

## **NEHEMIAH 1**

**Real church building**

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

**Introduction.** We begin today a series of sermons on the book of *Nehemiah*, a servant of the LORD who functioned in rebuilding Jerusalem and restoring Israel in the time after the great exile. I have a number of reasons for this selection for the coming weeks, and it might be good to give some of those reasons.

The first reason is personal: I have never yet preached on this book, and the whole post-exilic time (that is, the time after the Babylonian exile) is a bit of a “white area” for me that needs to be filled in. More importantly, however, the book of Nehemiah (as well as the related book of *Ezra*) gives us important guidance with respect to the work of *church building*, but not as a human effort, for it tells us how the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself a church chosen to everlasting life (as we confess in Lord’s Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism). We read about the requirements for church building, about the difficulty and success of this work, and especially we discover what is needed to function properly as people of the LORD in a world essentially hostile to God.

There is indeed much to learn here, also for today. The situations then and now are not the same. But human nature has not changed. And God is still the same in His counsel and providence. So, even taking all the differences into account between that time and ours, there is much

that is instructive here for us today, more so since Christ has progressed immensely since Nehemiah's time in the gathering of His church. How do we properly build the church of Christ in our time with its great dangers and immense challenges? That will be the question constantly in the background in this series.

This morning, in this introductory sermon, we deal with certain elements in the entire first chapter, in order to get a bit of an idea concerning the person and time of Nehemiah. Let me mention briefly the main sequence of events. After seventy years of exile, the first wave of ex-patriot Israelites had returned to Canaan under Zerubabel and Joshua, the high priest. We know that these people experienced much opposition from those who had taken over the area. Ezra and the second wave of returnees arrived about 80 years later, and they found that the situation in Judah was bad. The temple had been rebuilt, but the returned exiles hardly served the LORD. Instead they had intermingled with the local inhabitants. Ezra was appalled at the deformation he encountered. He took strong measures against it, but we are not sure concerning the success he had. Meanwhile, through political opposition and slick manoeuvring, the enemies of the Jews had managed to put a stop to the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It is in this period of time that Nehemiah comes on the scene.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem about 13 years after Ezra. But many of the same problems still existed: complacency, lack of commitment, conformity to the world, being lax when it came to rebuilding the city of God. Nehemiah, with Ezra, had to face and overcome immense problems. Humanly speaking there was little hope that Israel would ever again function as the faithful people of the LORD.

The book of Nehemiah (an autobiography of sorts) begins with recounting how Nehemiah – still living in Susa, the capital of the Persian empire – receives a visit from men from Judah, among them Hanani, probably Nehemiah's own brother. It is through this visit that the LORD calls Nehemiah to the work of rebuilding Jerusalem. For, lesson number 1, church-building work, even though done through people, is and remains a work of Christ alone. We see here especially two elements.

**Real church building can be done only**

- 1. in true *love* for the church of the Lord; and**
- 2. through a strong *bond* with the Lord of the church.**

1. Nehemiah, living in Susa, receives a visit from relatives and friends from Judah. Probably, since many exiles had not returned to Judah but remained in Babylon, such visits were not uncommon. Nevertheless, it raises a question: why did Nehemiah still live in Susa at this time? Was it not also his duty to return to Jerusalem and help to restore the city and rebuild the ruins of Israel? Those who stayed behind in Babylon certainly did not seem very committed to the cause of God's covenant people. What moved Nehemiah to stay behind, as it were, "sleeping with the enemy"?

It is difficult to answer this question. Many of the former exiles and their descendants had acclimatized very well in Babylonia and area, had settled in, and had made a new life for themselves. They had acquired possessions, position, and security, and did not want to expose themselves to the abuse going on in Canaan. They were quite content with their new home and had little interest in the circumstances of the returned exiles. That's still how it goes: not everyone has the same *love* for the church of the Lord, and therefore not the same commitment either.

However, it is hard to accept that Nehemiah did not have the proper love for the people of the LORD. We do not know exactly what personal reason motivated him to stay in Susa. But we do learn that the LORD uses the person and position of Nehemiah in the king's court (just as the LORD did with Daniel, for example) to benefit the rebuilding of Israel.

When it says in the last verse (11): "I was cupbearer to the king," this is not just an insignificant statement, for the cupbearer was a close and trusted confidant of the king. Is it not the LORD who sometimes positions His children in high places so that they may benefit the gathering of His church? Think of Daniel, Esther, and here Nehemiah. I

think that at times they may have occupied these positions without even really wanting them.

