

Chapter 60 Nehemiah 1-13

Nehemiah's *Stay in the Story* Legacy

“Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services. . . . Remember me with favor, my God.” Nehemiah 13:14,31

The canonical status of the book of Nehemiah is one way the Lord God answered Nehemiah's prayer to be remembered. I imagine Nehemiah never dreamed that his story would still be providing invaluable spiritual direction more than 2400 years later. His memoirs date from December 446 B.C., twelve years after Ezra returned to Jerusalem, and they highlight Nehemiah's twelve year governorship of Judah (5:14). Nehemiah is best remembered not for completing a task and building a wall but for leaving a legacy—the testimony of a God-shaped character. He was responsible for strategic developments in Jerusalem, but beyond that it was the impact of his character that has left a lasting impression. We talk about Nehemiah today, not because he coordinated efforts to build the city walls in fifty-two days, but because he was a man of prayer, with a heart for God and his people, who cared for the poor and stood up to the opposition. He loved the house of God, worship music and celebrations. He gave generously and obeyed the Word of God passionately. Nehemiah left a legacy worth remembering.

For those who have been tracking the story of the second exodus through the prophecies of Obadiah, Haggai and Zechariah, there is a prevailing sense in which progress has been limited. Each step has been difficult. Obadiah dealt with the emotional problem of hate. Haggai was called of God to challenge the people to get to work on the house of God. Zechariah's messages and visions were designed to give back to the people of God their identity and destiny. The book of Esther revealed not only how precarious the fate of the Jews was in the eyes of the world, but how faithful the covenant-keeping God of Abraham and Moses was to his people.

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries devoted to building up the biblical community. They fought similar battles, trying to dissuade the people from discouragement and disobedience. They challenged the people to live a life of faithfulness. If Ezra the priest reminds us of a second Moses, Nehemiah the governor reminds us of a second David. This comparison to their larger-than-life predecessors only works if we keep in mind that everything has been scaled back. Instead of miraculous plagues and a Red Sea crossing, there are behind the scenes prayer requests, a four month 900 mile journey, and plenty of hard, back-breaking work. Zechariah summed it up well when he said in effect, “Don't you dare despise the day of small things!” (4:10). Among the remnant, God was doing an awesome work, but it was more along the lines of crafting a manger than building a throne. Instead of a theocracy in the Promised Land, there was submission to a Persian potentate. Instead of manna in the wilderness there were Persian tax breaks. Ezra and Nehemiah were part of this amazing trajectory of humility leading *down* to the Incarnation of God. The two exoduses provide two different models for the Church. If the church today wants to identify herself with ancient Israel it is best that she identify with the post-exilic suffering remnant than with the conquerors of the Promised Land.

The Blessing of Emotion

Of all the leaders we have studied in this period of salvation history, Nehemiah is the most transparent. He shares his heart and soul with us, and for all his capability as an administrator, it is really his heart that attracts us to his leadership. He has a love for the Jewish remnant and a passion for working on their behalf. He has compassion for the poor and a heart for hospitality. He longs for real worship and insists on a joyous celebration. He has a heart for the house of God and a passion for obedience. The man most responsible for building the Jerusalem wall was a man of deep emotions and those emotions had the powerful effect of putting his life in motion. His heart broke with the things that break the heart of God and his broken heart ended up fixing a broken wall. Nehemiah shows us the relationship between feeling and doing, weeping and working, praying and planning. He was moved to act because his heart was moved by the plight of his people in Jerusalem. As Craig Barnes explains, “Love is inherently emotional, which did not originally refer to feeling, but to a movement or a change of positions. To love someone is to move your life toward them and to leave the former position in which you were settled as an isolated individual” (Barnes, *Searching for Home*, 159). Augustine wrote, “Our affections are the motions of our minds” (vol. 7, *Tractate 48*, p.259).

Success in Susa did not spoil Nehemiah’s compassion nor did his job as a high ranking official in King Artaxerxes’ court get in the way of his calling. When his brother Hanani, along with other men, came to the citadel from Jerusalem, Nehemiah interviewed them. He took the initiative to find out about the Jewish remnant and what he heard deeply moved him. He was told that the exiles who returned were “in great trouble and disgrace.” The city walls were broken and its gates burned. Nehemiah’s emotional reaction to this bad news proved not only that he was a resident alien in the Persian royal court but that his heart belonged in Jerusalem with his people. He sat down and wept. He mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. This was a defining moment for Nehemiah and his emotional reaction was the prerequisite for action.

A cynical person could not have cared less and a critical person might have condemned the Jewish remnant for squandering their window of opportunity. The prophet Haggai had issued his get-to-work orders seventy years ago and still the city remained in ruins. Ezra’s initiative thirteen years previously had done little to remove the international disgrace of the returning exiles. Perhaps a comparison should be drawn between the post-exilic biblical community and the present-day church in regions suffering from systemic poverty, corruption and persecution. Like Nehemiah’s brother Hanani, our brother or sister in Christ comes to the west and delivers the same discouraging message of suffering and overwhelming need that we have heard for decades. In the face of protracted suffering it is easy for compassion fatigue to set in and for people in the west to grow indifferent to the plight of the body of Christ. But Nehemiah proved to be a caring and compassionate man in spite of the chronic problems and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. He was neither interested in casting blame nor accepting the status quo. Rebuilding Jerusalem and renewing the people of God was still God’s plan even if it did not appear to be very successful, especially in the eyes of the world. Nehemiah refused all excuses and rationalizations. Instead he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. He allowed himself to be moved

to action. There is a natural and inseparable link in the life of Nehemiah between his emotional response and his prayer. Nehemiah lived into the meaning of his name, which meant “compassion of Yah” or “comfort of God.”

