

Preaching from Nehemiah

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Is leading the people of God something like pushing a piece of string? Or can God's ministers discover principles of leadership through a study of God's leaders as seen in Scripture? Nehemiah was a leader, a builder and a man of God. He cared for his ministry. He faced opposition. He led by influence and by word. He was used by God. Sound familiar? As you think through some of the preaching points below, I pray that you will hear God's voice calling you to learn, to share, and to do His work in your ministry setting.

1:1—The Comfort of God

Biblical names are more than individual "handles." Sometimes they are reminders. Moses' name referred to being drawn out of the water. Jacob's name reminded people of the circumstances of his birth. Isaac's mother laughed, and his name related to her laughter of disbelief and her laughter of joy at his birth.

Nehemiah's name portended God's ministry through him. "Nehemiah" has two parts. The first is related to the Hebrew word *nacham* which means to comfort or to be sorry. The second part is a shortened form of Yahweh. People who heard the name Nehemiah heard "Yahweh comforts."¹ The remainder of the book describes the particular way in which God comforted his people, i.e. the restoration of Jerusalem and its population.

Preaching point: We do not choose our names. Often we do not know the meaning of our names. Still, as we live our lives people begin to associate qualities and behaviors with our names. In that sense, we determine what our name means, not the dictionary. What does your name mean on the job or in the community? That is, when folks hear your name, because of your testimony, do they think of ways God comforts or speaks or blesses?

¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 637.

1:1-3—The Voice of God

Scripture is full of accounts of God’s speaking to his people, his servants, and others. Sometimes he used direct speech or miracles, sometimes the testimonies of others. Nehemiah’s call to service came through the words of Hanani, “one of my brothers and some men from Judah” (v. 2). Their report (v. 3) does not sound like a call to service. Seemingly, they did not ask him to do anything. But the distress of the land and its people touched Nehemiah’s heart. As he thought about the troubles, he experienced God’s call through a coming together of his concern and his opportunity.

Preaching point: How has God “spoken” in your life? Perhaps looking back over your history with God you can see his use of feelings, circumstances, and even other people. God may bless us with a “still, small voice.” Perhaps just as often, he sends someone to tell us of a work that needs to be done, a ministry that we need to take up. We should not rely on the words of others as the only determinates in discovering God’s will, but God does use other folks to call to us. To whom and to what do we listen?

1:4-11—Passion in a Predicament

Exilic and post-exilic material such as Chronicles, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah reveal God’s servants turning strongly to prayer. In these periods Israel had no political identity (except as a portion of another empire). People seem to have felt powerless to control their destinies or that of their nation. Thus, they turned ever more seriously to prayer. Nehemiah’s book begins with his turning to prayer, his seriousness and intensity shown by his tears and posture as he prayed and by his persistence. Nehemiah prayed, not as an alternative to action, but as a basis for all that would follow.

Preaching point: Often God’s call is a call to action. But to run off “half-cocked” without God’s direction and implementation is to put our ministry in jeopardy. Prayer such as Nehemiah’s is not something we do instead of leading, witnessing, giving, etc. More often humble, persistent prayer is the first step in following God’s call. Such prayer is most often sustained by our feelings and our faith, as was Nehemiah’s. That does not mean that we do need to create or to manipulate our feelings, but we need to be open to them. Can God tell, by listening to our prayer, that we care?

1:4-11—Part of the Problem

Scripture records the words of prayers for various reasons. Sometimes the reason is so that we can use the same or similar words in our prayers. Sometimes, as here, the reason may be to reveal the heart of God's human servant. These verses indicate that Nehemiah was not afraid to "own" the problem of Israel's sin. He began with "I" but quickly moved to "we." Did that mean he had committed the same sins as his forefathers? Probably not. Still, he saw himself as part of the nation or people. He embraced the fate of his contemporaries and "owned" the sin of his predecessors. He could not repent on behalf of those who had gone before him, but he could affirm the justice of God and the sin of God's people.

