

Commentary & Notes on Nehemiah

The commentary and notes below are adapted from the teaching materials of Annie Kartoian (1906-1989). In 1934 Annie became a missionary in China with OMS. During World War II she spent 21 months in a Japanese concentration camp as a prisoner. She was repatriated in 1943 and sailed on the famous vessel Gripsholm. In 1949 she made a miraculous last-minute escape from Beijing before it fell to Mao's Communists. When she could no longer enter China, Annie went to Taiwan. Annie and her family have been life-long friends of our family. In 1989, while pastoring with the United Armenian Congregational Church of Hollywood I had the honor of participating in her funeral. It was during those years in Los Angeles that Annie gave me her teaching notes (the commentary below) - laboriously typed on what is now yellowed paper with hand written marginal notes, many of which are in Chinese. - Pastor Steve

INTRODUCTION

Time The Book Covers

The book covers a period of about 12 years; roughly from 446 B.C. to 434 B.C. It takes up the history of the Jews about 11 or 12 years after the close of the book of Ezra. Fourteen years after the return of Ezra to Jerusalem, Nehemiah led a company 444 B.C., and restored the walls and the civil authority.

Author Of The Book

Nehemiah is the author of the book. His name means "Jehovah comforts" or "consolation". He was born, probably of the royal house, during the 70 years of captivity. He was cupbearer to Artaxerxes (Ahasuerus), king of Persia. In Judea his official position was that of governor under Artaxerxes. He is not to be confused with the Nehemiah who returned from the exile to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2).

Facts About The Book

1. It is the last historical book of the Jews. After Nehemiah, Judea remained subject to Persia for nearly 100 years; then they were subject to Greece and Rome. It was during the Roman rule that Jesus was born.
2. Unlike the book of Ezra, this book is written entirely in Hebrew.
3. The book gives an account of the improvements in the city of Jerusalem and the reforms among the people which were carried on by Nehemiah. In Nehemiah 6:15 is recorded the statement that the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was accomplished in 52 days.
4. Due to Persian influence, Nehemiah refers to God always as "God of Heaven" and not as the "God of Israel" or the "God of our fathers" (see Nehemiah 1:4).
5. In Nehemiah 8:4 we find the only reference in the Bible to a pulpit.

Key Thoughts

1. The book of civil conditions upon the return from Babylon.
2. Two key words:
 - a. Prayer: 1:4
 - b. Works: 2:17,18; *"Come, let us build..." "Let us rise up and build."*

Characteristics Of Nehemiah

1. He was a true patriot who sought the religious welfare of the state (5:18).

2. He had respect for the divine law and respect for the Sabbath (13:18).
3. He made devout acknowledgment of God in all things (1:11; 2:18).
4. He had a practical perception of God's character (1:5; 9:9-33).
5. He combined watchfulness and prayer (4:9-20).
6. He showed humility in ascribing all good in himself to the grace of God (2:12; 7:5).
7. He was firm as a reformer.

Nehemiah And Ezra Compared

Ezra was the religious reformer; Nehemiah was the civil reformer. Ezra reorganized the priesthood; Nehemiah reorganized society. Both labored hard to bring back the Jews to the law of God.

Some Results Of The Captivity

1. It cured the Jews of idolatry. When they returned to Palestine they abhorred idols. No matter how blind they became in other respects they never again worshipped idols.
2. The restoration did not set Israel in the place that she had lost. The Ark was not in the Temple. There was not national independence; they were subject to the Persians, Greeks, and Romans who finally led them again into exile. From the return from Babylon to the appearing of the Messiah we read of no miracle or miraculous intervention of God.

Outline Of The Book

1. Nehemiah Coming To Jerusalem And Rebuilding The Walls - chapters 1-7
 - a. Nehemiah learns of the distress of the remnant in Jerusalem and secures permission to go to Jerusalem - chapters 1:1-2:10
 - b. Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and begins the work - chapters 2:11-4:23
 - c. Nehemiah rebukes the usurers - chapter 5
 - d. The walls are rebuilt and protected - chapters 6,7
2. The Revival Under Ezra - chapters 8-10
 - a. Revival of interest in the Scriptures - chapter 8
 - b. Feast of Tabernacles observed - chapters 9,10
3. Important Lists Of Names - chapters 11:12-26
4. Dedication Of The Walls - chapter 12:27-47
5. The Return And Reforms Of Nehemiah - chapter 13

I. NEHEMIAH'S COMING TO JERUSALEM AND THE BUILDING OF THE WALLS Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1:1-2:10

Nehemiah learns of the distress of the remnant in Jerusalem and secures permission to go to Jerusalem.