The Blessing of Prayer

From the throne of the Persian King Artaxerxes the plight of the Jewish remnant was hardly news worthy. Talk among Persian philosophers and priests undoubtedly discredited the God of the Jews as a relatively inconsequential tribal deity who remained powerless to help his people. No one would have been more familiar with this disparaging rhetoric and the pluralistic realities of the empire than Nehemiah who worked at the very center of Persian power. Nevertheless, he prayed, “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments. . . .” Nehemiah’s understanding of God was not influenced by cultural pressures in the capital or by setbacks in Israel. His God was not “a small and cloistered deity” (Kidner, 20). Nehemiah boldly proclaimed and bowed before the covenant-keeping God of Israel, the creator and sustainer of heaven and earth—the Lord of the nations. He deliberately postpones the cry for help, “which could otherwise be faithless and self-pitying” and concentrates on the character of God (Williamson, 172).

Nehemiah would have been the first to admit that the power of prayer rested not in the one who prayed nor in the manner, method, or amount of prayer. The power of prayer belonged solely to the God who hears the prayer. Nevertheless Nehemiah prayed with great humility and fervency, saying, “. . . Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.” Although he prayed not for himself but for others, he included himself in the confession. The first person singular and plural pronouns of the confession reinforce Nehemiah’s deep feeling of solidarity with his people.

“*I* confess the sins *we* Israelites, including *myself* and *my* ancestral family, have committed against you. *We* have acted very wickedly toward you. *We* have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses” (1:6-8).

The prayer of confession removes any hint of disappointment with God. There is no question here of Nehemiah blaming God for letting the remnant down. There is no hint of a hard-luck story seeking pity or the tale of a jilted lover seeking compensation. He might have focused on how Israel had been sinned against, but he wisely didn’t go there. Instead, he admitted openly and honestly, “We have acted very wickedly toward you.” There are no grounds for being disappointed with God but Nehemiah knew that God had every right to be disappointed with them.

Nehemiah’s prayer is drawn from the prayers of Moses, Daniel and David. His spirituality echoes the praise and petitions that have been prayed before him. Originality is not an ambition in prayer, but humility is, and good theology is far more important than technique. Like Moses, Nehemiah prayed to the faithful God who promised to keep “his covenant of love to a thousand

generations of those who love him and keep his commandments” (Deut 7:9). He made his appeal to the God of heaven on the basis of three grounds: God’s promises, God’s people, and God’s servants. This concise summary of four months of agonizing prayer emphasizes the “return to me” promises of God, which held true even for the far-flung exiled people of God. “I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name” (1:9). Nehemiah knew that his broken-hearted passion for the people of God could not rise above God’s covenant love for his people.

Without saying it in so many words, Nehemiah’s prayer asks to whom do these exiled refugees belong?” The answer is clear. “They are *your* servants and *your* people, who *you* redeemed by *your* great strength and *your* mighty hand.” His prayer is reminiscent of Moses, pleading with God after the golden calf fiasco. Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God, saying, “Lord, why should *your* anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? . . . Remember *your* servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom *you* swore by *your* own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever’” (Ex 32:11-14). Both Nehemiah and Moses quoted the very words of God, not in an irreverent, insubordinate manner, as if they could somehow shame God into action. They were not trying to accuse God or hold God to account, the way a child tries to manipulate a parent by saying, “But you said. . .”. They were entreating God on the basis of his own loving commitment to his people.

Living as he did 900 miles away from the focus of his prayer concern, others might have confidently said, “Let others help,” but not Nehemiah. Apparently, he shared a perspective, similar to Mordecai, that he was positioned providentially for the sake of God’s Kingdom work (Esther 4:14). Nehemiah had the good sense to know that to pray this prayer without volunteering himself and his situation to the Lord was disingenuous. It was perfectly natural for him to pray, “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” In a single line Nehemiah disclosed three significant priorities. He was the Lord’s servant before he was the king’s cupbearer; he valued God’s kingdom success above personal status; and he saw Artaxerxes first as a man, like himself, and then as a king.

Prayer ought to clarify our priorities and evidence our values. For a man of action like Nehemiah, prayer became the prerequisite for turning painful emotions into faithful motion. *Waiting* on the Lord in prayer was the essential first step before *working* for the Lord in obedience. When Nehemiah and the builders of the wall were mocked by Sanballat and Tobiah, Nehemiah went to God in prayer and prayed out his anger and frustration. “Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders” (4:4-5). After the wall was built, but before its dedication was celebrated, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. They came together as the people of God to confess their sins. Their prayer of praise and confession is one of the longest recorded prayers in the Bible and one of the greatest recitals of salvation history (9:5-37). Through prayer they identified with God’s saving grace and the

sins of the previous generations. Prayer captured the down-to-earth spirituality of a God-dependent people who earnestly desired to stay in the story. The refrain that runs through Nehemiah's life as well as his memoirs is a prayer, "Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people" (5:19; see 13:14,22,29,31). This refrain, plus Nehemiah's immediate reaction to the king, strongly implies that Nehemiah modeled the apostle Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:16).

