

Nehemiah, Ezra and Timothy

James Wharton

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Nehemiah 12; 2 Timothy 1

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The Dilligence of Nehemiah

So dear brothers and sisters. This morning we've read the portions from Nehemiah and Second of Timothy, and as we read those final chapters of The Book of Nehemiah, we're showing the diligence of a ruler who was sent by God to govern his people's restored presence in their land.

It seems Nehemiah is one of those people who, well, it's never recorded that he personally let God down, and he was very anxious to maintain a faithful relationship with his Father in Heaven. So let's look back over a few specific parts of the story of Nehemiah, and Ezra as well, and let's consider the patterns the record gives us to follow, and interestingly, we can also see those patterns coming out in our Second of Timothy readings at the moment.

So before Nehemiah arrived to undertake his rule over the circumstances of the Jews, the book of Ezra sets the scene. And Ezra himself arrived at Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, as recorded in chapter seven of the book that bears his name, and his descent and his ancestral line, his family tree from Aaron, is carefully listed in that chapter all the way back, and we read that he was accompanied by a number of people skilled in worship and maintaining the operations of the House of God. And so he came in that seventh year of Artaxerxes, perhaps a number which shows us that the reign of the Gentiles had reached a completion or a tipping point, with the previous few chapters setting the scene for his personal journey. We've read in Ezra chapter one that when Cyrus advised the people, seemingly of his own free-will, that they could go and build the temple, so to quote

everyone whose heart God had moved went up to Jerusalem

There was a journey of several months that they made around the fertile crescent, and this ended seven months later in settlement in that land, but at that point perhaps we wonder what Ezra was doing, because this is before chapter seven, this is before he arrived at Jerusalem, so what was he doing at this point? Was he still serving in the courts of the kings of Persia? Perhaps he was still undergoing a lengthy education process that dignitaries were

expected to have. Perhaps he was considered too young or inexperienced. In chapter seven, he's described as a teacher well versed in God's law, but that does not mean he was especially old. He was entrusted, though, with the letter from Artaxerxes a little later and that surely means that wherever he was in life, he was considered extremely trustworthy. And here we see perhaps the first of many lessons for today, because centuries and millennia later in our era, humankind exchanges messages incredibly easily, but that ease of course, brings complacency, eventually, somebody will then point out that a way of transmitting messages is insecure, that it can be hacked, that it can be broken into, and then we turn to paranoia, and paranoia was something that would often have struck kings like Artaxerxes. At least once a generation there was usually some sort of military coup or similar, often because of rumours or Confederacies of disgruntled governors, who thought they knew something, and letters like the one that Ezra held and libraries of documents were crucial to ensure that the line of kings remained in power and this often hung in the balance. So for the king of the major nation to trust Ezra, the priest of the God of a foreign nation, was a massive honour.

No Priests

When we try to convey the message of God to the people around us, perhaps we, well perhaps we try to do that by the standards of moral conduct that we have, more than the words that we speak, and so we may not feel the same pressure exactly, but there is pressure there, we have to keep it up, and we have to remain honourable messengers. God is a far more powerful king with a more powerful message. And so, seven years after the beginning of the reign of the Artaxerxes, the priesthood was able to be set up, but first they needed priests, and Ezra realised that they didn't have any priests, apart from him. When he checked the camp for three days outside the city by the Ahava Canal just outside Babylon, he realised that there were no priests.

Three days they were, missing priests, and then that was followed by God's provision for their future. The ability to serve God depended on enough people being summoned to do the duties described in the law, which Ezra knew so well. Ezra must have had enormous faith when he told the men of learning in chapter eight verse sixteen of his book, to ask for the release of attendants from Eddo, and he didn't know who would be made available, or exactly how well trained they would be, but the eleven men that he sent would find that missing portion of people, and they returned with the temple servants who were required.

Now the number of people travelling was still small and together with possessions given out of the Imperial Majesty of Artaxerxes they would be very vulnerable to attack from bandits. Although the empires of the time were in the process of inventing the basics of postal systems to safeguard communications, they had lots of roads and outposts as a result, there would still have seen a lot of unfamiliar country. And they would have been travelling through that with people who perhaps weren't street-wise enough to resist attack physically.