Preaching point: Americans treasure individualism. We pride ourselves in being our own persons. We sometimes exalt personal freedoms above corporate responsibilities. Individualistic or not, however, we know that we often share the fate of those around us. When our family is honored, we share in the honor. If our congregation suffers, we feel that suffering. When our nation is attacked, we feel we have been attacked as well. Do such corporate feelings serve to tie us to the sins of others? Are we guilty of sins we have not personally committed? God has put us into groups—families, congregations, nations, etc. When we recognize that part of our corporate identity and heritage is sin, then corporate confession is appropriate. True, we cannot repent of their sins for them. We can confess God's past goodness and his desire for us. We can beseech him for grace.

2:1-10—Prepared to Act

Nehemiah had the right motive for action, but he needed the right time and the right words. None of his skill and wisdom would count unless "the good hand of God was on [him]" (v. 8). In his wisdom, then, Nehemiah developed a strategy. Prayer was a part of it, so Nehemiah prayed for success (Neh. 1:11). Action was another part, so Nehemiah planned what he would do and say. He knew the officials he needed to contact, the documents he would need, the duration of his time away. Nehemiah's actions and words would not be the whim of a moment when he was allowed to speak. He chose his words carefully. The results show he chose his words wisely. All that planning strengthened his resolution to act so when the opportunity came he could "seize the moment."²

² See Fredrick C. Holmgren's comments on Nehemiah as a wise person in *Israel Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 93-94.

Preaching point: Jesus asked if any man was foolish enough to begin a building project without estimating the cost (Luke 14:28-30). Our easy answer is “yes.” We know that if we begin a building project without plans, we are not likely to succeed. Do we approach our sermons, Bible lessons, or witnessing encounters in that fashion? Should we not pray-plan-perform (or act) in just that order so that our work for the Lord can be effective? Even for those blessed with a gift of spontaneity, preparation before the moment, before the “divine appointment” can result in more effective service.

2:11-20—A Vision Shared

Nehemiah was neither a one-man army nor a one-man re-building crew. He was not a one-man anything. God had blessed him with a burden and a goal. However, the burden and goal were more than personal ones. And God would provide the means and the men to accomplish the goal. In order for those men to work with Nehemiah, though, they had to see and to hear his God-given vision. Before Nehemiah shared his vision, he looked at the task for himself. He needed to know the magnitude of the work needing to be done. Then he spoke honestly about the task. He did not “sugar coat” the magnitude of the work. He did not claim to be an expert. He did recount how God had been at work. That was Nehemiah’s way of motivating his hearers, telling his story; then, “they” claimed the vision and set to work.

Preaching point: Leaders typically are visionaries. But not every visionary is a leader. To be a leader means to be able to communicate the vision in such a way that people want to be involved in implementing the vision. Likewise, a vision is more than a view of what can be. It is a view of what ought to be and, in the church, a view of what God wants there to be. A vision must be honest, counting the cost, recognizing obstacles that will have to be overcome. In the end, though, people follow leaders, not visions or programs.

2:11-20—Common Cause and Criticism

As the leader, Nehemiah was the “point man.” If Nehemiah’s opponents could undercut or discredit him, even destroy him, the task would not be done and the people might be discouraged from ever trying again. Thus, opponents naturally sought to mock, deride, and undermine Nehemiah the man and the legitimacy of his task. But Nehemiah knew the difference between “me” and “us,” “my” and “our.” The vision had been his, but now it belonged to those who shared it. Could Nehemiah say it’s “nothing personal”?

Preaching point: Many leaders cannot take criticism even though the criticism can be helpful. Sometimes critics are God’s tools to help us sharpen our thinking and planning and performance. Sometimes they are opponents and must be resisted. In either case, leaders must stay focused and not allow their response to be personal. God-given tasks are God’s tasks and are larger than either the leader or the followers (or the critics). Seen in this light, when the task is the issue, not the personalities, a wise leader can resist the mockery, derision, and “scare tactics” used against him or her.

