

Characteristics of a True Reformer

Nehemiah 1:1-4 HCSB The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the fortress city of Susa, (2) Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah, and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had returned from exile. (3) They said to me, "The survivors in the province, who returned from the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned down." (4) When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Let's begin by laying down some groundwork shall we?

Nehemiah. "Nehemiah" means "The LORD comforts." The name had been given to him decades before his great work. It was apparently given to him under the impulse of the Holy Spirit because Nehemiah would indeed revive the spirit of the discouraged exiles and bring them hope.¹

In the twentieth year. Since Nehemiah was a high-ranking official in the Persian court and for his entire life reported to the Persian king, this is doubtless reckoned in Persian, regnal years.



The twentieth year Nehemiah refers to would have been during the reign of Artaxerxes I.² The twentieth year of Artaxerxes I was 445 BC.

King Artaxerxes had just gone through a tough fifteen years. In 460 BC there had been a revolt in Egypt that was not quelled until 455. Three years before Nehemiah's call to Jerusalem, in 448, Megabyzus, satrap of TransEuphrates, rebelled but was later reconciled to the king.

Why is this significant? Its significance lies in the fact that at this point the king of Persia would have been interested in having loyal supporters in Jerusalem in case of more trouble in Egypt or anywhere in the west³

On the other hand, that meant that when Nehemiah's enemies later threatened to tell the king he was rebelling,⁴ there was good reason to think that the king might fall for the ruse!

¹ cf. Isa 57:14–21

² http://www.fouman.com/history/img/Coin_Ardashir_Artaxerxes_I_Makrocheir.jpg

³ Breneman, Mervin: *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. electronic ed. Nashville : Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1993 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 10), S. 169

⁴ Nehemiah 6:6

Fortress city of Susa. Susa is one of the oldest-known settlements of the region, probably founded about 4000 BC; though the first traces of an inhabited village date back to 7000 BC. Susa is mentioned in the Ketuvim, mainly in Esther but also once each in Nehemiah and Daniel. Both Daniel and Nehemiah lived in Susa during the Babylonian captivity of Judah of the 6th century BC. Esther became queen there, and saved the Jews from genocide.⁵ A tomb presumed to be that of Daniel is located in the area, known as *Shush-Daniel*. The tomb is marked by an unusual white, stone cone, which is neither regular nor symmetric. It was here that Daniel had his famous vision of the end times and the coming Antichrist.



Nehemiah was presented with a great challenge, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. As we approach our own challenge, the expansion of our church so that our growth can continue unhindered, it would be enlightening to see what type of people we must be in order to succeed. What are the characteristics of a true reformer?

1. Our motives must be pure.

Personal ambition must be set aside for the sake of the public good. Selfish motives must be replaced with generous impulses. Reward is not our goal. Our goals are pursuit of truth, of increased freedom to serve our God, the furtherance of God's kingdom, and the glorification of our King.

There once was a general by the name of Terence who served Emperor Valens well. In reward the emperor told Terence to ask for whatever he wanted. General Terence asked only that the church be delivered of her Arian foes. Emperor Valens tore up the request and insisted that General Terence ask something for himself. General Terence replied that he would never ask anything for himself if he might not prevail for the Church.

Any power, prestige, influence, or increased resources we may have are to be placed at the feet of the Master. They are to be sublimated to the interests of Hashem's people.

In the process of the construction, no vital principle may be sacrificed. We may not cut corners. We may not lie to the city or the state. Dinah d'malchuta dinah (the law of the land is the law) applies as much to the construction process as it does to any other law the magistrate demands we follow. Honoring the emperor, praying for those who lead us, obeying the laws of the land; all these must guide us as we move forward.

2. Our sympathies must be generous.

Our ears must be open to the cry of the distressed. We cannot have as our goal the building of a monument to our own glory. We are not building another tower of Babel here. Our hearts must be tuned to the thousands in our county who have not yet bowed the knee to their rightful King.

Last week we saw all that we had in Christ.⁶ Granted, we have brothers and sisters in Christ who do not worship with us here in this congregation. We are not so arrogant as to believe that salvation lies only within these four walls. However, we recognize that thousands

⁵ <http://mw2.google.com/mw-panoramio/photos/medium/8861525.jpg>

⁶ In Christ We Have; Hebrews 1:1-3

of people in our county are not in possession of a right relationship with the Messiah and as a result are without God, without eternal life, without light, without promise, and without hope.

Are we so complacent that we no longer care for these people? Are we going to limit the growth of our congregation so that we can be comfortable in knowing everyone in it? Why do we fear growth? Why do we ignore the proverb that teaches that a growing population is our glory while a dwindling population is our doom?⁷

Our hearts must be deeply affected by the state of affairs. Nehemiah sat down and wept. He mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Where is OUR passion? Where is our sympathy for the plight of the people around us? What can be said of a person who can gaze without feeling upon the souls of men and women bound for hell? What hope is there for such a person? How could such a person even claim to be a disciple of Christ?