But later in Ezra chapter six, we read:

For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way, because we had spoken unto the king saying 'the hand of God is upon all them for good that seek Him, but His power and

His wrath is against all them that forsake Him'

And so Ezra had reached a pinnacle of faith there, a pinnacle of faith in God because even some of the most faithful men in the Bible needed military escorts to protect them. David had his mighty men for example, and slightly differently, Paul had men on horseback when he was transferred between governors. But Ezra, in a land of very real danger went a step beyond this, he trusted completely in God, he was completely ashamed to trust anybody else, he would be *embarrassed*, as other translations put it, to consider wanting to overturn his trust in God. And so a quote from Second of Timothy:

No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier

There's also a Psalm which speaks of the emotions which Ezra must have felt which was written for the Director of Music. I'll read this passage from Psalm number five verses five to twelve, reading from the NIV, Psalm five says:

The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong; you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, Lord, detest. But I, by your great love, can come into your house; in reverence I bow down towards your holy temple. Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make your way straight before me. Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with malice. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they tell lies. Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you. But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favour as with a shield.

So this spirit was with Ezra, but the going wasn't always easy. We know that he had the tough task of leading the people's confessions of sin, including mourning over the things they'd done wrong in the past, and he felt everything personally. In that way he's a type of Christ, he's a shadow or prediction of Christ to come. He represented the feelings that Christ later felt and probably will feel in the future on the day of judgement. That's not something we necessarily think about very much. What will Christ feel when he judges the people? There are emotions there, it saddens the household of God, it makes them feel upset when the systems of men knock out the faith of those who felt they could resist but suddenly can't. But equally if you resist the things of men, that will please those who are there to judge.

But we read an Ezra that he rose up from before the House of God, this is a quote from chapter ten, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan, the son of Eliashib, and when he came there he ate no bread and drank no water for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.

Be At Work For God

Perhaps these pages have a layer of relevance for us in that they spell out how God will

choose men and women for himself in the future. God will always provide those one or two who recognise what needs to be done, those temple servants who make up the remainder who were missing, for the rebuilding of the kingdom.

He can always provide a high priest who has excelled in trusting Him, who rejected the opportunity of military violence. That high priest will carefully examine the resources available, he will feel the upset of the world around, but he will consecrate those who have held strongly in the faith, and he'll be able to examine the consciences and the actions of all those who have lived amongst all the different gentile peoples across the whole world, including whether or not they have tried to uphold lives separated from the hopeless systems of mankind.

Well, after Ezra had done all this, foretelling the work of Jesus, some time later Nehemiah received word from Hanani his brother. Nehemiah, and Hanani were sons of Hakaliah. Hakaliah's name means something along the lines of "whom Jehovah enlightens", and it's without question that their father was enlightened in the way of God, and so we have this family whose knowledge only really comes from God, and God is the only one who tells us very much about them. It's succinct, it leaves nothing to be desired in working out who they were, we have all that we need to know. And as soon as Hanani and his friends had told Nehemiah about Jerusalem, I think they all recognised that it wasn't good news straight away, because thirteen years beforehand they knew what had happened when Ezra had returned: he'd felt the pain, he'd felt the potential issues of setting up that kingdom once again. Although Ezra had still done good work in trying to separate out God's people and set up worship.

Fortunately for ourselves, we don't usually lose contact with our brothers and sisters for thirteen years at the time, but we have to remember that time and time again Jesus spoke about himself with various portrayals as a ruler who goes away for some time and then comes back later, and we're still waiting for that. For some people, they'll only be waiting a couple of months or years, between commitment in baptism and the kingdom coming, but for others, of course, it's much longer than those thirteen years. But whatever the length of time, a good report needs to come out of it at the end, because Jesus does not know the exact day or hour of his return, and so we need to make sure that there's a constant good report ready and waiting.

I think it's almost fair to say that Jesus will have a little bit of a nervous moment of anticipation to see if everyone has their defences lined up against the world, and, at the moment God requires him to return, who will be left? We know that the concept of unwalled villages makes people vulnerable and complacent, so we have to keep the message whole and pure, and we have to keep that shield of God around us. Remember that the Lord is a strong tower into which the righteous run. And at this point then in Nehemiah, we read the first prayer that he made, and sometimes people call Nehemiah "The Book of Nehemiah's Prayers", and they're probably right, because the pages of the book reads like a mind consciously drifting back and forth between his observations, talking with God, and a historical account. In this way, Nehemiah is one of the great men who walked with God. He's one of those people who only actually appears in the biblical record in the *context* of God. There are only very few people like him, people perhaps like Enoch, they're few and

far between, people who only appear when it's relevant to God's purpose, nothing else really is recorded about them.

