

Nehemiah (Quality Good)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 December 2001

Preacher: Dawson, Colin

[0 : 00] We're continuing this evening our meditations in the book of Nehemiah. The section under review this evening is in chapter 5, from verse 14 through to verse 19.

That's Nehemiah 5, verses 14 to 19. I'll just read the opening verse in this section. Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor.

So this section consists of a little interlude in the narrative concerning the building of the wall.

Nehemiah returns to that theme in the next chapter. So I'd like to just look at what he has to say in this interlude.

One thing that helps to confirm, it helps us to confirm the fact that Nehemiah was indeed the writer of this part of the word of God.

[1 : 38] He says, moreover, the time from which I was appointed. I and my brethren. And in similar vein he continues through this section.

Linking up then with our subject last Sunday evening, Nehemiah was one of those holy men of old, who wrote the word that we now have in our Bibles under divine inspiration.

Also, this interlude helps us to pinpoint the time when this book was written.

He refers here to the twelve years between the twentieth and the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king.

So we can see that the book was written after the events that it records. We learn also that Nehemiah continued as governor of the province for that period of twelve years.

[3 : 04] Remember, he had a job back in Persia, serving the king, and he had been given opportunity to be free from that job for a period.

Going back to chapter 2 and verse 6, remember the king said, well, how long are you going to be away? And I set him, he says, a time.

Whether that was twelve years, I don't know. One would suspect it was probably a shorter period of that, or the king would probably not have agreed to him being away.

Perhaps he'd had to renew the consent of the king over that period, but be that as it may, for twelve years he served as governor before going back to his other job in Persia.

In this section, he provides us with details as to the way he conducted his governorship for the whole of that period.

[4 : 20] Perhaps by contrast with the greedy moneylenders that we encountered in the first part of the chapter, perhaps it was that issue, that event, that prompted Nehemiah to speak like this.

He wants us to know that he was not of the same ilk as those people. And so he says, for the whole of that period, that he had not taken any remuneration from the people.

He had not followed the example of the earlier governors who had levied a tax on the people to pay for their expenses.

He also tells us that he and his servants had been actively sharing in the work of building the wall.

Though he was governor of the province, he was very hands-on in attending to this crucial work of rebuilding the wall of the city.

[5 : 39] He tells us that he had not been involved in the sharp practices that he had earlier condemned. He also tells us that he had been generous in providing accommodation and food, not only for the local Jews, but also visiting Jews.

And also he explains that he had an understanding and a sympathy for the people who were already heavily taxed by the Persian authorities and he was determined not to add to that burden.

So, the picture emerges, obviously, of a man of independent means, a man of his own personal wealth and using it to the glory of God and for the help of God's people.

But I think the point that will be of greatest concern to us as we think of this passage tonight is what was it that caused Nehemiah to act in this way?

What was the principle which guided him throughout the whole of this period? And you can see what that principle was in verse 15, at the end of the verse, so did not I because of the fear of God.

[7 : 25] And then, in verse 19, where he says, think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I've done for this people.

That last verse is not sort of saying, what a good boy am I, Lord, where's my reward? But, as we shall see, these are, this was the main principle that guided him throughout that period.

They had a governor who feared the Lord. And as a result of that, the people were greatly blessed. Oh, how the situation would change in any community if the governor, the king, the prime minister, the president, whoever it might be, was a man who feared the Lord.

See, it's not possible to fear the Lord in theory. You can only fear the Lord in practice. And, that's the point here, that, the fact that he feared the Lord affected everything that he did.

And, the fear of the Lord is so crucial, so essential today. We all need to have the fear of the Lord. Otherwise, we're not going to get anywhere in our Christian lives.

[9 : 02] We're not going to be any use in the service of God. If we don't operate in the fear of the Lord, then we're operating by another principle, a contrary principle.

And, God is unlikely to honour any principle which is a variance with that of fearing him. So, from this, this sort of interlude in the narrative.

We're introduced to the fear of the Lord and we can learn a number of things about the fear of the Lord. The first is quite obvious and that is that it caused Nehemiah to understand that all that he was doing was in the sight of God.

