

Nehemiah the Sabbath Reformer

Marc Rasell

Copyright © 2010-2012 All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the King James Version, 1611 (Authorized Version) Copyright status: Crown copyright (UK).

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Introduction

The Book of Nehemiah contains a fascinating story, the post-exilic Jews trying to rebuild their city walls, pitted against their more powerful foes who were prepared to do almost anything to stop them: including deception, murder, intimidation and violence. Under such forbidding circumstances, Nehemiah steps onto the scene, a man of prayer, courage, integrity and tact. Through the workings of providence and hard work, the people began to fill in the gaps and repair the walls. Their enemies mocked them and became increasingly desperate as the walls began to rise, but they were powerless to hinder God's plan for His people.

The story contains a spiritual message for God's people at the end of time, when a similar work takes place; this time not a literal wall, but a spiritual revival to restore the law of God. Modern society is moving toward a state of anarchy and lawlessness as the Western world turns to secularism and spiritualistic philosophies rather than the Bible. The walls protecting society have been broken down and need to be restored. These walls are the laws of God, which ensure that God's blessing and protection rests on the land (Deut. 28:1-8; 30:16). Before the exile to Babylon, when Jeremiah the prophet counselled the people living in Jerusalem to seek out the ancient paths (Jer. 6:16), he was treated with derision, no one wanted to listen to his message of doom (Jer. 18:18). Today, people do not want to hear the ancient truths of the Bible, nor heed the warnings of the second coming of Christ. A great revival will take place among God's remnant people - those who are willing to put in practice the law of God in their own lives. This will be achieved through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit leading to a complete rebirth, a new life in Christ (John 3:3-8).

Chapter 1 The Broken Walls

The background

Our story begins in the Persian Empire where the exiled Jews were living following the destruction of their city by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. His soldiers had destroyed the city, the temple and broken down the walls. How their city came to be destroyed and the reasons for the exile are set out in my first book, “Exploring the Heavenly Sanctuary”¹. After approximately seventy years, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians and following a decree issued by King Cyrus, many Jews were permitted to return to their homeland under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendant of King Jehoiachin who was one of the last kings of Judah before the exile (Hag. 1:1; 1 Chr. 3:17-19).

Isaiah had predicted the name of the king who would release the Jews before Cyrus was born (Isa. 44:28) and had also foretold how he would capture Babylon (Isa. 45:1-2). The City of Babylon was considered impregnable, but Cyrus had diverted the river Euphrates than ran through the middle of the city², and amazingly the drunken soldiers in their arrogance had left the inner gates open allowing the Persians to storm the city.

Not all the Jews wanted to return to their homeland, many chose to remain in the Persian Empire where they had acquired land or positions of importance. The exiles who returned to Judea began to cultivate the land and rebuild the temple. They generally chose to live in the towns that they or their ancestors had originally come from (Ezra 2:1; Neh. 7:73) and generally took up agricultural pursuits³. The capital city Jerusalem remained largely unpopulated (Neh. 7:4; 11:1) and the walls were not rebuilt until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The city became the focus of religious

¹ See www.adventistenterprises.co.uk

² Xenophon Cyropaedia vii. 5. 10, 13, 15, 16, 26–30; translated by Walter Miller, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943), pp. 265, 267, 269, 271, 273. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and The Loeb Classical Library in The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Students' Source Book; The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 9. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962, S. 548; Herodotus 1. 191; translated by A. D. Godley, Vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), pp. 239, 241. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and The Loeb Classical Library in The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Students' Source Book, S. 549

³ Francis D. Nichol, The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 3 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978) p. 423

services and the leaders tended to live there, especially the priests, in order to carry out their temple duties.