One of the only things that we read about Nehemiah's personal life was that he was a cup-bearer. We read that *after* his first prayer, and so we see that his position before the king was of much less relevance to his life than his position before God. But obviously that position as a cup-bearer was still dramatically important, because his position would not have been just as the physical bearer of the cup, but also as its poison tester, and he would have been a trusted attendant therefore of the king, probably his most trusted attendant. And he would have maintained an incredible standard of service for the king, palatial levels of service, so that the king always felt able to trust him, and if that's how Nehemiah treated his master on Earth, his service to *God* must have been absolutely amazing.

The cup of wine united Nehemiah with the purpose of serving God as he used the opportunity for God, just like the way we should use the breaking of bread today. But initially the king thought that Nehemiah was aware of some sort of plot, and when those opening chapters refer to 'sadness of heart' on the part of Nehemiah, that can actually be translated as 'having an evil plan', so the king perhaps, was accusing the Nehemiah of having an evil plan, and so it was urgent that he sought God's advice there and then, and from that point, Nehemiah's fortunes changed straightaway.

Unlike Ezra, Nehemiah *did* accept protection then, from the king, the same soldiers who, had he not prayed, had he not sought God's guidance, probably would have gone and executed him. We see that Nehemiah departed, he had cavalry sent with him. We don't read that he used those cavalry on his journey, and we also see that when he did the important work for God by inspecting that wall of the city at night, there were no other horses with him beside his own. So Nehemiah trusted God, when the things of men were provided, he only took it so far, and then he got rid of them, and just trusted in God.

The blackened stones of the city walls when he arrived, must have been a grim sight recorded in Nehemiah two, perhaps they were silhouetted against the moonlight or in flickering firelight from a distant camp hastily put up near the city. The report of the city being burned with fire was confirmed and that's actually mentioned quite a lot in the record, to damaged stone with fire requires something intense. So we see how dire the situation would have been from a human point of view. And this blackened city was no good for God because he requires absolute cleanliness and purity surrounding his worship. For us in this day and age, that's clearing our mind. But back then, the physical burnt stones would be a very real distraction. It was like the whole city had become some sort of unauthorised altar. So the rebuilding, the good work described in Nehemiah chapter two, and from then onwards, that started without hesitation. Everyone from the priests to the people of Jericho, got involved.

But before we look at that rebuilding, let's look at chapter five because in various translations, the whole of that chapter is titled "Nehemiah Helps the Poor". But it's much more than that, Nehemiah five records how he set an example of mercy, which everybody is to show to their fellow pilgrims. There was slavery, and that was almost like money laundering but with people, moving resources around just for the benefit of a few, and so things like that had to be changed. And Nehemiah himself became as the poorest of the land, he empathised, he

changed things. Nehemiah spent twelve years funding his own food out of his own pocket, and he didn't acquire any land for himself. He was a selfless and practical priest as well in the way that he lived.

And so we think of our chapter today, which we read in Second of Timothy [one]. Reading here from "The Message" translation:

So don't be embarrassed to speak up for our Master or for me, his prisoner. Take your share of suffering for the Message along with the rest of us. We can only keep on going, after all, by the power of God, who first saved us and then called us to this holy work. We had nothing to do with it. It was all *his* idea, a gift prepared for us in Jesus long before we knew anything about it. But we know it now.

And so Nehemiah centuries before Timothy, acted in this way as well. And he also used experience from the citadel of Susa in the way that he set up a table in his house for 150 people. So he was looking after as many people as possible, and that included anybody needing hospitality from the surrounding nations as well. His diplomatic and logistical skills as a cup-bearer in the king's house were now seeing good use in the service of God, looking after everybody without hesitation. He didn't just organise the building of the city walls, but he also boosted morale, something that sometimes as a community, at our only ecclesias we so desperately need, we need to use all of our skills.

