

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 31

Nehemiah – Part Two

These notes supplement the material from last week's handout. That handout supplied the background material and basic points from Nehemiah. Time this week allows for some supplemental material presented here.

I. Nehemiah's Prayer

Nehemiah Chapter One begins with Nehemiah in Susa (what is now Southwest Iran). Nehemiah is there as a part of the "diaspora." Nehemiah receives a visit from his brother, Hanani, who came from Judah.

Hanani's report about the problems of those in Jerusalem is particularly troubling to Nehemiah. Hearing that the walls of the city are broken and the gates burned down has left those that returned from exile in great trouble and disgrace, Nehemiah begins a multi-day time of prayer and fasting.

Theological term *du jour*

"Diaspora": The disbursal or scattering of the Jews among the nations after the capture of Judah by Babylon. The word is from the Greek word *diaspora* which combines two Greek words *dia* meaning "through" and *sporein* meaning "to sow or scatter." The Greek word is found in the LXX (Dt 28:25 — "You will be a *diaspora* in all kingdoms of the earth.") and the New Testament an 7:35 — "Will he go where our people live *scattered* among the Greeks?")

In his prayer, Nehemiah began praising Yahweh as a great and awesome God, faithful and loving. Nehemiah then confessed both his sin and the sins of Israel at large. Nehemiah sought God's favor with the Persian king, Artaxerxes.

II. The Commission.

Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes's cup bearer, a very important job! He tasted wine to make sure the King was not poisoned, among other chores. A courtier murdered Artaxerxes's father (Xerxes) in his own bedchamber. The king's attendants were among those he must have trusted most.

When Nehemiah next brought the king wine, Nehemiah was, for the first time, sad in the king's presence. Artaxerxes picked up on Nehemiah's demeanor and asked, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill?" (2:2).

Nehemiah explained the news he had gotten about Jerusalem's condition. Art then asked, "What is it you want?" (2:4).

Nehemiah's response to this question is priceless. Verses four and five show Nehemiah murmuring a prayer to God under his breath before answering the question. "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' *Then I prayed to the God of heaven*, and I answered the king...." This ability to have an ongoing dialogue with God in the midst of all life is dishing out is reminiscent of the encouragement the Apostle Paul will give centuries later when writing "Pray without ceasing."

Nehemiah asks the king for permission to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. Art wants to know how long Nehemiah will be gone, and then says "ok." Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah with letters of permission and authorization to get the necessary supplies. Nehemiah is also supplied with an armed escort for the journey.

III. The Rebuilding.

Nehemiah arrives and starts by taking a night tour around the destroyed walls. Sanballat (who according to the 408 B.C. Elephantine papyri was Governor of Samaria) and Tobiah, another official, are set against Nehemiah. Nehemiah's night time tour of the project was to gauge the scope of the work without anyone knowing what Nehemiah was up to.

Once Nehemiah begins the rebuilding, Sanballat and Tobiah begin the mocking, ridiculing and taunting — with not so vague threats. As the Jews rebuild, the taunts include insults (for example, "If even a fox climbed on what they are building, he would knock it down." — Tobiah quoted in 4:3). Nehemiah's response is to pray.

Once the walls reached half its intended height, Sanballat, *et al.* get more concerned. They begin to plot together with intentions of fighting the rebuilders. The rebuilders get discouraged and properly worried that the enemies are going to be in their midst and kill them. Nehemiah positions people in a fighting posture prepared to defend themselves and their work. Once Sanballat and others see that Nehemiah and the rebuilders are ready to fight and defend themselves, the attack is called off. For the duration of the rebuilding, Nehemiah leaves half his force as guards while the other half rebuilds.

Nehemiah has to deal with other plots of Sanballat before he is totally finished with the rebuilding. Although the text does not appear to follow a perfect chronological order, we read in Chapter Six of a subterfuge attempt of Sanballat. Nehemiah does not fall into the trap, however, again thwarting the efforts of Sanballat to either kill or frighten Nehemiah into submission.

IV. Nehemiah Post-Rebuilding.

The wall takes 52 days to rebuild. The narrative has an interruption in Chapter Five to discuss how Nehemiah came to the rescue of the poor and hungry among the impoverished Jews.

Nehemiah sets his brother Hanani in charge of Jerusalem because Hanani "was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do." (7:2)

While the walls had been rebuilt, Jerusalem itself was rather desolate and depopulated. God puts it on Nehemiah's heart to move folks into the city. Nehemiah finds the genealogical record (Apparently Ezra chapter 2) and quotes it in Nehemiah chapter 7. Nehemiah then assembles the people in Jerusalem for a celebration.

The celebration is a worship service of huge proportions. It begins with Ezra reading from the Torah (Law of Moses) from daybreak until noon. Ezra reads from on top of a high wooden platform built just for the occasion. The people hear the words and respond with "Amen's" and worship to God. Nehemiah urges the people to enjoy the day with feasting celebration rather than mourning.

Following the celebration, the people honor the Feast of Tabernacles set out in the Torah. During this eight day festival, the Torah is read daily to the people. After this celebration, the people set aside a time of national confession. For a quarter of the day, the Torah is read to the people. The people respond with great confessions of not only their sins, but also those of their fathers. God is then publicly blessed with a psalm that recounts Yahweh's hand throughout the history of the Jews as a people (Chapter 9). The Jews then renew their covenant to Yahweh and put their commitment into writing. The document is sealed as an assurance and promise of the people.

To deal with the depopulation problem of Jerusalem, a lottery system is used to determine who should have to move back into the city. Ten percent of the people are chosen by lot to return inside the city's rebuilt walls.

Nehemiah ends with supplemental information about Nehemiah's return to Artaxerxes along with follow-up problems in Jerusalem that required Nehemiah's return there. The book ends with prayer for God to remember Nehemiah and his work.

V. Points for Home

1. One person with God makes the difference
2. Pray without ceasing
3. Reading God's word changes lives
4. Ignoring God's word causes straying
5. Worship with Reading, Confession and Singing