

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Studies in the post-exilic Old Testament Scriptures

© 2012, Paul B Coulter (www.paulcoulter.net)

Historical Background

- 722 Assyrian King Shalmaneser V conquers Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, bringing its territory under direct Assyrian rule and destroying the independence of the northern kingdom.
- 607 First captives from Jerusalem are taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:1).
- 586 Nebuchadnezzar demolishes Jerusalem and leads many of the most important Jews, especially craftsmen, into Exile (2 Kings 25). Judah ceases to exist as an independent entity. The remaining Jews lacked the wealth and skills needed to rebuild the Temple. Jeremiah, who had warned the Jews not to rebel against the Babylonians, was left in Palestine, while Jehoiachin, the former king of Judah, was taken to Babylon.
- c.568 Nebuchadnezzar was at war with the Egyptians. Sometime around this King Jehoiachin of Judah was imprisoned by Nebuchadnezzar.
- 562 Nebuchadnezzar died and his son Evil-merodach (Amel-Marduk) became king. He reversed many of his father's policies and released Jehoiachin from prison (see 2 Kings 25:27-30 and Jeremiah 52).
- 560 Evil-merodach was murdered by his brother, Nergal-sharusur (Neriglissar), probably because he was unhappy with the reversal of their father's policies.
- 556 Nergal-sharusur died and his young son succeeded him. The new child king was murdered after nine months by conspirators and replaced by Nabonidus.
- 549 Nabonidus left his capital city to live in an oasis city in Arabia. His son Belshazzar ruled over the kingdom on his behalf.
- 539 Babylon was conquered by the Medo-Persian ruler Cyrus on 12th October. This event was foretold by Daniel, who had been living in Babylon since the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 5). Cyrus had a different approach to Empire than the Babylonians, and he allowed displaced peoples to return to their home countries and to rebuild temples to their gods. He made a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild God's Temple (Ezra 1).
- 537 The first group of Jews arrived back in Jerusalem (Ezra 2:68). They were led by Sheshbazzar, who was appointed governor of Judah (Ezra 1:8, 5:14-16), but Zerubbabel, the descendent of David, also returned with the group (Ezra 2:2).
- 529 Cyrus died in battle in India and his son, Cambyses, became king.
- 523 Cambyses conquered Egypt, but a rebellion led by Gaumata began in Persia.
- 522 Cambyses died in Palestine under mysterious circumstances. Darius, a Mede who was a loyal general of Cambyses, became king and declared his intention to put down the rebellion and restore order to the empire.

- At this time the decree of Cyrus was rediscovered and Darius confirmed the right of the Jews to continue rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 6:1-18).
- 521 Zechariah and Haggai began prophesying in Jerusalem (Zechariah 1:1, Haggai 1:1, Ezra 5:1).
- 519 Darius completed his task of putting down rebellion and began to reform the system of government and taxation in the Empire.
- 516 The Temple was completed and re-dedicated and the Passover was celebrated (Ezra 6:19).
- 490 Darius' attempts to conquer Greece were brought to an end at the Battle of Marathon.
- 486 Darius died and was succeeded by his son, Xerxes. Xerxes is only mentioned once in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 4:6), but he figures largely in the story of Esther (Esther 1:1).
- 480 Xerxes' fleet was defeated by the Greeks at the battle of Salamis, ending his hopes of conquering Greece.
- 465 Xerxes died and his son Artaxerxes became king. He struggled to hold his empire together (Egypt rebelled at the beginning of his reign) but also spent extravagantly on his own pleasure, causing an increasing tax burden.
- 458 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with a small group of priests and other Temple workers and began religious reforms (Ezra 7:1-7).
- 449 One of Artaxerxes' governors, Megabyzus, rebelled against him.
- 445 Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem as governor, appointed by Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1). He led the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
- 433 Nehemiah returned to Babylon (Nehemiah 13:6).
- 430 Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:7). Around this time Malachi was prophesying in Jerusalem.
- 424 Artaxerxes died.

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Part 1 – Ezra 1-4

The Series

Ezra and Nehemiah were almost certainly originally one book in the Hebrew Scriptures. They deal with same period of history (the return from exile of the Jews) and were probably edited into their final versions by one editor who may or may not have been the same person or group who finally edited Chronicles (the fact that 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 is identical to Ezra 1:1-3a certainly raises this possibility). In this series we will be combining a study of Ezra/Nehemiah with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who prophesied at the same time as the events recorded in Ezra/Nehemiah. It might sound quite ambitious to try to tackle four Old Testament books in just six studies, but the fact that they are dealing with one fairly narrow period of Bible history should make this easier than at first glance. An outline of the six studies is as follows:

1. Returning – Ezra 1-4
2. Rebuilding – Ezra 5-6 and Haggai
3. Repenting – Ezra 7-10
4. Rejoicing for Zion – Zechariah
5. Nehemiah – lessons in prayer
6. Nehemiah – lessons for leaders

As you can see, this series includes a variety of approaches including a straight dealing with the history and the theological lessons it teaches (in parts 1 and 3), linking prophecy into the historical context (part 2), an overview of a prophetic book with an attempt to see how the two horizons of prophecy (the immediate situation and God's future plan) merge together (part 4), and two thematic character studies (parts 5 and 6). Hopefully this variety of approaches will keep the reader interested and will not cause too much confusion as we shift from one style to another.

The Exile

Before we consider the return from Exile, we must first understand what the Exile was and why it happened. Firstly, consider the pattern of historical events that led to the Exile:

- **1010 BC David becomes king (dies 970)**

I begin at this point as it marks the high point in the history of Israel. After the failed monarchy of Saul, David, the man after God's own heart, was now king of a united kingdom of Israel. David's stunning military victories and steadfast faith in God laid the foundation for the prosperity that followed in the reign of his son Solomon between 970 and 930 BC. Israel was in the land God had given them, under the rule of his appointed king and enjoying His blessings. Jerusalem had been conquered by David and became his capital city.

- **960 BC Solomon completes the Temple**

The building of a Temple for God in Jerusalem was appointed for Solomon by God. This magnificent building was completed in 950 BC after seven years of construction. It was a masterpiece of design and artistry. The dedication of the Temple was the pinnacle of Israel's national achievement, and seemed to represent the permanency of their settlement in the land that God had given them. The Temple was the centre-piece of the Israelite religion and the physical representation of God's presence with His people. The bringing together of the seat of royal power and the centre of God's worship in Jerusalem was a visible reminder of the fact that God was Israel's true King and the human kings, descended from David, were ultimately accountable to Him.

