

Personality Paper: “Nehemiah”

by Ted Slater

Introduction

The book of Nehemiah is the apparently autobiographical account of one man’s involvement in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah shows himself to be an excellent and godly leader by committing all he does to the Lord in prayer. It is clear that it is through Scripture and internal revelation that he guides his people. Without such a personality of integrity and commitment, Nehemiah likely would not have been successful in his attempt to see the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt.

Overview

Nehemiah continues the work begun by the priest and scribe Ezra. While Ezra accomplished the spiritual establishment of the new community, Nehemiah succeeds in giving it physical stability. Having learned, while in the high position of cupbearer to the king, that the community in Judah is “in great trouble and shame” (1:3), Nehemiah succeeds in having himself appointed governor in Judah with authority and resources to rebuild the city walls.

Nehemiah acts with skill and daring. After surveying the walls at night to avoid detection by those who might oppose the work, he assembles a labor force and, dividing the walls into sections, supervises the building process, which is accomplished in the remarkably short time of 52 days. He faces determined opposition: mockery (2:19; 4:1-3); armed raids (4:7-12); a ruse to draw him outside the city, without doubt to murder him (6:1-4); threatened blackmail (6:5-9); and finally a prophet hired to foretell his death so that he would retreat to the temple in fear of his life (6:12). All of these he meets with courage, wisdom, and an invincible determination to complete the task.

With the wall completed he then takes measures to increase the population of Jerusalem and to correct social, economic, and religious abuses. His prayers and piety reveal a man of strong religious conviction, as is shown in the final words of his text: “Remember me, O my God, for good” (13:31b).

Personality Traits

Numerous positive traits enable Nehemiah to act as a dynamic and charismatic leader: respect for authority, recognition of God’s guidance and blessing, no apparent sacred-secular tension, a commitment to prayer, divine communication skills, an embracing of a wide range of emotions, encouragement, and self-denial.

Negative traits, however, are shown later in the text (e.g., anger and egotism). The outcome of his mostly virtuous personality is a blessing upon the city of Jerusalem.

Respect for Authority

So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” Then I was very much afraid (2:2).

But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God (5:15).

Again I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?” (5:9).

When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: “Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (4:14).

Nehemiah shows a healthy respect of authority. He is fearful of angering the king, who could have him killed. Upon being asked what he wants, Nehemiah utters a quick prayer and then respectfully requests materials and a leave of absence. The pagan king graciously grants his request, likely because of God’s faithfulness to Nehemiah’s prayer and the king’s mutual respect for his cupbearer. Nehemiah is also fearful of disobeying God’s commands, and encourages others to fear disobeying God. The Jewish nobles and officials had been charging fellow Jews interest, a thing denounced in Deut. 23:20. In order to regain God’s blessing, it was necessary to cease this ungodly practice, which they did.

On the other hand, Nehemiah does not fear those who oppose the Lord’s people. As a result of his encouraging his fellow Jews to fear only the fearful Creator, together they become able to return to their work on the wall, completing it in record time.

Recognition of God’s Guidance and Blessing

And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me (2:8b).

And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king’s words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us arise and build.” So they put their hands to the good work (2:18).

So I answered them and said to them, “The God of heaven will give us success” (2:20a).

Our God will fight for us (4:20b).

But now, O God, strengthen my hands (6:9b).

...God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar (12:43).

God’s intercession precedes any productive activity. Nehemiah recognizes this and gives God credit for the king’s favor, his success in rebuilding the wall, and God’s protection from Jerusalem’s enemies. The people of Jerusalem recognize this and give God credit for the joy they feel following the reading of Scripture. Nehemiah’s substantiated confidence in God is evident in 2:20 and 4:20. The people of Jerusalem understand that God is the provider of every good gift (James 1:17); “every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God” (Heb. 3:4).

Absence of a Sacred-Secular Tension

Then the king said to me, ‘What would you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven (2:4).

But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night (4:9).

Nehemiah rarely executes a temporal decision without framing it in spiritual terms or consulting his God. The text indicates that godliness is not necessarily incompatible with earthly success. His spiritual activity and physical behavior are not in opposition to each other. There is nothing “secular” about Nehemiah. In the second chapter, for example, he interject a quick prayer as he is making a request of the king; in the fourth chapter he is shown to direct the people’s thoughts toward God and also to adequately arm themselves. Their Lord is no “God of the gaps,” a God who only interacts with people in inexplicable, apparently miraculous ways. Instead, God is active in all things. For Nehemiah it is not “‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord,” but “By my Spirit, which works through your might and power.”

Prayer is Fundamental

Nehemiah’s work grows out of his praying; it is not a mere addendum to his work. His frequent prayers are an integral part of his life (see 1:4, 6; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29). Prayer secure the king’s favor and cooperation. Through it he obtains the necessary supplies and protection. Through it God endows Nehemiah with courage and wisdom in dealing with adversaries, imparts to him business shrewdness and tact in adjusting problems of labor and wages, equips him to deal

with wily and crafty officials, affords him peace in the midst of slander and lies, and renews his faith and optimism.