Now, if you think about that for a moment, sometimes even Christians do things without stopping to think that they're doing them in the sight of God.

Had they stopped and thought about that, they, in some instances, wouldn't have done the things that they have done or they wouldn't have said the things that they had said. And so, this first ingredient in the fear of the Lord, how crucial it is to the whole subject, all that we do is done in the sight of God.

[10 : 43] And that very fact ought to have an impact upon us and affect us quite, quite strongly. God sees me through and through.

God knows my heart, God understands my motives. God watches. All these people were busy day by day working away on the wall God was watching.

He saw the hard workers. He saw the shirkers. He saw those who were sincerely serving him.

He saw those who were serving themselves and making fortunes out of the less well-off. He saw it all. And Nehemiah conducted his period of governorship with that deep understanding that God saw him.

Thou God seest me. Secondly, we believe, I believe, that Nehemiah understood that he was accountable to God for his actions.

[12 : 00] God's and that is an essential part of the fear of God, the realization that we are accountable to God for what we do.

Again, you see, we're not talking about theory, we're talking about practice. The fear of the Lord can only be seen in a practical way. people who are serving him with the understanding that they are accountable to God.

And so they will want all their actions to be done in accordance with the will of God and the word of God. By him actions are weighed and they realize that and they know that one day they must give an account to him for those things which they have done in his name and in his service.

And we need to understand that as well. That we will have to give an account to God for our actions.

That the day of reckoning is coming and how we need to be ready for that and how we need to order our lives in his fear, realizing that one of two things with regard to our actions before God they're either right or they're wrong aren't they?

[13 : 28] And if they're wrong we're accountable to God and if we realize our accountability to God over our wrongdoings then we shall seek to confess them and seek the Lord's mercy.

And if we do those things which are right in his sight then we have confidence before him, confidence in our actions and in our service.

Thirdly, we can discover the effect of the fear of the Lord in Nehemiah's heart. It caused him to examine the customary actions of others before proceeding with them himself.

it wasn't sufficient authority for him to say well everyone does it, it's always been done like that, so I'll do it.

He examined the situation, he thought about the precedent of those governors before him who made the people chargeable unto them and taxed them so that there was sufficient bread and wine and also money available.

[14 : 54] He could just have carried on where the preceding governor had left off. We don't know who that governor was by the way, we know about some of the earlier ones who came back as recorded in Ezra, Zerubbabel for instance, but there's obviously others that had come during the interim, and this habit had been established.

The fear of the Lord, therefore, is an examining influence. We all have to make decisions in our Christian lives.

We can easily be affected in making those decisions decisions by the customs of others or by the views and opinions of others.

But that's not good enough. We need to be convinced in our own minds. We need to sort matters out before God individually.

we're not talking here about major matters of faith and practice. But God is concerned not only about those major things, but also minor things, and they need to be examined before God.

[16 : 22] And so, after examining the situation, Nehemiah decided that he would not go along with what the others had done.

So, fourthly, in the words of verse 15, so did not I, because of the fear of God. He realised that he would be accountable to God if he had done that.

And God could well have said to him, well, Nehemiah, that was out of place, that was wrong, you shouldn't have done that, you didn't need to do that. So he didn't do it. So the fear of the Lord has a preventative ingredient.

It prevents people from doing those things which are wrong. I wonder how many things that you and I could say we haven't done because of the fear of God.

How often we have been stopped in pursuing matters of a worldly nature because of that principle in our hearts.

[17 : 43] We knew that we were accountable to God and therefore we didn't do it. It's good when that's the principle behind it, isn't it?

This isn't any kind of legalism, this isn't any kind of self-righteousness, this is the holy principle of God implanted in a man's heart or a woman's heart that stops them from doing things that are wrong.

I'm sure if we take time to think about it, looking back over our lives, we may see that there are those things where perhaps our nature was about to launch into something and suddenly we were stopped and we were brought to realise that this is not the path for a Christian to tread.

These are not things for believers to get involved with. So there's the preventative aspect of the fear of the Lord and then there is the enabling aspect of the fear of God.

it enabled Nehemiah to do what was right. Talking to people I get the impression that this is an area where many need help.