3:1-32—Co-workers or Conscripts

Nehemiah had God and the Persian emperor behind him and God’s vision before him. With all this spiritual and political power, Nehemiah could have used his authority to force the inhabitants of the city or province to work. Israelite kings had done so. But Nehemiah wanted cooperation not coercion. One way to move toward that goal was to involve many groups. This chapter lists about thirty-nine groups. More than a list of names, though, the chapter identifies those who worked and some who refused to work, people who risked and people who refused to risk. Some work groups were from as far away as Jericho; many lived in the city. Some built; others repaired. Priests and officials were involved, fathers and daughters. Some worked because this was Jerusalem; many worked on the wall because the wall was near their house.

Preaching point: Any one group may be made up of people with varying abilities, desires, and motivations. Incorporating this variety and making it work for the common goal is difficult but important. Even within a voluntary organization such as the local congregation, leaders have some power and can often push through a plan or a strategy, and members may do the work. But this does not seem to fit the picture of the church found throughout the New Testament, nor the model of servant leadership demonstrated by the Lord. Perhaps a move from “my members” to “my brothers and sisters” would help prevent seeing a congregation as conscripted labor.

4:1-6—Fighting Words

Tobiah did not mean to start a fight with his words. Rather, by demeaning the work of Nehemiah and others, Tobiah meant to dishearten the workers and defenders. This was not an impotent strategy. Nehemiah knew that words could wound and discourage and that swords and spears were poor weapons against words. God’s leader, then, used his own “fighting words,” prayer words, to encourage and to support God’s task.

The prayer words sound harsh and vengeful to us, “Do not forgive their iniquity.” But the prayer called for God to respond to Tobiah’s “fighting words.” The task belonged to God. The fight belonged to God. The ones who opposed it were opposing God.

Preaching point: When attacked, we clench our fists, ready to fight, or seize a weapon. Verbal attacks, though, are hard to fight with fists and weapons. And using words against words may be ineffective, too. Authentic prayer is God’s tool, a summons, a cry, a testimony, and a weapon in the Christian’s armory. Old Testament saints believed that God cared about justice, about victims. Faced with injustice, oppression, and impossible odds, they cried out for God to intervene and to execute vengeance. Such prayers seem at odds with Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies. But Jesus modeled both “Father, forgive them” and “Woe” to those who attempted to undermine the kingdom of God.

4:7-23—Multi-tasking

Sanballat and others would not go away; indeed, their threats became bolder. The workers began to lose heart; the task was just too great. Jews who were not working lost heart and warned the workers of attacks to come, thus increasing the workers’ discouragement. Soon, they said, there would be an attack. Nehemiah needed to respond, but he could not simply work or defend. He had to do both. The job was superhuman, but he trusted and believed what he said, “God will fight for us.” Encouraged by his words and his example, the people discovered how to work and be ready at the same time. More than a good strategy Nehemiah knew the task was God’s and that he would carry it through.

Preaching point: Ministers today have a demanding role, expected to be and often seeking to be all things to all persons. Faithful ministers soon discover that they must be good at multi-tasking, working and praying, studying and visiting, leading and cooperating. Prayer should undergird such a demanding role. After all, work without prayer ignores the power and purposes of God. Prayer without work ignores the truth that God’s people need to be physically and mentally involved in the work of the kingdom. As the minister discovers how to integrate work and reliance on God, he can model that skill for his co-workers. Like Nehemiah, though, the minister must know that ultimately the task is God’s.

5:1-13—The Wrong in Our Rights

Not all of Nehemiah’s problems came from opponents or outsiders. Apparently, rebuilding the wall triggered economic problems. Workers

were on the wall instead of in the fields. Some may have neglected businesses to do the work. A famine had occurred or was imminent. As a result, three groups stood before the governor: landless workers, those who feared famine, and those who feared their inability to pay taxes demanded by the emperor. These groups feared and complained about fellow Jews, not godless opponents. As Nehemiah listened, he became angry, and appealed to those who were economically threatening their “brothers.” He appealed to their religion and to the image of God reflected in the callous treatment of their brothers (v. 9). Nehemiah’s passion ruled and the offending lenders canceled the debts and their liens on the property of the fearful ones.

