

Eden' argues on other issues) 'male hegemony' can accommodate itself to the feminist challenge while remaining fundamentally unchanged.

One is struck by the wider relevance of these observations. It is not just on the issue of the feminist challenge that evangelicals have resorted to talking past one another, failing to listen and denying the integrity of those who disagree. It is not only on this issue that Scripture is used and abused by an

inadequately wholistic hermeneutic. There are other issues where our 'biblical' answers sound more like our own sub-culture speaking back to us than truly scriptural. And we too, can so easily be deflected from the central to the peripheral!

So there is much to reflect on as we engage with the feminist challenge as evangelicals.... and some major changes of attitude and practices between the sexes that all the contributors to these two books agree on!

# RESTORING YOUR VISION—WITH NEHEMIAH (2)

Dr. Steve Brady

## The Story So Far

In our first article we drew attention to the absolute necessity for prayer if the work of God is to advance. The first chapter of Nehemiah provides one of the great 'pattern' prayers of the Bible. During the course of Nehemiah's praying over the parlous state of Jerusalem God incubated a conviction in his heart that he was the ideal man for the job. How that heart conviction is practically worked through becomes the focus of the following chapters of the book. If we need to regain our vision through prayer we also need to communicate that vision to others who can help bring it to reality.

## Sharing Your Vision Through Teamwork

The internal combustion engine has revolutionized the world! Many of us however simply take it for granted as we turn the ignition and our car engine fires into life. What then? Well, on most vehicles, we depress the clutch, engage the gear, increase the acceleration and away we go. Have you ever stopped to consider how all that power generated in the engine actually turns your car's wheels? Simple, really. A network of mechanical relationships called 'the transmission' does it all for you. Likewise, prayer is God's internal combustion engine. It generates tremendous 'power' that is intended, through a network of relationships, to turn the wheels of progress for the kingdom of God. These second and third chapters give us an insight into the 'spiritual transmission' that converts prayer into action. We concentrate on four elements.

## Present Responsibility and Future Service are Related

In footballing terms, there is a most definite 'midfield role' for the phrase that appears at the end of chapter one, 'I was cupbearer to the king'. It helps to explain the link between the chapters and why Nehemiah happened to be the right man in the right place at the right time. In our previous study we noted the principle *God never leaves us without the benefit of preparation* for what he wants us to do for him. For Nehemiah, as for many of us, God prepared and equipped him for 'spiritual' work through his 'secular' calling. He certainly had disadvantages to contend with. He was of immigrant stock for a start. He had no first-hand knowledge of Jerusalem hundreds of mile away. Some believe he was probably a 'eunuch' and therefore somewhat disqualified from divine service (Deut. 23:1). Yet here he is in a position of great trust and authority. He had clearly overcome various background obstacles. Just as importantly, to attain the office he had, he surely demonstrated the principle that 'He who is faithful in little is faithful in much' (Lk. 16:10). Ability wedded to reliability and availability are not only hallmarks of good 'cupbearers' but of any would-be servant of God too. A little time ago a missionary working in a church-planting situation in Europe asked for prayer for a young man with a number of fine qualities and a desire to serve God. But there was one sticking point: *'as yet he must learn to fit in and work cheerfully in the inconspicuous'*. The *inconspicuous*. Perhaps, as we suggested in our first article, Nehemiah's was 'fast-track graduate' entrance into royal service. It is just as possible that he received his initial 'training' washing pots and pans in the royal kitchens. We cannot be sure. But he

fulfilled the old maxim, 'bloom where you are planted'. 'Our man in Jerusalem' belonged to his majesty's senior service—the RFA—*ready for anything*—to the glory of God. 'To work cheerfully in the inconspicuous'. Do you? If not, may that be why God cannot yet use you in a more significant ministry? Do remember that actually nothing is inconspicuous or insignificant if it is done out of love for the Lord—whether it be cups of wine or cold water (Mk. 9:41).

