

# God's Message to Us in Nehemiah

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## **Introduction:**

In our sermon series on *God's Message to Us in Every Book of the Bible*, we have come to the book of Nehemiah.

- Last week, I mentioned to you that Ezra has traditionally been regarded as the editor and compiler of First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.
  - The great interest of these books is in the temple and its service...
    - 1 Chronicles focuses on David's preparations for the building of it.
    - 2 Chronicles focuses on the building of it and the use of it by Judah under her various kings until it was destroyed in 586 BC because of their unfaithfulness.
    - Ezra picks up with the decree of Cyrus in 536 to rebuild the temple, which was completed under Zerubbabel in 516 BC.
      - Ezra the priest came almost 60 years later in 458 BC as a reformer.
    - Nehemiah came some thirteen years later in 445 BC to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and set things in order, and visited a second time in 432 BC to bring reform again.

In our quest to see something of the message that the book of Nehemiah has for us, I want to focus on how Nehemiah serves as a beautiful type of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

- In particular, I want you to see how Nehemiah reflects the zeal of our Lord Jesus for God's house—
  - In our Scripture reading from John 2, we saw in John 2:17 that the words “zeal for your house has eaten me up” are attributed to Christ when He purified the temple early in His ministry.
- Zeal is an excellent thing when it is directed to a right purpose...
  - It was zeal for the purity of God's house that led Jesus Christ to leave the glories of heaven and come here to die on the cross.
  - God's people were entirely unfit to be in the presence of God, but God the Son purified us by His own blood so that we could come to the Father and to Him with complete forgiveness of our sins.

Now let's look at what we can learn from Nehemiah about this wonderful zeal for God's house that Jesus has.

- I.** Nehemiah's prayers point to the zeal of our Lord for God's house
- II.** Nehemiah's labours point to the zeal of our Lord for God's house.
- III.** Nehemiah's initiation of worship points to the zeal of our Lord for God's house.
- IV.** Nehemiah's corrective discipline points to the zeal of our Lord for God's house.

Let's turn now to consider each one of these ways that the zeal of Christ for God's house is seen in Nehemiah's example.

### **I. Nehemiah's prayers point to the zeal of our Lord for God's house**

- Nehemiah, like Jesus, turns to God in every circumstance.
- A. It is the first thing he does when he gets the bad news about Jerusalem.

1. In chapter 1, verse 4, he says: **So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.**
    - And what a great prayer it is!
      - He speaks of the greatness and the grace of God (v. 5),
      - confesses the unfaithfulness of Israel “which we have sinned (v.6-7),”
      - but pleads confidently with the LORD on the basis of His promise that if His people would return to Him, He would restore them (v. 8-11).
  2. We might think of Jesus as our priest praying as it says in Hebrews 5:7: **who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear...**
    - These passionate prayers, like Nehemiah’s, were on account of the condition of the church—the assembly of God’s people.
    - What a precious thing it is to know of His great love for us and His great concern for us!
- B. A short time later, he comes before the King Artaxerxes and is afraid when the king notices his sadness—
- subjects were never to show their emotions before the king—
1. Under all this pressure, look at what Nehemiah does in 2:4—it is very simply stated: **Then the king said to me, “What do you request?” So I prayed to the God of heaven.**
    - It is such a natural thing with Nehemiah, just as it was with Christ, to send prayers up in the heat of the moment.
      - It is a spontaneous prayer.
  2. We might think of the prayers He prayed at the tomb of Lazarus when He said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard Me.”
    - Or His prayers on the cross when He said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
    - What lessons there are for us, that we would spontaneously turn to God like this.
- C. We see Nehemiah praying imprecatory prayers against those who oppose the work.
1. He does this when Tobiah ridicules the Jews while they are building the wall, saying that even a fox would break it down.
    - In 4:4-5, Nehemiah says: **“Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.”**
    - This is not a prayer for personal vengeance, but a prayer against those who are standing against the city of God!
  2. We should be so thankful that our Lord Jesus stands in strong opposition to those who oppose His city.
    - He will not tolerate anyone opposing His Father and His Father’s house—for He came to reconcile us to the Father and provide a way back to the Father.
    - He will not let enemies continue in their opposition, but will bring them to destruction.