The Messiah saw our plight in Egypt and sent Moses to deliver us. Not content with that, He came Himself in the form of an angel and the Shekinah glory. He stood between us and our enemies and led us to freedom on the other side of the Red Sea. We must equally stand in the gap between the lost of this county and their prowling, roaring enemy. We must lead them to the foot of the cross.

In order to deal with thousands, we must make room for thousands. In order to reach thousands, we must have adequate resources. Does your faith falter before such statements? Nehemiah managed to build a city wall that stood for a thousand years in a span of 52 days. How? How did he manage such a feat? Two things were involved: the blessing of God and teamwork.

We must be willing to sacrifice in order to achieve. Nehemiah fasted for days. What are we willing to do without? Some here will refuse to sacrifice their comforts for the sake of a great cause. Some here will refuse to sacrifice their schedules even for church attendance, as though they have something more important than God and God's people to attend to.

No athlete ever achieved anything without sacrifice. No successful business was ever built without personal sacrifice. Anything worth having is worth sacrificing for.

- **Matthew 13:44-46 HCSB** "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field. (45) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. (46) When he found one priceless pearl, he went and sold everything he had, and bought it.

3. Our spirits must be devout.

We must recognize the legitimacy of human authority.

Nehemiah's principle concern was not the emancipation of Israel from Artaxerxes' rule. He was not trying to keep them from having to pay taxes. He did not encourage rebellion against the lawful government. He sought the moral as well as the material welfare of the people.

Yet Adonai is the ultimate authority and those who seek to eliminate God from human affairs will soon discover that ALL authority, including their own, will soon be brought into question. Thus, the one who seeks to eliminate God from national influence can be no patriot. As the Master told Pilate, any authority that the government has is delegated by God. As it was given, so it can be removed.

To be devout is not merely to read our Bibles, observe the festivals, and claim the name of the Master. To be devout is also to recognize the legitimate authority of those whom Yahweh Melek has assigned to be our leaders.

⁷ Proverbs 14:28

We must recognize the superiority of Hashem's rule. We obey men as long as they do not ask us to disobey God. His rule takes precedence. His goals must be our own and His goals include the salvation of ALL of mankind, not just two hundred.

We also must take heart in the superiority of His rule. If omnipotence is His, then nothing can withstand Him. If He wants a great church to stand in this county then the devil himself will not be able to do a single thing about it. If God decrees that a bastion of the faith stand against the forces of evil in our county then all the resources of the universe are available to those who align themselves with His cause.

We must regard prayer as the appointed means by which Divine aid is secured. Nehemiah did not immediately proceed to requesting King Artaxerxes' aid. First, Nehemiah went to his TRUE king, Yahweh Melek. Had God not granted His blessing, Nehemiah could have gone to every human sovereign on the planet – in vain.

Nehemiah was not lazy. He did not use his belief in the omnipotence of God as an excuse to not pray, to not fast, not seek the face of the Lord. Too many disciples are fatalistic. They look at the onslaught of materialistic humanism with dismay but do not raise their voices. They consider the rise in anti-semitism and atheism in our government to be a hateful thing but they do not vote. They know of the plight of the lost souls but do not drop to their knees and raise indignant prayers to the throne of God and cry out "How long, O God, will you allow this to continue?" They do not attend Ma'ariv on Saturday nights. They do not attend the men's prayer meeting before church on Sundays. For too many disciples, prayer is relegated to a brief, succinct, and repetitious prayer before meals. Maybe they proceed to a half-hearted, groggy prayer as they are falling asleep at night but not much more.

Project Nehemiah is not primarily going to be a financial challenge. It will not be a technical challenge. Do not be confused about this brothers and sisters. Project Nehemiah is above all a spiritual battle. It is a spiritual battle to gather more resources in order to be able to snatch ever more souls from the clutches of the devil. Do not be deceived. The devil will resist us every way he can and we are far too weak to fight him on our own. Even Michael the archangel does not dare bring an abusive condemnation to the devil but says, "the Lord rebuke you!"⁸

In the coming months we must make prayer an ever greater priority. We must storm the throne room of heaven. We must raise such an outcry against the devil in our county that Jesus Himself, like He did at Sodom, will want to come down to see what the fuss is about.⁹ Our hope is not in our wallets. Our hope is not in our own wisdom or skill. Our hope is in the Lord. We must make that clear in our prayer lives.

Conclusion:

In order to be effective reformers in this county we are going to have to have:

- Pure motives
- Generous sympathies
- And devout spirits.

We are going to have to:

- open our ears to the cry of the spiritually distressed,
- allow our hearts to be deeply affected by the state of affairs,
- be willing to sacrifice if need be,
- remain appropriately subordinate to legitimate authority,
- while holding to Hashem's superior claim to our loyalties,

⁸ Jude 1:9

⁹ Genesis 18:20-21

- and be the most audacious prayer warriors heaven has ever known.

My prayer is that we are up to that task – that we answer that call.