

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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STUDY NOTES ON NEHEMIAH

Chapter 1: Jerusalem - City of Broken Walls

Introduction

Our writer is Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah, whose character as a man of prayer, discernment, and action we will get to know in the book. Nehemiah served in Shushan, the palace of the king of Persia. This was the same place where Esther earlier had lived and served as queen in the book of Esther (Esther 1:2). Remember that events in the book of Nehemiah actually occurred after the events in the book of Esther. Although we don't have 100% certainty on the timing of the book of Esther, if you follow the majority crowd which says that Esther became queen in this same palace in 478BC, then that would place the timing of the beginning of Nehemiah's book 33 years later. Imagine - if Esther and Mordecai hadn't risked their lives to save the Jews, Nehemiah would not have been alive to accomplish all that we shall see him accomplish!

Nehemiah knew that 93 years prior, King Cyrus of Persia made a proclamation which said that any Jew who wanted to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple was welcome to go (Ezra 1). About 42,000 Jews and 7,000 others took Cyrus up on the offer. Then, about 13 years before the spot we are, in Nehemiah, Ezra the scribe and priest brought another 2,000 men and their families to Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes had given Ezra treasures for the temple and the authority to establish a system of law and justice according to the Scriptures. So when Nehemiah asked about the status of Jerusalem, he expected very good news.

A destroyed wall - a symbol of a city in defeat and desolation

Nehemiah received a visit from Hanani who is identified as one of his brothers (cf. 7:2) who came with other men from Judah. At this time two groups of Jews had returned to Judah from captivity. Apparently some of these came back for a visit to their relatives in Shushan. The news Nehemiah received was far from what he expected. Instead of hearing how Jerusalem was flourishing with a newly-rebuilt temple and governed by laws direct from the Bible, he instead heard a bleak report. The Jews in Jerusalem were in distress and reproach. The wall around Jerusalem was broken down and its gates had been burned. Walls and gates were the only protection most cities had from marauders and attacking armies. Without them, Jerusalem was a sitting duck for any enemy nation who felt like invading. The subsequent story will help us understand the significance of this problem. Cities in those days needed walls for protection from enemies. Also a destroyed wall symbolized a city in defeat and desolation (cf. 2:17).

God's people in our own day also face serious needs

The problems the Jews faced in Nehemiah's day had begun because of their apostasy from God's way. Some restoration had occurred, but there were still problems and challenges. Likewise, in our own days many people have departed from God's plan for the New Testament church. Much has been done to restore the service of God among His true people, but many problems still remain that are symbolic of broken walls - broken homes and marriages, worldliness, neglect of God's work, perversion of church organization and work, sexual laxity, profanity, lack of Bible study and prayer, and negligence in spreading the gospel. Some congregations of God's people are doing fairly well in these areas, but in many congregations the wall is broken down and the gates have been burned.

Reacting to the news (v. 4)

When Nehemiah heard the news from Jerusalem, he sat down, wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed.

When I read this, it makes me wonder: how many of us, occupying a comfortable position like Nehemiah's would have been burdened by the suffering of his people to the point of fasting and shedding tears? Will the news simply constitute a bunch of information that makes us sound intelligent and informed when we get into conversations at work? Nehemiah wept and mourned, fasted, and prayed to God. This continued for "many days," not just a few minutes. Note that fasting was an expression of his sorrow and grief, associated with prayer to God (cf. on Ezra 8:21; 9:3ff; 10:1ff). We too should be concerned and troubled when we see God's people are in trouble. We should not just overlook it or shake our heads and go about our business. We should be truly sad to know the problems and weaknesses that exist in the lives of members. We should go to God in prayer for His help. And we should grieve to the point of seeking to work to overcome the problems. How much does it bother you to see problems and spiritual failings in the lives of God's people and Christ's body, the church? Paul the apostle exhorted us to *weep with those who weep* (Rom. 12:15).

Fasting.

Nehemiah wasn't just sorrowful. He prayed and fasted. We will see the content of his prayer in a moment, but I'd like to highlight his fasting, that we might learn from it. Most Christians I've met have either never fasted, or never understood the purpose of it. But since it is mentioned more than 50 times in the Bible, it is certainly not something we should neglect or be ignorant of. By definition, going on a fast is to deny yourself food. The length of time without food varies greatly. You break your fast daily with breakfast (hence the name). Sometimes people fast for a day, and other times they fast for forty days! Throughout the Scriptures, we see that people fasted to seek and inquire of the Lord - because of extreme sorrow; to appeal to God for answered prayer; or as a simple act of humbling themselves before the Lord. In Nehemiah's case, it seems that his fast was for all of those reasons. Is this all academic, or should we be fasting? Whenever I'm asked that, I always turn to Jesus' statement in the gospels. Matt. 6:16-18: "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites [do], for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you." He told His disciples, "Whenever you fast," and "When you fast," not "if you fast." Certainly the church did it in the early days. It was during a time of fasting and ministering to the Lord that God set Paul and Barnabas apart for a certain ministry (Acts 13:2-3). And when they were appointing elders in the

churches, they fasted (Acts 14:23). I would encourage you as a Christian - make fasting a regular - and private - part of your prayer life. And in conjunction with fasting, Nehemiah prayed. We will discover that he is a guy who prays a lot. Sometimes lengthy, sometimes just a quick sentence, but always talking to God.

Nehemiah's Prayer (v. 5-11).