Serving as the royal cupbearer was about as far removed from waiting on tables, as the Secretary of State is from being a secretary. In addition to protecting the king from being poisoned, the cupbearer became a trusted confidant and advisor. Nehemiah belonged to a small circle of officials who saw Artaxerxes on a daily basis. For four months he prayed and waited for the Lord to open up an opportunity with the king. Keeping his emotions in check for sixteen weeks must have been a challenge, one that finally proved to be too much for Nehemiah. His sorrow over the plight of the remnant could no longer be contained. Once again, as in the case of Esther and Ezra, the personal element, forged over years of faithful service, became a catalyst for the king's concern and empathy. The king's acknowledgment of Nehemiah's sadness of heart was an answer to prayer. Eventually Nehemiah's prayed out emotions could not be concealed even from the king. I imagine that if the king felt he was being manipulated by Nehemiah he would have responded very differently.

When our emotions genuinely reflect our devotion to God and when our passion for God's justice comes from deep within, then even the world can sense our authenticity and express empathy for our sorrow. Sadly however, we often use our emotions to manipulate others. Under the cover of spirituality we can nurse a chronic case of self-pity. We can call attention to ourselves and secretly solicit the sympathy and support from others. Oswald Chambers expresses well the Lord's perspective when he writes, "Identify yourself with my interests in other people. Don't identify me with your interests in other people."

By identifying himself with his people, Nehemiah framed his response to the king in a way that the king could understand and identify with. When the king asked, "What is it you want?" we are not surprised to learn that Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven" before answering the king. Nor are we surprised that Nehemiah volunteered himself to return and rebuild the city. For Nehemiah prayer was a catalyst for personal commitment, strategic thinking, and careful planning, not its substitute. He was ready with an action plan and he was quick to conclude that the king granted his requests, "because the gracious hand of my God was on me" (2:8). Prayer moved Nehemiah's heart and mind to action.

The Blessing of Work

For those who tend to worship work, work at play, and play at worship, Nehemiah's work ethic deserves special attention. It even works for those who play at work, worship play and work at worship. If we applied Nehemiah's philosophy of work we would make considerable strides in faithfulness and efficiency, as well as humility and productivity. His work ethic is consistent with the New Testament themes of shared servant leadership, the priesthood of all believers, and

the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Nehemiah's work and life is a model of vocational holiness. He did not fall for the temptation of compartmentalizing life into distinct categories of "sacred" and "secular." He exemplified "a coherent life with meaning and purpose, a life lived to the glory of God" (Peterson, *The Message*, 793).

By modern standards, Nehemiah had a high-paying professional job with plenty of company perks, but it wasn't the kind of job that necessarily invoked the prayer, "Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people" (5:19). Since Artaxerxes was known for his whimsical cruelty and licentiousness, it must have been a pressured job for Nehemiah to say the least. As a royal official in the citadel of Susa, it would have been easy for Nehemiah to feel far removed from the kind of work that directly benefitted the people of God.

Nevertheless, in the providence of God, Nehemiah was strategically placed for just "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). In his position he had the opportunity to acquire the practical and professional skills necessary for acquiring resources and managing a large-scale building project. But it was the depth of his heart for God and his prayer life that must have convinced him of two things: first, that it was not by accident that he rose through the ranks to become a trusted advisor to the king; and second, that his success must not stand in the way of a *promotion to a greater work*.

Whether he was in Susa or in Jerusalem, Nehemiah knew that the Lord God was his Master. He believed in the sanctity of all legitimate types of work. He was just as much God's person working for Artaxerxes as he was when he was building the wall in Jerusalem. For work to be the blessing that God intended, we ought to see God as our primary employer. Some only view work as punishment for the Fall, but humanity was called to work prior to the Fall and given a mandate from God to exercise stewardship over creation (Gen 1:28). The apostle Paul reiterated a biblical work ethic when he told the believers at Thessalonica that there was no excuse for idleness and no explanation for shirking their responsibility "to settle down and earn the bread they eat" (2 Thess 3:12). Underlying the story of Nehemiah is a work ethic that offered service to God and to society. As a student of the Scriptures, Nehemiah may have been encouraged by these words from Proverbs: "Do you see those who are skilled in their work? They will serve before kings; they will not serve before officials of low rank" (Prov 22:29).

Nehemiah began work on the Jerusalem building project about eight months before anyone started making bricks, laying beams, and installing gates. Four months of anguished prayer, followed by four months of strategic planning and travel, preceded his arrival into Jerusalem. Up until now, his commitments were personal and private. Instead of leading with publicity, he kept his purpose and plans largely to himself. He arrived without fanfare, determined to keep his mouth shut and his eyes wide open. "I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem" (2:12). By the time Nehemiah announced to the Jews, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins. . ." he had already invested considerable time, energy, prayer, and sacrifice in making a difference.

When Nehemiah went public, he did what any effective leader would do, he defined reality. He

laid out the facts: “Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire.” Then, he took ownership of the problem (“You see the trouble *we* are in. . .”) and included himself in the solution. “Come, let *us* rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and *we* will no longer be in disgrace.” If Nehemiah’s work had depended more on his personality than prayer and more on his enthusiasm than careful planning, then Jerusalem’s disgrace would have remained. Israel needed practical, costly leadership, not a pep-talk, and in Nehemiah they got it. In a quiet, yet definite way, Nehemiah gained the confidence of the people, shared their concern and inspired their partnership. He saw himself as a servant leader, positioned under God and among the people. He led from the middle. Instead of giving his mission field away, he embraced it.