- **930 BC After Solomon's death the kingdom is divided in two**

When Solomon died in 930 BC his kingdom was split in two. Ten tribes followed Jeroboam to form the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria, while only two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) remained loyal to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, forming the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem. The kings of Judah were content to allow the northerners to travel into their territory to worship God at the Temple, but Jeroboam was afraid that seeing the Temple in Judah's territory would lead some of the people to express their loyalty again to the house of David, so he built two golden calves for the people of his kingdom to worship instead. This began a pattern of idolatry and syncretism (blending of truths about God with ideas from false religions) that marked the history of the northern kingdom. Although marked by greater prosperity than Judah throughout much of its history, the spiritual trend, led by a succession of idolatrous kings from various competing dynasties, was progressively away from faithfulness to God.
- **722 BC Assyria conquers Israel**

Israel weakened politically over a period of decades until eventually in 722 BC the Assyrians conquered the nation. They followed their usual policy of destroying the distinctive cultural, religious and political identity of the nations they conquered. Many people from Israel were taken in captivity to the Assyrian homeland and large numbers of people from other parts of the Empire were settled in Israel's territory. Although some faithful Israelites from the northern kingdom fled to Judah and were integrated into the community there, the ten tribes of Israel effectively ceased to exist as distinct entities as those who remained in their historic lands intermarried with settlers from other nations. Their descendants became the Samaritans. Judah was threatened by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in the time of King Hezekiah (715-697 BC), but the Assyrian army met with disaster and Sennacherib was forced to return to his home land, with Judah able to maintain an independent existence.
- **607 BC Nebuchadnezzar takes first captives from Judah (including Daniel)**

The Babylonians superseded the Assyrians as the dominant power in the Near East in 625 BC (while the godly king Josiah was reigning in Judah). By 607 BC, during the reign of ungodly Jehoiakim in Judah, Nebuchadnezzar was able to invade Judah and take away some of the most gifted young men to serve in his court in Babylon. This group of exiles included Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael.
- **598 BC Second exile of Judahites including king Jehoiachin**

Although Jehoiakim tried to rebel against the Babylonians, he could not fully establish Judah's independence, and when he died and his son, Jehoiachin, became king, Nebuchadnezzar's army again besieged Jerusalem. When Nebuchadnezzar himself arrived on the scene, the 18 year old Jehoiachin and his administration surrendered. The king and 10,000 soldiers and skilled craftsmen were exiled to Babylon. The gold articles from the Temple were also taken by Nebuchadnezzar. An uncle of Jehoiachin named Mattaniah was installed as a puppet king with his name changed to Zedekiah.
- **586 BC Babylonians destroy Jerusalem including Temple**

When Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar in 588 BC, the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem for two years. Eventually the Babylonians broke down the city wall and Zedekiah tried to escape, but was caught by Nebuchadnezzar's troops. They killed his sons while he watched, then put out his eyes and took him in chains to Babylon. Jerusalem, including the Temple, was destroyed by fire, and all the bronze from the Temple was taken away. Many of the leading people in Jerusalem were also taken into exile, and only a few of the poorer people were left to farm the land.

Why the Exile?

The exile of Israel and Judah could seem like an unremarkable part of the story of history – rising empires conquering weaker neighbouring nations and doing what they will with those they conquer. However, the Bible clearly reveals that behind the exile there was an important theological truth – God was working out His purposes through Assyria and Babylon. To appreciate the reasons fully we must understand something of the background:

- **Genesis 12** – God makes His covenant with Abraham, promising to make a great nation from him and to bless all nations through him.
- **Deuteronomy 28** – as they were about to enter the promised land, God promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience to the nation of Israel
- **2 Samuel 7** – God made His covenant with David, promising that David’s royal line would reign forever as kings over His people
- **1 Kings 11** – Solomon’s sin was the reason for the division of the kingdom, although the actual division was delayed until after his death for the sake of David
- **2 Kings 17** – Israel was exiled because of idolatry and rejection of God’s call to repentance
- **2 Kings 23** – Judah’s exile was also because of idolatry but came later than Israel’s because of faithful Josiah

In the exile of Israel and Judah we see God working out His purpose according to His righteous judgement for sin and His faithfulness to His promise. The promised curses of Deuteronomy came to pass in the exile but God preserved the nation of Israel (the fact that the Babylonians did not enforce intermingling of the peoples they conquered allowed this to happen) and the royal line of David, thus fulfilling His promises both to Abraham and to David.

Returning (Ezra 1-2)

Cyrus, king of Persia (1:1)

- Conquered Babylon 12th October 539 BC
- Named by Isaiah (44:28) 150 years before reign

God’s word through Jeremiah (1:1)

Jeremiah 29:10 (prophesying in around 598 BC) – speaks of 70 years of captivity (“This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place’). Possible suggestions as to timing:

- First captives (607) to first return (537)
- Temple demolished (586) to rebuilt (516)

Cyrus’ decree (1:2-4)

Here we have version in Hebrew announced to Jews – compare with formal Persian version in 6:3-5).

Those who returned (1:5-2:70):

- 50,000 Jews led by Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (descendant of David)
- Hearts moved by God (1:5)

God’s sovereign hand

God’s sovereign hand can be seen in the events of the return from exile in a number of different ways:

1. Jews in high positions

- Daniel (and his friends) – advisor to kings Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:48), Belshazzar (Daniel 5:29) & Darius (Daniel 6:3)
- Esther (and her uncle Mordecai) – queen in time of Xerxes, saved Jews from destruction (Esther)
- Nehemiah – cupbearer to king Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1)

2. Changing Empires

Three different empires dominated the region, including Canaan, during the period of exile and return:

- Assyrians 1100-625 BC

- Babylonians 625-539 BC
- Persians 538-330 BC

Each of these empires had different policies on management of their empire meant that:

- The ten tribes of Israel were exiled and lost their distinct identity under the Assyrians
- The prominent people of Judah were exiled but maintained their identity under the Babylonians
- Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple under the Persians

3. David's family preserved

- Jehoiachin, the last true king of Judah (Zedekiah, uncle of Jehoiachin, who was made king by Nebuchadnezzar was not properly recognised) was imprisoned by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:15)
- Evil-Merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's successor favoured Jehoiachin and even sustained him with an allowance (2 Kings 25:27-30)
- Jehoiachin's grandson was Zerubbabel who led the first return to Jerusalem in 537 BC (Ezra 3:2)
- The royal line leads through Zerubbabel to Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17)

Vision and strategy of the returnees (Ezra 3)

To make progress we need both vision and priorities. Vision means knowing where you need to get to. Strategy means knowing how to get there. The returnees' vision was clear: to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as a self-sufficient capital for Judah. Their strategy was interesting, however, and reflects their priorities. There were three stages:

- *Altar* (Ezra 3:1-6) – 537 BC – repentance shown through sacrifice came first
- *Temple* (Ezra 3:7-6:22) – completed 516 BC – a house for the LORD came next
- *Walls* (Nehemiah 1-7) – 445 BC – security for the people came third

Problems come when we try to rebuild something without first returning and repenting! The beginning point has to be dependence on God – our programmes come after that.

