

Nehemiah

Our only knowledge of Nehemiah comes from the book in God's Word that bears his name.

He was cup-bearer for the Persian King Artaxerxes I [465-424BC]. This was a privileged position.

Since there is no mention of his wife or children, it is possible that he was a eunuch.

As the king's cup-bearer he tasted the wine before the king drank of it and though he had little power, he had great influence, being trusted by the king.

Nehemiah was also a man of God who was concerned about the fate of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 2:1-10 [New King James] *“And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. Therefore the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.’ So I became dreadfully afraid, and said to the king, ‘May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?’ Then the king said to me, ‘What do you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.’ Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), ‘How long will your journey be? And when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Furthermore I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.’ And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me. Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.”*

Nehemiah used his position and the trust that the king had in him to serve the people who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city.

Why were Sanballat and Tobiah so hostile to the arrival of Nehemiah and his small band of exiles?

They were officials appointed by the king to govern Judah after the majority of the people were in exile.

There are several possible reasons for this hostility –

One – When Zerubbabel first returned with his group [**Ezra 4:1-2**] he refused to accept help from the Samaritans had caused bad relations.

Two – Nehemiah was no ordinary exile, he was the king's personal advisor and cup-bearer, arriving in Jerusalem with the king's approval to build and fortify the city. A rebuilt Jerusalem was a threat to their authority, as the exiles took control of the land.

Nehemiah arrived quietly in Jerusalem and spent several days carefully observing and assessing the situation, [**Nehemiah 2:11-16**].

After this Nehemiah presented a realistic strategy.

Spiritual renewal often begins with a vision of one person.

Nehemiah had that vision and he shared it with enthusiasm, inspiring Jerusalem's leaders to rebuild the walls of the city, [Nehemiah 2:17-18].

Nehemiah 2:19-20 [New King James] *“But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?’ So I answered them, and said to them, ‘The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.’”*

The Samaritan officials threatened to expose them as rebellion against the king, for Nehemiah had wisely **not** told them of the support the king had given him but that it was God's will and He would give them success.

Nehemiah showed great Godly wisdom in the way he dealt with the opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and remained calm under this opposition knowing that he was fulfilling God's will, [Nehemiah 3:1-32].

The physical rebuilding of Jerusalem, the city of David, led to the spiritual rebuilding of the people to rekindle the same devotion that King David had for the Creator God.

We see this transformation recorded in the Book of Nehemiah, where we are shown that the spiritual leaders were involved personally in this physical work.

Nehemiah 3:1 [New King James] *“Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel.”*

The sheep gate used to bring sheep into the city to the temple for sacrifice. Nehemiah was showing respect to the priests by giving this area to rebuild, it was at the same time emphasising the priority of worship.

Nehemiah 3:5 [New King James] *“Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.”*

They are the only group of people who considered that physical labour was not for them because of their importance in the society. Their inactivity will be remembered by all who worked hard!

Nehemiah 3:28-31 [New King James] *“Beyond the Horse Gate the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house. After them Zadok the son of Immer made repairs in front of his own house. After him Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, made repairs. After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun, the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah made repairs in front of his dwelling. After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the Nethinim and of the merchants, in front of the Miphkad Gate, and as far as the upper room at the corner.”*

For each family to be responsible for repairing the wall next to their family homes was a wise decision that added to their motivation to build it quickly and properly. They would not have to waste time travelling to more distant parts of the wall. Also they would defend their own home if the wall was attacked, added to this the building could be a family effort.

Nehemiah blended self-interest with the group's objectives, helping everyone to feel that the wall project was their own, ensuring high-quality work and personal satisfaction.

Nehemiah 4:1-5 [New King James] *“But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, ‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they*

fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish, stones that are burned?’ Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, ‘Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.’ Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.”

Ridicule can cut deeply, causing discouragement and despair. Instead of trading insults, Nehemiah asked God to give the people encouragement and strength to carry on.

Nehemiah was not praying for revenge but that God’s justice would be carried out. His prayer is similar to many of King David’s prayers, [Psalms 7:1-6 is an example of such a prayer that was accepted by God.]

Nehemiah constantly combined prayer with preparation and planning, [Nehemiah 4:9].

Too often we pray without looking for what God wants us to do.

Accomplishing any large task is tiring that fosters discouragement. The only way to overcome this discouragement is to focus on God’s purpose for our life and His special purpose for the project that looks so impossible physically.

Nehemiah reminded the people of their goal and calling, and God’s supernatural protection, [Nehemiah 4:10-15].

To further relieve the anxieties of the people Nehemiah set up a plan of defence and communication, [Nehemiah 4:16-23], a visible means of defence that helped them have confidence in God protecting them, [verse 20].

Nehemiah had the wisdom to see the trap that the opposition had set to place him in a position where they could kill him and cause the end of his motivating powers and organisation skills to bring the rebuilding to fulfilment, [Nehemiah 6:1-9].

After the completion of the physical reconstruction of Jerusalem, Nehemiah set about the reconstruction of the spiritual life of the people, using the Book of the Law as the standard expected by the Creator God.

Ezra as priest and scribe was the religious leader to bring about this reform, scribes also being among the most educated, acted as teachers, [Nehemiah 8:1-11].

The Feast of Tabernacles [booths] was renewed as a time set aside for spiritual instruction and worship as well as feasting, it being the time of the main harvest, [Nehemiah 8:12-18].

Note [verse 12] included in the celebration was the act of giving to those in need [Deuteronomy 16:13-17; Leviticus 23:34, 39-44].

Nehemiah had to return to Babylon in 433BC, 12 years after he had arrived in Jerusalem. Either he was recalled by Artaxerxes or he had fulfilled an agreed time away, [Nehemiah 13:6-7].

On his return Nehemiah was faced with a problem he found one of his major opponents in rebuilding the wall Tobiah had been given his own room in the Temple.

As an Ammonite, Tobiah was forbidden to enter the Temple.

The priests had been deprived of their official support and had returned to their forms of support themselves, thus their duties in the Temple and the spiritual welfare of the people had been neglected, [Nehemiah 13:10-13].

Even the Sabbath Day was being abused, [**Nehemiah 13:15-22**] and Nehemiah had to correct this.

Nehemiah also had to confront and correct men who had gone back to the old practice of marrying women from pagan countries, reminding them how such a practice was condemned by God and had been the downfall of Solomon, causing him to sin, [**Nehemiah 13:23-30**].

All of this shows how essential it is that leaders have to have certain qualities if they are to be effective leaders, especially in the spiritual life of people.

Nehemiah's life story provides us with many principles of effective leadership:

- 1) **Have a clear purpose and keep evaluating it in the light of God's will, as expressed in His Word, the Christian Bible.**
- 2) **Be straightforward and honest.** Everyone knew exactly what Nehemiah needed and expected from them, for he spoke the truth even when it made his goal harder to achieve.
- 3) **Live above reproach.** The accusations against Nehemiah were all empty and false.
- 4) **Be a person of constant prayer,** deriving power and wisdom from their contact with the Creator God.
- 5) **Everything that Nehemiah accomplished was acknowledged as being the Creator God working through him and done to glorify God.**

Leadership is often a lonely, thankless and pressured life filled with temptations to compromise values and standards.

Nehemiah was able to accomplish a huge task against incredible odds because he learned that there is no success without the risk of failure, no reward without hard work, no opportunity without criticism and no true leadership without trust in the Creator God.

There are words, repeated in the Book of Nehemiah, that express the humble mind of a true servant of the Creator God who had dedicated their life to God, "*Remember me my God,*" [**Nehemiah 13:14,22,31**].