

2. Nehemiah (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: Nehemiah 1–2, Deut. 7:9, Ps. 23:1–6, Num. 23:19.

Quotes

- Not only did he unleash his emotions through rivers of tears, but for several days he denied his body food so he could pray and seek the God of heaven. *Craig Groeschel*
- Every true work of God has had its bitter enemies - not only outside, but also inside - just as in the days of Nehemiah. *Dwight L. Moody*
- Prayer and humility, along with a hatred for sin, produces a ‘mind to work.’ ‘So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work’ (Nehemiah 4:6). True revivals of holiness always produce workers. Books and seminars and lectures don’t—but revival does! *David Wilkerson*
- Nehemiah, building the wall of Jerusalem, faced constant harassment by enemies from within and without. We cannot honestly, authentically, reasonably and deliberately serve our Lord without our willingness to accept difficulties and inconveniences. *K.P. Yohannan*
- Prevailing prayer requires a tender, compassionate heart, a deep solicitude for the glory of God and the good of His people. Nehemiah wept and mourned. *Arthur Wallis*
- When Nehemiah’s heart was broken he paid attention to his broken heart. *Andy Stanley*

Questions

How can we separate out the political from the spiritual threads in these stories? Why was Nehemiah so upset? What risks did he take in trying to rectify the situation? How does this apply to what we should be doing in our world today? Why was the return to Judah so important? What aspects of the story reflect the great controversy?

Bible summary

Nehemiah 1–2 provides the account of how Nehemiah brought about another return to Judah. While we can see this as merely some nationalistic kind of pride, at heart is the sense that God is misrepresented and disrespected because his “capital” lies in ruins. God is the faithful God (Deut. 7:9). He is the true shepherd who leads his people (Ps. 23:1–6). God is not human and doesn’t change his mind.

Comment

Nehemiah is a Bible student. He knows what is meant to be happening. He also recalls God’s words to Moses threatening to disperse his people among the nations, but also promising to gather them if they repent. Desperately upset about the news from Jerusalem, he takes the opportunity of his access to the king to present his request. He cannot help looking sad, even though it might well have been a “crime” to do so in front of the king. As a result he is able to explain the cause of his sadness, and ask for the king’s help.

The real problem is that the return and restoration are incomplete. The Temple services are not operating. The enemies of the Jews have been successful in preventing the walls from being rebuilt, because they don’t want to see a resurgent Judah. While politics and religion tend to go hand in hand during this era, it would seem that Hezekiah’s primary concern is that their witness to the true God is being stifled.

We can think of others who even more specifically addressed this concern. Moses did not want to become the leader of a new nation because he was concerned for God's reputation among the other nations. Abraham asked "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"

The role of God's people was to rightly represent him. They had become a complete failure in the time before their exile, so much so that in many ways they were worse than the Canaanites they had expelled from the land. Their formalistic worship and hypocrisy was rejected by God through the prophets, but the people didn't care, continuing their sinful lifestyles under a cloak of pretentious piety. Taking God for granted, they never believed that he would allow them to be defeated and taken off into captivity.

Now the tragedy is that the "glorious return" has become something of a joke. Few had responded to the call to return, and those who did were unable to achieve very much. Nehemiah's intervention was to try and address these problems—more people, and a confident trust in God to carry through what he had promised.

As we apply such lessons in our own lives we can see where we have failed God. As David said, "My sins are always before me!" The problem is that this can blind us to the redemptive power of God who promises to forgive us and renew us. Our return to God may be as feeble as the Jews' return to Jerusalem! Instead of wringing our hands over what might have been, as surely many Jews did, the important thing was to get on with rebuilding their lives—and so should we! All too often we don't really believe in God's power to heal and transform, and we hold onto our feeble and doubtful feelings.

So we will see how Ezra and Nehemiah changed all that, sometimes by drastic methods! Right now the important aspect is to be convinced, to believe that God can do as he has promised, in our own lives.

Ellen White comments

Nehemiah's experience in connection with the rebuilding of Jerusalem teaches lessons that will be needed by God's people as long as time shall last. The times call for men and women of strength and decision of character. Paul says, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." The enemy will mingle his evil with every good work that is done if the workers are not on guard. Thus he seeks to spoil God's purposes.—Manuscript 58, 1903. {CTr 184.5}

Nehemiah and Artaxerxes stood face to face,—the one a servant of a downtrodden race, the other the monarch of the world's great empire. But infinitely greater than the disparity of rank was the moral distance which separated them. Nehemiah had complied with the invitation of the King of kings, "Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me, and he shall make peace with Me." The silent petition that he sent up to heaven was the same that he had offered for many weeks, that God would prosper his request. And now, taking courage at the thought that he had a Friend, omniscient and omnipotent, to work in his behalf, the man of God made known to the king his desire for release for a time from his office at the court, and for authority to build up the waste places of Jerusalem, and make it once more a strong and defended city. Momentous results to the Jewish city and nation hung upon this request. "And," says Nehemiah, "the king granted me according to the good hand of my God upon me." {ChS 172.1}