- How often He announced the destruction of those who opposed Him, and how often He pronounced woes upon them.
  - Though His first coming was characterised by warnings and pleas for repentance rather than the pronouncing of curses,
    - when He returns it will be to execute judgment upon His enemies who ignored His warnings as He makes clear, for example, in Matthew 25.

TRANS> What a great comfort it is to know that our Lord's prayers arise out of His love for the City of God that He Himself is the head of.

- He prays for us because He is zealous for our well-being.
- There would be no prayers like this without our Nehemiah (Christ) at our head.
- Now let's look at the second way that Nehemiah's example points to Christ.

## **II. Nehemiah's labours point to the zeal of our Lord for God's house.**

- Diligent labour characterises Nehemiah throughout this history.

A. Nehemiah is like Jesus in that he leaves a comfortable place to go and labour for the city of God because of his love for the city of God.

1. Consider Nehemiah's situation.

- a. As a cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah has a very comfortable position.
  - It was a task that was given only to the most trusted of the king's servants.
  - It would have been easy for him to just settle down in the palace and let the people at Jerusalem work out their own problems.
- b. But as soon as Nehemiah hears of the trouble at Jerusalem and of how the walls are broken down, we have seen how he went to prayer; but he also went to work.
  - In the teaching of the Bible, prayer and work always go hand in hand.
    - Those who pray sincerely also work diligently.
- c. Nehemiah could not leave Jerusalem in its ruined condition when he possessed the power to do something about it.
  - So he leaves the comforts of the palace and makes the long journey to Jerusalem to go to work for the kingdom.
  - It was a labour of love.

2. Consider our Lord Jesus.

- a. From all eternity, He was with the Father in glory.
  - He was in a relationship of perfect love.
  - But because of our need in the city of God, He came to labour among us.
  - He left all of that glory because of His great love for us.
- b. He could not leave God's city in the desperate condition it was in without taking action.
  - And so He took the journey—what a great journey it was—from glory to becoming a man and living among us that He might redeem us.
  - We cannot begin to grasp what He left to come here, and what the contrast was between what He left and what He came to.
- c. What an encouragement is to see His great love for us.

B. And then we see how, like Jesus, Nehemiah engages in the great work!

1. As soon as he arrives, he begins surveying the walls, going out at night to look at the ruins of the walls of Jerusalem.
  - Then, as you can see in Nehemiah 2:18, he says **“Let us rise up and build.”**
    - It was a huge task.
    - You all know how a large task often looks impossible and causes people to give up before they even get started...
      - Just think of it—building walls all the way around a whole city with the primitive tools they had in those days.
    - But Nehemiah provides the initiative that gets everyone going.
      - People from all walks of life join him—goldsmiths, perfumers, and some of the leaders among the people—
      - It is pretty clear that without Nehemiah’s enthusiasm, the project would never have got off the ground.
2. This is so like our Lord Jesus.
  - He calls us to labour with Him in building the city of God.
    - We see Him summoning His disciples and putting them into the work that He has for each of them to do when He was here.
  - He still does that today—through His word... when He gets hold of our hearts, he sets us to labour with Him—He gives us hope so that we work when we would otherwise give way to despair.
    - And soon people from all walks of life are involved in building His city.
    - Without Him, the work would never begin.
  - Has He engaged you in His work?
    - Do you do things like lead your family in daily worship—or do you despair that the task is too great?
    - Do you reach out to the lost around you, or do you give up before you even get started?
      - Look to Jesus... hear His call... He is our Nehemiah who comes among us and rallies us to get on with it.

C. And then we see how, like Jesus, Nehemiah is indefatigable in his labour.

1. The account is full of opposition of all kinds.
  - a. As soon as the work begins, Sanballat, Tobiah, and others are angered and begin to oppose them.
    - Listen to Sanballat’s ridicule in 4:2-3: **And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?”** Now Tobiah the Ammonite *was* beside him, and he said, **“Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.”**
    - They are appealing to those sentiments that kept the people from getting started before Nehemiah came—
      - “You’ll never get it done!”
      - “And even if you do get something done, a fox will break it down!”
    - But Nehemiah just prays, as we saw before, and keeps working.

