

NEHEMIAH (Chapters 1-13)

The previous article introduced the reader not only to Ezra, the priest, but also to Nehemiah who was called by God to leave Babylon and help his people during a critical time in their history. We will find in Nehemiah a dedicated layman who loved his God and was most dedicated to helping his people in a time of great hardship.

In the introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah, we divided the chapters of both books into four parts. Now we turn to Part 3.

PART 3: REBUILDING THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM (Chapters 1-7)

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: Discerning God's call

"In the month Chisleu of the twentieth year, I was in the citadel of Susa when Hanani, one of my brothers, came with other men from Judah. I asked them about the Jews, the remnant preserved after the captivity, and about Jerusalem, and they answered me: 'The survivors of the captivity there in the province are in great distress and under reproach. Also, the wall of Jerusalem lies breached, and its gates have been gutted with fire.' When I hear this report, I began to weep and continued mourning for several days; I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

(vv 1-4)

The opening chapter of Nehemiah can be divided into two parts:

- a) Report about the exiles who have returned to their homeland (vv 1-3);
- b) Nehemiah's response which is stated in a prayer (vv 4-11).

The visitors tell Nehemiah that the people back in Judah are in "great distress," a condition symbolized by the brokenness of the wall around the city which is their center.

The bad news from Judah grips the spirit of Nehemiah. He weeps for several days and he fasts and prays. The prayer includes a confession of sin, a remembering of God's call to Moses and a strong

plea for God to act. *"O Lord, may your ear be attentive to my prayer...."*

Pause: What speaks to you most about Nehemiah's prayer? What can we learn about prayer from Nehemiah?

CHAPTER 2: Nehemiah receives permission to return to Jerusalem

"If it pleases the king, if your servant is deserving your favor, send me to Judah to the city of my ancestor's graves, to rebuild it." (v.5)

Having obtained permission from the king to return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah heads out with an authorizing letter for materials for the rebuilding project and an army of officers and cavalry.

Verses 11-16—Nehemiah's night ride. After a three day rest, Nehemiah goes for a night ride around to survey the actual damage to the city wall. By going quietly at night, Nehemiah delays the interference of those who would be hostile to his plans.

Verses 17-18—Nehemiah reveals his plans. In these verses, we note the leadership skills of Nehemiah. He meets with some of the leaders. First, he states clearly what they know to be true: "You see the evil plight in which we stand, how Jerusalem lies in ruins" (v.17). Then he challenges them to act so that they and he will be no longer be the laughing stock of their neighbors. The invitation to rebuild the city is a challenge to restore themselves as a people deserving respect. As a clincher to his sales pitch to his audience, Nehemiah states that his plans to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem have the blessing of God and the king. Nehemiah's listeners are moved by his challenge. *"Let us rise up and build."*

Verses 19-20—Enemies of the project speak up. Once Sanballat and Tobiah hear of Nehemiah's plans, they raise their voices against him. Nehemiah responds: "This is God's work and it is none of your business." Nehemiah, the strong leader, is not going to be intimidated by the naysayers.

Pause: Thus far, what appeals to you most about Nehemiah?

CHAPTER 3: List of the workers

At the end of chapter 2, the people say: “Let us rise up and build.” In this chapter, the narrator offers us an impressive list of those who have responded to Nehemiah’s challenge to bring honor and respect back to their city.

CHAPTERS 3:30 to 4:17: Homeland security kicks into gear to deal with the opposition

“Have no fear of them. Keep in mind the Lord, who is great and to be feared....” (4:8)

When verbal abuse and ridicule (3:33-36) fail to stop the rebuilding, Nehemiah’s enemies plan a military attack. Nehemiah’s response is *prayer* and *action*. “We prayed to our God and posted a watch day and night.” When the workers become discouraged (4:4), Nehemiah gives them a pep talk (v.8). Nehemiah’s concern with homeland security means that the number of workers are cut back fifty percent. Some workers do a bit of both. They carry bricks in one hand and a weapon in another (v.11). Once again, Nehemiah shows himself to be a very able leader. He refuses to be intimidated by his attackers. He motivates discouraged workers to stay focused on their important work which he firmly believes is God’s work.