Living in the surrounding territory were the Samaritans, who were hostile to the Jews. They had been brought into the land by the king of Assyria and had been instructed how to worship the Lord, but they also continued to worship their idols (2 Kings 17:24-41). The return of Jews alarmed them because they had a natural claim to the land and were the true worshippers of the Lord. When the Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple and claimed to be worshippers of the Lord this was rebuffed, and so began the strife between the two groups (Ezra 4:1-3). Their jealous enemies did not like to see them prosper or their temple being rebuilt; so they sent malicious reports to the king of Persia and hired counsellors to work against them (Ezra 4:4-5). They succeeded in their plan to hinder the rebuilding of the temple and the work came to a standstill (Ezra 4:24). With the work stopped, the people began to focus on beautifying their own houses while the house of the Lord remained in ruins (Haggai 1). The prophet Haggai prophesied to them because they had neglected the Lord's house, and the prophet Zechariah encouraged them to continue building the temple and spoke of its completion (Zech 4:9). Encouraged by these messages, the leaders restarted the rebuilding of the temple and were subsequently challenged by the governor of the region, who referred the matter to King Darius (Ezra 5). The elders told the governor that Cyrus had decreed the rebuilding of the temple and they were servants of the God of heaven. A report was sent to Darius who asked for the records to be searched to see if such an order had been given by Cyrus. A scroll was found confirming this decree, and Darius ordered the rebuilding of the temple to continue; he threatened anyone who tried to change the decree with death (Ezra 6:1-12). As the prophet had predicted, the mountain of difficulty would disappear (Zech. 4:7); and although some people scoffed when the work began, it was completed as predicted when the prophet saw in vision the wall being tested with a plumb line (Zech. 4:10).

The city gained a measure of independence when Ezra the priest came from Babylon with a new decree from Artaxerxes I, giving Jerusalem a measure of autonomy to enforce their own laws (Ezra 7). Ezra began to rebuild the city walls which had been completely destroyed by the Babylonians before the exile (Jer. 39:8). As a result of this rebuilding work, the enemies of the Jews sent a complaint to Artaxerxes accusing the Jews of being rebellious, they succeeded in getting the work stopped (Ezra 4). It is surprising that the king at first made the decree giving them

more freedom and then stopped them from continuing with the work of rebuilding. Artaxerxes was tolerant of the Jews and known to be noble and compassionate, however he was troubled about this time by a major rebellion in Egypt⁴. Any suggestion of further rebellion would have caught his attention. The Samaritans used this situation as an opportunity to accuse the Jews of sedition, and with rebellion already in the empire they succeeded in arousing the fears of the king. Artaxerxes was known to have a moody character and easily change his mind about things. On one occasion he promised amnesty for an Egyptian rebel only to change his mind and have him executed!⁵

Nehemiah decides to help the exiles

The Book of Nehemiah begins in the 20th year of the reign of King Artaxerxes I (Neh. 1:1; 2:1). It is at this point that Nehemiah steps into the picture, he was serving as the king's cupbearer. With the Egyptian rebellion on, Nehemiah probably had not heard how things were going for his fellow Jews in Jerusalem⁶, but when news came it was dismal. It appeared that the enemies of the Jews had received authorisation to stop the rebuilding of the walls; they had broken down parts of the wall and set the gates on fire (Neh. 1:3). The Jews were in disgrace and their city walls were still in ruins. Nehemiah decided that it was time to fast and pray and intercede for God's remnant people (Neh. 1:4-11). He acknowledged that they had been taken into exile because they had disobeyed God's laws and now through repentance had been brought back to their homeland. He prayed for success in approaching the king about this delicate matter and recognised divine providence in this situation; as the king's cupbearer he could do something to help the exiles. Fasting seems to have become a common practice during the exile⁷, we read of Daniel praying and fasting for his people (Dan. 9:3; 10:2-3); another account is given in the Book of Esther when the people fasted for three days when threatened with annihilation (Esther 4:15-16). Times of trouble lead people to fall on their knees and seek help from above.

⁴ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1827&letter=A>
; **Artaxerxes I.** (2009). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved September 09, 2009, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/36741/Artaxerxes-I>

⁵ **Megabyzus.** (2009). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved September 09, 2009, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/372906/Megabyzus>

⁶ Francis D. Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Volume 3, p.392

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 393

Nehemiah is to be commended because approaching a Persian monarch was a risky business. According to Persian thought the happiest place to be was in the king's presence⁸, so to ask for a leave of absence was a risky business. It is interesting that he waited four months before making his request (Neh. 1:1; 2:1). This may be because the king was absent from Shushan where Nehemiah resided or it could be he was waiting for the right moment⁹. On one occasion while serving the king, Artaxerxes asked why Nehemiah looked sad (Neh. 2:2); this was his opportunity and also a dangerous moment. Nehemiah made a quick prayer for help before he replied (Neh. 2:4). Persians kings were known to have great respect for tombs and disapproved of their desecration¹⁰; it was on this note that Nehemiah wisely addressed his request. Nehemiah explained that the city where his fathers were buried was in ruins (Neh. 2:3). The king graciously agreed to let Nehemiah go, and at his request granted him a letter to the keeper of the king's forest for the needed timber, and letters of safe conduct to reach Jerusalem (Neh. 2:7-8). Miraculously Nehemiah's requests had been granted in the providence of God, and he would soon be on his way to Jerusalem.