But what is decisive here is not our assumptions concerning Nehemiah's personal motives for staying in Susa. We must conclude from Nehemiah's questions and reactions that he dearly loves the church of the Lord. When these visitors came to see Nehemiah, it says in verse 2: ". . . I *questioned* them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem." These are key words.

I underlined the word "questioned." The verb has a sense of immediacy and urgency. Nehemiah did not ask about all kinds of family relations, how uncle Jack and aunt Jill were doing, whether business was brisk in Bethel, or how the weather had been in Jericho lately – typically the kind of thing we might first ask – but he questioned them about the remnant and the city! He said: tell me (and I would add: first!) about the church in Judah and the city of Jerusalem. First things first, right? The verb also suggests that Nehemiah was very focused and detailed in his questions. It was not an "en passant" polite question, in the sense of "Oh, by the way, how are things in Jerusalem?" but a series of penetrating questions: tell me exactly how it is with the people and the city!

Nehemiah uses the words, "the remnant that survived the exile." That is also a telling formulation. For him these people are not foolish idealists who are following some impossible dream of building again their own nation – like fanatical Zionists – no, he sees these people as the remnant, the people that God has preserved for Himself out of all Israel; those whose hearts were made faithful by God when the opportunity to return home was opened again.

The remnant are not the "left-overs," a motley crew of misguided fools, but the beginning of a new Israel, the basis of the ongoing gathering of God's church. The remnant are those of whom the prophets spoke, the people God would bring to repentance and make faithful to Him. They have survived the exile, that means, they did not go under, like so many other Israelites, but by God's grace survived, kept the faith, and continued to live as God's own people. "Survivors" are people

who have clung to the hope of life and freedom, who have weathered the storm of God's wrath, the perils of alien hostility, and returned to their lawful inheritance.

He also asks at length about *Jerusalem*. The people first, but also the city. And why the city? Because Jerusalem is where God dwells in the midst of His people. Jerusalem is where the temple is located, where the ministry of reconciliation takes place; it is the beloved Zion, of which God Himself had said: For Zion by all men admired, / the LORD has chosen and acquired / On her I will my blessings shed, / her priests I'll with *salvation* dress; / her saints will shout in happiness. / There I will cause, in David's line / a horn to sprout, a lamp to shine (Psalm 132 : 8, 9, 10 – rhymed version). Nehemiah is not just talking about any old city, but about the city of God, the city of David, the city of the great Messiah, the city and kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Tell me exactly how it is with the remnant and the city, the hope and heart of Israel. That is his first concern, for this people and this city have his deep love. He may be physically in Susa, for whatever good reason, but his heart and soul belong with the faithful remnant, are in Zion, belong to God.

Now, of course, this is Old Testament language. The church was the great concern of the prophets of old. But has anything really changed? It was also the first concern of the apostles. Paul spent many anxious days waiting for good news from and about the churches. The first concern of any Christian is the church of Christ and its well-being, is it not? For the ministry of reconciliation must continue. Not so long ago I said to the pre-confession class: the church is never a side-line, never a hobby, never something that receives passing attention as if it were located on the periphery of life. No, the church of Christ, His body, His people, His kingdom, is the main event; it is our life. At the heart of all we think, say, and do, stands Christ and His church-gathering work. That is not “sectarian” or fanatical, that's Biblical. Psalm 137: Jerusalem, for love of you I cry; / my right hand wither if I you deny!

The visitors from Judah give a factual and honest appraisal of the situation. Now I have the impression that Nehemiah probably already

had an idea of what was coming. He knew of the struggles, the opposition, the political manipulations at the king's court. He was right in the middle of everything. But when you hear the real and whole truth from people really in the know, when your worst fears are confirmed, it affects you deeply.

These men do not give an unnecessarily negative account, but tell it like it is. The people? They are in trouble and in disgrace. Jerusalem? The wall is broken down and the gates burned with fire. Bad situation, Nehemiah! The people are in trouble. This probably refers – as we will see in future sermons – to the outward circumstances, the poverty and oppression. We will discover later that there was famine and even slavery. And the word *disgrace* is perhaps a reference to the fact that the people do not serve the LORD as they should. These men are concerned about both the material and spiritual situation of the church.

The church has a material side. It must be a matter of concern to all when the financial obligations of the church are not being met. For this ultimately means that important ministries are not being carried out. But of still greater importance is the spiritual side of the church's life: when people do not care much anymore about serving the LORD. Often the two go together; a church that is not spiritually sound will also be materially weak. That was true in Nehemiah's time and it is still true today.