[19 : 20] Not so much that they don't know what is right, but they lack the power to do it. They hesitate, they linger, they don't know quite what to do.

But here this principle is a principle that enabled Nehemiah to set a precedent, to branch out from the norm and to do that that was right in the sight of God.

So, we need that. We've often perhaps been convinced in our minds that we should do something and we haven't done it, put it off till tomorrow and then the conviction tomorrow is that little bit weaker than it was the day before and we put it off till the next day and the conviction gets weaker and until we get to a point where the conviction is gone.

And so we excuse ourselves by thinking well it wasn't the Lord's will after all. But the fear of the Lord is that enabling principle once the course of action is known to pursue it to the glory of God.

God. And then lastly we learn from this passage that it was the fear of the Lord which enabled him to seek the reward that God has to give rather than the praise of men.

[21 : 02] And that I think is how we need to understand verse 19. He was looking for the reward that God had to give. Now so should we all be looking for that reward.

Not a reward of works of course not a reward of deservedness or merit but the reward nevertheless that God has to give to those who serve him, that fear him.

Many scriptures of course speak of that reward. That blessing that awaits those in the kingdom of God when the Lord comes again.

And that's what Nehemiah was most concerned about. To have that reward that comes from God rather than any praise of men.

men. Again it searches our hearts doesn't it because the desire for the praise of men can be very strong and very powerful.

[22 : 12] It can sometimes move us to do things or not do things because we have the praise of men in view. But if we get the praise of men almost certainly we shall forfeit the praise of God.

So in all that we do in the fear of the Lord the eye is upon eternity. The eye is upon what the Lord has to give that well done good and faithful servant rather than any temporary flattering praise of men.

So this passage helps us then as Nehemiah speaks of how he conducted himself over those twelve years of the fear of God.

But now let's give a little time just to thinking about what the fear of God is. And as far as I've been able to establish almost universally where you have the references in the Bible to the fear of God, the idea concerns reverence and it concerns worship.

Let's think of the latter of those two first. Worship. The fear of the Lord is the ingredient, the essential ingredient in worship.

[23 : 54] Which immediately throws out the truth that worship is not just something that we do when we meet together like this on a public occasion for the worship of God.

But worship is something we do all our lives. Something we do as we and if we are blessed with the fear of the Lord we shall be worshipping God.

Worshipping God, praising God, looking to the Lord, talking to the Lord, having fellowship with God. And it's that, see it isn't sort of Nehemiah here and God there.

In this relationship the fear of the Lord brings them together and Nehemiah is enjoying the company of God and he's worshipping God. and he's thanking God for this precious gift of the fear of the Lord.

Fear then is not just the sort of fear that has torment, being frightened, but having a right reverence for God.

[25 : 04] Realisation that God is great and holy and infinite and just and wise and true, the creator of the universe. Yet this God can be known.

This God is our God. This is the God with whom we have to do. So I just want to pursue that theme of the fear of the Lord by looking at one or two Psalms.

You'll find that it's a phrase that crops up quite a bit in the Psalms and I'm just going to look at a few of them.

First of all in Psalm 2 verse 11 Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

I suppose we'd have to say this is a word of precept. A word of exhortation or command serve the Lord with fear.

[26 : 16] And it's linked as fear sometimes is with trembling. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Think then of those two.

Think of this situation. The great and the holy and the eternal gods. lovingly condescending to talk to a poor wretched sinful person on the earth.

Inviting them to come into fellowship with him. Inviting them to come and know him and love him and serve him. How does a sinner respond?

fear and trembling. Fear and rejoicing. Fear and reverence, respect for this great God who is so kind and loving and merciful to such a wretched sinner.

Rejoicing with trembling. You may sometimes see people rejoicing and trembling on a natural level. Children may rejoice, they may be very happy something's happened in their lives or they've been told that something's going to happen that really fills them with such delight and they tremble at the thought of what they're about to enjoy.