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapter 4?

CHAPTER 5: Exploitation of the poor within the community

“Then there rose a great outcry of the common people and their wives against certain of their fellow Jews. Some said: ‘We are forced to pawn our sons and daughters in order to get grain to eat that we may live.’” (vv 1-2)

Chapter 4 focused on problems that Nehemiah faced from *outside* the community. In this chapter, we look at the problem he faces *inside* the community, namely, that of the exploitation of the poor by the rich. When farmers are unable to produce food from their fields, they are forced to buy it from the wealthy Jews. To pay for the food, they have had to pawn off their children into slavery or mortgage their property. Others have to borrow money to pay taxes.

Verses 6-13—Nehemiah’s response. When Nehemiah hears what is going on, he becomes very angry. It is a clear case of the rich exploiting the poor. Nehemiah calls together the culprits and gives them a good tongue-lashing. *“You are exacting interest from your own kinsmen”* (v.7). *“Your behavior makes us look bad in the eyes of the Gentiles”* (v.9). Then Nehemiah admits that he and his kinsmen have also been guilty of lending money. It is time to put an end to this ungodly behavior. In response to Nehemiah’s strong words, the guilty admit their wrongdoing and *“return everything and exact nothing further from the poorer farmers. We will do just what you ask”* (v.12).

In verses 14-19, Nehemiah does a little bragging about his good behavior as governor of Judah.

Pause: When it comes to borrowing and lending within the family or within society, what thoughts and feelings do you have about this issue?

CHAPTER 6: A leader who refuses to be sidetracked

“...‘Nothing of what you report has taken place; rather, it is the invention of your own mind.’ They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will slacken in the work, and it will never be completed.’ But instead, I now redoubled my efforts.” (vv 8-9)

This chapter shows again the great leader that the exiles had in Nehemiah. We will read of three failed attempts to stop him from completing his great work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

Verses 1-4. In the first attempt, Nehemiah’s old enemies Sanballat and Tobiah invite Nehemiah not once but four times to meet them outside Jerusalem. If he had gone, there was a good chance he would get assassinated. Nehemiah tells them that he is too busy to travel to see them.

Verses 5-9. This time Nehemiah’s enemies send him a message that lots of people are saying that he is plotting a revolt against the king. Nehemiah, who has an excellent relationship with the king, knows that this rumor is totally false.

Verses 10-14. The attempt to sidetrack Nehemiah from *within* is more subtle. Shemaiah who poses as a prophet suggests that Nehemiah take refuge in the

temple. After carefully considering the suggestion, Nehemiah concludes that Shemaiah has been bribed by Sanballat. In addition, Nehemiah, a layman, is forbidden to enter the temple (Num 18:1-7). As Nehemiah knows that he is on a mission from God, he refuses to be sidetracked by opponents from outside or inside his community.

Verses 15-19. The work of rebuilding the great wall of Jerusalem was completed in fifty-two days. Who wouldn't hire Nehemiah and his men for a building project? But these verses sadly relate that Nehemiah's enemies from within and without continued to plague him.

Pause: As you go about your daily work, what distractions do you experience from within and without? What helps you to stay focused?

CHAPTER 7: Census of the Province

This census list is almost identical to the one found in Ezra 2.

PART 4: RESTORATION OF THE COMMUNITY AROUND THE LAW (Chapters 8-13)

CHAPTER 8: Ezra reads the law

“Standing at one end of the open place...Ezra read out of the book from daybreak to midday, in the presence of the men, the women and those children old enough to understand.” (v.3)

We have in verses 1-12 one of the most graphic portrayals in the Old Testament of Israel at worship. Catholics can easily see the roots of our liturgical worship in these verses.

- The assembly gathers together “as one man”—a symbol of a unified community. The assembly consists of men, women and children “old enough to understand.” (The younger children stay in the cry room.) The purpose of the introductory rites of the Mass is to unify a diverse community and prepare them to listen to God's Word proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word.

- Ezra, the priest, is the Presider and calls the people to a time of worship.

- Ezra proclaims the word from “daybreak to midday” (not a short Mass).