### Prayer and Action are Great Friends

The opening verses of chapter two could well be entitled *pace* Dale Carnegie, *How to win friends and influence people*. The four months of Nehemiah's praying, indicated by the dating at 1:1 and 2:1, had driven him to one conclusion: he was the man to plead for Jerusalem, hence the prayer, 'Give your servant success today' (1:11). The presence of the queen (6), as the second chapter opens, suggests that some form of banquet was in progress. Suddenly opportunity kindly knocks, for the king enquires about Nehemiah's sad appearance. To put a positive complexion (!) on the king's enquiry would suggest his concern and compassion for one of his servants. Accordingly Nehemiah's 'fear' (2) would be that of failure to capitalize on his opportunity. Negatively interpreted, the king may have suspected an attempt on his life via poisoning. Either way Nehemiah simply explains his sadness in terms of his 'home' city. Of course Artaxerxes is no fool. There is a hidden agenda in there somewhere. His 'what is it you want?' is greeted by Nehemiah's silent telegram prayer and a direct request that the king send him officially to do something about it (4,5).

It will be recalled that 'Jerusalem' had become a dirty word around the palace of Artaxerxes, as events recorded in Ezra 4:6–22 make clear. It was a politically volatile expression. It is therefore interesting to note how many times Nehemiah uses the word in his conversation with the king. How many? Not once! Now there's a lesson in tact. Indeed the opening verses portray the sheer courtesy and gracious demeanour of Nehemiah before Artaxerxes. In common parlance there is nothing 'bolshy' about his approach. Although in prayer Artaxerxes is only 'this man' (1:11), in life he is the one to whom honour is due, however much Nehemiah believed 'the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it . . . wherever he pleases' (Prov. 21:1). Respect in the home, especially for not-yet-Christian parents, win-someness in the workplace, particularly with irascible employers, and tact and courtesy when we approach people in authority in our communities, are still ways to win friends for the gospel and influence them for Jesus Christ.

### Progress and Problems Go Hand in Hand

Verses 6–9 record considerable progress. Nehemiah had certainly been praying. Indeed we might say he was 'dreaming' about what he might accomplish for God. But he had also been doing some hard thinking. He has therefore a veritable shopping list of requests for the task ahead—safe passage, building materials,

a governor's residence. What a sight it must have been to see the cavalry coming to the rescue! (9) There are some vital lessons here.

The Christian world has never been short of dreamers. In the second World War, for instance, the comedian Will Rogers was listening to an American admiral as he outlined the threat that the German 'U' boats were posing to allied shipping in the Atlantic. 'Excuse me, Admiral, but could these 'U' boats operate in boiling water?' he asked. 'No, I don't believe they could', came the bemused reply. 'Well, there's your solution!' added Rogers, 'Boil the ocean!' 'And how do you propose I do that?' came the confused Admiral's reply. 'Oh, that's your problem', said Rogers, 'I gave you the idea. You work out the details!' On the other hand there have been many faithful 'plodders' in God's work who somewhere along the line lost their vision. We have all met the missionary who has become a 'stationary' because the 'work' has ground out the last ounce of vision. Nehemiah is a healthy corrective to both. For a dream without a plan quickly becomes a nightmare; a task without a dream rapidly becomes a drudgery. Nehemiah seems to have combined both amazingly well. A dream to rebuild Jerusalem. A plan to see it through to fulfilment. And it appears that he unashamedly enlisted what 'secular' support for the cause of God he could: rendering to God the things that some would account as 'Caesar's'. Clever fellow!

All's well that ends well! Indeed. But this is only the beginning and alongside the undoubted progress there are bound to be problems. We will meet the full hurricane force of such in our next article. Already, however, this second chapter gives an early warning in verses 10 and 19. One thing is for sure. If you are going to please God you are bound to upset some people. For many years I have taken great encouragement from the Lord's censure, 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you' (Lk. 6:26). Have you? You ought to if you are facing opposition. You have attempted something significant for God. You have gone to a run-down, rural or inner-city church. You have, Nehemiah-like, a vision to rebuild. Yet in your particular Jerusalem you have your Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem 'reception committee'. Surprised? It's par for the course. Welcome to the club—'through many hardships we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). Whatever you do, however, don't go hot-footing it back to 'Susa' before your work is even begun. Progress and problems go hand in hand.

### Preaching and Planning Should Be Well-Aquainted

The second half of chapter two and all of chapter three emphasize the need for planning. To fail to plan is to plan to fail. Failure, however, is not on Nehemiah's agenda. First, he assesses the situation for himself.