There is a trend in today’s church for “full-time Christian workers” to spend most of their time selling their mission to potential supporters. They expend considerable energy and effort to get others to support them and their cause. Christian organizations borrow heavily from commercial enterprises and secular marketing strategies. The ubiquitous fund-raising letter, mass produced to look personal, with its description of dire need and financial crisis, timed and targeted for maximum effect, contradicts everything Nehemiah stood for. Instead of attributes of prayer and humility, there is a reliance on publicity and personality. Instead of face-to-face encounters and genuine personal commitments, there are mass marketing mailing lists purchased with ministry dollars. Ministry promotion today reminds me of Mark Twain’s entertaining description of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn getting out of work by cleverly duping others into doing their work for them. They made whitewashing the fence look so exciting that all the kids in the neighborhood were lining up to do it. The difference between Nehemiah and many of today’s support-raisers is that Nehemiah embraced his mission and they try to give their mission away. The point is simple: Don’t give your mission field away!

From Nehemiah’s initial challenge, “Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem,” to his orchestration of the celebration and dedication of the wall, Nehemiah affirmed the people’s ownership of God’s work. He offered them God’s grace for their disgrace and challenged them to do good work for their own good. Some forty-one groups are named as participants in a coordinated and simultaneous building effort. Laborers were drawn from various professions and regions. Priests, Levites, temple servants, goldsmiths, merchants, and officials joined the project. They came not only from Jerusalem but from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, and surrounding towns. Some built sections of the wall that protected their own homes and businesses but others, whose homes were miles away from Jerusalem, were motivated to labor for the greater good of the people of God. Nehemiah’s chronicle only hints at the human drama behind this large scale project. Some who should have worked refused to do so and some who were not expected to work did so. Out of sinful pride the nobles of Tekoa did not “put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors” (3:5), but out of honorable pride the men of Tekoa managed to build a second section (3:27). The daughters of Shallum willingly helped their father build their section of the wall and Baruch son of Zabbai distinguished himself by “zealously” repairing a section of the wall (3:20).

In spite of considerable intimidation and opposition the wall was completed in fifty-two days. Nehemiah testified that even their enemies realized that “this work had been done with the help

of our God” (6:16). Important lessons can be learned from how Nehemiah confronted his enemies, but first, we conclude our focus on the blessing of work, by appreciating how Nehemiah orchestrated the dedication of the wall. He led the people in a joyous celebration for a job well done with creative, energetic worship and with songs of thanksgiving.

The celebration brought everyone together, even those from outlying areas. Levites, priests, musicians, officials, laborers, farmers, and merchants, all joined together in one great congregation of praise and thanksgiving. Two large choirs led the people in worship with songs of praise, accompanied by cymbals, harps, lyres, and trumpets. Ezra, the teacher of the law, led one choir in a processional around the city on top of the wall to the right. Nehemiah was with the other choir that went to the left. They met at the house of God for an unforgettable thanksgiving service. Worship, complete with rites of ceremonial cleansing and burnt sacrifices, was the fitting climax to their hard work. “On that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away” (12:43).

We should note that this highly unusual celebration and worship experience was not self-congratulatory. Awards were not given out for the fastest bricklayer or the best engineer. Attention was not drawn to individuals to be praised and complimented. The focus of joy and thanksgiving was upon the Lord God whose help was gratefully acknowledged by all as essential to their success. The difference between the re-building remnant and many church volunteers today is that their involvement in a thanksgiving worship experience was thanks enough.

The Blessing of Confrontation

Most of us would agree that *work* is a blessing, though we may do so reluctantly. But to call *confrontation* a blessing sounds downright wrong, if not ridiculous. What possible good can be accomplished through confrontation? Some types of confrontation may be respected as a benefit, even if the actual experience of confrontation may be difficult. Confrontation between friends and colleagues may work like “iron sharpening iron,” challenging us to grow, work harder, accomplish more, and deepen in character. But the kind of confrontation experienced by Nehemiah was intentionally designed to destroy him. Can we still say that even this kind of life-threatening confrontation is a grace in disguise?

Nehemiah’s tenure in Jerusalem is a study in three types of confrontation: the threat of violence from sworn enemies, the insidious evil of systemic injustice, and vindictive personal attacks intended to deceive and destroy reputations and lives. As soon as Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite heard that Nehemiah was coming they were “very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites” (2:10). Clearly, a revitalized Jerusalem was perceived as a threat by those who benefitted from Israel’s vulnerability.

The first reaction of Nehemiah’s enemies was to mock and ridicule and slander. They accused the Jews of rebelling against the Persian king (2:19). The evidence suggests that Sanballat and Tobiah were not rejected outsiders but well accepted insiders. The high priest Eliashib’s

grandson married Sanballat's daughter and Tobiah an Ammonite official married into an influential Jewish family (13:28). They were foreigners with vested political and commercial interests that were better served by maintaining the status quo than promoting the welfare and strength of Jerusalem (6:17). As progress was made on the wall the intensity of their opposition escalated. Their ridicule and insults turned to threats of violence. The task of rebuilding the wall was hard enough, but now the builders faced the threat of surprise attacks anywhere along the wall. To counter the threat, Nehemiah divided the builders into two parties, laborers and armed guards. He set up a warning system which consisted of strategically placed buglers along the wall. "Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" (4:20). The builders worked on the wall from dawn to dusk and then posted guards through the night. They slept by the wall and remained in their work clothes. In the midst of these difficult circumstances I doubt whether a sleep deprived, over-worked Nehemiah would have considered the opposition a blessing, nevertheless even Sanballat's fierce anger and the threat of violence hanging over the construction project was a grace disguised.