The Samaritan problem (Ezra 4)

- An offer of help (4:1-2)
- Rejection on legal grounds (4:3)
- Campaign of opposition (4:4-23)
- Why was this a problem?
 - 2 Kings 17:24-41: "Even while these people were worshipping the LORD, they were serving their idols"
- The Samaritans of Jesus' day

Returning today

When we feel lost we must return to where God has called us to be

- Is God still sovereign?
- What is our vision and our strategy?
 - As individuals
 - As a community
- What essentials unite us with other Christians?

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Part 2 – Ezra 5-6 and Haggai

Returning from Exile

- 539 BC Cyrus (Medo-Persians) conquers Babylon
- 537 BC Sheshbazzar & Zerubbabel return – altar rebuilt (Ezra 1-4)
- 521 BC Haggai / Zechariah prophesy (Ezra 5)
- 516 BC Temple completed (Ezra 6)
- 458 BC Ezra returns – religious reform (Ezra 7-10)
- 445 BC Nehemiah returns – walls rebuilt (Nehemiah)
- 430 BC Malachi prophesying

Rebuilding the Temple

The Temple was completed by Solomon in around 960 BC. It was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (King of Babylon) in 586 BC. The significance of the Temple for the Israelites cannot be underestimated – it represented God’s dwelling place with His people.

Ezra 5:1-6:12 (520 BC)

- **The God who was over them and His prophets who helped them (5:1-2)**
- **Tattenai’s enquiry (5:3-17)**
- **King Darius’ reply (6:1-12)**

Haggai – an unusual prophet

Haggai is an unusual prophet for a number of reasons:

- **No biographical details**
Probably older than Zechariah as always listed first. Some suggest had actually seen previous Temple (would mean he would be an elderly man in over 70 years old), but this is only inferred from his question in 2:3, and is far from conclusive.
- **Does not use much poetry**
Some say uses none, others see some parallels in some of his words (Hebrew poetry about parallels of ideas not rhymes). We can see this in the NIV Bible, where poetry is indented (see Psalms for examples). There is no indentation in Haggai.
- **Dates his prophecies precisely**
He records the date of his prophecies with unusual precision – to the very day. This is probably because he wanted to clearly establish the timescale of the peoples’ response to his prophecy. The precision of the dates is a reminder that this is a historical book, not a book of myths.

- **Has a very single focus – rebuilding the Temple**

Most of the prophets focus on issues of social justice and warnings against idolatry. Haggai has an unusually single focus on the Temple (although there are hints of some Messianic hope in a couple of verses, as we shall see).

- **Was obeyed immediately**

This was highly unusual for a prophet. Apart from Haggai and Zechariah the only other prophets who had such immediate responses were Nathan (speaking to David about his adultery with Bathsheba – his immediate response tells us much about the humble heart of David) and Jonah (who was less than happy at the response he saw). Prophets were generally rejected by the people before the Exile (see Jesus' words in Matthew 23:37 – Jerusalem who kills the prophets – or Hebrews 11:36-38 which summarises the experience of the faithful Old Testament servants of God).

Haggai's Prophecies

Amazingly, the details in Haggai allow us to date his prophecies precisely:

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 1. To Zerubbabel and Joshua (1:1-11) | 29 th August 520 BC |
| 2. To Zerubbabel, Joshua and the remnant of the people (2:1-9) | 17 th October 520 BC |
| 3. To the priests (2:10-19) | 18 th December 520 BC |
| 4. To Zerubbabel (2:20-23) | 18 th December 520 BC |

Prophecy 1: to Zerubbabel and Joshua (1:1-11)

- **The people's excuse (1:2)**

"The time has not yet come" – making excuses for disobedience to God's command. Not clear on what basis (perhaps calculation of Jeremiah's 70 years or perhaps because world circumstances did not appear favourable). Often people make excuses for not following God's vision and maintaining their own narrow or short sighted visions. It would take them 5 years to build the Temple after this – they had to keep building now or the vision would never be fulfilled.

- **The challenge: "give careful thought to your ways" (1:3-8)**

This is always a timely challenge. How are you using the time and energy God has given you? They were investing their efforts in building a comfortable life for themselves, but it wasn't working!!! It was not bringing satisfaction and it was like putting money in a purse with holes (v6). Their lives were supposed to be lived for a higher purpose – to build something that would last!

- **Disobedience brings no blessing (1:9-11)**

The lack of blessing on their labour was because they were labouring in the wrong place with the wrong priorities (v7-11). Often people approach life like this – deciding their own priorities and then expecting God to bless them. We need to seek God's guidance for what we should do and how we should do it. He wants lives that are wholly surrendered to Him!

- **The immediate response and God's encouragement (1:12-15) – building began within three weeks!**

The Lord's encouragement is that He is with them (v13). This is the most common word of God in the Bible, and the most common promise of Christ together with the words do not be afraid.

Prophecy 2: to leaders and people (2:1-9)

- **The cause of discouragement (2:3)**

Comparing the past glory of Solomon's Temple. The point is valid, but getting stuck in the past is always dangerous. It is not good when older men disparage the God-given vision of younger men.

- **The source of courage (2:4-5, 8)**

The message from God is three times to *be strong* (Zerubbabel, Joshua and people). There are three sources of confidence:

- God's covenant promise (v5)
- God's enduring presence (vv4-5)
- God's unlimited provision (v8)

The new Temple may not be as grand as Solomon's, but God still desires to live with His people!

- **The promised glorious future (2:6-9) – greater glory and granted peace**

The shaking of all nations will come (v7). This is the only verse from Haggai referred to in the New Testament (in Hebrews 12:26). It refers to final judgement when all that is not unshakeable will be shaken away, leaving the unshakeable Kingdom of God intact.

Prophecy 3: to the priests (2:10-19)

- **What is contagious (2:11-14)? – holiness is not, but uncleanness is**

Disobedience in one area of life affects the whole of life. This is a lesson in integrity.