- The people are actively engaged: they listen attentively (what every priest hopes for) and at appropriate times, they shout out their “Amen!”—their ‘yes!’ to what they hear (v.6).

- Ezra preaches a homily “interpreting the Word so that all can understand (v.8).

- The proclamation of the Word moves people to tears. Sometimes the Word of God convicts us of our failures. In the “act of penitence” in the Mass, Catholics have an opportunity to tell God they are sorry for their sins.

- After the completion of the liturgy of the Word, those gathered have a big celebration with rich foods, sweet drinks (lots of cake), and those who can afford nothing are also cared for—a little bit like bringing forward food for the poor during the offertory at Mass.

Verses 13-18—Feast of Booths. The feast of Booths (sometimes called “Tabernacles”) is one of Israel's oldest and most prominent festivals. It is a seven-day religious celebration at harvest time to thank God for the season's crops of grapes and olives. During this particular celebration of Booths, Ezra conducts a Bible study each day. This priest is on a roll. He is not about to pass up a great opportunity to teach God's Word. On this occasion, the festival of Booths is a wonderful mixture of fun, rest and spiritual renewal centered on God's Word.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 8? How has Bible study enriched your life?

CHAPTER 9: A proclamation of God's goodness and mercy, and Israel's sinfulness

“Now, therefore, O our God, great, mighty, and awesome God, you who in your mercy preserve the covenant, take into account all the disasters that have befallen us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our father, and your entire people, from the time of the kings of Assyria until this day! In all that has come upon us you have been just, for you kept faith while we have done evil.” (vv 32-33)

The renewal work of Israel's top spiritual leader, Ezra, continues in this chapter. On this occasion, Israel's lead priest calls the people together for what we might call a general confession or penance service. Sometimes during a retreat, or during the fifth step in the AA process, people can make a general confession in which they declare all the sins they have committed in their lives.

On this particular occasion, Ezra proclaims to his people God's goodness to Israel from the time of creation to the call of Abraham to the present time. He also recalls Israel's failure to respond to God's goodness and mercy. Every act of God's goodness is matched by acts of disloyalty on Israel's part. Because the present generation belongs to their ancestors in the faith, they share in their sin. As part of the celebration of the Millennium, Pope John Paul had a Reconciliation Service during which he asked God's mercy and the forgiveness of the world for the sins of the Church in previous ages.

Ezra's prayer begins with the acknowledgement of God's creative activity in heaven and on earth (v.6) and ends with the political distress of the writer's own day. Within these two boundaries, Ezra rehearses salvation history. He hopes that the outcome of the Penance Service will be that God will once again offer his mercy to his people and that they will renew their commitment to be much more faithful to God's goodness than their ancestors.

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapter 9? Have you ever participated in a general confession for yourself or in a parish-wide service during which general absolution was administered? If so, what was that experience like for you?

CHAPTER 10: The people's response

"In view of all this, we are entering into a firm pact, which we are putting into writing..." (v.1). *"...We will not neglect the house of our God* (v 40).

Ezra's sermonic prayer in chapter 9 calls for a response from the people, which we receive in this chapter. The community solemnly swears to fashion itself according to the law of the Lord given through Moses. *"No leader administers the oath, rather, through mutual consent; members of the community bind one another to the requirements of the law"* (Collegeville Commentary, p.364).

Verses 29-40. In these verses, we have outlined concrete examples of the agreement that the people entered into with the Lord: no intermarriage (29-31), provisions for the upkeep of the temple and the clergy (vv 32-39).

CHAPTERS 11 to 13:4: Repopulating Jerusalem

The leaders take up residence in Jerusalem while the rest of the people cast lots to bring one man in ten to reside in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the other nine remain in the other cities. The people applaud those men who willingly agree to take up residence in Jerusalem (vv 1-2).

Chapter 11 and most of chapter 12 consist of lists of people who have occupied the land at various times from Zerubbabel (12:1) down to Ezra and Nehemiah (12:26). The purpose of these lists may have been to show that the provision for the work of the temple has properly continued from the time of Zerubbabel down to Ezra and Nehemiah.

