

NEHEMIAH

A People Set Apart

Lesson 61

I like to garden. Something about it stirs my soul. Maybe I never got over the childhood boy-fun of playing in the dirt. You see all sorts of strange creatures in there. I also like the way gardening produces obvious results. When you pull the weeds in a garden, there is an immediate visible difference. Picking the vegetables or fruits gives you something you can hold. Of course, what you are holding is generally good food, which is always a joy in itself!

I also love the math in gardening. For example, take a kernel of corn. You can plant a handful of corn kernels, and each should produce a stalk. As long as you plant them relatively close to each other, the stalks will pollinate and grow ears of corn, generally one to two per stalk. The reason you want to plant them close is because the tassels at the top of each stalk contain the pollen. The ears of corn have silk protruding from each ear, and each silk strand is attached to a potential kernel. The pollen that falls from the corn tops must pollinate each silk strand in order for a kernel to develop. So having the plants close enough for falling pollen to hit the corn silks is essential to producing kernels on the cobs.

The cob from just a few stalks, if used for seed rather than eating, can plant a much larger crop. With about 800 kernels per cob, ten cobs would produce 8,000 kernels. Those kernels replanted would produce 8,000+ ears of corn! Now that is a corn crop any backyard gardener would find too large! That is enough seed to pass around to friends and neighbors.

The mathematics of going from one kernel to a few plants to an extended crop seems a fair analogy to what we have seen in our Old Testament studies as we have watched Israel. Israel began as a promise concerning the descendants of Abraham. Abraham's family was given front and center attention in Genesis until the time they settled in Egypt. The Israelites went into Egypt a family, but when they came out, they had become a nation. As Deuteronomy 26:5, 8 explains,

A wandering Aramean was my father.¹ And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty and populous...And the LORD brought us out of Egypt.

¹ This is likely a reference to the ancestors of Israel coming from the region known as "Aram alongside the River." Isaac's children (Jacob and Esau) were of Aramean heritage as their mother Rebekah was the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram (Gen. 25:20). The children of

At various times, Israel as a nation thrived, stumbled, split, and eventually fell, conquered by Assyria and Babylon. During Biblical times, the nation of Israel never reassumed its independent character. A number of Jews returned to the Promised Land, but many more stayed outside of Canaan living in what scholars call the “diaspora.” This term is from two Greek words, but we can easily use another, more common English cognate for the same Greek words and simply say the Jews were “dispersed” throughout the world. The family that had become a nation had become a people. The handful of kernels, that became a family of plants, were now a crop with seeds shared among the neighborhood.