Wisely Nehemiah kept the purpose of his visit a secret; he did not want to give the enemies of the Jews a chance to spoil his plans. They were disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Jews but could do nothing about it because of his letters of safe conduct and the Persian officers who came with him (Neh. 2:9-10). Nehemiah also kept secret the purpose of his visit from the Jews and secretly made a journey around Jerusalem by night to inspect the walls; he wisely concealed his plans from them so no one could think up objections before he had time to fully formulate his plans. He exited the city at night on the western side of the city, travelled south and then north along the eastern side reviewing the damage (Neh. 2:12-15). After that he retraced his steps and re-entered the city, it must have been an exiting and eerie journey. This completed, Nehemiah began to act quickly; he recounted the situation to the nobles, and the support he had received from the king (Neh. 2:17-18). He convinced them that the time had come to rebuild the walls. When the enemies of the Jews heard about it they scoffed at them, they did not expect that so small a group could achieve much (Neh. 2:19). They asked Nehemiah what he was doing, and accused him of rebelling against the Persian king. Nehemiah wisely did not even tell

⁸ Ibid., p. 395

⁹ Ibid., p. 394

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 395

them that he had permission for the work. The less they knew the better; it made it harder for them to think up valid objections. They were going to be in for a big surprise at how well the work would proceed; Nehemiah answered them by saying that God would give him success and rejected their right to interfere in the work (Neh. 2:20). He did not stop to respond to the charge of rebellion, rather he met opposition by referring the matter to God.

Their enemies had caused much destruction, the walls were broken down but the foundations had not been destroyed. From these foundations and damaged walls, a work of rebuilding was going to commence. In a similar way the church today may have fallen into decay, zeal may have flagged but God is about to start a work of rebuilding; the foundations of truth have not been destroyed. The outlook may seem bleak but with God's power and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit things can change for the better. Sometimes it is easy to imagine that a revival is impossible, but with God's power all things are possible through faith and prayer. Elijah was discouraged because he thought he was the only one left who remained faithful to God. Yet unknown to him were thousands who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). Isaiah and Jeremiah laboured under difficult circumstances before the exile; the outlook was bleak, the majority would not listen to God's messages, but a remnant would benefit from their preaching and be turned from idolatry to the living God until one day the whole earth would be full of the glory of God (Isaiah 11:9). A time is coming when God will restore his church, and a remnant will be faithful to God's commandments (Rev. 14:12). In this way, the holes that have been made in the wall of God's law will be restored. A wall serves to protect a city from outside attack; it gives security to the inhabitants. God's law functions in a similar manner, protecting us from doing harmful things to others or ourselves; by keeping God's commandments we also invite God's blessing in our lives. Israel is described by Isaiah as a vineyard which is protected by a wall (Isa. 5:2); Jesus used a similar analogy in His parable of the vineyard (Matt. 21:33-46). God protects His people by giving them His laws and warning them of the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience (Deut. 28). Once a hole has been made in the wall, enemies can easily attack the city. In a similar manner, if we begin to disobey God in one point, we have weakened our spiritual defences against the workings of the evil one. The holes in the wall need to be filled up, the law of God must be restored to enable God's people to

stand safely in the final crisis just before Christ returns; because at that time even the elect may be deceived (Matt. 24:24).

Chapter 2 – Opposition

Work begins on the walls

The work began in earnest on the broken walls with different people elected to repair different sections of the wall; a list of honour to the builders is given in the third chapter of Nehemiah. The walls were effectively divided up into sections depending on the ability and number of those in each group. Some sections needed major repairs and others only minor repairs. Those living in the city repaired the sections next to where they lived. All classes of people were involved in the work, including the high priest and other important officials; only the nobles of Tekoa did not take part (Neh. 3:5). The people were united and worked zealously to complete the project, “*for the people had a mind to work*” (Neh. 4:6). From the Biblical record it is clear that most of the work being done was to repair damage rather than a complete rebuilding of the walls; the word “repaired” appears quite frequently in the third chapter of Nehemiah.

