

## PEOPLE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

God's people had accomplished great things, because as Nehemiah said, "*the joy of the Lord is your strength.*" When the Word of God is declared, He gives understanding. When the Word of God is obeyed, there is joy of confession, individual and corporate. Lives are changed as people encounter God's Word. This experience from long ago speaks deeply to us today, on the anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attack.

The people rebuilding Jerusalem realized their completion of the wall really involved God's construction work in their own hearts and minds and wills - rebuilding their very lives. As Colin Smith notes, "God had spoken to them through His written Word. It had humbled them in their sins. It had lifted them to see the grace and mercy of God. And it had directed them into a new life of obedience" that was visible in their homes, among their neighbors, in their place of worship, and in their workplace. Will you do likewise?

"They were committed to do whatever the Word of God says. When they left their worship services, they were not going home preoccupied with themselves and their failures, but rather with God's grace. His hope and joy gave them strength to face their challenges." In Nehemiah chapter 9 they had publicly read the word of God, confessed their sins, and then put their desire to live according to God's rule in writing.

**1- RENEWING our covenant with God.** Confessing our sins leads to renewing our relationship and covenant agreement with Almighty God, as we see in Nehemiah 8-10. The leaders of the covenant community agreed together and inscribed their names to declare their intentions of both individual and corporate obedience to God's commands. As Leviticus 20:26 instructs, *to be a people holy unto God.*

Men, women, children old enough to understand, made a pledge to "*join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His rules and His statutes.*" This written pledge specified what they were led to repent of, in v30: mixed marriages with the pagans of the land. No more would they give their daughters in marriage, nor allow their sons to marry women of foreign gods. This is not about ethnicity but about basic beliefs, being set apart for the one true God.

They also pledged to keep the Sabbath laws, unique to Israel. No more conducting business on the day the Lord had made holy, set apart for His people. Their pledge included the temple tax, tithes, offerings, all as prescribed in the Law of Moses. They confessed that neither they nor their fathers had obeyed these things. In verse 39 they pledged "*we will not neglect the house of our God*" nor their worship in it. Derek Kidner notes the great temptation to begrudge the effort and expense of it all, the mood captured and castigated in Malachi 3, and contrasted with the impact of God's Word as it is lived out in faith.

**2- REFORMING our community of God.** Nehemiah 11-12 records more changes, according to God's Word. As Exodus 19:6 says, *God's people are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, set apart for God.* Kidner says, "they are conscious of their roots and structure as God's people, no rabble of refugees settling down just anywhere, but rather with dignity of order and known relationships."

As they worked to re-settle in Jerusalem, where the leaders were living, the people cast lots. This way one out of ten also came to live in the holy city, so that it would be adequately populated and protected. Now that the altar and temple and walls had all been rebuilt, the city was re-established for national worship. This was too important to be left unplanned, and Nehemiah led in the tasks at hand.

1Corinthians 14:40 instructs, "*all things should be done decently and in order*" and so we follow suit in our own congregations. In Jerusalem, leaders, priests, Levites, temple servants, choirs, teachers, gatekeepers, watchmen, etc. were among "*the valiant men*" willing and able to defend the holy city in which they lived. All for the main purpose of the worship of the one true God. M.Breneman notes the emphasis on leaders and doing things for the good of the community includes lists of real people.

**3- RENOUNCING and confessing our sins.** The people of Jerusalem took on real challenges and made real changes, because in God's work each individual is important in all the activity of the community. And so it is in our churches today, as the New Testament covenant community of God. Ephesians 4 and other passages note how each believer is spiritually gifted, so that as each one works, the whole body grows up together in Christ. But today's culture calls for self-centeredness, contrary to the Bible's picture of self-sacrifice for the good of the community. Because we really do live in dependence upon one another, and of God. We seem to expect this of our missionaries, but wrongly, not of ourselves.

The examples of repentance and faith in the book of Nehemiah speak deeply to our own lives and times today. Like them, we need to kneel in repentance before God, lifting our hands and bowing our hearts and minds and wills. We can pray something like this: "In Jesus' name, I confess, most holy Lord God, that I have sinned against You, in thought, word and deed, in things I have done, and have left undone. I hereby repent, renouncing and forsaking my sins, and renouncing Satan's works and ways, and turning to You for forgiveness, by the blood of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to obediently walk in Your ways, according to Your holy Word, in the newness of eternal spiritual life in Christ, in Whom I humbly pray." And all God's people say, Amen and Amen! ☐