

SLOW FOOD: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH (37 studies)

Leadership is crucial. Whether the situation is a generally hopeful one that depends upon onward progress, or a depressing or even threatening one that urgently needs a decisive injection of energy, without a leader (or leaders) nothing will really happen and in the end the forces of destruction or sheer inertia will triumph. Ezra and Nehemiah were two such leaders who under 'God's good hand' (Ezra 7:6, Neh 2:8 etc) carried forward the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the teeth of furious opposition. John Goldingay however reminds us that this book is not about leadership as such, or if it is, 'it is interested in God's leadership, not ours' (*Nehemiah for Everyone* p99). Whether we are leaders or not, then, we can gain an understanding of the pressures involved and the essential character of the faith that wins through in the end.

The broader historical context is the return of the Jewish people to their home city after the Exile. The Babylonian kings had conquered Jerusalem and deported most of the people of Judah successively in 605, 597 and 587 (all dates are BC/BCE, so next year is numerically *lower* than this year). Then in 539 king Cyrus of Persia captures Babylon and brings its empire under the control of the new dynamic Medo-Persian regime. In the very next year, 538, Cyrus decrees that all exiles should return to their own cities. This immediately releases the first wave of Jews to return and to start rebuilding Jerusalem. By 516 the Second Temple has been consecrated, but not completed, and much of the city rebuilt. There is then an unexplained (but, given the strength of feeling among the neighbours, not inexplicable) stagnation of some sixty years until a second wave of exiles under Ezra the scribe is sent by the Persian king Artaxerxes I in 458 to establish a coherent government in Jerusalem. This movement too attracts fierce opposition and considerable parts of the city, including much of the defensive system of walls, but not the Temple itself, are dismantled (as described in the excursus of Ezra 4:7-23, which may act as a useful prologue to these studies). In late 446 Nehemiah, an official in king Artaxerxes' court at Susa, hears this news from one of the exiles. The book of Nehemiah describes his and the king's response, resulting in Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem and his twelve-year governorship (445-433) during which the walls are completed in the teeth of powerful enemies; a further visit by Nehemiah around 430 completes the repopulation and full fortification of Jerusalem. This set of studies therefore centres around the leader's calling to and vision for the work, his or her selection and equipping of a resourceful team, encouragement of the people in the face of discouragement, shrewd and energetic resistance to

the forces of opposition, and above all relationship to the God in whom one believes and trusts for the completion of the task.

Useful commentaries include: Derek Kidner *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Tyndale 1979); H G M Williamson in the *New Bible Commentary* (IVP 4th ed 1994); John Goldingay *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther for Everyone* (SPCK 2013). Alan Redpath's *Victorious Christian Service* (Pickering & Inglis 1971) looks at the book from a devotional angle.

Slow Food studies, which are suitable for busy teachers and others, break down a passage of Scripture into short manageable sections with one leading question on each section. They are not designed, though they may be adapted, for detailed expository analysis. Cross-references (listed in Biblical order, and normally restricted to three) chase up ideas in the section; in Old Testament studies these references may help us relate the passage to our faith in Christ even if his name is not mentioned. The first person singular is normally used, in order to encourage personal application; for group study it can be pluralised. Studies may be combined as desired.

1:1-3 How bad had things got for Jerusalem? Are things bad where I am? *Ezra 4:7-23; Isa 10:20-23; Zech 4:10a; 2 Cor 1:8-9.*

1:4-7 What is Nehemiah's attitude as he brings this news before God? What about mine? *Ps 79:1; Ps 80:14-19; Dan 9:12, 18; Isa 57:15.*

1:8-11 How can I know enough about God's purposes in Christ to be able to pray according to his will? *Jn 15:15-16; Rom 8:26-28; 1 Jn 3:19-24.*

2:1-8 What inclines the king to be favourable to Nehemiah's request? Why might God listen to my prayer requests? *Prov 21:1; Dan 2:20-23; Heb 7:25.*

2:9-16 What discouragements does Nehemiah face when he arrives in Jerusalem? If I am facing an apparently hopeless task, what first steps could I take? *Isa 41:10; Zech 1:16; 4:6-9; Mk 11:22-25.*

2:17-20 What can I learn from Nehemiah's attitude to his friends and to his enemies? *Ps 124; 1 Cor 16:9.*

3:1-32 What is instructive about the way Nehemiah proportions the tasks to the available workers? (Most of the place and people names will be unfamiliar, but there seems to have been a wide measure of support for N's project.) *Exod 18:13-25; Num 11:16-17.*

4:1-6 Am I knocked off my stride by bluster and ridicule from influential people? *1 Sam 17:41-47; Acts 17:32; 1 Pet 4:14-16.*

4:7-14 How do I deal with intimidation and discouragement of the 'workforce'? *Exod 14:10-14; Ps 27:1-6.*

4:15-23 If God was fighting for them (v20), why did they need weapons and armour (v16)? *Josh 23:10; Joel 3:9-10; Eph 6:10-20.*