There are important lessons to be learnt from the experience of the builders. Today we face many challenges to complete the gospel commission; when all the people unite and work zealously, each in his own location and sphere then the work will be completed with the blessing of God. While the people are disunited, the work cannot be done. One sure way to hinder reform is to allow infighting to flourish. The work can only be successful when all the people join in. An army in which only the officers fight will not last very long; unless the foot-soldiers fall into place, it cannot succeed. Its strength lies not in the officers but in the mass ranks of ordinary soldiers¹¹. Paul likens the church to a body (1 Cor. 12), unless all the different parts work together, nothing constructive can be achieved. We have all been given different gifts by the Spirit and none can work independently of the body. A hand cannot say to the foot, I don’t need you (1 Cor. 12:21)! Nor would it make sense for one part of the body to attack another part. The body of Christ is united by the Holy Spirit and with love for one another (1 Cor. 12:13; 13:1-3).

¹¹ Ellen White, *Gospel Workers* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1892) p. 351

Whenever God begins a reformation or revival it is not long before a countermovement begins and opposition arises. Sanballat, one of their principle opponents became angry and mocked the Jews; his associate Tobiah also made fun of them. Nehemiah ignored their insults and continued with the work; he prayed to God for help (Neh. 4:1-5). When the wall reached half its height a plot was laid by the Samaritans to stop the work by slaying the builders (Neh. 4:7-8)! At the same time some of the builders grew weary and felt the work could not be completed (Neh. 4:10). News of the plot reached Nehemiah through fearful Jews who lived near the Samaritans; they were so terrified they kept repeating what they had heard to Nehemiah (Neh. 4:12). Nehemiah took decisive action and had the people armed and stationed on the walls ready for the attack. He told the people to trust in the Lord and fight courageously (Neh. 4:9, 13-14). When the Samaritans knew that their plot had been discovered, they gave up on the idea of attacking the builders (Neh. 4:15). From then on, some worked while others guarded and even the builders carried a sword just in case. The work continued in shifts, day and night, and those who had been coming from outside Jerusalem stayed in the city for safety (Neh. 4:16-23). The opposition that arose only redoubled Nehemiah's efforts to complete the task; his faith in God did not waver.

In the last days, when God's people take the work of reform forward, there will be opposition from the world. No one can live righteously without being persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12; Matt. 10:16-42). At that time, because of opposition and difficulties we may be tempted to think that the work is impossible and feel like giving up, but if we trust in the Lord He will sustain and prosper the work. Jesus said that he who endures to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13). When we uphold the law of God it will excite consternation from the sinful masses whose conscience has been disturbed. Jesus' ministry exiting opposition and He warned His disciples to expect the same because a servant is not above his master, if they call the master Beelzebub, what will they call the servant? (Matt. 10:25). Jesus never taught that the way of a Christian would be easy, *"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."* (Matthew 5:10-12)

Chapter 3 – Corruption

Usury

The work of rebuilding the walls came to a point of crisis because of an internal economic problem (Neh. 5:1-5). The people had to pay high taxes to the king of Persia (Neh. 5:4) and because of a previous famine the poorer ones had been forced to borrow money on interest to pay the taxes and get grain to sustain their families (Neh. 5:3). Some had been forced to sell their children into slavery to pay for their debts (Neh. 5:5). The poorer Jews, especially those with large families complained against their richer brethren because they had lent money to them with interest. In the Bible this is known as usury, which was forbidden in the laws of Moses (Ex. 22:25). The richer brethren had been enriching themselves by taking advantage of their poorer brethren whom they had a moral obligation to assist (Lev. 25:35-36). With such internal corruption, the work could not continue; the workers could not feel happy while their brethren were behaving like this and they were facing starvation and slavery. The people had been delivered from exile, but now they faced a new captivity at the hands of their own brethren!

Nehemiah took a stern stand for justice; he knew that unless something was done, the work on the wall would surely come to a standstill. Nehemiah was outraged at what was going on and called an assembly to remind the brethren that what they were doing was unlawful (Neh. 5:6-7). However, this did not seem to bring about the desired effect, so a larger assembly was called. Nehemiah had been buying back slaves only to find out that more Jews were being sold into slavery; he wondered what kind of impression this would leave on the Gentiles (Neh. 5:8-9)! He ordered the leaders to give back the lands they had acquired and the usury they had taken. The leaders agreed and Nehemiah made them take an oath to make sure it was carried out (Neh. 5:12).