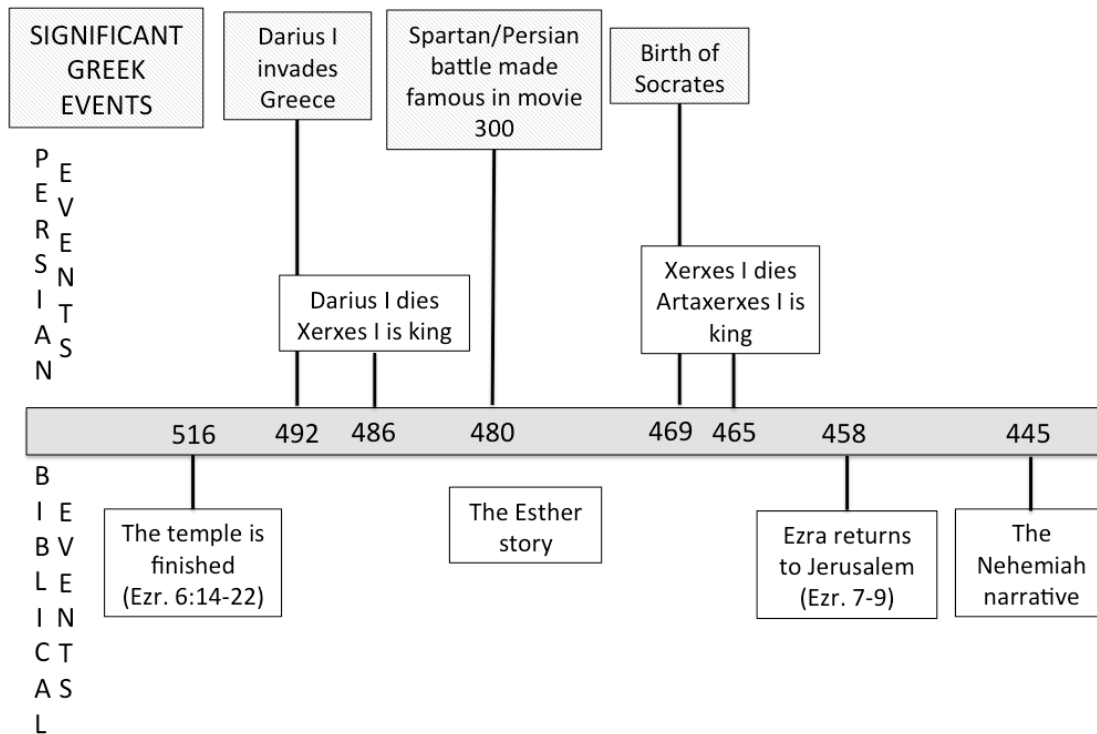
The difficulty for these people included issues of how to live right before God abroad, as well as how to live right in Jerusalem and Judea. In Nehemiah, the storyline we have been following in Ezra continues. The narrative interplays between Nehemiah, God’s people, and their enemies. As the story begins, Nehemiah, like Ezra, was a Jew living abroad. He went to Jerusalem to do what he perceived was God’s will for Jerusalem and the Jews there. The focus, however, goes beyond Nehemiah to the people of God. The story line shows the people set apart in two ways. We see the people set apart with physical fortifications (the wall of Jerusalem) in the first half of the narrative, and then in the second half we see the people set apart with spiritual fortifications (the Law).

NARRATIVE STORY

The main part of the narrative takes place around 445 BC. We consider 445 as the most likely date because the narrative begins, “In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year” (Neh. 1:1). The twentieth year of Atraxerxes I’s reign was 445 BC.

The following timeline places the events into the most commonly accepted chronology. We have added some core events in Greece that are commonly known to give more perspective to the timing of the Biblical events.

Leah and Rachel were of Aramean heritage as well since their mothers were descended also from Bethuel the Aramean (Gen. 28:2ff).



The narrative of the wall

Nehemiah was serving the Persian king in the capital of Susa when his brother Hanani and several others arrived from Jerusalem. Nehemiah quizzed the men about life and conditions for the remnant that had returned to Judah. The men reported that the Jews there were in dire trouble because the walls of Jerusalem were full of breaches and the gates had never been replaced after being burned. This news distressed Nehemiah and for several days he mourned, with prayers morning and night, fasting, and even tears.

Written in first person, Nehemiah recorded one of these prayers. It began,

O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you (Neh. 1:5-6).

Nehemiah went on to confess the sins of Israel with great specificity. He then cited God's promises to Moses about God bringing his people back to God's chosen place if the people would return to God and live under their covenant

obligations. Nehemiah ended this prayer pleading for God to honor the prayer and give aid to his people.

Throughout the narrative, we see Nehemiah offering prayer and then going into action on the very thing prayed about. This time Nehemiah, who functioned as wine bearer to the king, took his sad countenance to work. While Nehemiah was serving the king his wine, the king noticed how sad Nehemiah seemed. The king asked the reason for the sadness, and Nehemiah explained the poor state of Jerusalem and its walls. The king, showing a great deal of regal directness, asked bluntly,

What are you requesting? (Neh. 2:4).

In the moment, Nehemiah prayed to God even as he then uttered his request:

If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it (Neh. 2:5).

The king wanted to know how long Nehemiah would be gone, and once Nehemiah answered, the king signed off on the mission. Nehemiah then asked the king for letters, not only for safe passage, but also for the timber from the king's forest necessary for rebuilding gates. The king granted the letters, a move Nehemiah credited to God ("for the good hand of my God was upon me" Neh. 2:8).