Use Your Talents

We never really know sometimes how our circumstances *now* are setting up our skills to use in the *future*. Some people like to talk about how we'll use skills from our present lives to work in various aspects of setting up God's kingdom, and I think this is a nice tie-in with the stories about the wise use of talents. When we read parables like that, we think of talents maybe as a weight. But I think we can also justify using the word talents to mean skills, just like we do in the English language now.

So in Nehemiah chapter five to quote from verse sixteen to verse nineteen it says:

Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work. And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

Then it gives the quantities of what was done for them, and then it says in verse nineteen.

Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

Skipping one chapter forward, we read at the end of chapter six about how people like Tobiah tried to intimidate Nehemiah, but in amongst this God does not forget to mention people who have been found worthy of protecting his people, and his message. The NIV records that Nehemiah put his brother Hanani and another man called Hananiah in charge of Jerusalem and its gatekeepers. Hananiah was a sheer contrast to Tobiah, he was word for word,

a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do

Nehemiah had a talent for picking out the best for God, ignoring the worst, picking out the best, the best before God are always remembered.

And then, in chapter eight, we read that

all the people gathered together as one man

and so with Nehemiah's strength, his faith, his skills, he put in place an exhortation for us: we all have to stand together in faith when we're called. And that calling together was at the Watergate, and that seems to be only referred to in the book of Nehemiah. Whatever the former name of that place, the new site of the Watergate was a fresh place to experience the power of God, and we read in chapter three that the Temple servants, the Nethemim had constructed it, and those people were slaves or servants dedicated to assisting with the physical tasks of the priests and the Levites.

So this was a holy and sacred place. The NIV records that those temple servants were a well organised body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. Again we can see how perhaps that's an example for working together today. And the involvement of servants dedicated to the temple suggests that the priorities for construction of this area were very high. The temple community being thoroughly involved with the defence of the worship of God, and this location was one of the destinations for the two choirs who provided what must have been an amazing musical backdrop for Thanksgiving at the dedication of the wall.

Temple walls and temple gates have a number of recurring references all the way through the Bible. The Watergate is very symbolic not just because of its name, but because it reminds us of our calling, and it faces east in a way that reminds us of other passages in the Bible. It means that we see the glory of God approaching. The people were gathered together at this location, both to hear the instructions of God in chapter eight, and also to be reminded of the skills and talents and patterns of worship that He'd given them. There was a practical demonstration and that emotional musical demonstration in chapter twelve.

And now we think again of Second of Timothy, and back to chapter two, verse 21:

Therefore if anyone cleanses himself..., he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

As we prepare to take the emblems of bread and wine, we're reminded that God's word is always accessible to us, God can always find a way to explain His purpose.

When we read Nehemiah, we read that they distinctly read from the book in chapter eight, in the Law of God and they gave the sense and help them to understand the reading. And we also read in Second of Timothy:

a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient.

All the people then in Nehemiah's time, listened attentively and they understood, we're not quite there in their own world. But we know that one day when we have the opportunity to help the Nations understand God, people will listen, and they will listen attentively and

they'll understand the sense of it. Until then, we ourselves listen, and we also pray to God for Him to remember us. And then we see in Nehemiah, that he commanded everyone to cheer up and said that they should all enjoy choice food and sweet drinks. We might not think that a bit of bread and a cup of wine will be either of those, but to God, it is good that we remember the plan and the salvation laid down for us. One day, it really will be a feast when Christ drinks wine again with his followers. So Nehemiah eight verse twelve:

And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

And that book continues and tells us a lot more about the process for a kingdom to be set up.

Set Your Face Towards Jeruslam

Ultimately though, in those days, even after the subsequent musical dedication of the wall, Nehemiah still had to pray to God to seek guidance, he had to carry on establishing reforms, especially given what happened as soon as he left the city. And even though he did leave the city, he was still clearly a man of service. Right to the end of the record, he was trying to keep it up, trying to purify the temple, provide for the Levites. And in the final chapter he plays that God should remember the errors of those who did wrong, he prays once for that, but three times he prays for mercy on himself because he sought the Lord and wanted His favour and His favour alone.

Nehemiah thirteen verse thirty-one:

I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me with favor, my God.

And so just like Nehemiah, we know which side we want to be on, which kingdom we want to help establish.

So we now make provision in our lives. For the first-fruits of God. We remember Jesus. We remember that One who died and rose again. So from Second of Timothy once more:

For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.

James Wharton