- b. Then opposition comes from the labourers themselves.
  - You know how easy it is to get discouraged as the labour continues.
  - Listen to their words of discouragement in 4:10-12: **Then Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is failing, and *there is* so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.”** <sup>11</sup> **And our adversaries said, “They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease.” So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, “From whatever place you turn, *they will be* upon us.”**
  - It is amazing all the discouraging things your friends will say,
    - telling you how hard it will be to go on—in a sense trying to sympathise with you—but it’s just the opposite of what you need.
    - Really—ten times over they repeat the mantra.
    - You need encouragement to stick it out, not sympathy about how hard it is.
  - But Nehemiah will not be stopped!
    - He posts some watchmen and in v. 4:14, he says: **And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”**
- c. Then there is the problem of economic pressure on the people (chapter 5)...
  - Nehemiah does not let this hinder the work of rebuilding.
  - As they were engaged in the work of building the wall, some of them had to mortgage their land...
    - And some of the poorest had to sell their sons and daughters as slaves to pay their bills.
    - And this all because of the greedy wealthy members of the church were taking advantage of them and stuffing their pockets... charging high interest to their own brothers.
  - Nehemiah will not have it!
    - He is angered because of his zeal for God’s house, and he insists that these oppressors desist at once and stop charging interest to their brothers and restore their lands and their children to them.
    - Nehemiah himself does not take advantage of his position to enrich himself, but instead is generous and provides for himself and others out of his own resources.
- d. In chapter 6, Sanballat and his friends launch another attack—directly aimed at Nehemiah because they realise that he is responsible for all this work.
  - 1) They begin by calling Nehemiah away from the work to come and meet with them (6:2).
    - Nehemiah knows that they want to harm him, so even though they try to wear him down by calling him four times, he simply says:
      - **Neh 6:3: So I sent messengers to them, saying, “*I am* doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?”**
    - What a great response!
      - Just keep your eye on the task that God has given you.

- 2) Then Sanballat writes an open letter in which he accuses Nehemiah of treason, but Nehemiah will not be intimidated...
- In Nehemiah 6:8-9, he says: **Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart.”** , For they all *were trying to make us afraid*, saying, **“Their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done.”** Now therefore, *O God, strengthen my hands.*
- And so the wall is completed in just 52 days! An extraordinary feat that Nehemiah attributes to right source.
- 6:15-16 summarises the situation: **“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw *these things*, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.”**
2. This is a picture in Nehemiah of our indefatigable Lord Jesus Christ!
- Think of all the opposition He faced—
    - Though He went about preaching the good news of the kingdom, he was despised and rejected by His own people.
    - They threatened Him and they sought to discourage Him.
  - And the Devil himself sought to discourage him from the work.
    - With what force did his temptations come to turn from the cross—to change His approach—to win the people with His powers instead of going to the cross to die for their sins.
  - But our Lord had put His hand to the plough and would not turn back.
    - He laboured and toiled in His work—He did not turn back, but persevered to the end.
    - Isaiah 49:4 captures the struggle He felt. It quotes Him: **“Then I said, ‘I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain; yet surely my just reward is with the LORD, and my work with my God.’ ”**
    - And in 50:5-7, we see His powerful resolve to keep going: **“The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away. <sup>6</sup> I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting. <sup>7</sup> For the Lord GOD will help Me; therefore I will not be disgraced; therefore I have set My face like a flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed.”**
    - That is our indefatigable Saviour!
      - Nothing can stop Him, all because of His zeal for God’s house—because of His love for us and for the Father to whom He brings us!

TRANS> There would be no labour for God without our Nehemiah (Christ) at our head.