Nehemiah was a leader that led by example as well as precept, so the people had confidence in him because they knew he was dedicated to God and an honest man. He was entitled as the governor to an allotment of food, and had at his command a number of servants; he also had powers to levy a tax (Neh. 5:15). But he used his food allotment to feed others by having fifty Jews and officials eat at his table as well

as visiting guests (Neh. 5:17-18). He did not acquire land, and his servants helped in the rebuilding of the wall (Neh. 5:16). So rather than use his office to lord power over others and selfishly enrich himself, he set a good example by selfless service. With such conduct the nobles had no room to resist his reforms. Had Nehemiah not had the interests of the people and the glory of God paramount, he could not have pressed others to reform.

There is nothing more discouraging than to suffer at the hands of ones own brethren. The true cause of this is often selfishness; the Bible says that the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10). We find a similar problem in the Book of James where some believers were rich and others poor. James counsels the poor not to envy the rich, and warns the rich of the dangers of their conduct (James 4:1-5:6). We can keep the law outwardly but that does not ensure we are keeping the spirit of the law. The rich may not feel they have done anything wrong, but their riches place a moral obligation on them to help those in need (James 2:14-17; 5:1-6). The rich young ruler thought he had kept the law until Jesus challenged him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor (Luke 18:18-30). The collapse of the banking system in 2009 led people to see that one can keep the letter of the law, yet because of greed can precipitate a crisis and be morally bankrupt. Society is built on trust, and when that breaks down society collapses.

Sometime later, on his second term as governor, Nehemiah noticed that traders were entering the city on the Sabbath and selling their wares (Neh. 13:15-16). Nehemiah ordered the city gates to be shut before the Sabbath began each week (Neh. 13:19-21). He was not a leader to shy away from calling sin by its right name, and when he discovered that the people had been marrying foreign wives he contended with them and pulled some of their hair out (Neh. 13:23-27)! He would not sanction sin or tolerate it. The reason for the prohibition against foreign wives was due to the fact that they were not worshippers of the Lord. It was through such marriages that Solomon had turned from the Lord and led the nation into apostasy (Neh. 13:26; 1 Kings 11:4). The fact that they were foreign was not a problem in itself; it was because they were idolaters rather than servants of God. Moses married a Midianite wife, who although foreign was a worshipper of the true God.

Nehemiah was a man of prayer; he was also zealous for the Lord and had integrity. This is the kind of leader needed in the last days of earth's history to lead out in the reform of God's people. Gatekeepers and watchmen are needed to warn of

danger and close the gates against sin (Ezek. 33:6-9). Too often leaders become people-pleasers, turning a blind eye to sin and preaching peace when God has not spoken of peace (Gal 1:10; Ezek. 13:10-16). Before the gospel commission can be completed (Matt. 28:18-20), God's people will need to reform and rededicate their lives to God. A cleansing work will go on in the church before Christ returns (Mal. 3:3-4); the believers will be filled with the Holy Spirit as the latter rain falls on them (Joel 2:23, 28-32)¹². Prior to the outpouring at Pentecost, the disciples had bickering about who was the greatest (Mark 9:34-35; Matt. 18:4); but now, having seen the Lord crucified and risen from the dead they were changed men. The early Pentecostal rain helped to germinate the seeds of the gospel, but at the end of time the latter rain will come which will ripen the crops for the harvest (Matt. 13:39); which means a greater manifestation of the Spirit than at Pentecost! The Spirit is not given just for our own benefit, but to equip us to minister to others and complete the gospel commission (1 Cor. 12:9-11; Eph. 4:11-12). We can take part in the final reformation and receive this Pentecostal outpouring if we are willing to humble ourselves and follow God's commandments.

[Chapters 4-10 omitted in the preview]

Chapter 4 More Opposition

Chapter 5 Revival Begins

Chapter 6 Backsliding

Chapter 7 Repairers of the Breach

Chapter 8 The Antidote for Selfishness

Chapter 9 The Origin of the Sabbath

Chapter 10 The Moral Law and the Gospel

To obtain a copy of this book, please go to www.adventtruth.co.uk or www.amazon.com/author/mrasell

¹² Nichol, Francis D.: The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 4 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978) p. 945