His prayers and tears are a reflection of his own devotional life. His prayer in 1:5-11, for example, is a blending of reverence, confession, contrition, and confidence. He holds God to his covenant and to His plighted Word as a reason to grant him success in his approach to the king for permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. Without prayer Nehemiah would likely not be the dynamic leader which Scripture identifies him to be.

Communication with God

And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding (2:12).

Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him (6:12).

Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the people to be enrolled by genealogies (7:5a).

Nehemiah's faith is more than a dedication to a religion or a people. His focus is on a tangible relationship with his Creator. His communication is not merely a one-way sending of prayers skyward, but one of intimate interaction. Because of his relying on extra-Scriptural guidance, he is enabled to successfully assess and repair the wall, discern false prophecy, and draw up a genealogical record. Again, in Nehemiah there is no considering that the profound thoughts which spring to mind are his own "secular" creation, but he consistently and rightly credits God. It is likely through practice that he has learned to identify the still, small, friendly voice of God.

Embracing of Emotions

Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, "I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants" (1:4-6a).

Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for

this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:9f).

At times Nehemiah is so grieved about the condition of his people that he breaks down and weeps. This surge of emotions drives him for days to fast and pray for his people. Similarly, the people of Jerusalem are encouraged to exchange their repentant mourning for an activity which comes more into alignment with God’s will: rejoicing. The results of both Nehemiah’s and Jerusalem’s activities is dramatic: Nehemiah sees the wall rebuilt and the people of Jerusalem find that their rejoicing is heard “far away” (12:43). Indeed, this phenomenon is common throughout Scripture — “His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5).

Encouragement

The God of heaven will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building (2:20a).

Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes (4:14b).

Our God will fight for us (4:20b).

Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength (8:10b).

Throughout his tenure, Nehemiah encourages those who work with him, welcoming his compatriots to join him in trusting God. The words are encouraging because they are grounded in the truth that God sees his people and his work through their struggles. Nehemiah’s faith and zeal are infectious — the people’s eager response early in Nehemiah’s account is typical: “Let us arise and build” (2:18).

Self Denial

... neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land (5:14b-16a).

Nehemiah, like Moses before him, chooses “rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:25). Throughout the account, he forgoes comfortable options and instead works hard, alongside common workers, to see the wall of Jerusalem rebuilt. He refuses to eat fine foods, for example, like other leaders, and takes no land. This behavior places him in good

stead with his fellow Jews. Nehemiah truly is a “servant-leader” — the type of leader whom workers enjoy following.

Personality Fault: Anger

Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. And I consulted with myself, and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, “You are exacting usury, each from his brother!” Therefore, I held a great assembly against them (5:6f).

And it was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah’s household goods out of the room (13:8).

Then I warned them and said to them, “Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you.” From that time on they did not come on the sabbath (13:21).

And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair (13:25a).

I chased him away from me (13:28b).

Nehemiah reveals a dramatically bad temper following the completion of the wall. In the first example above, he decides to conduct a large assembly, apparently without even consulting the Lord, as he usually does. Some of the Jews had married non-Jews and were raising their children apart from the faith; Nehemiah becomes angry and physically beats them. While Nehemiah’s anger is justified — those with whom he is angry are guilty of various sins — his response seems wrong: he consults himself, instead of his God, and sometimes flies into a rage. Nehemiah should have been cautioned, “Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (parorgismos “irritation”) (Eph. 4:26).

Nehemiah’s response should have been more like that of Jeremiah, who prayed, “Yet Thou, O Lord, knowest all their deadly designs against me; Do not forgive their iniquity or blot out their sin from Thy sight. But may they be overthrown before Thee; Deal with them in the time of Thine anger” (Jer. 18:23). The prophet turns his anger over to God, requesting that He become angry in Jeremiah’s stead.

Personality Fault: Egocentrism

Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people (5:19).

I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you? (6:3b).

But I said, “Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in” (6:11).

Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services (13:14).

Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good (13:30f).

Nehemiah seems egotistic, frequently taking credit for the work of others. “Remember me,” he prays, “O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people” (5:19), he says, even though it is clear that hundreds of people assisted him. It is this same self-righteous attitude which prevented Job from receiving God’s favor.

While at times Nehemiah recognizes that it is the Lord’s hand upon him which enables him to accomplish such feats, at other times he seems to hold himself in such a high regard apart from the Lord. The work is only able to continue with him at the helm, he appears to feel, actively involved in every aspect of the rebuilding. “Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life” he asks, as if other, less dignified men would flee.

Conclusions

Much can be learned from Nehemiah’s example and godly style of leadership. His commitment to prayer, his recognition of Scriptural principles, and his commitment to the people and work of God, among other things, enable him to lead effectively. Despite his anger and egotism, the outcome of his mostly virtuous personality is a blessing upon the city of Jerusalem.