- **The curse afflicting them (2:15-19a)**

- **The future is bright! (2:19b)**

From this day on there will be blessing.

Prophecy 4: to Zerubbabel (2:20-23)

- **A future divine victory (2:21-22)**

Subversive language indeed! Liable to get Zerubbabel arrested!

- **God's signet ring (2:23) – The Messianic hope!**

Zerubbabel is God's signet ring – meaning His seal of authority. There is a strong messianic hope here – Jesus is the descendant of Zerubbabel.

Ezra 6:13-22 (516 BC)

- **The Temple completed and dedicated in 516 BC (6:13-18)**

- **The Passover celebrated (6:19-22)**

- **The God who moved the heart of the "king of Assyria" (6:22)**

The title "king of Assyria" is unusual as by this time the Assyrians had been replaced first by the Babylonians and more recently by the Persians. Presumably the title is chosen for effect. The threat to the people of Israel began with the Assyrians, but now God has reversed the curse! This verse and 5:1 form "divine bookends" around chapters 5 and 6: God encouraged them; God moved the heart of Darius. The work of rebuilding the Temple was God's work and began and ended with Him.

Rebuilding today

When we are where God wants us to be we must keep building faithfully.

- What has God commanded us to build?

What is His Temple today? Our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19) and the church (2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21-22).

- What excuses have we made?

We don't have the time

- Do we have what we need?

In our mission of demonstrating and proclaiming the Kingdom of God we have everything that Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people had:

- *God's covenant promise* – Christ promised that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18)
- *God's enduring presence* – the Spirit lives in us and will continue His work in us (Ephesians 2:21-22).
- *God's unlimited provision* – “God's work done in God's way will never lack for God's supply” (Hudson Taylor).

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Part 3 – Ezra 7-10

Ezra's identity (Ezra 7:1-5)

- **His name**

Ezra is the short form of *Azariah* – meaning “my help is God” – a name that appeared at least twice before in his family tree. This reminds us of the benefit and privilege of choosing name for our children. When we chose names for our children we should be prayerful on considering the people we would like them to become. It is worth considering the meaning of the name and the people who have carried it.

- **His family tree**

Ezra was a descendant of Aaron (the brother of Moses and first leading priest of the nation of Israel) through:

- *Phinehas* – the priest under Joshua
- *Zadok* – the High Priest under Solomon
- *Seraiah* – the High Priest in 586 BC (Exile)

This is an impressive pedigree – Ezra had a great deal to live up to! The challenge for him is whether or not he would carry on in the same line as his great ancestors. Would he be God's man for his time as they had been in theirs?

- **His role in shaping future Judaism**

Ezra was a forerunner of the scribes who later took on role of teaching Law from priests. Ezra stood at a turning point in the history of Israel where the priests were passing on this responsibility to the scribes. There are suggestions that Ezra was involved in gathering together and confirming the Old Testament canon and also editing some books including Chronicles.

Ezra's preparation (7:10)

Ezra was devoted to studying the word, living the word and teaching the word. This is a lesson for those of us who are involved in teaching the word of God in whatever capacity (whether preaching, in cell group or in Sunday School). Before teaching we must study and live the word. The word of God is living and must live in us and transform our lives before we can effectively communicate it to others. However, these principles are also relevant for every Christian in the context of witnessing. If we are to be effective in witnessing the word of God must dwell in us richly, and this only comes through studying it and living it before we open our mouths.

Ezra's return (Ezra 7:6-10)

- **Favoured by the “King of Kings” (7:6) – given great powers (7:11-26)**

The Persian kings used the title King of Kings (v12), referring to their position as overlords of a huge including many kingdoms. Ezra certainly had the favour of King Artaxerxes, but more important for Him was the favour of the Lord, whose hand was upon Him. The Lord is the true King of Kings, the sovereign One over all human authorities, and this title was later used to describe God (1 Timothy 6:15) and Christ (Revelation 17:14; 19:16). The King gives Ezra sweeping powers over the Jews in the whole province of Trans-Euphrates.

- **The returnees (8:1-14): 2000 men and their families (c. 5000 people)**

- **Details of the return (7:8; 8:15-36)**

- Left Babylon 8th April

- Arrived in Jerusalem 4th August 458 BC

Ezra's aim was to strengthen the Temple worship by bringing teaching of the Law, personnel and financial and material resources. The journey took nearly 4 months – indicates that they took the longer route along the fertile crescent trough modern day Syria rather than the more direct but more dangerous route directly across the desert.

Ezra's attitude

- **Response to the King's support (7:27-28) – praising God for the opportunity**

Praising God with a sense of God's hand on his life. It may seem simple, but the reality is we easily forget to thank God for the blessings He gives us. We pray when we are in trouble, but we fail to acknowledge God's provision in the everyday things of life. Ezra could have seen his promotion as the result of his own ability, but instead he is truly thankful to God.

- **Prayer and fasting for protection (8:21-23) – trusting God to protect and provide**

An interesting occurrence. Ezra Refuses to ask for a guard because he wants to prove God's faithfulness. Yet he is still afraid and so they pray and fast and God answered their prayer. This contrasts with how Nehemiah acted 13 years later (Nehemiah 2:9) when he took an armed guard on his journey back. Nehemiah was not a person of less faith. When is it appropriate to expect God's supernatural provision, and when should we accept more "ordinary" means? The fact is that God provides through the "ordinary" means as well as the more obviously supernatural. In this case Ezra felt that God's honour was at stake, and that must often be the determining factor. All such decisions must be approached with prayer and fasting.

- **Priorities on arrival (8:32-36) – thanking God for success**

When they arrived in Jerusalem the order of things they did was interesting:

1. Resting for three days (v32)
2. Handing over the items for the Temple (vv33&34)
3. Sacrifice for sin (v35)
4. Delivering orders to the Persian officials (v36)

Ezra's attitude was God-focused and prayerful from start to finish. He looked to God as He planned the return, as he executed his plan and after he was successful. How often do we lose our focus on God? When we make plans we bring God in as an after-thought, expecting Him to bless the decisions we have already made. When we face challenges we put our hope in our own ability or others rather than in God to see us through. When we come through a difficult time we often forget to thank God.

The problem (Ezra 9)

- **The problem of intermarriage (v1-2)**

- *Why had this arisen?*

There may have been very practical reasons why intermarriage had occurred, with a disproportionate number of men among the Jewish returnees. It probably seemed to at least some of the Jews as if there was no other way to guarantee their survival as a community or at least as individuals.