Nehemiah had to contend with a second form of confrontation that was even more deeply rooted in the life of remnant. A grassroots cry for justice rose up from the families of the working poor who had mortgaged their fields, vineyards and homes in order to borrow money to pay the king's land tax and put food on the table. Some were reduced to selling their sons and daughters into slavery as collateral for unpaid loans. The wealthy were becoming rich at the expense of the poor. Nehemiah was not so engrossed in building the wall that he was insensitive to the moral pain of the economically deprived Israelites. Thankfully, Nehemiah was still shockable! His initial reaction to the outcry was outrage, then reflection. He "pondered" the charges in his mind. He took the protest to heart. He "mastered" his feelings (NEB) and "took counsel" with himself (RSV). There was no way around this issue, but to confront it head on and accuse the nobles and officials of exploiting their fellow Jews. He convened a large meeting to confront the unthinkable contradiction of liberated Jews returning from Gentile bondage, only to be re-enslaved in their homeland. "What you are doing is not right," declared Nehemiah. "Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?" (5:9).

The theology behind Nehemiah's indictment and proposed reforms was drawn directly from the Old Testament. Simply stated: God is the absolute owner of property and all that we hold, we hold as stewards of God's property. Economic justice is demanded among all people (Deut 15:9-11). Human dignity must not be sacrificed for materialistic gain (Lev 25:17, 35-38). When the nobles and officials heard the charge "they kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say" (5:8). They agreed to give back what they had taken and not demand anything more from the people. To guarantee their pledge Nehemiah summoned the priests and made them take an oath to do what they had promised. The whole assembly saw the wisdom of this commitment. They said, "Amen," and praised the Lord (5:12-13).

Menacing enemies and economic exploitation are not blessings in and of themselves, but they are blessings in so far as they challenge us to stand up and be obedient. Nehemiah had to contend with a third type of confrontation. This one was directed at him personally and was designed to cause him harm and destroy his leadership. Ironically, the success of the building project caused

Sanballat and Geshem to narrow their attention to Nehemiah. Since their threats and ambushes had been unsuccessful in stopping or even slowing the work on the wall, they targeted Nehemiah directly. If they could discredit him through false accusations or character assassination, they stood a good chance of disrupting the whole reconstruction project. Their first tactic was to set up a meeting with Nehemiah. They may have hoped to bribe him or failing that, they may have planned to kill him on the spot. In any case, Nehemiah refused their trap four times. Their second tactic was to send a letter accusing Nehemiah of plotting to revolt against Persia and proclaim himself as king of the Jews. Nehemiah dismissed this allegation as nonsense by saying, “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head” (6:8). Their third tactic was a set-up, designed to scare Nehemiah into breaking the temple law by hiding out in the temple in rooms reserved for priests. Tobiah and Sanballat bribed Shemaiah to hatch the plot, but Nehemiah “realized that God had not sent him” and refused to be discredited (6:12-13).

In spite of all the pain and suffering these confrontations caused, in spite of the mental anguish and anxious prayers they produced, in spite of the sleepless nights and physical hardships they wrought in the life of Nehemiah, all three types of confrontation proved to be a blessing. They were a grace disguised that served to strengthen Nehemiah’s legacy rather than destroy it.

At the very least we can claim the blessing of Nehemiah’s confrontations for ourselves. Nehemiah left us a powerful example of how we should respond to enemies, injustice, and personal attacks. Even if these crises were not a blessing to Nehemiah, his response to them provides valuable spiritual direction to us. His perseverance in spite of opposition, his persistent prayer, and his practical response in each situation lives on as legacy we can learn from. But beyond the value of his example for us, these confrontations with Sanballat and others proved to be an invaluable blessing to Nehemiah personally. What Jesus said to his followers was true for Nehemiah as well, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10).

Even before Nehemiah got to Jerusalem, back in the citadel of Susa, when he was praying and fasting for four months before approaching King Artaxerxes, the possibility, or we should say, the inevitability of confrontation must have shaped Nehemiah’s outlook. There was a history of opposition in the region that is well documented in the book of Ezra and that Nehemiah would have been well aware of before setting out to rebuild Jerusalem. We can be sure that Nehemiah contemplated these confrontations before they arose. He counted the cost before undertaking his mission. He was not under the naive illusion that the reason Jerusalem had not been rebuilt was because the people were lazy. Nehemiah was prudent, not paranoid, when he carried out an internal audit of the potential opposition. His request for letters of permission from the king along with resources and an armed guard reflect some of these considerations. The threat of opposition has a way of focusing our attention on the cost of commitment and on practical necessities. Jesus challenged his disciples to do a similar cost analysis when he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple.” Like the tower builder in Jesus’ parable, Nehemiah had to calculate the cost before ever leaving Persia. Like the king going to war the followers of Christ have to be willing to give up everything before engaging the enemy (Lk

14:25-33). Having your guard up against potential confrontation is a blessing (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Confrontation can also be a grace disguised because it helps to define our identity, sharpen our convictions, and clarify our motives and purposes. This was certainly true in Nehemiah's case. He stepped out of his comfort zone and put his MBA (or what must have been the ancient equivalent) to work on behalf of the people of God. He did not set out to be a catalyst for opposition. His purpose was "to promote the welfare of the Israelites" (2:10). God's way usually requires us to go out of *our* way to meet the needs of others. Opposition ought to be anticipated. Nehemiah's reaction to Sanballat and Tobiah's initial confrontation clarified the battle lines. "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it" (2:20). This confrontation was not a conflict between two philosophical approaches or a clash of personalities or a contest of ideologies. Nehemiah did not call for dialogue; he called for separation. He did not try to rationalize the confrontation; he clarified the confrontation. This was an either/or situation: one was either for the rebuilding or against it. To attempt conflict resolution between Nehemiah and Sanballat would have been a frustrating and fruitless exercise. Clearly defined battle lines can be a good thing. It was in Nehemiah's situation and it can be in ours. Moreover what solidifies conviction strengthens solidarity. Rebuilding the wall under the threat of violence and the constant barrage of mockery and slander required the Israelites to depend on each other. Outside opposition served to unite the builders of the wall in a common front. This too, was an unintended blessing of confrontation.