Preaching point: How do church members view the economic problems of fellow Christians? In congregations *koinonia* too often refers mostly to hugs, fellowship meals, or conversation. Economic disparity within congregations or between one congregation and another is an opportunity to show love to a world that treasures money. Americans earnestly defend our right to make and save money. Unfortunately, as we do, we can privatize poverty, i.e. “that’s their problem.” When Christians or Christian churches ignore the needs of believers within the same city or neighborhood, God’s name can be defamed. The world knows how we treasure our rights, even when those rights cause us to do wrong.

6:1-14—Reasonable Requests

Mockery and threat had not stopped the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah’s opponents had others tricks. They invited Nehemiah to talk with them, but the place of their choosing, the plain of Ono, was thirty miles from Jerusalem. What mischief did they intend in Jerusalem while Nehemiah attended their conference? Failing that, the opponents used a “prophet” to encourage the governor to take refuge in the Temple. Though a seemingly reasonable suggestion, Nehemiah knew it would open him to a charge of cowardice. Moreover, how long could he stay in the Temple—the rest of his time as governor?³ Somehow Nehemiah “perceived” that the prophet who suggested this flight was not a prophet of God, but a hired man. The request was logical, but did not fit with the task of governing to which God had called Nehemiah.

³ H. G. M. Williamson viewed this request as an attempt to get Nehemiah to go into the Temple’s Holy Place, a place reserved for priests, and thus to violate sacred space to save himself (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary 16 [Waco: Word Publishing, 1985], 258f.).

Preaching point: Most of us need help when dealing with reasonable temptations. Our love for logic and rationality, our appreciation for the mind God has given each of us, though, can be a trap. When we have decisions to make we want to use the best thought process possible. But we need to think spiritually, too. We want to match the opportunities laid before us with the task to which God has called us. We want to learn to recognize (with the help of others) the voice of God. Not everyone who says “Thus saith the Lord” actually speaks for God. Practice at listening to and obeying God’s voice can help us recognize the counterfeit sound of Satan.

6:15-7:73a—Completed But Continuing

In less than two months, God’s willing workers had rebuilt Jerusalem’s wall. It was the opponents’ turn to be discouraged by events. But evil never gives up and Tobiah and others continued their psychological warfare. Nehemiah knew, too, that walls do not secure a city, people do. Jerusalem needed more than a strong wall. It needed vigilant guards and citizens committed to standing fast. Whom could Nehemiah trust with the task of securing the city? Who would be a better commander than the very man who first touched Nehemiah’s heart with Jerusalem’s plight? Guards were enlisted, a regimen for opening and closing the city was established, and a numbering of the people was begun in order to again know who had come back and who would have a place in city and Temple.

Preaching point: Whatever victories we celebrate in our congregations, temptations and undercutting will not go away. The evil one is persistent. Thus, in the congregation as in our nation, eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. The community of faith, not just the leaders and workers, is responsible for that vigilance. To be vigilant, the people of God need a leader who can lead, but who also fears God. Such a leader can enlist, encourage, and enable the people of God.

7:73b-8:1-8—The Regular Reading

After completing the work, but before dedicating the wall, in the seventh month (v. 73b), Nehemiah and Ezra gathered the people for a reading of the Book of the Law. The seventh month was special, beginning with the Feast of Trumpets followed by the Day of Atonement then the Feast of Tabernacles. Deuteronomy envisioned a reading of the Law during this Feast every seventh year. But this was a special time in Israel’s history. Moreover, people were there to give the sense of the reading (vv. 7, 8). Undoubtedly many of those there that day had heard the book read

before. Had they understood it? Probably many were no longer fluent in biblical Hebrew. Helping them understand made the reading more than a superstitious religious ritual. They truly heard the word.

Preaching point: The Bible envisions an “educated” people hearing the word with understanding. Anything less could be seen as a superstitious exaltation of a holy book and the error of bibliolatry. While in our land we bemoan the loss of a biblical perspective, even a loss of exposure to biblical concepts, one of the tasks of the minister of God is to enable God’s people to hear with understanding. But how much Scripture do our fellow worshippers hear, a paragraph or less for a text, a few select verses in a Bible study that assumes members can read the rest with understanding? We rightly emphasize the preaching of the word of God. Are we as serious about enabling people to hear the word read?