Verses 1:1-3: When the report came to Nehemiah he was the king's cupbearer but was concerned for his brethren. It is well for us to inquire into the condition of our brethren in the Lord, especially those whom God has placed under our influence.

Verse 1:4: The effect of the report on Nehemiah as such that he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed (Jeremiah 9:1; Matthew 23:37-39; Romans 9:1). What effect do the sorrows of others have upon us?

Verses 1:5-11: In preparation for prayer, when Nehemiah heard the report of the condition of his brethren his heart had sorrowed for them. This is the proper frame of mind and heart for intercessory prayer. He first ascribes praise to God (1:5). He confesses the sin of his people (1:6,7). They had not kept the commandments (moral law), the statutes (ceremonial law), nor the judgments (civil law). He reminds God of His covenant spoken in Deuteronomy 28:63-67; 30:1-5 (1:8,9). He presents his request 1:11). Notice the steps in the prayer: praise, confession, claiming God's promise, and then the request.

Verses 2:1-10: Nehemiah then secures permission from the king. The sadness in his heart was revealed on his face. Whatever is the heart will be revealed in the countenance. The kind king took notice of him and granted him his request. Nehemiah first prevailed with God, and then with the king. Later he prevailed with his own people to being the work, and also over his enemies. This is a lesson on prevailing prayer. First, we must prevail with God.

Chapter 2:11-20

Chapters 2:11 to 4:23 focus on Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem and his beginning of the work.

Verses 11-16: Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and views the walls. He surveys at night the task which is before him.

Verses 17-20: Nehemiah's reception in Jerusalem

The people are stirred by his example and the information of the king's commission. Nehemiah, their leader, says, "*Come, let us build...*" and the people answer "*Let us rise up and build.*" (2:17,18)

The enemy opposes Nehemiah. Sanballat and Tobiah were Samaritans; Geshem was an Arabian. In spite of the ridicule of the enemy, Ezra knew his God-given duty and persisted in it. Duty is between us and God; it is not determined by others although we profit by counsel and with older Christians regarding our Christian duty.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 focuses on the builders at work. Every man and woman contributed by a part of the great whole. But, it was all part of the same work. What is recorded here is a lesson in harmonious cooperation.

Verse 5: The nobles of Tekoa did not work. Even though they were not guilty of ridicule or criticism, still they were not pleasing to God because they did not do their part. They dishonored God by their passive attitude.

Verse 10: Every man had his own sphere in which to work "*opposite his house.*" They began at right at home. In working for the Lord we usually start in the place where we are and work out from that point.

Verse 12: Some women are mentioned as helping.

Verse 20: Baruch the son of Zabbai is specially commended because he worked “zealously” (NASB).

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 records the opposition to the work and how the Jews met the opposition.

Verses 1-9: The actions of the enemy begin with ridicule (4:1,2) and are followed by wrath and physical force (4:7-9).

Verses 10-22: The Jews met the opposition with prayer (4:4,9), by setting day and night watches (4:9), arming the workers (4:13), and detaining all in Jerusalem (4:22). A Christian must work with his spiritual weapons at hand (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Chapter 5

Nehemiah rebukes the usurers who were making unlawful gain out of their brethren. God’s work is very often attacked from the outside, but enemies also rise from within the work. Usually difficulty from within is far worse than any opposition from the outside.

Verse 1-5: The complaint of the poor against the rich. There was a dearth in the land as a result the poor became greatly indebted to the rich. Some of them even became slaves of the rich. The Mosaic law forbade Israelites to take usury of their brethren (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36; Deuteronomy 23:19).

Verses 6-13: Nehemiah settles the matter. An assembly was called (4:7). An appeal was made (4:8-11). Restitution is assured (4:12,13).

Verses 14-19: Nehemiah sets a personal example before the people. Verse 14 shows that Nehemiah had maintained an expensive establishment for the public good for a period of about twelve years. In the Persian empire the dues of the government were paid partly in provisions. Nehemiah, on account of the distressed state of the people, had not taken from them the usual allowances to which, as governor, he was entitled. His example had truly been an unselfish one.

Chapter 6

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the rebuilding of the walls and another attempt being made to stop the work. Specifically in chapter 6, the work is finished in spite of attempts to destroy it.

Verses 1-14: The enemies designs against the work

They ask for an interview with Nehemiah (6:2,4,7). We should never hold an interview with the enemy. Our answer should be the one given by Nehemiah in verse 3.

The open letter sent by Sanballat (6:5-9). It was the custom of the day to send letters carefully sealed and usually enclosed in a silken bag. By sending the letter open, contrary to custom, Sanballat doubtless intended to do two things: to insult Nehemiah and to incite the fears and discontent of the people for, since the letter was unsealed, its contents could easily become known. “*Geshem also says it...*” (verse 6). How often we hear rumors today based on what some one else is supposed to have said. They accused Nehemiah of rebellion and of trying to exalt himself to the position of king.

