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The Nehemiah Story: Paying Close Attention at a Biblical Revival Meeting

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It had been a time of utter darkness for God's people.

With Jerusalem in ashes, the Temple destroyed, and most of the people in Babylonian exile the situation seemed hopeless. But then God had done the impossible. Babylon had fallen and the new superpower of Medo-Persia allowed God's people to return to their home—the Promised Land—in a second exodus. The Lord had “stirred

access to great universities, and what would they return to? A destroyed city, neglected fields, unfriendly neighbors, and a dangerous location somewhere on the fringe of the empire between Egypt and Mesopotamia.

When we read the first chapters of the book of Ezra we immediately recognize the immensity of the task and the many problems (cf. Ezra 3–7). However, a careful look at the larger picture tells us

there is silence for many decades. We jump to the year 445 B.C., roughly 70 years after the reconstruction of the Temple, and Jerusalem is in trouble. Nehemiah, a high ranking official at the Persian court, receives bad news about Jerusalem, and in one of the great prayers of Scripture he brings his anguish before the Lord (Neh. 1:1-11). He confesses his sins and the sins of his people, but he also claims

The Nehemiah Story

Paying close attention at a biblical revival meeting

By GERALD A. KLINGBEIL

up the spirit of Cyrus” (Ezra 1:1), the Persian king; and when God moves on a heart, who cannot respond in kind?

Tough Beginnings

Based on extrabiblical documents, name lists, seals, and other inscriptions, scholars estimate that the roughly 50,000 people (Ezra 2:64, 65) who returned under Zerubbabel represented only a small number of the Jews living in the Medo-Persian Empire.¹ Many had settled down nicely and did not want to move. The mortgage was nearly paid off. Life under the new regime was good, their children had

that the issue was bigger than a destroyed city and major opposition from the outside. The prophet Haggai tells us that the returnees had a *spiritual problem*: they struggled with warped priorities, worldliness, selfishness—and soon had to recognize that without putting first things first their efforts would not amount to anything (Haggai 1:2-11).

Enter Nehemiah

Scripture tells us that the temple was finally rebuilt about 20 years after the return from exile and that the Jewish community celebrated their first Passover (Ezra 6:13-22). But then

the divine promises of renewal and transformation (verses 8, 9). As he prays he seems to recognize that he is not only part of the problem (see his confession) but needs to also be part of God's solution.

Still praying, but with trembling heart and wobbly knees, Nehemiah approaches his boss, who happens to be an absolute monarch whose simple gesture or word is enough to end one's life in an instant. God does another miracle and Nehemiah leaves Persia, empowered by the Persian king, in an official government capacity. He now has the clout to make things happen.



Revival in Jerusalem

Jerusalem is defenseless, its walls neglected and destroyed, its hostile neighbors gloating. Nehemiah inspects the damage in a secret night operation (Neh. 2:11-16), then sets out to work. However, he realizes that this great work requires a community, and, describing God's recent blessing at the Persian court, Nehemiah invites the leaders to join in the great work



AMY BURTON

of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:17-20).

You remember his single-mindedness. Nobody and nothing is going to stop him—and, God be praised, Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt in record time (cf. Neh. 3, 4, 6, 7). But revival and reformation is not just a matter of action. It calls us back to basics. And as we continue reading the Nehemiah story we are part of a great public assembly in Jerusalem during the seventh month.² Ezra, the priest, reappears in the story and reads from the Torah, the law, referring most likely to the Pentateuch (Neh. 8:1-3),

taking turns with other Levites. Everybody listens for hours—concentration spans must have been longer in those days.

One of the keywords of this revival meeting is the term *understand*, which appears six times (8:2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 12) in the chapter. Men and women, young and old, understood that their lives were not in harmony with God's Word—and they weep and mourn (Neh. 8:9), so much so that Ezra and Nehemiah need to remind them that God's grace is all-sufficient. As a matter of fact, the joy of the Lord is their strength (and ours as well), exhorts Nehemiah (8:10).

What Can We Learn?

Something important began on that day in Jerusalem—a revival that involved the clear recognition that God and sin do not go together; and that also led to changed relations among the members of the postexilic community. Here are some key elements of biblical revival that we can glean from Nehemiah's story:

1. Revival is not a one-time event but a constant (and conscious) decision. We read about other revivals in the postexilic community (e.g., Ezra 3 and 10), and prior to that we have numerous examples of revival in earlier periods. Revival needs to be a daily commitment.

2. Revival is Scripture-based, not focused on emotions and the right accompanying music or group dynamics. When God's people are confronted with divine revelation, when they look into the mirror of God's Word and recognize who they really are (yes, we are sinners!), revival happens.

3. Revival in God's people involves a community: women and men, young and old, rich and poor—all came together to listen to the Word—and they responded as a community. While it's true that personal revival

is a daily commitment, there are key moments in the life of a church in which the momentum of personal revival leads to a corporate revival.

4. Revival is not focusing upon a revival leader. Yes, Nehemiah and Ezra were strong leaders and had a burden for Jerusalem and its troubles. But they could only move forward when others also caught the vision. They *led*, but they did *not generate* the revival.

5. Revival looks at the big picture and avoids being sidetracked by outside distractions. I am sure Jerusalem's enemies wanted the city to focus upon its problems. However, instead, the faith community focused upon God's Word and His message for its time.

Restore Us, O Lord

Do you feel in need of this personal renewal of your spiritual life? Is your time with Scripture and in prayer limited by too-busy schedules and too many (even helpful) appointments? Nehemiah's story is personal and, at the same time, far-reaching. He must have often read in the Psalms about this restorer-God: "Restore us, O God; cause your face to shine, and we shall be saved!" (Ps. 80:3). God did let His face shine upon His people—and He is ready to do it again. ●

¹ Compare the discussion in Laurie E. Pearce, "New Evidence for Judeans in Babylonia," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming, eds. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), pp. 399-412, and additional bibliography there.

² The Old Testament seventh month, corresponding to September/October of our calendar, is important in the Jewish religious system. Three key events fall in this month, including the feast of trumpets (Lev. 23:24), the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27), and the festival of booths (Lev. 23:34). It is really a revival and reformation month!



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