As we read Nehemiah's prayer, we see a man who has a good relationship with the Lord. He is mindful that God is in heaven, and yet understands that he has God's ear. He knows that he is a sinner, yet knows that God loves him. He is reverent of God's high position, yet bold enough to remind the Lord of what He had promised His people.

Nehemiah begins his prayers by saying, "let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant." A large part of Nehemiah's prayer consisted of contrite confession. He freely admitted to the Lord that his people had sinned, and included himself in that group. This is the opposite of what the self-righteous person does. The one who is self-righteous goes to God and says, "Look at their sin, Lord!" But the humble man says, "God, we have sinned. Even if I did not participate, I am guilty by association for being a fellow countryman of theirs, a member of their family, or simply a human being." God does not delight in a self-righteous heart, but in a humble and contrite one (Isa. 66:2). Having praised God, Nehemiah then begged Him to open His eyes, be attentive, and hear the prayer Nehemiah was about to offer. He said he was in prayer day and night about this matter. Note the frequency and duration of prayer: night and day over a period of many days – v4 (not just a few hours a week whenever the church is meeting). Nehemiah prayed on behalf of God's servants, the children of Israel, not just for something he wanted for himself. He prayed for others, the whole nation in this case. He then confessed and acknowledged the sins of the people. Israel had sinned; Nehemiah and his family had sinned. He openly admits their corrupt conduct toward God - that they had not kept God's commands, statutes, and ordinances given through Moses. (Cf. Ezra 10:1; Neh.9:2; Dan. 9:20). In 1 John 1:9 we read: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is the importance of confession: freedom from the condemnation of unrighteousness. David wrote in Psalm. 32:3-6 (NAS): "When I kept silent [about my sin], my body wasted away..... My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah."

Remember the instructions you gave. After confessing their sin, Nehemiah reminded God about His Word by quoting the promises given in Deuteronomy 28 and 30. I find it interesting that God is not annoyed by our reminders. After all, He's God, He knows what He's said and remembers what He's written. Why is it then that so many people in the Scriptures are constantly praying, "Remember God, you said this..." and "Don't forget, Lord, that Your Word promised that..." The reason it doesn't annoy God when we remind Him is that those kind of prayers serve at least two purposes. First of all, when we say, "Lord, Your Word promises,..." we're really saying, "God, I have faith in Your Word, I believe that You are a keeper of promises." Secondly, we're reminding ourselves of the future God has promised to us. So it doesn't annoy the Lord for us to quote His Word to Him - it blesses Him greatly when we do.

At the end of Nehemiah's prayer, he makes a statement which shows us that this is more than passive intercession: Nehemiah 1:11: "...make Your servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man." Nehemiah then reminded God that he was making request on

behalf of God's own servants, the people He had redeemed by His mighty power. He was not making request on his own behalf. Here is another lesson for us: we surely may pray for things we ourselves need, but we should also remember to pray for the needs of others, especially God's people. Nehemiah again called on God to hear his prayer and the prayer of others who feared Him. He then came to the specific point of his prayer. He wanted God to bless and prosper him in his effort to make request of the king. At this point we are not told exactly what request he wanted to make, however the next chapter immediately reveals that Nehemiah wanted the king to empower him to go back to help the Jews with the problems Nehemiah had heard about. We are not even told exactly what "man" it was but he wanted mercy in his eyes.

This is clearly hinted at however by telling us that Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. Note that we likewise need to pray to God for the things that are truly important in life, especially for His blessings on our work for Him. We should realize that our strength and success comes from Him, and we will prosper only if we have His blessings. Without Him we can do nothing. When we see problems in our families or in the church, we should be willing to work to meet the need. But we must also seek God's blessings in prayer.

We see that he has made a decision. He is going to attempt to be a part of Jerusalem's restoration. He is going to try and be personally involved. He is not going to sit back and say, "Lord, make this happen." He is saying, "Lord, if it is Your will, I am available to make this happen." He is saying, as Isaiah did, Isaiah 6:8: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Who shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!""

Now, I want you to notice what happened in just this short period of time. Nehemiah was living his life, not expecting any changes to come down the pike. He's comfortable in his job, and minding his own business. A short meeting, a chance encounter, a quick discussion, resulted in him being affected spiritually and emotionally. He prayed about it, and felt the tugging on his heart that his life was about to change. He was about to enter the ministry of serving God's people. People have asked me countless times in the last dozen years, "How do I know if God's calling me to ministry?" Here are some practical tips straight from the Word: Are you weeping over a hurting group of people? Have you spent months in prayer and fasting? Have you said, "God, if this is Your will, I'm available?" Until those things have happened, I wouldn't give you any reason to believe that you're being called into ministry.

You see, a lot of people are more fascinated with the benefits and visibility of the "ministry" than they are in having a broken heart over a lost and dying people. They see that the pastor has a building full of people listening to them. They see that the evangelist is respected and getting on television. But that's not the Spirit pulling people into ministry, that's their flesh.

Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer. This was not a trivial job: carrying around a cup. It was, like current security police who work to protect the president. The cupbearer's job was to make sure that no one poisoned the king. He was to constantly supervise all that the king drank to be sure no harm came to him. As cupbearer, Nehemiah was a very trusted servant. He would also be a constant companion to the king and his composure always was expected to bring joy and reassurance to the king. As a counsellor, he could not afford to wear a melancholic look in the king's presence.

An ongoing assignment as we study this book will be to list principles of useful service to God that were followed by Nehemiah.