8:9-18—A Responsive Reading

Nehemiah did not record what Ezra read. He did report how the people responded. As they heard with understanding, they began to weep, undoubtedly out of conviction over sin. Some, too, perhaps wept out of joy, not having heard a public reading of the Torah in a long time. As they listened, their response showed they heard and understood. When they wept, though, God’s leaders reminded the hearers of the joy of the Lord, a joy to be shared with others. If they truly heard, they would share what they had in this feast time. The pattern was that God’s people would first rejoice in the Lord, celebrating him and his goodness, then would come a time for mourning and repentance. The people obeyed as they began the Feast of Booths. Apparently, the people had lost the practice of living in booths to celebrate God’s care for their fathers in the wilderness (v. 17). Properly instructed from the Torah, they built their booths and the reading of the word of God went forward.

Preaching point: Our land and time has more Bible translations, commentaries, and study helps than any other generation—and perhaps less authentic understanding of the word. Preachers and teachers may expound, but do folks understand? Or are hearers so taken with the speaker and her or his style that the word of God is not heard? Do we dare evaluate our preaching, teaching, and worship by the changes they produce in the lives of the hearers? Can we say that those who hear truly understand the word if the only response is “see you next week,” with no sharing, no grief, no joy evidenced? Do those of us who preach have a real response to the reading of Scripture when we open it before God? Does God’s word still stir us? If not, are we aware of what handicaps us?

9:1-38—Conviction, Confession, Commitment

The minds of the Jews in Jerusalem must have turned back to their history as they celebrated the Feast of Booths, a history of God’s grace and his people’s sinfulness. Instead of denying their parentage, though, they recognized the sinfulness of previous generations. Yet they began the prayer here by affirming and praising God’s character and nature. After a time in the prayer, the words of the prayer changed from “they” (referring to their fathers) to “we” and “us.” Confession turned to commitment and they made an agreement among themselves, a commitment to make their own history different in the land God had given them anew.

Preaching point: While we recognize Adam’s sin scarred our nature, a scarring that has resulted in millennia of sin, we typically confess only our own sins. Sometimes the sin of our physical or spiritual fathers is so great it prompts us to make public confession (as in the confessing the sin associated with slavery). But families, cities, congregations, and nations sin, too. God teaches us that reality so we can more deeply appreciate his grace, not so we will be burdened with guilt. Indeed, awareness of the sin which so easily besets groups as well as individuals can lead us to commitment that by God’s grace we will move forward and create a new history.

10:1-39—The Specifics of Holiness

A thousand years had passed since Moses articulated God’s commands. Nehemiah and his fellow Jews lived in a different time and culture. They needed to update the application of God’s eternal truths and requirements. All who could understand and had separated themselves unto God (v. 28) joined in the process and in the oath to walk before the Lord. Because of the needs of the day, they dealt specifically with intermarriage, sabbath-keeping, and support of the Temple. They created new ways to keep God’s law, took on new requirements based on precedents in the Torah, integrated several laws into principles they could follow, and allotted Temple responsibilities. No one imposed this *halakah* (lifestyle) on them. As God’s people, they chose to be separate, to be fair and honest, and to be faithful in their religious obligations.⁴

Preaching point: Commitments to be godly often break down because of a lack of specifics. God does not change; neither do his concerns and expectations nor his demands. But the human setting in which we live

⁴ See Williamson’s commentary for a good discussion of this “updating” of the Torah requirements.

out our commitment to him does change. We need specifics on how God's concerns and his leading are to be lived out. Thus, God's servants have a responsibility to study God's law in order to discover God's concerns and interests and purposes reflected in the ancient setting. As we begin to study his law in this light, discovering that we are to be separate and pure, embrace economic justice, and worship by giving him time and other resources, we see new ways in these new days to live and teach God's law. Scripture is the anchor and the rock to which we return repeatedly in changing times.

