremes every pastor has encountered. Did you hear of the man who was heavily into deliverance ministry? One morning, he later told a friend, he discovered that a fly in his study was demon-possessed! He spent the rest of the morning trying to exorcise it! When asked how he would have handled the situation, the friend wisely quipped 'I'd have swotted it!'

'So the wall was completed' (15). Just like that? Let's see.

### Conclusion

On 15th September, 2339 years ago, approximately (!), the walls were finished. Josephus tells us that it actually took two years and four months (*Antiquities* 11.5.8). That almost certainly includes all the finishing touches. Completed. That's Nehemiah's verdict for now. His vision has been amply fulfilled. He has prayed, planned, parried and stood firm. And his enemies conceded that the work had been accomplished with the help of Nehemiah's God. Little wonder they were afraid and lost confidence (16).

So that's it? All done? Unfortunately God's enemies seem to have all the optimism of the average football supporter: 'Defeat? What defeat? There's always next season!' The loss of self confidence is only a temporary blip. The chapter ends (and the book for that matter) with Nehemiah still facing problems—'and Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me' (19). Hence eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. This side of things there will always be battles to face, mountains to climb, valleys to conquer. God has promised to wipe away every tear from our eyes—one day! (Rev. 21:4). So our study draws to a close with Nehemiah finding himself as dependent on God now the walls are up as he ever was when they were down. There are 'broken walls' in our marriages, homes, churches, communities and world. All they need is God's help and a Nehemiah-like tenacity to see the job through. Anyone for 'Jerusalem'?

*Dr. Steve Brady is Senior Minister of Lansdowne Baptist Church, Bournemouth.*