Following the completion of the wall project, there are not enough people in Jerusalem. If the city is to be a viable one, more people need to live in it. It seems most families are *not* jumping to move to the holy city. After all, such a move entails searching for a new place to live and finding new ways to make a living. Also, living close to the temple may obligate one to be more faithful to God's laws. In response to the people's concerns, Nehemiah draws lots to bring one man in ten to relocate to Jerusalem. And everyone appreciated all who abided by Nehemiah's plan in order to repopulate the city (v.2).

Verses 27-44—Dedication of the city wall. Now that the people have been rededicated to God and the city repopulated, it is time to rededicate the new city wall.

Once the Levites, singers, and musicians have gathered, their first ritual action is for the Levites to purify themselves and thereafter purify the gates and the wall (v.30). Then follows a big procession made up of the Levites, choirs and city officials. A spiritually restored community now dedicates a restored city wall. It is a very joyful day for all present (v.43).

Verses 44-47 tells us how the people are happy to play their role in providing for the needs of the clergy. These verses make every clergyman's heart sing. ☺

Verse 13:1-4 reiterates Ezra 9 which bans marriage between Israelites and other races.

CHAPTER 13: Nehemiah's second trip to Jerusalem

"During this time I had not been in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had gone back to the king. After due time, however, I asked leave of the king and returned to Jerusalem...." (v.1)

Sometime after the dedication of the great wall of Jerusalem, Nehemiah returns to Susa to continue his service to the king. But then he springs a "surprise trip" back to Jerusalem to see how the religious reforms initiated by Ezra and himself are holding up. Nehemiah is not happy with what he sees. He discovers that three grave abuses have been allowed by the leaders to creep into the daily lives of the people. All three abuses involve permitting foreign or pagan practices to infect the pure religion proposed by Moses in his law.

Verses 4-14—First abuse. The priest Eliashib has allowed Nehemiah's great enemy, Tobiah, to take up residence and do business in the very space reserved for temple supplies and for the provisions of the Levites. Nehemiah, a man of action, tosses out Tobiah's goods into the street. We can only imagine what kind of a black eye Eliashib received for allowing such an abuse to occur. After tossing Tobiah out and reinserting the Levites in the temple, Nehemiah, in verse 14, asks the Lord to give him brownie points for the good job he is doing in protecting God's house from abuse.

Verses 15-22—Second abuse. The second abuse has to do with desecration of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of rest during which the Israelites can ponder God's goodness to them, and a time to reflect on the fact that all things, including work, are a gift from God. Sabbath rest is something that sets the Israelites apart from their pagan neighbors. Hence, conducting business on the Sabbath, especially with pagans, is not just a crime against God but it is another way that the leaders are allowing pagan influences to infect the Israelite religion.

Nehemiah's response: No more trading on the Sabbath. To make sure that pagans cannot enter Jerusalem on the Sabbath, he closes the gates and perhaps puts up a big sign that reads **CLOSED FOR BUSINESS ON THE SABBATH**. When vendors continue to come by the city gates, Nehemiah runs them off saying: If you guys don't get out of here, I will do you harm! (v.21).

Verses 23-31—Third abuse. The issue of Jews marrying non-Jews seems to be a recurring problem. Even the priest's grandson has married the daughter of Nehemiah's archenemy, Sanballet. Enemy influence now lives in the leading house of the community that is supposed to be holy and set apart from all the nations of the earth. All of these abuses gets Nehemiah really mad, so mad that he curses some of those involved, beats up others, and even pulls out some of their hair (obviously an expression of anger not restricted to girls in those days).

We may wonder why the Israelites who, earlier in the book, seemed to have sincerely sworn to follow God's law revealed through Moses, could so easily backslide into behavior that Ezra and Nehemiah specifically told them to avoid because it was contrary to God's law. Their failure testifies to the sin that pulls all of us away from God. It also points to our need for Jesus and his saving grace.

Pause: As you look at the world and the Church, whose hair would you like to pull out? Even though Jesus has come into our midst, how come so many Christians fall into a backsliding pattern? What is your lasting impression of the layman Nehemiah?

This period in Israel's history will be revisited when we study the post-exilic prophets.