

Wholistic Ministry and Nehemiah

by

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The book of Nehemiah is a fantastic look at wholistic transformation of a community. The primary architect of this transformation was Nehemiah, who served as the cupbearer to Artaxerxes I, king of Persia, in the 5th century B.C.

The Problem

Change, at least in ministry, should not be accomplished for the sake of change. Rather change should be sought when a problem exists for which existing plans and actions have proven inadequate.

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 1:1-4 (NIV)

What was the problem? Some read this and say that the problem was that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were destroyed. This is certainly a problem, but was probably not why Nehemiah wept. Why is that?

- Nehemiah’s primary question was the Jewish remnant, with the situation of Jerusalem listed second. Consistent with this, the reply talked first about the state of the remnant in Judah, and then spoke of Jerusalem. There seems to be no reason to think that the condition of the walls was the primary focus of the questions or the answers.
- By this time, Jerusalem had not had intact walls for 140 years. It could hardly have been a shock that the walls were (still) destroyed. *(Note: It is suggested by some that Nehemiah’s shock was that the modest work on the walls that had been started by Ezra had not only been stopped, but reversed. (See Ezra 4:17-22 and the Wycliff Bible Commentary on Nehemiah).* It seems to this writer to be at best a minor part of the overall concern felt by Nehemiah.

- Even though the rest of the book of Nehemiah places the rebuilding of the walls prominently, this work was only one of many changes Nehemiah accomplished as a leader in Jerusalem, and was a task that covered only a tiny portion of his long career. See Table 1 for a list of numerous problems in Jerusalem and Nehemiah’s response to each.

It seems best to say that Nehemiah’s concern was primarily for the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding province of Judea. One of the symptoms of the difficulties of the people there was the lack of walls and gates. After all, in that period, walls and gates were felt needs of city dwellers.

Needs	Type	Response
Walls	Structure	Chapters 1-4
Debt/Oppression	Economic	Chapter 5:1-13
Taxation	Economic	Chapter 5:14-19
Housing	Structural	Chapter 7:4-73
Ignorance of God’s Law	Spiritual/educational	Chapter 8
Sorrow at Sinfulness	Spiritual/emotional	Chapter 8-9
Populate outward	Social (multiplication)	Chapter 11
Temple problems	Leadership	Chapter 12:44 – 13:13
Breaking of Laws	Social	Chapter 13:15-30

Table 1. Problems in Jerusalem and Nehemiah’s Responses

Nehemiah’s Response

Nehemiah’s immediate response, according to verse 4 is three fold:

- | | |
|-----------|--------------------|
| -Mourning | Emotional response |
| -Fasting | Physical response |
| -Praying | Mental response |

Chapter 1 verse 4 states that these three things were done “before the God of Heaven”, so these were spiritual actions. How long did this all take? Verse 4 says that it covered “some days”. But the time difference between Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1 was about 4 months. Certainly, this was not non-stop. He was a full-time employee of the king. He had to work, he had to eat, he had to appear happy before the king. During this time we know that he also strategized and planned. How do we know this? First, that last verse of his prayer showed that he had been planning.

“... O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.’ I was cupbearer to the king.”
– Nehemiah 1:11 (NIV)

“This man”, mentioned in verse 11, was Artaxerxes I. Nehemiah recognized he needed the king’s help to be part of solving the problem in Jerusalem. (It is refreshing to see one who prays to God to be part of God’s solution for problems, rather than seeing one who uses prayer to “wash one’s hands” of a problem. One who says “I am ready to serve” rather than “It’s not my problem.”) Second, chapter two shows that Nehemiah had already done research as to time and resources needed to carry out his plan.

But why did Nehemiah need the help of the king? Nehemiah had:

No time No money No authority

Nehemiah had no time. He was the cupbearer to the king. His time was not his own... but the king’s. He had no money. Perhaps he was wealthy by the standards of the day (cupbearers did have high status in oriental courts) but he certainly was not wealthy enough to carry out this size of a task. Most importantly, he had no authority. A previous king of Persia stopped wall construction (Ezra 4:17-22) and it would take the word of the king to allow it to restart; and it would take the coordination of many people and government entities to collect materials and support labor.

Since Nehemiah had no time, money, or authority, maybe it would be foolish of him to seek to minister to his people. However, Nehemiah, in those critical four months, must have recognized that he had some characteristics that made him uniquely capable to be part of God’s plan to minister to the people of Jerusalem. These would include:

- **Access to (and trust of) the king of Persia; and thus, access to secular resources.**
- **Understanding of how to organize and lead major projects.**
- **Access to God; and thus, access to spiritual resources and divine empowerment.**

The king could provide the money, time, and resources that Nehemiah needed. As a cupbearer, the king trusted Nehemiah with his life (poison was the assassins’ greatest weapon at that time). Additionally, Nehemiah worked in the court of the king and was, probably, a confidante of the king. That certainly provided him with a great education in how things are accomplished. Yet all of these things, as important as they are, pale to the importance of acting in accordance with the will of God. The rabbi Gemaliel spoke truthfully regarding God and the apostles when he said,

“Leave these men alone. Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” -Acts 5:38-39 (NIV)

Looking at Figure 1, we can see a fair bit of what Nehemiah did when facing the problem. The immediate response was emotional (mourning), physical (fasting), and mental (praying). However, all these were directed to God. God has no interest in these things as acts of mere outward piety. (See Mark 12:40; Matthew 6:16). In fact, Isaiah 58 and Micah 6 suggest that acts of piety are meaningless if disconnected from seeking justice and mercy for those in need. Clearly Nehemiah was seeking to help those in need. This initial response apparently led to strategizing, analyzing, and planning. This intermediate response is suggested by the nature of his prayer in the latter part of chapter 1. It is also suggested by the knowledge and understanding



Figure 1. Nehemiah's Response

he showed in chapter 2. This is not to say that this step is disconnected from God. The prayer in chapter 1 is clearly tied to this response. Further, Nehemiah himself noted that the plan given to him was from God and empowered by Him (Nehemiah 2:12, 18 among others) Strategizing, analyzing, and planning have little value unless it is tied to action, implementation and evaluation of the plan. However, this also is not disconnected from God. Numerous places, such as Nehemiah 2:4-5, show his reliance on God throughout.