Confrontation is a constant reminder of our dependence on the Lord. Without opposition we might be tempted to think that we could do God's work in our own strength and wisdom. Nehemiah was spared the illusion of self-sufficiency. He prayed out his frustration and hate and confessed his complete dependence to the God of heaven. "Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders" (4:4-5). Genuine dependence on the Lord through prayer and the word of God was evident in Nehemiah's life whenever he faced confrontation. He prayed to the God of heaven, not to escape responsibility, but to sanctify action. His practical strategy for dealing with Sanballat's plot can be summarized in a single line, "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat" (4:9). In the face of opposition, Nehemiah's consistent pattern of prayer proved his moment-by-moment reliance on the Lord (6:9) and it is evident that he looked for this dependence upon the Lord in other leaders as well (7:2).

Confrontation in the life of Nehemiah became a blessing, not because there was any inherent goodness in Sanballat's opposition or any moral value in the wealthy exploiting the poor, but because of how Nehemiah was led to respond to life's difficulties by God's grace. The New Testament command to give thanks in all circumstances, does not mean that everything is good, but that in every situation God is good (1 Thess 5:16). Nehemiah proved to be a great example of the apostle Paul's admonition, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil 4:6). There is little doubt that confrontation made Nehemiah a better servant than he would have been without it,

maybe even a better a servant of Yahweh than he wanted to be. Confrontation was a positive factor in his sensitivity to others and in his pursuit of justice. It may have made him more sensitive to the plight of the poor, not less. Just knowing that there people out there wishing that the whole Jerusalem project would self-destruct provided motivation for Nehemiah to see God's will fulfilled. Contrary to popular opinion, being on the receiving end of hate does not necessarily turn people into victims or blamers. Some may harden, but Nehemiah softened. The fact that he had real honest-to-goodness enemies may have led him to extend hospitality to so many without any tax burden on the people. Sometimes confrontation is just what is needed to break our crusty shell open to allow the fruit of righteousness to germinate and grow. Perhaps part of our problem is that we don't have enough confrontation in our lives. Maybe a few more enemies would make us more like Nehemiah.

The Blessing of Worship

Nehemiah may be best remembered for fixing a broken wall, but it was his contribution to spiritual renewal that left the most lasting legacy. His work ethic led to reconstruction, but his passion for worship led to spiritual renewal. The Latin prefix **re** conveys the sense of having to go "back" and do it "again" and aptly describes this phase of Salvation history. The story of spiritual renewal requires this little Latin prefix, because everything is having to be redone, rebuilt, and renewed. Israel must go back to its roots to try again, as if for the first time. Nehemiah and Ezra led a renewal (*renovare* - Latin) or renovation movement, designed to do over again on a smaller scale what had already been done on a much larger scale. The remnant, both those who remained in the land and those who returned, had to remember how it was in the past in order to go forward into the future. Nearly two hundred years earlier, the prophet Jeremiah had voiced God's word, saying, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls" (Jer 6:16). Now at long last, the remnant was interested in that promised rest and they were beginning to remember the will of God.

Even calling the covenant people of God "the remnant" emphasizes this trajectory of humility leading *down* to the incarnation of God. The word *remnant* refers to the small remainder that is left after the larger portion has been removed. The remnant are the left-overs, the left-behind, the remainders. In publishing, when a book doesn't sell well and it goes out of print, the publisher tries to sell off all the remainders at give-away prices. The post-exile remnant are the remainders, useless to the world, but valuable to God. Ironically God's covenant with Abraham is once again renewed, but this time in reverse. Israel reached the apex of its worldly glory during the reign of Solomon, but in the days of Nehemiah, Israel was reduced to a remnant. Isaiah's prophecy foresaw this: "A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. Though your people be like the sand by the sea, Israel, only a remnant will return" (Isa 10:21-22). Nevertheless God's promise holds, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3).

The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, economic justice was restored, enemies were rebuffed, and the city was being repopulated. These blessings demonstrate in physical and social terms, what

Nehemiah meant when he prayed,

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name’” (1:8-9).

The greatest challenge facing the Israelites was not repairing the walls or repopulating the city but responding to God’s personal challenge, “Return to me.” In the final analysis more was needed than brick and mortar and numerical growth. Later, Jesus will use the parable of the prodigal son to re-enact what the people of God had experienced historically on a massive scale. The prodigal returned home from the far country into the embrace of the waiting father; the post-exilic remnant returned home into to the embrace of the Word of God.

The wall was completed by late summer in the month Elul (6:15) and the next month, Tishri, was the start of the new year and the first day of this seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets (Lev 23:23-25; Num 29:1). Nehemiah’s memoirs describe an extended worship experience that spanned a month. The story of this great worship experience is told without any one person getting the credit. The leaders did their part, but the motivation for turning to God came from the people themselves. The same hallmarks of worship that characterized the early church, namely, devotion to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, sacred ritual and prayer, are evident in the remnant’s spiritual renewal.