5:1-5 Do I try to understand the economic and social pressures on those in my team? Is the Lord interested in that kind of thing? *Dt 15:7-8; 2 Ki 4:1-7; Acts 6:1-6; Acts 11:28-30.*

5:6-13 How does Nehemiah strike a balance between cool analysis and hot indignation? Do I err on either side? *Ps 39:1-3; Prov 17:27-28; 2 Cor 5:13-14a.*

5:14-19 What kind of practical outcomes should 'the fear of God' (v15) have in my life? *Lev 25:35-38; Isa 58:6-7; Jas 2:14-17.*

6:1-9 What 'great work' (v3) am I involved in? How do I deal with distractions and invitations to compromise? *Isa 54:17; Col 4:17; 2 Tim 2:4-7.*

6:10-14 If I am being given guidance by officially appointed spiritual or religious authorities, should I always follow it? *Lk 13:31-35; Acts 4:18-20; 1 Thess 5:20.*

6:15-19 How can I ensure that God gets the credit for my success (if any)? *Ps 115:1-3; Ps 126:2; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 3:5.*

7:1-4 If I believe in Divine protection, is it unspiritual to arrange for human means of protection? *Neh 4:9; Ps 127:1; Zech 2:4-5.*

7:5-73 This section is an almost exact copy of Ezra ch 2. How important is the keeping of accurate records? *Esth 6:1-3; Ps 87; Phil 4:3.*

8:1-8 Is the public reading of God's Word sufficient on its own? *Matt 13:36; 2 Cor 3:14-17; 2 Tim 3:14-17.*

8:9-12 'Holiness and gloom go ill together' (Kidner). Is my religion too solemn? *Dt 16:15; Phil 4:4; 1 Thess 5:15-19.*

8:13-18 Who in my context are 'the heads of fathers' houses' (v13) and what part can they play in furthering the increase of biblical literacy among their people? *Dt 6:6-7; Josh 1:7-8; Tit 1:5-9.*

9:1-5 Why is it important to preserve a healthy balance of scripture, confession and praise in public and private prayer? *1 Chr 29:10-14; Ps 78:1-8; 2 Tim 4:1-4.*

9:6-15 Is this God my God? *Ps 34:6-10; 1 Tim 1:12-17.*

9:16-25 How is the idea of 'grace' illustrated by these verses? *Eph 2:1-10.*

9:26-31 If I go backwards in my allegiance to Christ, is that it? *Lk 22:31-34, 24:34 with Jn 21:15-17; Heb 10:35-39.*

9:32-37 Am I still a 'slave' (v36)? *Jn 8:31-36; Rom 7:21-25; 2 Cor 5:15, 17; 2 Pet 2:19.*

9:38-10:29 What are these families and individuals signing up to do? How 'binding' is my 'agreement' (v38) with Christ? *Rom 6.*

10:30-39 How much does my commitment to Christ cost me in terms of relationships (v30), convenience (v31) and financial outlay (vv32ff)? *2 Sam 24:24; Mt 10:37-39; Mk 10:28-30.*

11:1-12:26 What can I discover from these rather dry catalogues about the character of God's people under Ezra and Nehemiah? (See for example 11:2, 12, 14, 17, 19, 24, 12:24, 25-26.) *Jn 17:20-23; 1 Cor 16:13-14; Eph 4:7-16.*

12:27-43 Am I a stickler for ceremonial, or a sucker for celebration? *2 Sam 6:16-21; Ezra 6:16, 22; Lk 10:17-21; 1 Cor 14:40.*

12:44-47 How important are 'priests and Levites' (v44)? *Mal 2:1-9; 1 Cor 9:7-14; Heb 13:15-17.*

13:1-9 Was Nehemiah right to be intolerant towards someone like Tobiah? Am I too easygoing? (For Tobiah see 2:19, 4:7, 6:12-14, 17-19.) *Mk 11:15-17; Lk 9:49-50; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1.*

13:10-14 How scrupulous am I about making sure God's work is provided for financially? *Mal 3:7-12; 2 Cor 9:6-12.*

13:15-22 How can I keep God's day special? *Isa 58:13-14; Jer 17:19-27; Lk 13:10-17.*

13:23-27 If I need to take a tough line on some issue, how can I honour the teaching of scripture, my own strong convictions and the need to show the fruits of the Spirit? *Lk 9:51-55, with footnote on v55; Jas 1:19-20; 1 Pet 3:13-17.*

13:28-31 Do I share Nehemiah's, and Christ's, passion for the 'establishing' (v30) of his kingdom on earth? *Mt 6:10; Lk 19:41, 45-46; Jas 4:1-10.*

Review 'There is a limit to what our best efforts can achieve and we cannot know what they will in fact achieve. Nehemiah is free to express that anxiety to God and then leave things with God' (Goldingay). List some of the things achieved (or not) under Nehemiah's leadership. Am I too anxious about my own legacy? *2 Tim 1:12, 2:1-2, 3:10-13.*