Nehemiah went forthwith to Judah, accompanied for the journey by some of the king's soldiers. Once Nehemiah arrived, he immediately met opposition from two that are identified in the narrative simply as "Sanballat the Horonite" and "Tobiah the Ammonite servant" (Neh. 2:10). While the narrative seems to assume the readers would know at least Sanballat, and indeed, Jews of that age would have, in the 21st century we have to dig a bit to find out who they were. Sanballat was an official who soon, if not already, would become governor of Samaria (the name still given to the area that had been Israel's northern kingdom, immediately north of Jerusalem and Judah). Sanballat's children carried names that paid homage to YHWH, so we can assume he at least gave lip service to YHWH.² Of course, this

² Sanballat the Horonite began a dynasty that lasted over a century. He named his sons Delaiah and Shelemiah, both names that include the abbreviation for YHWH in them. Sanballat was already in his middle years when Nehemiah arrived in 445. We have independent archaeological evidence that his sons acted on his behalf as Samaria's governor as early as 410 BC. His grandson was also named Sanballat and he succeeded into the governorship in the early 300's. The family continued their dynasty into the time of Alexander the Great. See, Cross, Frank Moore, "Aspects of Samaritan and Jewish History in Late Persian and Hellenistic Times," *The Harvard Theological Review*, (July 1966), Vol. 59, No. 3, at 204.

was a time where many people gave lip service to YHWH, and still worshipped other gods as well.³ As for Tobiah the Ammonite, the Ammonites were considered archenemies of the Jews. Tobiah is described as a “servant,” and that likely indicates he worked for the Persian government in some capacity.

In spite of Sanballat and Tobiah’s opposition, Nehemiah continued to prepare for his project, keeping his plans secret from everyone. For three days, Nehemiah laid low in Jerusalem, but then one night, when no one was the wiser, he inspected the walls and gates. The next day, Nehemiah called together the Jews (priests, nobles, officials, and commoners), and urged them to join him in his endeavor. He told them he wanted their help in rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Toward that end, he informed them that “the hand of my God” had “been upon me for good,” and he then told them of what the king had already said and done to support the project. The people responded affirmatively and enthusiastically,

Let us rise up and build (Neh. 2:18).

The project was not going to come off that simple, however, as Nehemiah’s enemies sprang into action. At first, Sanballat and Tobiah used words, mocking, jeering, and generally treating the Jews contemptuously, deriding their actions and accusing them of rebellion against the king. Nehemiah was not easily intimidated, and he responded full of faith:

The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem (Neh. 2:20).

The narrative goes to great lengths setting out the names of the families doing the hard work, detailing the construction of the gates and walls in chapter 3. After setting out the crews and the areas where they were working, the story line returns to the drama brought on by the opposition.

When words had no effect on the work, Sanballat became enraged with anger. He brought the army of Samaria, added in other Samaritans (“his brothers”) for a greater show of force, and came to the job site. Sanballat was likely trying to provoke some confrontation to justify killing many of the Jews. Failing that, he thought to at least worry and frighten the Jews into stopping construction. Confronted with the Samaritan forces, the Jews just kept working to restore the fallen walls. Sanballat began to bellow challenges:

³ The Jewish community in Elephantine, Egypt that was ongoing at this same time worshipped YHWH, even keeping the Passover, but also worshipped other Egyptian Gods.

What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that? (Neh. 4:2).

Like a toady servant in a bad movie, Tobiah bolstered Sanballat's challenges with his echo of the taunt:

Yes, what they are building— if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall! (Neh. 4:3).

Rather than let the confrontation devolve into a melee, which the Jews would have certainly lost against the armed soldiers, Nehemiah prayed for the project and prayed against the enemies. Hand in hand with the prayer, the people kept working. The work was moving forward “for the people had a mind to work” (Neh. 4:6).

The progress did not go unnoticed. Sanballat decided intimidation and threats were not enough. He was stepping up his efforts yet a third time. Sanballat set out a plan of attack (literally) to send in soldiers discreetly at night, to kill the Jews, and to stop the project once and for all. With all this added life-and-death pressure, the people began to despair. Even Jews from outside Jerusalem who were not working on the project were scared. They came to Nehemiah and his workers “ten times”⁴ to warn them to stop before someone got killed! Before the surprise attack could occur, Nehemiah armed his workers and set his people in the gaps where the walls were not yet meeting up. They stood ready to fight the oncoming soldiers. Nehemiah encouraged them with the faithful assurance,

Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes (Neh. 4:14).

