*DEVOTIONS*

August 14 - 19

*People of God: Nehemiah*

**Monday, August 14 Nehemiah 1:1 – 2:20**

*“Send me to Jerusalem to rebuild the city”*

After Cyrus and the Persians conquered Babylon in 539bc, the king issued a decree that commanded the Jews, who had been in Babylonian exile since 586bc, to return home and rebuild the Temple. Their initial efforts to rebuild the Temple were interrupted by opposition from the peoples of the land, but it was eventually completed in 516bc. In 445bc Artaxerxes I sent Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, a task completed within fifty-two days.

From Nehemiah’s point of view, Israel had not yet been restored out of its exile into its homeland. How could one talk of restoration when the walls of the city had gaps in them and when the gates had been burned down? Nehemiah wanted God to continue as redeemer and fulfill the promises he had made to Moses. Holding God to his promises is a way of describing how we do not fail or lose heart or faith in bleak situations. God does not need to be reminded of his promises, but we need to remind ourselves that God’s promises are true, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

*Your promises are true, Lord, and you will fulfill them in your time. Amen.*

**Tuesday, August 15 Nehemiah 3:1 – 4:23**

*“We carried our weapons with us at all times”*

Even though God and the Temple are not mentioned, no sacrifices are offered, and there are no prayers or hymns in chapter three, we see how God works with people from every segment of society to realize fully God’s plans and promises. Nehemiah’s leadership is clear, without his name’s ever being mentioned and without his having to tout his own accomplishments. The whole community participated, and the task of rebuilding the walls and gates of the city was completed.

Chapter four articulates an excellent mixture of the physical and the spiritual in carrying out one’s ministry. Nehemiah responded to the first threat with prayer, but to the second he responded with prayer and the setting up of a guard. Conditions had changed, and Nehemiah did not make the mistake of only praying while neglecting to take concrete actions through which God could provide deliverance. At a time of crisis, he assigned his elite troops, the burden bearers, and the builders themselves to concrete action of self-defense. He proved his enemies wrong when they said, “They are not prepared for what we are going to do to them.”

*We pray and we act, Lord, and you ensure that your will is done. Amen.*

**Wednesday, August 16 Nehemiah 5:1 – 7:7**

*“I called a public meeting to deal with the problem”*

The situation in Jerusalem, with its economy distorted by a great public works project and by a crop failure, contained all the ingredients of an economic disaster. Pledges made against loans were being called in, and people were having to surrender their children and their real estate to cover their debts and to maintain life itself. What made the situation particularly bad was that the creditors were fellow Jews. Even Nehemiah had been involved in making loans.

Nehemiah insisted that this problem involved the whole community, and he called an assembly where he appealed to the creditor’s faith (“Should you not walk in the fear of our God?”) as well as to their pride (“to prevent the taunts of the nations”). But Nehemiah also set an example. He pointed to his own generous policies as governor to illustrate hospitality toward fellow Jews. The people whom he governed were not people who owed him a living, but were in fact his “brothers.” He had treated people generously during his term in office because he honored God and because he had compassion for the people due to their heavy tax burden.

*May I be an example of generosity, Lord, and so bring honor to your name. Amen.*

*DEVOTIONS*

August 14 - 19

*People of God: Nehemiah*

**Thursday, August 17 Nehemiah 8:1 – 9:38**

*“The joy of the Lord is your strength”*

It is good to note the theme of joy in this passage, since we often connect law to legalism or to accusations against us. Reading and teaching the law led to understanding (8:8), but also to great joy (8:12). The first reaction to hearing the law was mourning and weeping, and from one point of view, that was a good and correct understanding, given the gap between God’s law and the people’s poor record in keeping the law. But Ezra and the Levites stressed that this day was not a day of punishment. Rather, it was a day that was considered holy, or set apart, by God.

The joy of the Lord is our strength (8:10). Joy in the Lord reflects dedication to God, commitment to God’s way and to God’s law, faith and trust in God. If one wants refuge from the accusations of the Law, one finds it in reliance on God. The best obedience is not that of slaves before their master. Such obedience comes from fear and hatred and raw exercise of power. The obedience described in this passage is total, involving all the assembly, and it is spontaneous and voluntary. In the keeping of the law there was great rejoicing.

*I obey your law, Lord, because it gives me joy to be your child. Amen.*

**Friday, August 18 Nehemiah 10:28 – 11:4**

*“We promise . . .”*

Between the lines of these verses one can detect serious ethical issues: How does one decide what to do when the law is unclear or when it is silent? In such uncertain times one tries to build on precedents in the tradition to follow the example of leaders in the faith. Today we ask how we can maximize love for God and love for neighbor in new, unprecedented situations. We also need to ask what our sisters and brothers in the faith think so we can achieve consensus as the community of faith.

This passage also focuses on stewardship and the support of worship. When the Temple had been a royal chapel, the king was expected to finance its daily needs. But now there was no king. Sacrifices had to be financed for every evening and every morning; wood had to be provided to keep the flames eternal; and the clergy had to be paid. The people resolved to meet these financial needs. Stewardship includes a commitment to support the house of our God – its worship life, its clergy, its building, its ministry, and its people.

*I promise to obey your Word, Lord, and to support the ministry of my church. Amen.*

**Saturday, August 19 Nehemiah 12:27 – 13:31**

*“I became very upset”*

Through the building of the wall and his reform measures, Nehemiah endeavored to create a separate and holy city or province. While we do not know why Eliashib gave Tobiah a room in the Temple or what Tobiah hoped to do with that room, it is easy to understand that this association of one of Nehemiah’s arch enemies with the Temple was intolerable. Clearly not everyone, not even among the priests, was on the same page with Nehemiah. Eliashib’s actions disrupted the purity of part of the Temple; even worse, it destroyed the financial system that supported the clergy.

Nehemiah’s actions appear intemperate to us at times. He threw Tobiah’s goods out of the temple chamber, threatened Tyrian merchants with physical violence, and virtually lost all control when it came to dealing with those who had married Ashdodite women. But these actions need to be seen in the light of their context. They are clear expressions of the dangers he perceived for the community. He did not take evil lightly.

*Show me how best to combat evil, Lord, so that it will not corrupt me. Amen.*