- Now, thirdly,

### III. Nehemiah’s initiation of worship points to the zeal of our Lord for God’s house.

A. Now remember what I have often told you... that Jesus is our liturgist.

1. He is the one who calls us to worship God in response to God accepting His sacrifice for our sins.
    - In Hebrews 2:12, He says that He will declare God’s name to us and sing praise with us in the midst of the assembly.
      - To *declare God’s name* is to tell us of God’s character, His saving work, His commandments—it is to tell us all that God has revealed...
      - And to *sing* is to respond to all that He has done with praise and thanksgiving.
  2. In Hebrews 8:2, it says that He is “**a minister [liturgist] of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.**”
    - He is our worship leader.
- B. And you see a full display of this exhibited in Nehemiah.
- It is full of instruction for us!
1. God’s people are called together in a great worshipping assembly and at the heart of it all is the exposition of God’s word.
    - a. We have one of the fullest descriptions of how God’s word is to be used in the worshipping assembly of the Lord.
      - Unlike pagan religion, He has much instruction for us in His word—including not only how we should live, but also the declaration of who He is, of what He has done, and of His gracious promises—and of the way of salvation.
        - The essence is captured in chapter 8:8 where it says of the leaders: “**So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading.**”
    - b. The Bible is meant to be read to the congregation in their own language.
      - The ministers of the word are not some elite caste of priests that interpret the word that is too deep for the people to understand...
        - No, their task is to show the congregation what the word says—to open the word so the people can see what the word says.
      - The papal church was in a grievous error when they began to tell the people that it was up to the priests to tell people the truth because the word could not be understood by the average man.
        - Instead of opening scripture, they began to teach their own doctrine—and it was doctrine such as that salvation could be obtained by donating money or by viewing relics or praying to the saints.
          - They did not get it right—Nehemiah and Ezra got it right.
            - The word is to be preached so that all can understand it!
- The people are greatly moved by the word.
    - They are broken over their sin and weep but are told to rejoice before the Lord and to feast (8:9-12)
2. We also see the people responding with praise and prayer and confession.
    - The prayer in chapter 9 is a great example of all of these as you have the voice of one leading the whole congregation in prayer.
      - It is a great prayer to study, but here is a brief outline...
    - a. The prayer opens with praise to God who is **exalted above all blessing and praise** (9:5).

- b. It continues with a recitation of His covenant mercy to His people in calling Abraham their father and then bringing them out of Egypt and giving them the law and the land.
  - c. Next there is a confession of how their fathers were unfaithful—the theme is captured in verse 28: **“But after they had rest, they again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies...”**
    - That is the way we have been as God’s people to this day—
      - We always seem to drift away.
      - If He did not continue to restore us, we would have perished long ago.
      - Jesus is at our head, ever faithful, ever anchoring us to God, ever reeling us in again.
  - d. And so in view of God’s restoring grace, they cry out to Him in verses 32-35 to have mercy on them despite all their sin.
3. And then they do something else that we looked at this morning...
- Something that God’s people have often done when they return to Him.
    - They made a covenant with Him.
    - The covenant is presented in chapter 10.
  - The essence of the covenant is captured in 10:29: **These joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:**
    - The *curse and the oath* means that they ask God to judge them if they do not do what they have promised.
    - And their promise it to keep God’s commandments.
  - Notice the three things they specifically promise: not to intermarry, to keep the Sabbath, and to tithe so that the worship of the Lord might continue.
    - Those are the three things that always seem to be the first things to go when God’s people drift away—
      - they become attracted to unbelievers and intermarry with them...
      - they neglect the Sabbath—worship is not important to them...
      - and they stop supporting the church with their tithes.

TRANS> All of this worship and repentance seems to have come about as a result of Nehemiah’s zeal for God’s house.

- His coming and His leadership, along with Ezra’s (Ezra representing Christ as priest and Nehemiah representing Him as our king)
  - brings about this beautiful worship.
- This is what happens when our Lord restores His house.
  - There would be no worship like this apart from our Nehemiah, Jesus Christ, at our head.
  - Because of Him, there is a covenant in which we promise not to intermarry with unbelievers, profane the Lord’s Day, and neglect our tithes.
- This brings us to the fourth thing that Nehemiah points to about Christ.