- *What was at stake?*

It must be clear that the issue here is not a racial one. Biblically speaking there is no division of race (we are one human race created in God's image whatever our skin colour or culture), and God's love and the message of His truth is not intended to be restricted on racial grounds. Intermarriage between races is not an issue, and even Moses had a wife of black African ethnicity (Numbers 12:1). However, the key issue here is that these women are from a different religious commitment (v2, "holy race", explains this). The book of Ruth shows that intermarriage was not an issue for the people of Israel if the wife converted to worship of God. The Law absolutely forbade intermarriage with the tribes of Canaan, but this was in the context of God's command that

Israel should destroy these tribes because of the negative spiritual influence they would have (Deuteronomy 7:1-4; Exodus 34:15-16; Joshua 23:12). When it came to other tribes outside Canaan, the Israelites were permitted to intermarry with them (Deuteronomy 21:10-14 gives conditions for taking a wife from a defeated enemy). This was a major part of the downfall of the kingdom of Israel, starting with Solomon who married foreign women and then set up temples to their Gods (1 Kings 11:1-13). One example of a Jewish community that was lax concerning intermarriage was the Elephantine settlement that was contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah. Intermarriages took place among both lay leaders and priests. The Jews at Elephantine worshipped not only Yahweh, but the goddess Anath-Yahweh. Myers writes that:

"It is not accidental that Jewish communities in exile gradually disintegrated – for example, the one at Elephantine.... A pure cult with a pure people conducted in their religious and domestic affairs in a pure language was essential."

- *The leaders and officials led by example*

This is probably the saddest, and certainly the most serious, aspect of the story. It is a serious thing when the leaders of God's people lead them in a direction of disobedience to God rather than setting an example of faith and righteousness.

- **Ezra's response (9:3-15):**

- *His personal public repentance for the sins of others (v3-4)*

Ezra does not condemn the guilty people, but identifies with them. This is an important scriptural principle. We must learn to reject the individualism that seizes our modern mindset and realise that we are part of a community of God's people and our spiritual life is dependent on theirs as theirs is on ours.

- *His public "sermon prayer" (v5-15)*

We may be reluctant to consider praying publicly about the sins of others or of the church we belong to, but Ezra did not shy from this. His prayer is entirely honest, and he simply presents before God the facts and his feelings about them. His intention is to pray to God but also through this prayer to bring the people to a realisation of the seriousness of their situation. This is both a prayer and a sermon. We would need great wisdom to do the same thing in our day, but it may not be wrong. More importantly, if we hear someone doing this we must be careful not to reject what they say simply because we disapprove of the way in which they do it. We must have the humility to ask whether they may have a point and be prepared to repent if they do.

- **Sin within the community affects the whole community (v15)**

This is a vital principle that we must grasp. We should be committed to a local church fellowship, and if we are its problems are our problems. We must not judge others from a distance or ignore them if they stumble in sin, we must intercede for them and do everything we can to rescue them. This can only begin when we realise that we too are affected by their sin as part of the same community.

The solution (Ezra 10)

- **Shecaniah's support for Ezra (v1-4) – public and unconditional**

This support was vital for the success of Ezra's reforms. It began with one man who was courageous enough to stand up and be counted in support. This support was unconditional and public. We must never underestimate the impact that one man who is obedient to God can make. We may not be an Ezra, the leader of God's people, but we could be a Shecaniah: one who is prepared to be the first to stand up in support of the leader, to put his neck on the line for him or her.

- **Ezra's actions**

- *Demands commitment from the people (v5)*

This was a serious issue and demanded an immediate and firm response (an oath).

- *Will not rest until the job is done (v6)*

He continues to mourn even though the solution is in sight.

- *Confronts the issue directly (v9-11)*

This is interesting, as the Jewish culture was probably not normally a direct culture. However, even in indirect cultures (the cultures of most of the world except the West) there is a time for direct action when the issue is serious enough.

- **The strategy**

- *Participation was not optional (v7-8)*

The people had to attend or they would be excommunicated from the community.

- *Truth was carefully established (v16-17)*

There was no knee-jerk reaction, but time was taken to establish the truth carefully. There is no conflict between the movement of God's Spirit and order.

- *Opposition was not entertained (v15)*

The names of those who objected are mentioned almost in passing (4 people). It is amazing how much impact a small number of people can have, but in this case it seems that Ezra just ignored them completely.

Church leaders may be able to apply some of these principles as they face situations in their churches where sin, even among a minority, is threatening the unity or vision of the church.

Repeating today

Sin among the community of God's people must be dealt with through repentance.

- How are you preparing for God's plan for your life?
- How does your attitude to life's challenges compare to Ezra's?
- What sins are we guilty of & how can we begin to deal with the problem?

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Part 4 – Zechariah

Zechariah's call to repentance (Zechariah 1:1-6)

- 520 BC – two months after Haggai (v1)
- God's call: "Return to me ... and I will return to you" (v3)
- God's anger at their forefathers (v4-6a)
- The sin of being 'normal'
- The people obeyed (v6)

Eight Night Visions (Zechariah 1: 7-6:8)

1. The man among the myrtle trees (1:7-17)

- Four horse men (v7) – the Lord's agents (v10)
- When world peace is a bad thing (v11) – a false sense of security (v14-15)
- God will return to Jerusalem to comfort it, and His house will be rebuilt (v16-17)

POINT: God will judge the nations and Jerusalem will be saved and restored

2. Four horns and four craftsmen (1:18-21)

- Four powerful nations scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem (v18-19)
- God's terrorists – four "ordinary" craftsmen (v20-21)

POINT: God will use seemingly ordinary people to accomplish great things in His Kingdom

3. A man with a measuring line (2:1-13)

- The plan to build walls (v1-2)
- God is a wall of fire (v5)
- Remaining Exiles called to return (v6-9)
- God will come to live among His people and many nations will be included (v10-13)

POINT: Jerusalem is where the future is bright because God has plans for it

SUMMARY – visions 1-3

God's judgement on the nations is anticipated (4 horsemen)

Two visions about God returning to Jerusalem:

- a) His Temple will be rebuilt
- b) His people will be restored

4. Clean garments for the High Priest (3:1-10)

- Joshua the saved man (v1-2) – Satan is rebuked by God
- Joshua's sins are forgiven (v3-5), but how is this possible?
- The Branch (the Messiah) will remove sin in a single day (v8-9)

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a **Branch** will bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1)

“The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous **Branch**, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land’.” (Jeremiah 23:5)