The visitors also speak about the state of the city. Verse 3b: "The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." What this means is that the city does not offer a refuge to the Israelites. It is no longer, as once before, a place of safety and hope. Once a fortress, it is now a pile of ruins that presents a desolate picture. Behind this lies the question: does God really live in that city, among Israel? The city is the heart of the nation: if it lies in ruins after all these years, what hope is there for Israel's restoration?

I said: Nehemiah will have known some of these things. Regarding the wall and the gates of Jerusalem a letter had come to the king from the governor of Samaria, stating that the Jews were rebellious and refused to pay taxes. This was not true, but the king had nevertheless

decreed that the rebuilding of the city be stopped immediately. Such a decree was irrevocable and had to be carried out. And, apparently, it was done with haste and glee.

This is a devastating report. I have the impression that it is even worse than Nehemiah imagined. Whatever slim hopes he had were now dashed. His worst fears were confirmed. We are now 125 years after the return of the first exiles, but what progress has been made? None! The people of God are indeed being sorely chastised. Sometimes it seems as if the spiral of decline never stops. What is the purpose of the return of the exiles if this is the state of affairs after an entire century?

What is remarkable is what we read in verse 4: "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." This is a simple expression of profound sadness and grief. Nehemiah is deeply moved by the report. Notice the progression: weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying. The initial reaction is to weep audibly. Then it becomes a mourning, a silent grieving. This leads to fasting and prayer. All this demonstrates a deep love for the church, the people of the LORD.

Let us note a few important matters here. I do not read of any anger or self-pity. Nehemiah does not become upset with the LORD and blame Him for Israel's misfortune. I mention this because anger and self-pity are perhaps the most common human reactions to any type of adversity. Both reactions also inhibit or prevent a proper response to adversity. As soon as you become angry at others who are not to blame, a solution is not imminent. Self-pity also prevents an honest assessment of the situation and of the way in which it perhaps may be resolved. Both anger and self-pity are impediments to beneficial action.

We also do not read that Nehemiah becomes paralyzed with despair. His profound grief does not lead to inaction. Christians do not throw in the towel. There is, after the initial weeping, a deepening of the grief, and the man perhaps fell silent as he mourned, but meanwhile he does take proper *action*: he prays to the LORD! Here is the sign of a true child of God: adversity does not silence prayer but *intensifies* it. Nehemiah does not say: well, after 125 years there is still no real



progress, therefore forget about the LORD and His promises . . . no, he multiplies and intensifies his prayers for the people of God.

Sometimes, when we are faced with all kinds of adversity – even and especially when it concerns the expectations that we have about the LORD – we become frustrated, angry, self-pitying, and we stop praying. We tell ourselves that God has given up on us, and this justifies our giving up on God. I have heard it more than once being said: prayer? No, I don't pray much anymore, I don't really know what to say and whether it has any effect. Spiritual paralysis, neatly camouflaged sometimes, sets in. We feel betrayed and we isolate ourselves. I know these human reactions all too well from my own life.

But if it is really love for the church of the Lord that moves us, we never quit. For we know that the church is not our effort or issue. The church is God's masterpiece, His building. Israel is the covenant nation of the LORD. The only thing to do is to take the need in which the church finds itself and to place it before the LORD, who alone can bring about positive change. This is the only proper action of the saints: to place the need of God's people before the LORD Himself. If our life is motivated by a true love for the church of the Lord, then this is sustained and strengthened by a true dependence on the Lord of the church.

2. You can only do something for the church of the Lord if you have a strong bond with the Lord of the church. We see evidence of this bond emerging in Nehemiah's prayer, mentioned in the verses 5 – 11. Already the address of this prayer is very instructive. In verse 4 we read that Nehemiah says: I prayed before the *God of heaven*. And so he also begins his prayer, verse 5: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God . . ." This address shows us that Nehemiah has not for one moment lost faith in the *power* of God. Even this sad report about Israel's condition does not make him waver with respect to God's almighty power. God can do great works, has done them, and will do them again. Just because things do not always (immediately) go the way we want or expect, this does not mean that God is powerless. Nehemiah

still stands in awe of God's majesty and glory as the only God *of heaven*, the God who sits enthroned above all peoples and nations and who governs and directs all things. To be a church builder, you have to believe in the omnipotence, the government and providence of this great God.