#### IV. Nehemiah's corrective discipline points to the zeal of our Lord for God's house.

A. In chapter 13, we have Nehemiah correcting the very things that the people promised to do in the covenant they entered into in chapter 9.

- The three problems I mentioned that always seem to appear when we start to drift away from the Lord.
- 1. In 13:10-14, Nehemiah deals with the neglect of the tithe...
  - The Levites had to become farmers because they were no longer being supported by the tithes of the people.
  - In verse 11-12, Nehemiah says: **So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place.** <sup>12</sup> **Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.**
  - You can say that you love God and the gospel of Christ,
    - but if you are unwilling to give a tithe to support the worship of God, your words are empty.
- 2. In 13:15-22, Nehemiah deals with the neglect of the Sabbath...
  - He finds people working and buying and selling.
    - In verse 17, it says: **Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?"**
    - He demands that the gates be closed on the Sabbath and drives away the foreign merchants who show up to do business.
- 3. In 13:23-30, Nehemiah deals with the problem of marriage to unbelievers.
  - You can see his great zeal—let me read to you from verse 23
    - **13:23-29: In those days I also saw Jews *who* had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, *and* Moab. <sup>24</sup> And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. <sup>25</sup> So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, *saying*, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. <sup>26</sup> Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. <sup>27</sup> Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?" <sup>28</sup> And *one* of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, *was* a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; therefore I drove him from me. <sup>29</sup> Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.**
  - Did Nehemiah the governor overreact here?
    - He did not.
    - He realised that these sins were going to lead the people away from the Lord—to ruin them as God's people—to bring them back into the condition they were in when God had to drive them from Jerusalem for their sins.
    - He did this because he loved them and he saw how destructive their behaviour was to the city of God.

TRANS> But oh how prone God's people are to these sins!

B. It is remarkable how quickly the people go astray when Nehemiah returns to serve King Artaxerxes for a time.

1. From what we can tell, Nehemiah was gone for about twelve years.
  - This can be ascertained from his comments in 13:6 where he mentions that he had been away until the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes—
    - and that upon his return he found that the storeroom for the tithes had been turned into an apartment for one of his enemies, Tobiah, who had tried to stop the rebuilding of the walls.
    - And he was there because of a wicked priest named Eliashib who had intermarried with Sanballat's family.
      - You can see in this one circumstance intermarriage and the neglect of the tithes for the Levites.
2. It seems that the people could not get along without Nehemiah.
  - a. It was only because he came in the first place that the walls were rebuilt and that the people repented of their intermarriage and neglect of the Levites and the worship of God.
  - b. And as soon as he left, everything returned to disorder again...
    - intermarriage, no tithes, profaning of the Sabbath...
    - The very things that bring the church down today again and again.
  - c. It is only because of Nehemiah's return that all this is restored.

C. What are we to learn from this dependence on Nehemiah?

1. We are to learn of our dependence on Jesus Christ.
  - He stands alone in His zeal for the house of God!
  - No one else is able to sustain zeal as He does.
2. As soon as we lose sight of Christ, we go to ruin! It is pitiful.
  - We start to marry unbelievers, we stop tithing, and we stop keeping the day that God has appointed for us to worship Him.

**Conclusion:** How glad we should be for the zeal of our Lord Jesus for God's house!

- Where would we be without it?
  - I tell you where we would be—far, far from God!
- Without His zeal for God's house,
  - there would be no sacrifice for sin—he never would have come to redeem us—why should He if not for His burning desire to see us restored to God?
  - And without zeal, we would have drifted into complete apostasy long ago.
- Nehemiah repeatedly asks the LORD to remember him when he restores God's house.
  - In fact, the very last verse in Nehemiah is: **“Remember me, O my God, for good!”**
  - That is the prayer of Jesus Christ...
    - In a way far more significant, the city of God is blessed because the Father remembers what our Lord Jesus Christ has done to restore us.
  - We should join Him in praying that God will remember Him.
    - That for our sake, the Father would remember His Son because without Him, we are have no standing with God as His church.