Problems

Problems are always with us. Those that think that a “victorious Christian life” is without problems simply have not read their Bibles very closely, nor have seen the world around them. One might group problems into two categories (actually there are many ways they can be categorized):

Good problems and **Bad problems**

Bad Problems are the difficulties that occur when bad things come our way (due to our actions, the actions of others, or otherwise). Good Problems are the difficulties that occur when good things come our way. Good problems can be as troublesome as bad problems. If one’s church grows rapidly, this is great, but can still result in a lot of problems regarding space, polity, finances, and more. Also good problems and bad problems are often interconnected. Good things occur and this causes a bad response from someone creating a bad problem.

Reading the passages listed in Table 2 gives the following insights:

- **Good news often proceeds problems. Sometimes problems come without good news as well.**
- **Problems do not necessarily mean that God is not on your side. Problems are always here.**
- **Our response to problems is critical to serving God.**

Good News	Problem	Response
2:7-9	2:10	Foreshadow of problems ahead
2:17-18	2:19	2:20
3	4:1-3	4:4-5
4:6	4:7-8	4:9
4:9	4:10-12	4:13-22
----	5:1-5	5:6-13
----	6:1-7	6:8-9
----	6:10	6:11-14

Table 2. Nehemiah’s Problems

Capacity Analysis

Capacity analysis is the investigating of the problem and solution in line with the community’s ability. Generally community developers would point out that it is best when a community uses its own resources to solve its own problems. It is not good for communities to think that they cannot progress unless there our resources coming in from the outside.

Chapter 2 shows Nehemiah investigating the remains of the wall. No matter how good your intel is, there is no substitute for personal observation. He kept his mission silent until he has seen the scope of the problem. One should not promise what one cannot keep. One should not seek help from the local community until one knows what help is needed. We don’t know exactly the conclusions that Nehemiah came to, but his actions could suggest the following:

Existing (Internal) Resources	External Resources Needed
Manpower	
Stones	Timbers
Mid and Lower-level leadership	Top-level leadership

Table 3. Capacity Analysis

Looking at Table 3, it seems that Nehemiah found that there was adequate manpower to do the work. Chapter 2 says that he was in Jerusalem three days observing things and inspecting the wall secretly until he felt confident to go before the local leaders. He apparently found adequate stones. The toppling of the walls of Jerusalem most likely left many stones intact. Jerusalem is in a very rocky part of Israel so unhewn rocks would also be plentiful if necessary. Nehemiah also found adequate mid and lower-level leadership. After his inspection he spoke to the local leaders of Jerusalem who accepted his plan enthusiastically. Then chapter three shows the lower level leadership organizing teams to work on repairing the wall.

However, no matter how much one may want a community to solve its own problems, it may lack capacity in some ways. Timbers were lacking. The gates had been burned so new wood must be obtained. Nehemiah had already recognized this and got authorization from Artaxerxes I to get timbers from the royal forest reserves. The work also required some top-level leadership. A number of the most capable leaders in the area, such as Sanballat and Tobiah, were opposed to the work, so Nehemiah took the project lead.



Figure 2. Resource Utilization

The capacity analysis of Nehemiah led to maximizing the use of community resources and limiting the use of outside resources to what is truly needed. The result was a wall that the community could have pride in and ownership of. The wall of Jerusalem was maintained and expanded locally for another 400 years. If Nehemiah had had the wall built with completely outside resources (if this was even possible), the wall might have been built but the people probably would not have had a sense of owning the wall. Neither would they recognize their own capacity for producing it and maintaining it.

Wholistic Community Transformation

Returning to Table 1, we see that the building of the walls was only one of several things Nehemiah did to transform the community. When one looks at what was done and when it was done, there appears to be some patterns. It should be noted that all of the problems existed from the beginning, but they were not dealt with at the same time but at appropriate times. Two patterns to consider.

- Nehemiah was more focused on felt needs at first. The people felt they needed a city wall, relief from usury and taxes, and adequate housing. Once these felt needs were dealt with, Nehemiah moved towards spiritual and societal problems. With these latter problems, it is likely the people were generally unconcerned with them at first, and yet many of these were more important than whether they had a wall or not.

- Nehemiah focused on easy things first. We think of a wall as difficult to build. In some ways it was. Yet, since he had the materials, manpower, and authority, it was fairly simple to do it. The same with changing rules regarding taxes and usury. He had the authority to make these happen. However, later changes required a change of attitude in others or challenging the local leadership. These are difficult things. It is interesting that Nehemiah appears to have used the leaders for the early reforms. These same leaders he later challenged. By building a pattern of success with easier tasks, Nehemiah developed influence to allow him to take on more difficult reforms later.

It would seem that these provide good principles to follow when possible. Prioritize concerns the community has. The community is more ready to support working on what they value. Of these concerns, prioritize those that you are well suited to achieve based on your experience, resources, and authority. Later on one can (and should) expand to changes that are needed, but may not be immediately appreciated by the community