As Sanballat realized his surprise attack was foiled, he called it off. Nehemiah then recommenced working on the wall, but with only half the people. While half of the people worked on the walls, the other half stood guard over the workers. Nehemiah also set up an alarm system so if an attack happened at any one place, the armed people at other sites around the city wall would come help fight. The

⁴ This is a good example of a number likely being used for its symbolic meaning rather than simply its numerical value. Ten was a multiplier, it meant “lots!” In this sense it is indicating that people were coming in to warn the Jews off of construction over and over again. See details on different uses of numbers in the Appendix to the Daniel Part Two available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

people all stayed inside the city during the nights, and many like Nehemiah, kept their clothes on, sleeping with their weapon at hand.

A break in the narrative

At this point in the narrative (chapter 5), there is an insertion of “non-wall events.” Scholars debate whether this story is placed into the narrative here because it happened during the wall building, or whether it happened later and was inserted at this point for other reasons of the author. Chapter five centers on the poor people’s suffering from the oppression of richer Jews. The poorer Jews had borrowed from the rich to buy food during a famine and to pay the king’s taxes. Because the poor could not pay the exorbitant interest rates, they were forced to give their sons and daughters to the Jewish lenders as slaves.

This abuse angered Nehemiah, and he set about to stop it. He called together the rich lenders and upbraided them for their wrong behavior to their fellow Jews. After intense dialogue, the rich honored Nehemiah’s admonitions and agreed to stop. The rich agreed to waive the outstanding interest and even agreed to repay a portion already collected. Nehemiah required an oath from the lenders that they would do as they promised, and he then “shook out the fold of his garment” saying,

So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied (Neh. 5:13).⁵

Nehemiah then adds that he was careful to practice what he preached. At some point not identified, the king appointed Nehemiah as governor of Judah for a twelve-year stretch. During those twelve years, Nehemiah was entitled to collect taxes to sustain himself, his family, and his administration. Nehemiah did not collect as the law allowed, but chose instead to live on his income, even as he worked on the wall for the good of all the people.⁶

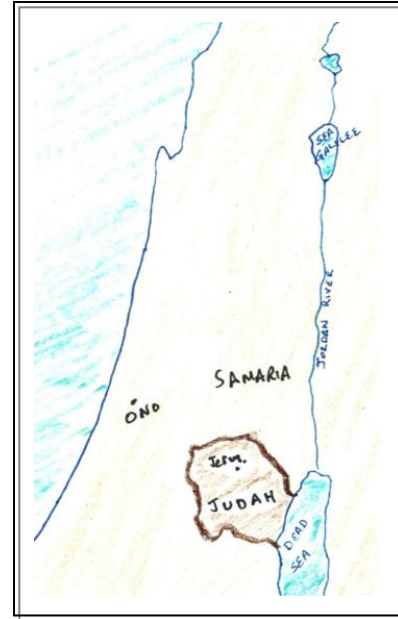
Return to the narrative of the wall

⁵ The action of shaking out his garment, and calling God to appropriate action sees itself again in the missionary life of Paul. As Acts 18:6ff recounted Paul’s story, he was in Corinth speaking to Jews and Gentiles about Jesus Messiah. Some Jews “opposed and reviled him” so he “shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads!’”

⁶ In this way, Nehemiah served as an example even to the Apostle Paul. Paul used the same reasoning for his lifestyle as a missionary. In I Corinthians 9:3ff, Paul explained he had a right to collect missionary payments rather than working as a tentmaker to support himself. Paul gave up his right to such things, however, to avoid any obstacle to the gospel.

After discussing the oppression of the poor, the narrative resumes to finish the story about the wall. Sanballat and Tobiah (along with a new character in the narrative, “Geshem the Arab”) heard that the wall was completed. The gates were not yet set, but the stonework was done. Sanballat, having tried words, as well as brute force, now tried deception. Sanballat appeared to offer up a truce, asking Nehemiah to join him and others on the seemingly neutral plane of Ono to discuss things. Nehemiah knew their evil intent behind the meeting, and RSVP’d “No” saying,

I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you? (Neh. 6:3).