11:1-12:26—People Power

Jerusalem was once the economic center of the land of Israel, as well as the political and religious center. Although the Temple had been rebuilt almost seventy-five years earlier, the city still suffered. Nehemiah and others had built the wall, but who and what would build the city? Jerusalem needed people and one tenth of the community was chosen to live in Jerusalem, a privilege but a task, too. Many preferred life in the villages where they could support themselves more easily. But they came as called, some as valiant warriors (v. 14), many as servants of the house of God. Other folks returned to the places of their fathers.

Preaching point: Pioneering sounds glamorous—until we try it. Going places where no one has gone, and doing things no one has done is hard work. A new church start is work. Initiating a gospel witness in a land far from home is lonely, demanding, and sometimes dangerous. But pioneers are needed. In the local congregation we refer to “charter members” and honor those who were part of the beginning work. Sometimes we even listen to their stories of how tough things were. Sometimes we hear God calling us to pioneer a ministry while others will live in their own place. If the kingdom is to develop as God intends, he will need pioneers.

12:27-47—The Final Act?

Several chapters after Nehemiah described the completion of Jerusalem's wall (Neh. 6:15), he described its dedication. The intervening events were the real story of re-establishing Jerusalem, worship, confession, commitment, and people to guard the walls, fill the streets and shops, and carry on the work of the Temple. Still, “prayer walking” (or “praise walking”) atop the walls around the city made a point. The job was finished. As the two choirs came together in the Temple, foes and friends alike knew that God had done the work using the hearts and heads and hands of his people. But Nehemiah had more to write because “it's not over until it's over.”

Preaching point: Public celebration of a milestone in a congregation's life can go a long way toward proclaiming the gospel. We recognize that God uses evangelists and pastors, teachers and deacons, builders and bankers to provide a concrete image of his presence in a city or neighborhood. Friends and foes of the church need to be able to see that God is at work right before their eyes. Still, while chapter twelve is the climax of Nehemiah's book, it is not the end. Dedicating a building, or proclaiming a new ministry may be the climax of the moment, but it is not the end. The work will have to go on.

13:1-31—Biblical Realism

Some time after the celebration described in chapter twelve, Nehemiah returned to the king's court (v. 6). Soon, though, he came back to Jerusalem and found that the community had failed in each and every commitment it had made (chapter 10). Opponents of the people of God had infiltrated the Temple; tithes for the support of the Temple were unpaid; the sabbath was ignored, and the people mingled with non-Jews through intermarriage. Nehemiah, leader that he was, turned the situation around, but not without much personal effort.

Preaching point: Individuals who recommit themselves to the Lord often must do that again. Congregations that experience revival do not stay revived. The simple duration and "everydayness" of life has a way of wearing down our commitment to what is pure and right and holy. So Nehemiah ends not in a moment of celebrative accomplishment but in a more realistic struggle to establish godliness and to keep godliness in the life of the people of God. We are not to be discouraged by our fall from the heights of our enthusiasm. Neither are we to think we can always live on high. We can, though, *always* trust the one who was tempted like we are and yet did not sin (Heb. 2:18). He will, he has, and he does come to our aid.

13:1-31—Remember

Four times in this chapter Nehemiah called on God to remember (vv. 14, 22, 29, 31). The man of God did not think he worshiped an absent-minded deity; rather his plea was a call for God to act in light of the situation (similar to the psalmist's plea in Psalm 89:50). Three times Nehemiah called for God to remember, he seemed to be congratulating himself for good things he had done. In verse 29, he called God to remember the sin of those who defiled the priesthood. In all these Nehemiah was putting his future and that of the community in God's hands. "Remember" was a call for God to respond as God determined he

should respond. Nehemiah trusted God to respond to faithfulness and goodness with blessing and to respond to sin with judgment.

Preaching point: Although God has revealed to us that heaven awaits his children, we are still people of the earth. We long to see immediate results from faithful service. We want immediate judgment for those who defile and destroy. Sometimes God grants our desires. We see evident blessing and judgment. Whether or not we see the immediate results of godliness or sin, however, as God's children we commit life itself into God's hands saying "remember me" and "remember them," trusting God to do what is right according to his loving will. Is Nehemiah "blowing his own horn"? Or is he saying that God knows and he trusts God's determination?