5. The gold lampstand and the two olive trees (4:1-14)

- The power is from God’s Spirit (v6) – No obstacle is too great for Him (v7)
- Zerubbabel will complete the work he has begun (v8-9)
- The “day of small things” must not be despised (v10)
- The olive branches are Zerubbabel and Joshua (v14)

SUMMARY – Visions 4-5

Two visions about the leaders of God’s people (Joshua and Zerubbabel)

- a) They are made fit for service by cleansing of their sin (Christ, “the Branch”, will achieve this)
- b) They are empowered for service by the Spirit of God

6. The flying scroll (5:1-4)

- A huge scroll (v2)
- A curse on thieves and liars (v3)
- There is no escape (v4) – judgement is inescapable and complete

POINT: God will judge those in the community who refuse to repent

7. The woman in a basket (5:5-11)

- Wickedness personified (v5-8) – dishonest business practices?
- Wickedness removed to Babylonia where it will be worshipped (v9-11)

POINT: God will purify His people by removing wickedness completely

8. Four chariots (6:1-8)

- Mountains of bronze (v1) – Solomon’s Temple had pillars of bronze
- The horses spread out across the earth (v2-7)
- Peace is brought to the north (v8)

POINT: God’s judgement will be executed on all nations

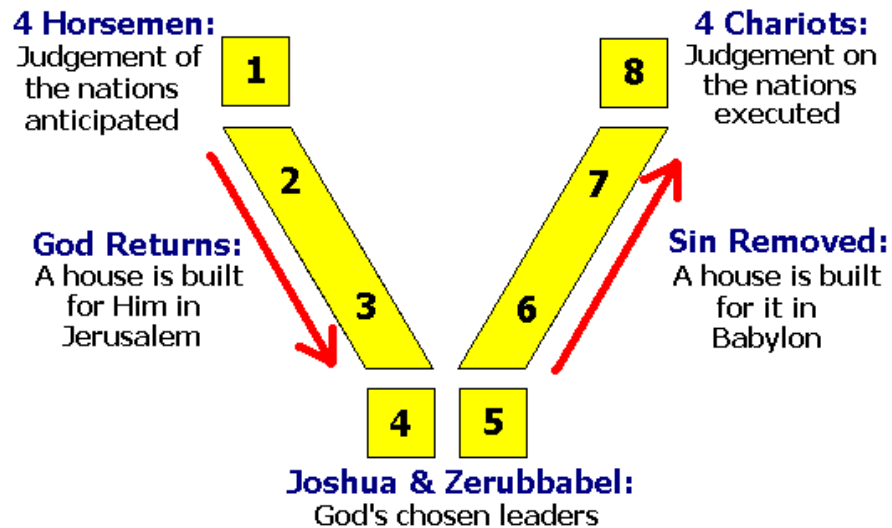
SUMMARY – Visions 6-8

Two visions about the removal of sin from God’s people:

- a) The liars and thieves will be destroyed
- b) Wickedness will be removed

God’s judgement is executed on all nations

These eight visions form a ‘chiastic’ (mirror image) pattern, as the following diagram demonstrates. They move from the anticipation of God’s judgement on the nations to the execution of that judgement but inbetween they explain how God’s people will be delivered through that judgement through God’s saving action.



The Priest-King (Zechariah 6:9-15)

A parable in action

- A crown is made (v9-10)
- The priest is crowned (v11)
- The crown becomes a memorial (v14)

The picture is explained (v12-13)

- The Branch will be both priest and King
- Christ is the High Priest and King!

The Messiah in Zechariah

1. The Branch who will remove sin in one day (3:8)
2. The Branch who is both King and Priest (6:12-13)
3. The true King enters Jerusalem on a donkey (9:9) – see Matthew 21:4-5; John 12:14-15
4. 30 pieces of silver thrown to the potter (11:12-13) – see Matthew 27:9 [for whom was the price paid?]
5. Israel weeps for the one they pierced (12:10) – John 19:37; Revelation 1:7
6. A Shepherd stricken by God (13:7) – Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27
7. Reigning over God's eternal Kingdom (Ch 14) – Acts 1:11-12 [who stand on this mountain?]

The Messiah as Priest:

- Will remove sin
- Will be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver
- Will be pierced by Israel
- Will be stricken by God

The Messiah as King:

- Will enter Jerusalem on a donkey
- Will defeat God's enemies & reign in power

Rejoicing for Zion today

God's Kingdom is eternal and He will use us to build it.

We can serve God because we are:

- Cleansed by Christ's death
- Empowered by the Holy Spirit

Our future hope is certain

- Christ came and fulfilled chapters 12-13
- Christ will come again to fulfil chapter 14

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Part 5 – Nehemiah: a life of prayer

Nehemiah – historical context

- 539 BC Cyrus (Medo-Persians) conquers Babylon
- 537 BC Sheshbazzar & Zerubbabel return – altar rebuilt (Ezra 1-4)
- 521 BC Haggai / Zechariah prophesy (Ezra 5)
- 516 BC Temple completed (Ezra 6)
- 458 BC Ezra returns – religious reform (Ezra 7-10)
- 445 BC Nehemiah returns – walls rebuilt (Nehemiah)
- 430 BC Malachi prophesying

Nehemiah opens in November – December 446 BC (the month of Kislev in the 20th year of Artaxerxes I in 1:1). Artaxerxes I was the son of Xerxes (the king during time of Esther) and a grandson of Darius. He had a prior history of refusing to let the Jews rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (see Ezra 4:7-23), which is important to understand in the context of Nehemiah's fear when he had to ask the king to support his mission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah: the man and his achievements

Nehemiah (his name means comforted by God) was a layman, not a priest or descendant of kings (different from Ezra, Jeshua and Zerubbabel). In addition, because of his position in the king's court he was probably a eunuch, another reason why his status among the Jews would be in question. He was, however, a senior official in the court of King Artaxerxes – cupbearers were trusted with the king's life and according to some records had a status lower only than princes. Certainly it was a trusted position of influence if not necessarily of power.