Sanballat sent the request repeatedly, and each time Nehemiah refused to meet. Finally Sanballat sent a personal note threatening to report Nehemiah for treason:

It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together (Neh. 6:6-7).

Nehemiah, who clearly had a close relationship with the king, was not so easily cowered. He responded simply, “You’re making this stuff up!” (Literally Neh. 6:8 reads, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind!”).

Sanballat then worked to taint Nehemiah as a sinner, discrediting him to the Jews. Sanballat even managed to get a Jew to do his dirty work. The Jew, named Shemaiah, urged Nehemiah to meet him in the temple, citing the importance of the temple for protecting Nehemiah. (He claimed that Sanballat was sending people to kill him.) Nehemiah refused to go into the temple, something God did not allow for a non-priest, and averted yet another plan of Sanballat’s.

Fifty-two days after construction started, the wall and gates were finished. It was obvious to all, including the adversaries, that God’s protection had made this possible. It caused a ripple of fear to work through the people.

With the walls rebuilt, Nehemiah moved on to his next chores. He noted that “God put it into” his “heart” to enroll the people by genealogies, and so he did. Nehemiah 7 sets out the list of returning families from exile, basically re-listing those already referenced in Ezra 2. With the walls now completed, and the people registered, the next stage of the narrative begins. With this stage, the people of Judah become the people of the Law.

The Law narrative

The first section of narrative provided for the construction of walls, setting the people of God *physically* apart and protecting them and their worship from the threats and intimidations of others. Nehemiah then set out the role the Law played in setting the Jews *spiritually* apart and protecting their lives and their worship from the threats and influences of the pagan world. In this section, Ezra the scribe re-entered the picture.

After completing the wall, all the people gathered together into the square inside the city and Ezra the scribe brought out the Book of the Law of Moses. Rising up on a wooden platform built specifically for that purpose, Ezra read from the scrolls from early morning until mid-day. As he began the reading, Ezra offered a blessing to the Lord, and all the people responded “Amen,” bowing their heads in worship. Ezra was not the only Jew reading the law. A number of men joined Ezra both in reading from the Law and in explaining it to the people.

The effect on the people was profound. They were moved by guilt and began weeping. Seeing the obvious grief and repentance, Nehemiah, Ezra, and other leaders urged the people to appreciate the holiness of the moment and the day. As leaders, they then worked to move the people from tears to a place of rejoicing and appreciation for the work of the Lord in their midst. The day of weeping became a day of joy and celebration, as the people saw the joy of the Lord as their strength.

As the people were learning the Law, they found out that the following day began an important festival, the Feast of Booths. This family-oriented festival celebrated God’s protection and provision of the Israelites when they lived in booths (tents) during the exodus. The Jews celebrated the festival as it had not been done since the days of Joshua. Each day of the festival (it lasted for seven days of feasting followed by a solemn day), the festivities were accompanied by reading of more of the Law.

The people continued to focus on life as a holy and separate people immediately following the festival. The Israelites assembled again with fasting, not allowing

any foreign pagans present.⁷ They read from the Law and began confessing their sins. In Nehemiah 9, we read the parts of the prayer that were written down. It is striking for the way it incorporates so much of the Law. Clearly all the reading of the Law over the month was making quite an impression. The prayer began with Genesis, praising God as the creator, who “made the heavens” as well as “the earth,” the “sea,” and all things in each. It then recounted God’s call of Abram, how God called him out of “Ur of the Chaldeans” (which was deep in the Babylonian areas of exiled Jews) and renamed him Abraham. This must have reverberated with the Jews who themselves had left Babylon, which included the area of Ur, to return to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. From there, the prayer moved through Exodus, recounting the Egyptian bondage and God’s miraculous delivery of the Israelites from Pharaoh. The Laws of Sinai, given in Exodus and recounted in the remaining books of the Law, were prayed over as “right rules,” “true laws,” and “good statutes and commandments” (Neh. 9:13). The Israelite’s wilderness rebellion was prayerfully recited, as was the time spent in the wilderness.