Worship began with a gathering, one great reunion of men and women and children. “All the people assembled with one accord in the square before the Water Gate” (8:1). Unity is a theme that resounds throughout this symphony of repentance and praise. The solidarity of the building campaign is replicated in worship. They gathered together to hear the word of God, to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, to confess their sins, to sign a binding agreement and to join in the processional of praise. With “one accord” they experienced reformation, repentance, renewal, and rejoicing.

Unity was not the goal of their worship experience, but its setting. Their unity focused not on themselves and how they felt toward one another, but on their relationship to God and how obedient they were. Instead of using worship for their own individual experience, worship used them, transforming them as a body of believers into a more obedient and faithful community. Individual initiatives, tastes, and preferences were not the big factor in their worship experience as they often are in ours. Unity was the setting, not the ambition, of this sacred reunion.

Another characteristic of this particular setting for worship, was its lack of emphasis on sacred space. This worship gathering must have been very different from the dedication of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8:8). The people stood before a high wooden platform and listened attentively as Ezra read from the Book of the Law of Moses. On the second day of worship, they re-enacted the week long Feast of Tabernacles. They built and lived in temporary shelters made out of tree branches to recall Israel’s days in the wilderness. This exercise in “spiritual camping” reminded

them of the Exodus and their journey in the wilderness. The whole experience was designed to distance themselves from the royal “glory days” and focus their attention on the roots of their redemption.

They all gathered again on the twenty-fourth day of the same month to hear the Book of the Law read and to confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors. This corporate confession was followed by a solemn signing of a binding agreement, but the location for both of these worship activities is not indicated. Nehemiah’s memoirs describe the dedication of the wall as the final act of worship. This processional of praise encircled the city as if to sanctify the entire city and dedicate every square foot of Jerusalem to the Lord. The implication seems to be that they were standing on holy ground even at the Dung Gate (12:31). By de-emphasizing the temple and referring to the temple as “the house of our God,” Nehemiah re-enforced the conviction that spiritual renewal transformed all aspects of society. True spirituality is demonstrated best by ordinary people living for God in the ordinary course of daily life. Nehemiah’s experience of spiritual renewal is on a trajectory that leads from Ezra’s wooden platform to our Lord’s wooden manger. His vision of worship extends from ordinary Israelites singing songs of praise on the wall of Jerusalem to Mary praying, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant” (Lk 1:46-48).

The blessing of worship then and now was centered in the reading, hearing, understanding and applying of the word of God. Ezra the teacher of the Law is called from obscurity to read from the Book of the Law of Moses (Kidner, 104). He was by no means a pulpit pounding preacher forcing his message on a reluctant audience. Nor was he delivering some new manifesto that he had cleverly invented for this special occasion. He was simply reading from Exodus and Deuteronomy, the authoritative Word of God, the foundations of the faith. He read from daybreak till noon, some six hours “and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law” (8:3).

Ezra did what the apostle Paul advised Timothy to do: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what they want their itching ears want to hear. They turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:2-4).

Thankfully, this cross-generational gathering of men, women and children, responded to Ezra’s reading from the Book of the Law of God with great praise and humility. Their response was characterized by doxology and discussion. “All the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground” (8:6). Ezra was joined by the Levites, who translated the text from Hebrew to Aramaic and led small group discussions to make the meaning clear (8:8).

Philip Spener, a leader in the 17th century German Pietistic movement, called for “a more extensive use of the Word of God” and encouraged family bible reading and small group Bible

studies. “Although solitary reading of the Bible at home is itself a splendid and praiseworthy thing,” wrote Spener, “it does not accomplish enough for most people.” Like Ezra and his team of Levites, Spener chose a teaching style that fostered serious discussion about the biblical text. In small group Bible studies the Holy Scriptures were to be read aloud and discussed verse by verse in order to discover their “simple meaning” and to highlight “whatever may be useful for the edification of all.” Spener was convinced that “if we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people” (Pia Desideria, 87-91).

The emotional impact of reading and discussing the Word of the God was felt by everyone and seemed to take the leadership by surprise. Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites joined together in encouraging everyone by saying, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” What was it about listening to the words of the Law that caused all the people to weep? Apparently they felt deeply moved by their failure to live according to God’s will. The force of the Law of God against their lifestyles left them disheartened and broken. They realized that it was not God who had failed them, but they who had failed God. It is precisely at this point that the difference between the remnant and today’s believers may be the greatest. Can we imagine reading anything in God’s Word that would leave us devastated? To be honest, is it not our tendency to explain away the discrepancies between our lifestyles and God’s Word? We might be tempted to think more readily that the Scriptures are wrong than that we are wrong and need to change.

One of the reasons why worship is such a blessing is because it helps all who grieve over their sin to process that grief in constructive, healing ways. Among the remnant this happened in four ways: First, Nehemiah took the initiative in insisting on grace. Before anything else, even before prayers of repentance, they needed to rest in God’s grace. “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:10). Regardless of their long history of failure and disobedience, they were encouraged to choose joy. It was the Lord who made the day holy, not themselves. Their joy was dependent on the Lord’s strength, not their own. Nehemiah knew that a sinner’s grief could only be dealt with in the context of saving grace. When the message got through to the people, they were able to celebrate with great joy. Second, they re-enacted the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev23:33-43; Num 29:12-30; Deut 16:13-17), which was a special time of thanksgiving for God’s provision and a reminder of God’s sustaining grace in the wilderness of life. Third, they gathered together for a time of fasting and confession. Through prayer they humbled themselves before the Lord by reviewing their history. They affirmed the legacy of God’s blessing and the litany of their failure and disobedience.