Nehemiah's achievements are significant, and mark him out as one of the greatest leaders of God's people in the Scriptures:

- The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt (2:11-4:23; Ch 6)
- The poor were helped (Ch 5)
 - The system of charging interest to those who had to take loans from richer Jews to buy grain during famine and to pay the Persian taxes was stopped
 - Did not tax the people heavily as previous governors had done
 - Shared the food that was his by right as governor with poor Jews
- The city of Jerusalem was repopulated (Ch 11)
 - 1 in 10 people were chosen by lots to settle in Jerusalem
- The Law was restored (Ch 13):
 - Temple purity (Tobiah the Ammonite was put out of his apartment in the Temple)
 - Tithes for the Levites
 - The Sabbath was observed
 - Intermarriage was forbidden
 - The priests and Levites were purified from foreign influences

In this study and the next we will discover what underlay Nehemiah's success. In this study we will consider his life of prayer, which is where his story begins and ends (the book opens with one prayer and closes with another). In the next study, the last in this series, we will consider the skills that made Nehemiah a great leader. Before we move into the study let us first notice the huge risk in human terms that Nehemiah took when he chose to leave his own position in Susa (probably the land of his birth) to travel to Jerusalem. In Susa he had comfort, status and safety. In going to Jerusalem he

would trade his comfort for effort – it would be hard work with many struggles in the face of great opposition. He exchanged status for possible insignificance. Although he became governor of Judah, in the wider sphere of the Persian Empire this was a low and relatively minor position. Judah was a tiny backwater province. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that a Persian born eunuch with no distinguished heritage would be accepted by the Jews. In making this journey Nehemiah also left safety for danger. His enemies were dangerous men who would not hesitate to murder him if they had the chance.

Nehemiah is one of those heroes of faith who made what are, by the standards of this world, insane choices for the sake of God's kingdom. He is one of God's fools – those men and women who counted this world's privileges and honours as dung to be part of God's great purpose. He stand in grand company, with Abraham, Moses and Daniel, with Lydia, Paul and Christ Himself. Praise God for such examples. May we too be God's fools as we seek His purpose for our lives! What are you living for? What would you refuse to sacrifice for God's Kingdom? Surely we have much to learn from Nehemiah?

A life of prayer

Nehemiah's life was dominated by prayer. In the book there are nine prayers recorded, including the longest in Chapter 1 (see below) and several one sentence prayers. It is clear as we examine these prayers that Nehemiah practiced several kinds of prayer, all of which will be vital in our lives if we genuinely seek to walk with God:

a) 'Quiet time' (1:4-11)

Nehemiah spent extended times in prayer as part of solitude with God. In chapter 1 we also read about him combining this with other spiritual disciplines including fasting over a period of time when he was struggling to know God's guidance. We need these times when we withdraw from our usual routine and all the distractions that surround us to seek God's presence. Although we may not always need this every day, if we go without it for only a small number of days we will find ourselves growing weak, cold and out of touch with God's leading.

b) 'Arrow prayer' (2:4; 6:9: "Now strengthen my hands")

Nehemiah gives us a great example of what has been called an "arrow prayer", meaning a quick, instant prayer shot up to God in a time of need. In 2:4 Nehemiah stands before King Artaxerxes, and he must answer a question from the king. We must remember the absolute power the Persian kings had to appreciate the significance of this moment. The answer he gives could mean the difference between life and death for Nehemiah personally and the success or failure of his mission.

c) Constant prayerful attitude (6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31)

Throughout the book (especially in Chapter 13) Nehemiah breaks into short prayers asking God to remember aspects of His life and experience. This reflects a constant attitude of prayer, which should be the goal of our lives as well. In a sense this is what a life of prayer really means. Our aim should be to live in constant communion with God – always aware of Him and always submitting our thoughts to Him. The "quiet times" should be only the tip of the iceberg, and prayer should become our life.

Nehemiah's prayer (1:1-2:20)

Nehemiah's five-fold vision

In these verses we see Nehemiah looking in five different directions:

- Outward (1:2-3) – he is listening for news about what is happening to God's people.
- Upward (1:4-5)
- Inward (1:6-7)
- Backward (1:8-9)
- Forward (1:10-11)

Ten key qualities of Nehemiah's prayer (1:5-11)

1. **Sincere** (v4: "For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed")

There was nothing more important to Nehemiah than doing God's will and the well-being of God's people. He sees a need and instead of responding in His own wisdom he cries out to God, seeking His guidance. Nehemiah's sincerity expressed itself in strong emotions. Emotions are an important part of our Christian experience, but they are not the measure of it. There ought to be times of great emotion as we experience God, but there will also be times when we do not feel so strongly. Emotion is not vital to prayer, but sincerity is. An insincere prayer is no prayer at all, but a sincere, honest cry to the Lord will be heard whether there is much emotion or none, and whether the emotion is one of joy or mourning.

2. **Reverent** (v5: "O LORD, God of Heaven")

Nehemiah acknowledges the sovereignty of God. Prayer is pointless if it does not begin with a recognition of the person to whom we address ourselves. In fact, we can go as far as to say that prayer accomplishes nothing – God accomplishes His purpose, and He chooses to do so through the prayers of His people.

3. **Faithful** (v5: "the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love")

Nehemiah's prayer is based on his living faith in God's love, power and faithfulness. He acknowledges two things about God that are vital discoveries for anyone who would pray:

- a. *God is powerful* – He is all-powerful and able to accomplish His purpose.
- b. *God is good* – He will accomplish His good purpose for those who love Him, who are bound in a covenant relationship with Him (in the Old Testament this means Israel, in the New it means those who are in Christ Jesus). The word translated *love* is the Hebrew *hesed*, a powerful word for God's covenant love that incorporates the ideas of both love and faithfulness.

These two qualities of God are vital if prayer is to be effective. A powerful god who was not good would be nothing less than a megalomaniacal tyrant using people when it suited him and abandoning them when it was not in his interests, while a good god who lacked power would be nothing more than a kind grandfather figure who wished us well and then waited in fear for news of what happened to us. The one true God is both powerful and good, mighty but also kind, awesome yet loving.

4. **Humble** (v6: "let your ear be attentive ... to hear the prayer your servant is praying")

Nehemiah is God's servant. He is not presumptuous, but pleads for God to hear his prayer. Pleading does not persuade God to answer, but it is the self-sacrificing desperate heart that God is able to use to accomplish His purpose. Until we are able to put ourselves in this position of utter dependence on God He is not able to use us as He would. We do not come to God in prayer to ask Him to rubber stamp the decisions we have already made, but to seek His guidance in our troubles.

5. **Persistent** (v6: "before you day and night")

Nehemiah is persistent in prayer. Again we must say that God does not act because we pray often (the parable of the persistent widow told by Jesus proves that God answers because of His grace towards His people – see Luke 18:1-8), but sometimes we need to be persistent in prayer to understand how He will answer and what He wants us to do. Nehemiah became the answer to his own prayer, just as the disciples did when Jesus told them to pray that God would send workers into the harvest before sending them out (Matthew 9:38-10:1). We must be prepared to persist in prayer if we are to see God at work.