The prayer continued to recount Israel’s history from the Law, with the recognition of God handing over the kingdoms memorialized in Deuteronomy. The prayer lamented that in spite of God’s great deliverance and gifts, the people sinned and rebelled against God. God warned them, and God showed great patience, but finally God gave the Israelites over to their enemies for discipline. Even as the people acted wickedly and were punished accordingly, the prayer recited God’s mercy, as he rescued them and brought them back into the land.

After this prayer, the people thought it important to recommit to God’s covenant, putting their agreement in writing on a sealed document. They took

...an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes (Neh. 10:29).

Meanwhile, the walls that Nehemiah had built encompassed much more of the city than was populated by the returned exiles, most of whom were living on farm or pastoral land. This was a problem, and the city needed more people living inside the walls. Lots were drawn to increase the inhabitants of the city, and a number moved into Jerusalem.

⁷ This becomes a significant backdrop for Acts 15 and the entire New Testament. It was hard for the Christian Jews to accept and understand that God had opened his to all peoples of all races and religious backgrounds. One did not have to first become Jewish before becoming a Christian.

A ceremony was held specifically to dedicate the walls to the LORD. The ceremony included singing with full instrumentation as well as purifying of the priests and Levites for service. There were great sacrifices and still more public reading from the Book of Moses. This reading included the story of Balaam and the instruction to exclude Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly of God, (found in Deuteronomy 23). In an interesting turn, the narrative tells that one of Tobiah's relatives set up quarters for Tobiah adjoining the temple (something Nehemiah plainly states was done while he was out of town.) As Tobiah was an Ammonite, this action directly contravened God's word, in addition to being insulting in light of the adversity Tobiah had brought on the people while building the wall. When Nehemiah got back and discovered it, he threw out all of Tobiah's belongings, and removed him from the dwelling.

The narrative closes with Nehemiah showing focused vigilance toward Jews who were transgressing the various laws. Nehemiah taught and reinforced the laws of Sabbath, the setting of portions for the Levites, and the prohibition on intermarriage with pagans. The last sentence in the book is Nehemiah's plea that God remember him for good.

THEMES

There are a number of themes and ideas that recur consistently in the Nehemiah narrative. An obvious one is the life and faithful role of Nehemiah. The candor of the text, and the free flowing narrative is at times touching and entertaining. His conviction and ready service to God are inspiring. His reactions to his enemies are both humbling, as he works in the face of fear, and humorous, as he tells Sanballat, "You must be dreaming!"

Beyond Nehemiah, there is another consistent theme of the power of pervasive prayer. Many times there is a public prayer, with Scriptural affirmations and confessions. However, there are also private prayers for strength and wisdom. The prayers are always accompanied by strong action. Beyond those more obvious themes, however, we consider in detail two more: God and the people.

YHWH God

"Nehemiah" means, "YHWH is compassionate" or "YHWH has comforted."⁸ His name sets up a principle theme of the narrative—the role of YHWH with his people. The narrative places God front and center. YHWH is:

⁸ The "-iah" ending to Nehemiah's name is the abbreviation of YHWH. The Hebrew *NHM* means "to comfort" or "feel compassion for." Brown, Francis, *et al.*, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford 1972).

- The “God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love” (Neh. 1:5);
- The one who commanded Israel through the Book of the Law of Moses (Neh. 8:10);
- The one blessed as “the great God” worthy of the people’s worship (Neh. 8:6);
- The source of joy and strength for the people (Neh. 8:10);
- The one to whom we owe confession for sin (Neh. 9:3);
- The “God from everlasting to everlasting” (Neh. 9:5);
- The only God, who made heaven, the earth, the seas, and everything in each. He is the only God who preserves all of them (Neh. 9:6);
- The one who chose Abram and made the people of Israel a chosen race (Neh. 9:7); and,
- The one who was to receive the first fruits and worship of the people (Neh. 10:35).

God moves throughout the story, not with obvious miracles, but through his sovereign hand as he worked in the king, answered prayers of provision and protection, and moved in the heart and mind of his servants. God was the source of all good things that happened!