The next element in the prayer which we highlight is that Nehemiah also addresses God as the God of the *covenant*, verse 5: "who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands." The God of heaven is not far away but has in His covenant come very close to His people. The covenant is a real and living relationship of love. This is seen in the whole ministry of the covenant, its great promise being the redemption of God's people in the great Mediator of the covenant. Nehemiah still sees that bond of love existing and functioning.

He also realizes that this covenant obligates Israel to respond in love and obedience. And if there is any lack, then it is not with God, but with God's people. Nehemiah's prayer contains a profession of faith but also, importantly, a confession of sin. Verse 6: "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you." If anyone is to be blamed, it is not God, but Israel. Here is a true church builder, indeed.

Notice how Nehemiah expressly makes it a *personal* confession. He does not say: Israel sinned, but we all sinned, including myself and my father's house. He even places emphasis on his personal guilt. The man humbles himself. He takes full responsibility with God's people for the sad situation. You know how easy and tempting it is, when things go wrong in your personal life and also in church life, to blame others. It's not our fault, we say, and we can be full of criticism with respect to others who have failed and disappointed us. But God cannot use such people in His church-building work. To build the church, you need first of all humility. You require a close bond with the Lord of the church, a bond that is based on profession of faith and confession of sin. You take responsibility, and never shove that off on others.

Nehemiah also understands the seriousness of the sin of Israel, verse 7: "We have acted *very wickedly* toward you!" It is a matter of knowing, as Lord's Day 1 says, how great my sins and misery are. Church builders do not mask reality, or downplay their culpability; they take full responsibility for their actions and see them clearly in the light of God's Word. For Nehemiah adds that God's law was made quite clear and explicit through Moses. God did not give uncertain directions; Israel stubbornly refused to follow God's clearly revealed will. It is the same confession as in Psalm 79: the misdeeds of our fathers *and* our transgressions. Ongoing sin, accumulated guilt, despite clear direction and many blessings – sadly, the history of the church is filled with this.

And then in the verses 8 – 11 Nehemiah comes with a moving petition: "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses . . ." And he means clearly: God's covenant promises. If the people return to the LORD and His ways, He will be merciful to them. He pleads on God's own promises for God's undeserved grace.

Here you have a profile of a true church builder. He is a man who has a strong bond with the Lord of the church, a personal bond experienced also in the fellowship with God's people. He professes God's almighty power. He confesses his own sin. He pleads on God's promises. And he seeks comfort only in God's grace. The love for the church of the Lord does not come by itself; it results from a bond with the Lord of the church.

The Lord seeks humble people, who love His church, who trust His promises and depend on His grace alone. Such people will always find a way to serve the upbuilding of the church. They do not put themselves in the forefront; it is God who brings them to the fore, especially in time of need.

The close bond with the Lord of the church is seen in true faith and simple prayer. Church building is based on prayer. It is not done in our own strength, but in full dependence on God. Only people who humble themselves in this kind of prayer are useful to God. Others are a hindrance to Him.

I think that this was made even clearer by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He lived and functioned only through prayer, through complete and total dependence on the Father. Christ's love for His church flowed from a strong bond with the Father, a perfect bond, for he was without sin. And if you give yourself to God in this way, there is no limit to what you can do for the church of the Lord.

We remain limited by our weakness and sins. But in faith we can work and succeed. Only Christ could give unlimited, perfect service. That is why He is the only Mediator, the perfect Saviour, the one Head of the church. But through Him, through the bonding fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we, too, can become church builders, also in our time.

Then we know that those who pray must also *work*. Nehemiah makes clear in this prayer that he will take action (verse 11): "Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man." Nehemiah will go to the king. It's a dangerous undertaking to attempt to have a royal decree revoked. He could be punished for gross insubordination. But he will go with God. His mind is made up, his mission clear, his program determined. Indeed, prayer is not an escape route from responsibility, but a way of proper involvement in the building of the church. Prayer revitalizes, motivates, and activates God's children to the work of serving in the kingdom of heaven.

We are not Nehemiah, and our time is different. But we are all called to be church builders. Even more so today, because we serve in the last days under Him Who is the foundation and head of the church, who has clearly manifested Himself in His work of salvation. Christ purchased the church with His own blood. It is *His* body, not ours. But we are to be living members of it, active components of a body that functions and grows and builds itself up in love.

Now, through Christ and by the Holy Spirit, in that strong bond with the Lord of the church, we show our love for the church of the Lord.

All of us are called to be church builders.

AMEN.