Fourth, they signed a binding agreement that pledged their obedience in four specific ways. Nehemiah was the first to sign the document, along with the priests, Levites and leaders of the people. (1) They pledged to prohibit mixed marriages for both men and women. As we said earlier in our study of Ezra, this was not done out of ethnic prejudice or racial animosity, but out of ethical principle and spiritual necessity (see 2 Cor 6:14-18). (2) They pledged to preserve the holiness of the Sabbath by refusing to buy and sell on that day. (3) They pledged to protect the

poor, by letting the land lie fallow every seventh year and cancelling all debts. (4) They pledged to support the house of God with dedicated personnel and generous gifts. The final line of the agreement summed up their dedication: “We will not neglect the house of God” (10:39).

These four responses can be attributed to the blessing of worship: a celebration of grace over grief, a spiritual retreat in the tradition of the Feast of Tabernacles, a prayer of confession and a binding agreement. In Nehemiah’s memoirs the climax to worship comes with the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem but this occurs only after deep repentance and spiritual renewal. It was not enough to reconstruct the city without building up the people of God. By the time Nehemiah and Ezra led the praise choirs around the city, they were truly ready to rejoice. They knew first hand that the deepest joys come at the end of a long struggle which has required perseverance, patience, endurance, hope, and trust. Richard Foster warns, “Many people try to come into joy far too soon. Often we try to pump up people with joy when in reality nothing has happened in their lives. God has not broken into the routine experience of their daily existence. Celebration comes when the common ventures of life are redeemed” (Foster, CD, 166).

I wonder if Nehemiah recalled the words of the psalmist as he joined in the festive throng encircling the city, “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy”? (Ps 126). The songs of thanksgiving must have recalled the sorrow he felt almost a year before, when his brother Hanani reported that Jerusalem lay in ruins. I doubt if Nehemiah had forgotten his sad, solitary journey around the city and through the rubble, when he assessed the damage and determined a course of action. I imagine that he felt, at least on the inside, a little bit like David when he danced with all his might before the ark of the covenant. No one had paid a greater price to celebrate joyfully and no one had offered a greater sacrifice than Nehemiah. By the grace of God he had earned the right to pen the following in his memoirs: “And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God has given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away” (12:43). Nothing pleased Nehemiah more than to hear the sounds of joy echoing off those walls!

The Blessing of Leadership

The main story in the final chapter is not the litany of persistent problems, but the consistency of Nehemiah’s faithfulness to the end. After serving for twelve years as governor, Nehemiah had returned to Artaxerxes king of Babylon for an unspecified period of time (13:6). Eliashib the priest had taken advantage of Nehemiah’s absence and re-instated Tobiah to a position of influence. Self-serving priests had always been a problem for Israel and Eliashib was no exception. When he gave valuable space to Tobiah, Nehemiah’s long-standing nemesis, Eliashib apparently valued the commercial interests of Tobiah over the collection and storage of provisions for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers. This was not the only problem facing Nehemiah when he returned. He also encountered the widespread desecration of the Sabbath. Foreign merchants took advantage of the lax situation and Jewish nobles seemed eager to support full scale retailing on the Sabbath. The most serious and flagrant violation of biblical obedience confronting Nehemiah on his return involved intermarriages. In spite of biblical teaching, biblical warnings, and the binding agreement, Jews were absorbing the pagan lifestyles, religious

customs, and false spiritualities of the surrounding cultures through marriage.

Nehemiah responded to all three of these challenges with his characteristic determination and biblical integrity. He threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. He rebuked the officials for neglecting the house of God and leaving the Levites without support. He condemned those who were buying and selling on the Sabbath and he posted guards at the gates to prevent merchants from entering the city. He rebuked, cursed and beat up some who had married pagan women. Some commentators conclude that Nehemiah had become an angry old man. He was irascible, violent and autocratic. But I prefer J. I. Packer's perspective. "Any embarrassment we might feel at Nehemiah's forthrightness could be a sign of our own spiritual and moral limitations rather than his. . . . Would Moses, David, Jesus, or Paul ever have qualified as 'Mr. Nice Guy'? The assumption, so common today, that niceness is of the essence of goodness needs to be exploded. Nehemiah should not be criticized for thinking that there are more important things than being nice. If, now, we have a problem with Nehemiah's anger, we should realize that it was a deep feeling of outrage that expressed not self-absorbed resentment nor personal hostility, but the anguish of a heart that longed for God's glory and hated—the word is not too strong—all that obscured and obstructed it" (182).

The final chapter in Nehemiah's memoirs offers a sober look at the most important attribute of great leadership—faithfulness to the end. We have already examined a number of attributes that set Nehemiah apart as a faithful and effective leader. Few leaders have been able to tell their own story in a way that impresses the reader with both their humility and success. Nehemiah succeeded where others have failed. His factual account, heartfelt prayers, and emotional transparency, conveys a sense of genuine authenticity. Nevertheless, for all the emotion, prayer, effort, confrontation, and worship that Nehemiah put into his leadership he had little to show for it in the eyes of the world and maybe even in his own eyes. In the end, we are impressed, not with a man who is proud of his accomplishments, but with a man who clings to faithfulness in spite of repeated set-backs. The striking feature of the closing chapter is a refrain that is repeated with slight variation three times: "Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services" (13:14,22,31). This prayer is consistent with everything that has gone before. The integrity of these memoirs stems from the fact that Nehemiah's writings are more like pages from his prayer journal than a resume of his accomplishments. Nehemiah was not concerned about what other people thought of him nor was he worried about his legacy. His one over-riding concern as expressed in a prayer, "Remember me with favor, my God." We remember him today because God answered that prayer.

