



**So, I looked for someone ... who
would stand in the gap before
me on behalf of the land**

WEEK SIX – NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah chapters 1-4

Notice the verse from Ezekiel says SOMEONE, not ANYONE. To me that indicates that God will choose only those who have proved themselves not just willing, but able to carry out the task. Nehemiah, one of my favourite Biblical characters, was such a man. The date of this book is roughly 423 BC and in chronological terms it was about 40 years after the book of Esther, though absolute dates are uncertain. It is possible that Esther may have influenced the king to support Nehemiah's plans which makes for an interesting thought, given her willingness to save the Jewish people after becoming Queen in the citadel of Susa.

Chapter 1

As mentioned in our study on Esther, many Jews had chosen to return from exile to their own country. Hanani, a brother of Nehemiah, along with some friends, came back to Susa to visit Nehemiah. The story they told of the broken-down walls and burned gates of Jerusalem, was devastating for Nehemiah to hear.

- **Read verses 4-11**: having wept and mourned for some days, what did he then do?
- Is this how we respond to unsettling events in our lives? I suspect for many of us we might get there eventually, but Nehemiah after fasting and praying turned to his only source of help and comfort: God.
- What was Nehemiah's confession?

Recently, I have read articles in the local paper about people who have committed horrendous crimes. Their defence lawyers always try to mitigate their deeds by explaining that they have had a difficult life; maybe parents divorcing, illness, drugs, drink and so on. Whilst we should always have compassion for others, there is a point in everyone's life when they are made to face up to the things they have done.

- Remember, God will forgive us for the things we have done and said, provided we not only acknowledge our sin, but we turn our back on it. Repentance means

not just saying sorry, but a complete turnaround so that we go forward on a different path.

We should read those verses through more than once, as there is so much to learn from them about a relationship with God.

Chapter 2

Can any of us truthfully say we have never gone to work a bit down in the mouth? Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer. This was a responsible role as he would have not only have to select and serve the wine to the King, but first taste it. They would probably have enjoyed a relatively close relationship, so when King Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah why he was looking sad, when he clearly was not ill, Nehemiah became fearful. He wanted to ask a huge favour of the king and this did seem a promising beginning.

He tells the King of the destruction of his city, Jerusalem, and when the King asked what he could do, he did not just jump in. Verse 4 says: "*With a prayer to the God of heaven, I replied, If I please your Majesty and if you are pleased with the me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried.*"

We can learn from this. Having a poor attitude to work, or constantly complaining is unlikely to get us anywhere. Nehemiah's testimony was such that the king knew the matter was serious.

I like the way when the King heard Nehemiah's request, that he was all business, asking how long will you be gone and when will you return? Verses 7-9 show that Nehemiah had clearly given much thought to the project he had in mind. I like the NLT version of verse 9 which says, "*The king, I should add, had sent along army officers and horsemen to protect me.*" This man was the king's cupbearer not the holder of an office of state, but again it showed how highly Nehemiah was regarded.

- It is worth reading verses 1-10 again, so we can be encouraged to live out our Christian faith in a similar manner. Jesus says in Matthew 5:15-16: "... **let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**" People notice what you do, often more than what you say.
- Read verses 11-18. What do you notice about Nehemiah's actions? That last verse is important: "*Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king.*" Dealing with issues in a Christ-like way will enable a favourable response: "*Good! Let us rebuild the wall*".

Nehemiah's plan was to plug ALL the gaps in the walls of Jerusalem to make it safe from their enemies and restore their way of life.

- Whenever we decide to do something for God there will doubtless be those who tell us we cannot do it! (verses 19-20). If you are sure that God has given you a specific task, do not let anyone put you off.

Chapters 3 and 4

As Christians in the 21st century, we can learn so much from these chapters. To give you some idea of the size of the task:

Length of walls 4.018 meters (almost 2.5 miles)

Average height 12 meters

Average thickness 2.5 meters

34 watchtowers and 7 main gates

When we read about the people doing the work, we find they were quite unsuited for the job. Sections were being rebuilt by goldsmiths, a manufacturer of perfume and merchants! Nobody dropped tools because it was not the job for which they had been trained. Nehemiah, sensibly, got people to rebuild the walls opposite their own houses. The secret was this: chapter 4:6, ***“for the people had a mind to work.”***

- Are you prepared to work at tasks in the church for which you are seemingly, unqualified?
- Are you prepared to work with people whom you would not have chosen?
- We may not be building physical walls, but we are *‘living stones’*: 1 Peter 4:5 *“... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house”*. We are building God’s church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our gifts will vary, as will our contribution, but the key fact is that everyone of us is vital to the success of this task.

You might say that it is hard, that people do not take you seriously or you are ignored. Let us look again at these two chapters. Three men are mentioned as particular enemies of the Jews who did not want them back in Jerusalem, probably because it would weaken their influence in the area and, the Jews had a powerful God. When the wall was half built up, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, the Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites, became furious and plotted to see how they could bring a halt to this work. They made plans to come and fight against the Jews and bring confusion to the situation. *“But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves”*.

Knowing that attacks could come from any direction, and that the people were becoming tired, Nehemiah came up with a new plan. Each working group was split into two, half would work, and half would stand guard armed with swords, spears, and bows. Nehemiah had at his side the trumpeter and told the people if any attack

happened the trumpet would be blown, and everyone must go to the place of the attack, but that God would fight for them. **The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in 52 days.**

Ephesians 6:10-13 ¹⁰*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.* ¹¹*Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.* ¹²*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* ¹³*Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."*

Our battle may be spiritual rather than physical, but the principle remains the same. God still needs his people to take up spiritual weapons and fight against evil.

Nehemiah was God's man for the hour, the one who would **STAND IN THE GAP ON BEHALF OF THE LAND.**

Prayer

Father God, may we follow the exhortation in Ephesians "... *stand your ground and after you have done everything, to stand.* May we never give up.