*Always assess the situation first-hand*

Logistical decisions in either warfare or building cannot usually be made from a distance of hundreds

of miles. Verses 11–16 record Nehemiah's covert operation: ('I set out . . . with a few men. I had told no-one what God had put in my heart' . . . 'during the night' . . . 'by night', 'the officials did not know where I had gone' (12, 13, 15, 16). There's brilliant strategy here, practically and psychologically. Practically he needed to know the true extent of the damage and have opportunity to work out a plan, without the prying eyes of both friends and foes. Psychologically he needed ammunition for the vision killers, the 'it-can't-be-done' brigade. One can almost hear them: 'What's he know about it? He's only been here five minutes! As if we haven't enough to do already!'. How will he overcome such latent inertia? He appeals for help.

*Regularly enlist people's help*

I always find the comment 'I had said nothing to the Jews . . . or any others who would be doing the work' (16) rather humorous. He gets the vision, they get the job! But there's little to amuse when he actually confronts his people with their situation: 'you see the trouble we are in' (17). Did they? I expect they saw nothing. They had grown accustomed to the rubble. The stroke of genius is sometimes to point out the obvious. One of the benefits of an 'outsider' coming into our church is that he or she sometimes sees clearly what is opaque to us. We may think we have great worship and a friendly church. Arnold, however, found the worship incomprehensible and welcome tepid. Nehemiah therefore calls on them to do something about it (17). He addresses their minds with facts ('You see . . . Jerusalem lies in ruins'), their hearts with feeling ('in disgrace') and their wills with a call to action ('let us rebuild the wall'). He does not ignore the 'YBH' factor either—'Yes, but how?'. He has a plan that is backed by heaven and earth (18). 'Let us start rebuilding' is the response. It is one thing to preach a stirring message on the need for evangelism. It is quite another to show church members how. Nehemiah plans to mobilize his people. Chapter three is the result.

*Generally allocate the work-load*

How do you cope with the mammoth task of rebuilding city walls without heavy earth-moving equipment and a paid work-force? And just how do you manage it in fifty-two days (6:16)? Indeed, how do you cope with any overwhelming task? Simple. You imitate Nehemiah.

Some sections of the wall were by now completely missing or needed to be resited. After all, since Jerusalem was razed to the ground 140 years before,

the present needs of the city were not identical to those that pertained in 586 BC. So some sections had to be 'built' (2). Other sections of the wall needed to be 'rebuilt' (1), 'repaired' (6) or 'restored' (8). Where does one begin? On the presumption that some three or four miles of wall needed attention, Nehemiah does what we ever need to do when faced by a mammoth task. He organized and mobilized the people, breaking the project up into small, manageable proportions. Think of it this way. Four miles of wall, allocated to the forty-two groups of workers recorded in chapter three, spread over a fifty-two day period comes out at a mere three or four yards per day per section. There were many parts to be played in this building operation: organizers, foremen, rubble clearers, hod carriers, stone masons etc. And the sheer variety of people involved is interesting: priests and levites (1, 17), nobles and rulers (5, 9), gifted goldsmiths and delicate-handed perfumers and merchants (8, 32), women along with men (12). Some appear to have had a vested interest in repairing in front of their homes (23) whilst others gladly travelled up from Jericho and Tekoa (2, 27). Some would do more ('five hundred yards' (12)), others less ('their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work' (5)). Together they accomplished a great deal.

'Wall-building' in God's kingdom likewise requires a lot of people doing their 'bit' rather than a few virtuoso performers doing it all. Indeed too often the church appears to be like a football match: twenty-two players needing a rest and thirty thousand spectators needing exercise! How the lessons of total mobilization for the kingdom's work need to be learned in many of our churches. We too soon forget that the very faith that saves us without works, since it is a living faith, gives birth to good works 'which God prepared in advance for us to do' (Eph. 2:10). One of the forgotten marks of grace is hard work: 'I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me' (1 Cor. 15:10).

One cannot leave this chapter without wondering why God should deem it important that thirty-two verses of his canon of Scripture should be devoted to what is seemingly a list of 'employees' on an ancient building site. Is it just 'for the record'? Yes, God's record: 'God is not unjust, he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them' (Heb. 6:10). The reward for being a 'city of God' builder, ancient or modern, will outshine the sun and outlast the stars.

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