The People of God

In commenting on our lessons, Old Testament scholar Dennis Magary explained his belief that a “main character” of both Ezra and Nehemiah should be considered to be “the people.” He is right that the book of Nehemiah (and Ezra) constantly refers to “the people of the province” (Neh. 2:1); “the people of Israel” (Neh. 2:20); “the temple servants” (Neh. 2:68; 4:3), “the whole assembly” (Neh. 2:64), “the heads of fathers' households” (Neh. 2:68; 4:3), “all the people” (Neh. 3:11), “the people” (Neh. 3:13 – three times), and more. Over and over there are lists of people who built the walls, lists of people who returned from exile, lists of people who moved and repopulated Jerusalem, as well as lists of priests and Levites in service.

The theme of the people is particularly appropriate because Nehemiah’s narrative is the ending narrative of God’s action with the chosen people in the Old

Testament. In our study, we will consider two more minor prophets, but the narrative ends with Nehemiah. We have reached the point where Israel has become a people, no longer just a family or a nation. The people of Abraham have become numerous and spread out among all the peoples, preparing the soil for an explosion of new growth that will come from a prophet, priest, and king, descended from the line of David, as promised in the prophets. The narrative will continue in the gospels and Acts!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good.” (Neh. 2:18).

Nehemiah did not simply say, the “hand of God had been upon him for good,” although that would certainly be sufficient for any task or order. Instead, Nehemiah personalized it. YHWH was not simply God. YHWH, whom Nehemiah called “YHWH God of Heaven,” and “the great and awesome God,” was personal to Nehemiah. He was *my* God.

On this I want to always think clearly. God is God. He is God of heaven and he is great and awesome. He is those things whether or not I even want to believe God is real. God does not need my belief to be who he is. He exists totally apart from me and what I think of him. The chance to know him, the chance to relate to him, the chance to see him as personal to me—that is the opportunity God has afforded me. I can leave the God of heaven alone, and give my worship (*i.e.*, ascribe value) to other things (my mind, my schedule, my opportunities, my work, my resources, even my family), or I can give my worship to the awesome and great God and enjoy the incredible blessings of the hand of *my* God being upon me.

2. “So we built the wall...for the people had a mind to work ” (Neh. 4:6).

It is amazing what you can do when you put your mind to it, especially when you cover the activity in prayer! Nehemiah calls to mind the maxim, “Pray like it is all up to God, then work like it is all up to you!” Nehemiah was praying over all aspects of the job, from inception and idea, through the requesting and requisition phase, through the solicitation phase, against the opposition, and through to completion. Hand in hand with these prayers, was action! People with a mind and body to work, did the things they had set before God.

In Paul's language, they were "working out" what God was at work doing in the Philippians (Phil. 2:12-13).

This is where I want to live my life. I want to live a life that prayerfully sets all matters before God. Then I want the experience of working toward those same ends, confident that it is God at work within me, both "to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). This is especially important when the path of life sets enemies before us. As we live for the Lord, and as we seek to do the things in this world that were set apart for us from the heavens, we will have adversity and adversaries. Jesus was blunt, "In the world you will have tribulation." He concluded his warning with an encouraging reminder of God at work: "But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). In Nehemiah's walk we see it plainly: when faced with opposition and fear, pray about it and keep working for the Lord!

So it leaves us working on earth for God's glory, even when it means the manual labor of building a wall, but we do so with confidence and assurance that God is at work on something much larger. We are to do our part, with a mind to work for God!

3. *"The king said, 'What are you requesting?' So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king..."* (Neh. 2:4-5).

I love this passage. This is a strong point for home that I pray I never forget. In a moment, the hard question is set for Nehemiah. There is no time to declare a fast, no time to send out a prayer chain, no time to fall on his knees and humbly beseech God. But there is a moment of prayer, a thought of reliance on God, a mental recognition that God must rescue or all is lost.

The Psalms assure us that "Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether" (Ps. 139:4). If the words are not there, even in our acknowledgment of praying, the Spirit is at work. "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Rom. 8:26).

I want that ready relationship, and regular prayer resource. I want times of prayer to be so common in my life that when faced with an emergency, my mind immediately turns to God for help, even as I am responding.