Through hired prophets they attempt to get Nehemiah to fear (6:10-14). Verse 10, “*who was confined*”, that is ceremonially unclean (Jeremiah 36:5); also means that he was hindered by some regulation regarding those who enter the temple. If he had fled to the temple he would have belied a courageous confidence in God. He also would have been guilty of seeking refuge in the Holy Place, which was forbidden to all but priests.

Verses 15-19: The wall is finished. In the completion of the wall God was glorified and the enemy humbled.

Chapter 7

It is not enough to build the walls; they must be protected and cared for. The price of safety, than as now, was continued vigilance.

Verses 1-4: Guards, porters, and overseers were appointed. Notice the emphasis placed upon the trait of faithfulness in verse 2. The city gates were not to be opened until the sun was hot, though the usual practice was to open at sunrise. This precaution would prevent a surprise visit by the enemy before the whole city was active. “*No houses had been rebuilt*” (7:4) - there were unoccupied spaces; the city was not full of inhabitants.

Verses 5-72: The people were numbered according to the early register dating back to Zerubbabel’s time. This register when compared with that found in the second chapter of Ezra, is found to have some differences. The totals given in Ezra 2:64 and in Nehemiah 7:66 are the same; but the particulars of the two differ, and each falls far short of the whole amount.

Chapter 8

Chapters 8-10 focus on the revival under Ezra. The work of the builder is finished; now someone is needed to teach the people. When the church is founded someone is needed to teach the people. Ezra comes to the front and Nehemiah is in the background. It is supposed that Ezra returned to Babylon after his first coming to Judea, and then returned at this time; however this fact is not established historically. Some believe that he was in Jerusalem preparing the edition of the Old Testament with which his name is associated.

Specifically, chapter 8 focuses on the great revival under Ezra and interest in the Scriptures.

Verses 1-8: The reading of the Scriptures.

The request comes from the people themselves (8:1). All gathered together and asked that the Scriptures might be read. A revival will always come if the people are hungry for the Word of God and if there is someone to teach them. This request was made on the first day of the seventh month, or the first day of the civil year (New Year’s Day). On this day was the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 29:1ff). During the Feast of Tabernacles, which was also held during this month, it was commanded that in every seventh year the law should be publicly read (Deuteronomy 31:10,11). This may have suggested the people’s request.

Ezra was there (8:2). He was God’s man, a scribe, prepared to give instruction.

There was prayer before they read the Scriptures (8:6).

He read distinctly (8:8). The Hebrew was probably translated for the benefit of the people who spoke Aramaic, and the meaning was also explained by Ezra and his helpers.

Verses 9-12: The people are ordered to rejoice.

“Tirshatha” (KJV) or “governor” (ESV), this is the title given to Zerubbabel and Nehemiah as the Persian governors of Judea (Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 8:9; 10:2) (8:9).

The word of God always brings joy. It may not at first if there was sin in the life, but if the sin is removed, joy will come. One element of this joy was that of doing good to others (8:10).

The keeping of the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18). The Feast of Tabernacles was so named from the booths (tents or arbors, Leviticus 23:38-43) which the Hebrews made to dwell in during its continuance. It is also called the Feast of Ingathering (Exodus 23:16; Deuteronomy 16:13) for it was held after the labors, not only of the harvest, but also of the fruit season generally. It naturally became a most joyous festival since it followed shortly after the Day of Atonement and since it commemorated the Israelites happy settlement in the fruitful land after their wilderness experience.

1. The people attended there reading of the word continually (8:13)
2. They learned their duty from the word (8:14)
3. They obeyed and kept the Feast of Tabernacles (8:16-18). If one reads the word, learns his duty from it, and obeys it there can be no result but joy.

Chapter 9

Chapters 9 and 10 focus on The Feast of Tabernacles being observed and a covenant made with the people.

Verses 1-3: A fast is proclaimed. This is a special national fast, introductory to the covenant which followed. They also read the word and confessed. They devoted three hours to the Scriptures and three hours to prayer.

Verses 4-38: A prayer offered. It was a review of the whole history of Israel from the time of Abraham. In the prayer they realize the wonderful dealings of God with Israel. They close their prayer with a realization of the reason for their bondage (9:35,36). Because of past sins and the punishment they had suffered, they now pledged themselves to be faithful to God (9:38).

Chapter 10

Verses 1-27: The record of those who put their names to the covenant. Nehemiah, the governor, first (10:1). The priests, second (10:1-8). The Levites, third (10:9-13). The chief of the people, fourth (10:14-27).

