

NEHEMIAH'S BURDEN (ch.1)

In the Hebrew Bible, the books we know as Nehemiah and Ezra are *one* book. They were probably written by Ezra, with personal notes added from Nehemiah between the years 445 and 420 BC. ... It's quite ironic how the name 'Nehemiah' means 'Jehovah comforts/soles', but actually his book begins with *him* needing to be consoled ...!

Nehemiah was a Hebrew in exile in Babylon when the word reached him the Jews who had recently returned to Jerusalem were planning on building another temple in Jerusalem. ... He was in the king's winter palace in Shushan (Susa), in the mountains to the north of the Persian Gulf in modern-day Iran which was 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. ... Normally he lived and worked in the king's palace in Babylon but, during the winter, he accompanied the king to Susa.

To know the background requires a little piece of the history ... King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem in 605 BC, then again in 597 BC, and finally in 586 BC he ransacked the city completely and brought nearly all of its remaining citizens to captivity in Babylon. ... Going further back ... In 721 BC the Assyrians had invaded the ten northern kingdoms, and now in 586 BC the two southern kingdoms were also invaded ... all this was as prophesied as a judgment from God on all twelve tribes of Israel. ... Incidentally, during its long history, Jerusalem has been attacked 52 times, captured and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times, and destroyed twice (586 BC and 70 AD).

As was prophesied in Daniel's visions, in 539 BC Nebuchadnezzar was defeated by King Cyrus of Persia, who gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem. With great excitement and anticipation of starting afresh, 42,360 of them went back in 538 BC with the intention of rebuilding the temple straightaway. When they arrived though, they had to face the harsh reality of the poor state of their capital city. They were extremely deflated, - the 'wind very quickly went out of their sails', and they grew less enthusiastic about rebuilding the temple and, instead, they prioritised the building of their own dwelling-places ... God came 'second'. For this they were chastised by Haggai ... and they did eventually reassess their priorities. ... This was the first stage of their return ('aliyah'), and Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David, was appointed by Cyrus to be their 'governor', and he was assisted by the high priest, Joshua, the son of Jehozadak. During this period also, they were constantly hindered and hounded by neighbouring Samaritans who wanted to keep them out of Jerusalem.

Eventually though, under Zerubbabel's supervision, the *second* temple began construction eighteen years later in 520 BC when King Darius the Mede was reigning, and was completed and dedicated in 516 BC. ... The first temple, - Solomon's temple, - was completed in 957 BC and destroyed in 586 BC (it stood for 371 years). There was no temple in Jerusalem during the seventy years from 586 until Zerubbabel's temple in 516, as was prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11-12). ... The building of this new temple was to be the dawn of a new era.

The second stage of the Jewish *aliyah* was led by Ezra, a scribe from a Levite family. Around a further 5,000 Jews returned from Babylon. His greatest problem was dealing with those Jews who had returned but had become so lackadaisical they integrated with the people of the land who were *not* Jews (Ezra 9), thereby they were compromising the true faith of their fathers, and the future generations. Ezra worked hard to convince them they needed to separate themselves and uphold God's priorities ... but it was a long and hard process!

All was not going as smoothly as these returning Jews to Jerusalem had envisaged for firstly, the people took longer building the temple than they had anticipated ... and Haggai had to speak very firmly to them! Secondly, the 'spiritual rot' had seeped into the Jewish people and they became all-too-willing to condone principles which were contrary to God's law. ... And when Nehemiah heard all that was going on, he sunk into deep despair ...

NEHEMIAH HAD A BURDEN FOR JERUSALEM

Even though he had a good job in Babylon, as an official in the royal court, - the winetaster for the king ... influential and respected, - nevertheless the news he heard coming from Jerusalem turned him into a broken man, **Neh. 1:3** The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. ... He was devastated, distressed, distraught. ... He could neither sleep nor eat! The life had gone out of him!

But what could *he* do? ... What influence had a wine-taster! Zerubbabel was a prince, Ezra was a scribe ... but Nehemiah had no such pedigree. He was the son of Hachaliah, - a man nobody knows anything about! Nehemiah had no special training, no influence and no standing *and yet*, the burden he had for Jerusalem was without equal, And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven (Neh. 1:4).

How many times do you hear people say in the Bible, “Who am I?” They realise the situation is so bad there is nothing they can do about it ... Take Moses, for example, - a murderer on the run ... David, - a young shepherd boy, even his father forgot about! ... Elijah, - he was the only one left (... or so he thought) ... Isaiah and the prophets, and many more ... How many of the disciples would you and I have chosen for the task, and yet Jesus called and used them mightily! ... Similarly, Nehemiah had no great qualifications. There was no great achievement he had accomplished to empower him for what God intended him to do. ... He was a wine-taster, not a wall-builder! ... And yet, God can take the willing heart and make it into something He uses for His glory ... and that is what He did with Nehemiah. ... Nehemiah wasn't a prince like Zerubbabel, or a scribe like Ezra ... but Nehemiah was the man to whom God gave a burden for Jerusalem in the next stage of His plan for the nation.

Nehemiah could have chosen to stay in the ‘lap of luxury’ of the palace and been concerned ‘from afar’ ... but God laid such a heavy burden upon his heart for Jerusalem, Nehemiah could do nothing *but* rise to the challenge God set before him. ... And that is what makes the difference.

The days of our church are numbered if we do not attend faithfully to the burden of work the Lord sets before us to do ... That is not a prophecy, but it is simple reality for it is the Lord's people who are charged to uphold and maintain the Lord's work, with His help. ... We know the lost need to hear about Christ, - that's why God has us here ... *to tell them*. We know we have to be encouragers of each other ... to strengthen and encourage each other in the Lord, for the sake of His work here ... Ultimately we are here to serve Him, - that's our purpose and our goal ... and that is where Nehemiah found himself when he heard what was happening in Jerusalem ... He had a burden for God which meant he could not remain in the comfort of the king's court while his beloved city lay in ruins. ... He had to be obedient, no matter how tough the task.

Let's leave our study there, with this question ... Has the Lord given you a burden for His work in this place? There would have been no point Nehemiah going back to Jerusalem, merely to survey the ruins. It would have been a waste of his time and energy travelling all the way from Babylon if all it did was to make feel even worse. ... No, the Lord was about to bring him back to Jerusalem for the purpose of rebuilding those magnificent walls ... and what a *heavy* work is required of us here too, - as it was in Nehemiah's time also.

One of the last instructions given to the church is in Rev. 16:15 where the Lord Jesus repeats what He has said previously, Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. ... The old hymn reminds us ...

There's a work for Jesus, ready at your hand,
'Tis a task the Master just for you has planned.
Haste to do His bidding, yield Him service true;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

There's a work for Jesus, humble though it be,
'Tis the very service He would ask of thee.
Go where fields are whitened, and the labourers few;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

There's a work for Jesus, precious souls to bring,
Tell them of His mercies, tell them of your King.
Faint not, nor grow weary, He will strength renew;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.