- [27 : 40] Serve the Lord like that with fear and trembling. And this service isn't just what we do when we come to chapel. It's a way of life.
- Serve the Lord with fear, rejoice, then with trembling. But fear of the Lord is an integral part of worship.
- Let's move on to Psalm 5. Verse 7, As for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy, and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple.
- So here the psalmist is referring to those occasions when he comes with others into the house of God for the worship of God.
- Those times in the temple. Well, I will come, he says, in thy fear. Not I will conduct myself when I get there in the fear of God, but I will come in thy fear.
- [29 : 02] It just points us to the fact that worship doesn't start when we get here, necessarily, but we need to be worshipping as we come.
- I will come into thy house in thy fear. It's true, isn't it, what we do immediately prior to our coming to worship will affect us.
- And we often find this particularly on a week night. I used to, when I'd come straight from work, as I often had at one point in my life, many times I'd be straight from work to preach.
- It was difficult to switch off from work and switch on to worship. But I remember there were some occasions when the journey was profitable because it was a time when the Lord drew near and coming to the house of God was already part of the worship.
- So in other words, we come in a worshiping frame. And God is so wonderfully kind and gracious. He knows all about those occasions like that when we're busy and we come straight from work to the house of God sometimes.
- [30 : 42] They're some of the most precious times of all when the Lord is with us. So fear of the Lord worshipping, reverencing, praying, trusting, praising, communing with God.
- That's how we come together to the holy temple, says the psalmist. Psalm 19 under verse 9.
- The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring, enduring forever. Part of a section in the psalm where he's extolling the virtues of the Lord, the law of the Lord is perfect, the testimony of the Lord is sure, the statutes of the Lord are right, the commandment of the Lord is pure, the fear of the Lord is clean.
- Where can you turn for that which is clean? Well, we know, to our cost, not to the world.
- There we should find that which is dirty, that which is defiling, that which has that defiling effect upon us, if we tarry too long there.
- [32 : 08] The fear of the Lord is clean. It won't defile us in any way at all. There are no side effects.
- You know, many of modern drugs have side effects. Their aim is good, but in producing what is good, there are often many side effects, sometimes their side effects can even be worse than the problem that they are intending to solve.
- There are no side effects with the fear of the Lord. It's absolutely clean, it's pure, it won't defile in any way. But last of all, Psalm 34.
- verse 9, O fear the Lord, ye his saints, for there is no want to them that fear him.
- Here is an exhortation, an encouragement. Here is one man, in this case it's David, the psalmist. He's encouraging others to fear the Lord.
- [33 : 28] And he speaks to the blessings and the benefits that will flow from the fear of the Lord. You'll want for nothing if you fear the Lord.
- Then verse 11, come, ye children, hearken unto me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

So it's encouragement to fear the Lord and teach. Now I thought some length about that. How do you teach the fear of the Lord? Well, there may be a place for speaking about it as we try to do tonight.

It may be a case for learning from the example of others, as we have in the case of Nehemiah. But how can you teach your children the fear of the Lord?

It seems to me there's only one way, and that is by example. Come, ye children, listen to me, I'll teach you the fear of the Lord.

[34 : 43] The only way that we can really teach children, or anyone for that matter, is by practicing the fear of the Lord ourselves. Indeed, any form of teaching that is betrayed by inconsistent walk is really hypocrisy.

if you teach children not to do things that you do yourself, that's hypocrisy. If you teach them they should do things, then they see that you don't do those things.

That's hypocrisy. But to teach children the fear of the Lord is to live in the fear of the Lord. So that left me wondering, coming back finally to Nehemiah, as he conducted a 12 year period in authority in fear of the Lord, how many others were affected by it?

We don't know the answer to that, but I'm sure that many others would have been. Others seeing his example, seeing a life devoted to God and the service of God in the fear of God would be bound to have an impact on others.

Only today someone was telling me about two old ladies, both in their 80s, one who has been tried to live a Christian life in her life, and the other one who started out coming to chapel and left, married in the world and lived in the world.

[36 : 46] And her testimony was of the other lady, I wish I had got what she had got, but now it's too late. It struck me what a good testimony it was to the first lady, but what a sad state the other lady is in.

She hasn't got what the other one's got. And perhaps we could say what the other one has got was the fear of God. May we, by God's grace, be given that fear and live in it to his honour and glory.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.