Verse 29: The purpose of the covenant is, *“to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our god and his rules and his statutes.”*

Verses 30-39: The articles of the covenant into which the people entered showed what portions of the law they had of late most neglected.

1. They would not intermarry (10:30).

2. They would observe the Sabbath; give the land its seventh year rest and remit debts in that year (10:31).
3. They would maintain the temple service (10:32)
4. They would support the priests (10:32-39)..

Chapters 11:1-12:26

Jerusalem was underpopulated and the city had unbuilt spaces within its walls (7:4). These lists record an effort to remedy this situation.

Verses 11:1,2: The methods taken to increase the population were for the rulers of the people to dwell there and for lots to be cast to bring one out of ten to the city. It involved danger and difficulty on the part of the drafted ones, so they merited the public gratitude.

Verses 11:3-19: A general account of the inhabitants of Jerusalem is given.

1. The chief laymen (11:3-9).
2. The priests (11:10-14).
3. The Levites (11:15-18,22).
4. The gatekeepers (11:19).

Verses 11:20-36: The dwellers in other cities.

Verses 12:1-26: A record of the priest and Levites. Note that the Ezra in verses 1 and 13 is not Ezra the scribe. This Ezra appears in 10:2 with the name written Azariah.

1. The names of the priests and Levites that came up out of Babylon when Jeshua was high priest (12:1-9).
2. The succession of the high priests (12:10-21).
3. The chief Levites (12:22-26).

Chapter 12:27-47

The remainder of chapter 12 focuses on the dedication of the walls.

Verses 27-43: The walls were built in a time of great trouble. Fear and trembling had been upon the people, but now they dedicated the walls with joy. The two processions which Nehemiah arranged set out from near the valley gate (Jaffa Gate) the one proceeding northward and the other southward, and the two meeting in the open space east of the temple. What was the meaning of the dedication of the walls?

1. It was a solemn thanksgiving to God for His mercies in enabling them to build the walls.
2. They devoted the city in a particular manner to God.
3. They put the city and the walls under Divine protection.

That is what it means when one dedicates his life to God. The dedication is with thanksgiving for the mercies of God; they life is devoted to the cause of God and is put under His protection.

Verses 44-47: Since the people has pledged themselves (10:32-39) to bring in their tithes, etc., now they appointed officers to take charge of them. The temple order is restored.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 focuses on the return of Nehemiah and the reforms he made.

Nehemiah had promised the king of Persia that he would return after a certain length of time (2:6). He had left Jerusalem in the twentieth year of the king, Artaxerxes (1:1; 2:1). He returned to the king in the thirty second year of Artaxerxes (13:6). How long he remained is not certain but it is believed that he was only absent for a few months. This chapter gives a history of the reforms he accomplished upon his return.

Verses 1-9: The Ammonites and Moabites are separated from Israel. The reason was because of the way they treated the Israelites when they came out of Egypt (Numbers 32). The people obeyed the law as soon as it was made known (13:1-3). Eliashib (3:1), the high priest, had taken on of the chambers of the temple and fitted it up as lodgings for Tobiah the enemy (2:10; 4:7,8). Eliashib's lukewarmness had already been shown by the absence of his name from the covenant in chapter 10. Tobiah's influence had been so great that the Jews did not venture to enforce the law of separation. Nehemiah would make no compromise with the enemy. He had the chambers cleansed and brought the vessels of the house of God.

Verses 10-14: Nehemiah discovered that the Levites had not been receiving their lawful dues, and to support themselves had been compelled to go out and work on farms. The fault lay with the rulers who should have seen to the paying of the tithes. Nehemiah restored the order of God's house.

Verses 15-22: Nehemiah found that this brethren had been treading grapes in the winepress, and bringing in sheaves of grain and other burdens on the Sabbath Day. Furthermore the fishermen of Tyre were carrying on their traffic of fish. Nehemiah rebukes them and reminds them of former breaches of the law (Jeremiah 17:22,23,27). To prevent the traffic he ordered the city gates closed when twilight was coming on before the Sabbath and kept closed until the Sabbath was over. Merchants then stayed outside the city walls to carry on trade, and he threatened to lay hands on them.

Verses 23-29: Dates for this reform show that it was from 12 to 20 years after the same reform of Ezra (Ezra 10). Notice how both Sanballat and Tobiah (13:4), the terrible enemies of the Jews, had crept into their midst. Does this not remind us that if the enemy cannot destroy us he will try to creep in through subtle means. Josephus says that this expelled priest was named Manasseh; that he went to his father-in-law, Sanballat, who built a temple for him upon Mount Geriain, in opposition to that in Jerusalem; and that this was the origin of the religious rivalry and extreme hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews (John 4:20).

Verses 30,31: Nehemiah gives a scant summary of his reforms.