6. **Penitent** (vv6-7: "I confess the sins we Israelites ... have committed against you")

Prayer must include an attitude of repentance and recognition of our own weakness. We cannot come to the holy God without acknowledging our sinfulness, and our relationship with Him cannot be right if we refuse to confess our sins. However, in Christ we have one who can cleanse us (1 John 1:9).

7. Corporate (v6-7: “We have acted...”)

Nehemiah prays on behalf of the nation as well as himself. It is a good reminder that we should not be obsessed in our prayers with only our own needs and feelings, but with God’s glory and the good of His people. This is a further illustration (as we have already seen in Ezra’s attitude) of the way in which God’s servant identifies himself with the sin of the community. Do we understand ourselves in this same way in relation to our local church, or have we fallen for the lie of individualism that allows us to judge others or distance ourselves from them instead of seeking to be part of the means through which the Lord will restore them to Himself?

8. Scriptural (v8-10a: “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses”)

Nehemiah quotes Scripture’s promises (from Deuteronomy 28:64 and 30:1-4), and in v10 we see that he has learned from the example of Moses in Deuteronomy 9:29 when he interceded with God not to destroy the Israelites after their idolatry with the golden calf. If we want to learn how to pray and what we should pray for there is no better place to go than the great prayers of the Bible. Nehemiah learned from Moses and we can learn from Nehemiah. It is interesting to see the intimate relationship between scripture and prayer, and Scripture will both inspire us to pray and give us the words to pray.

9. Thankful (v10: “whom you redeemed”)

Nehemiah acknowledged what God had done in the past in the time of Moses. It is good in prayer to remember to be thankful for what is past.

10. Specific (v11: “Give your servant success today”)

Nehemiah asks for his own personal need, but for God’s glory. This is the only request in the prayer, and it is worth noting that it comes after adoration, confession and thanksgiving, and indeed after possibly as much as four months of prayer. Too often we rush into asking God for things without taking time to seek the Spirit’s leading about what we should be praying for. Prayer is about listening to God, seeking His leading and bringing our will in line with His.

The content of Nehemiah’s prayer

This prayer includes five great dimensions of prayer:

- A** – *Adoration* (v5) – we should take times to acknowledge who God is and worship Him.
- C** – *Confession* (vv6-7) – we should remember to confess our sins.
- T** – *Thanksgiving* (v10) – we must always be thankful for what God has done.
- S** – *Supplication* (v11) – we should bring our requests before Him in surrender to His will.
- I** – *Intercession* (v6) – we should pray on behalf of others.

The results of Nehemiah’s prayer

The results of this prayer are powerful, but interestingly they are all to do with Nehemiah’s attitude. In other words, the prayer changed Him, it did not change God.

- Courage to speak when the opportunity arose (2:2-3)
- Wisdom to ask in the right way (2:4-9)
- Vision from God (2:11-12)

God’s purpose is certain, but we must be available to Him if we are to be part of His purpose.

The occasion of Nehemiah’s prayer – seeking guidance

This great prayer comes at the beginning of Nehemiah’s experience as a leader among God’s people. In the words of John White:

He is like an embryonic butterfly, shaped to perfection in a cocoon, without ever having tried his wings. His cocoon is the summer palace at Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. His graduating examination was to be an ordeal from which he would emerge from the cocoon trembling, wings, as it were, still wet, teetering on newly released legs before taking flight.

The prayer is the heart cry of the cocooned Nehemiah as he contemplates the ordeal before him and as he seeks God's guidance for the task ahead of him. We can learn helpful lessons from Nehemiah's example about the path to guidance:

- **Knowing God's will begins with being open to God's leading (1:2-3)**

We cannot expect God to lead us if we are not seeking His Kingdom and His righteousness above all. Perhaps the most succinct verses on guidance in Scripture are Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight". If we are to know God's guidance we must first commit everything to Him in trust and stop relying on our own understanding.

- **We must pray sincerely and persistently (1:4)**

Prayer is a conversation through which God's leading becomes clearer to us. In prayer we seek God's wisdom, surrender our own desires and wait for God's timing.

- **Understanding guidance requires us to recognise two great truths:**

- a) *The sovereign purposes of God* (1:5) – we will never know God's leading until we are surrendered to His purpose and glory.
- b) *Our own inadequacy and unworthiness* (1:6-7) – God cannot work with the proud. In fact, He opposes them (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; I Peter 5:5), but there is nothing that He cannot accomplish with just one life that is wholly surrendered to Him.

- **We must immerse ourselves in Scripture and its promises (1:8-10)**

Guidance depends on knowing God, and there is no substitute for the word of God as we are to know Him more. As we read and meditate on Scripture, so we will begin to think as God thinks and to understand what things are important to Him and how He operates in the lives of people who seek Him. Too often we believe that God is not blessing us because we expect Him to give us things that He never promised to give us. We should find out what things God has promised to do for us and through us and dedicate our lives to these purposes.

- **We should remember that we are not alone and seek support in the prayers and advice of others (1:11)**

Nehemiah mentions other servants of God in his prayer. It is vital that we realise that we are not alone in our desire to serve God and to accomplish His purposes. If you are passionate about serving Him, then seek out others who have the same passion. Share with them, listen to them, pray with them, learn from them. It is vital that we break the idea of individualism that is so dominant in our minds and learn to submit to others. Too seldom do we seek advice from other godly people when facing important decisions, and we are too ready to believe that we know better or that we are mature enough not to need others. The godly servant of God will depend on others and will seek to work with others who love God too.

Are you a Nehemiah?

In the inspiring words of British evangelist Henry Varley, made famous by American evangelist DL Moody:

"the world has yet to see what God will do with a man (or woman) fully consecrated to him."

I want to be that person. Don't you? Let us begin to pray as Nehemiah prayed!

Returning, Repenting, Rebuilding

Part 6 – Nehemiah: lessons in leadership

Nehemiah is one of the finest leaders of God's people in the Old Testament, and, thanks to the fact that the book that bears his name is comprised largely of first-person memoirs written by him (Chapters 1-7 and 12:27-13), one about whose personal life we know a great deal. Leaders with any area of responsibility, whether in the church, the workplace or the family, who seek to be godly and responsible in leadership can learn a great deal from the example of this man. In particular, we will learn about:

- The personal qualities of a godly leader
- The challenges godly leaders will face
- The skills of a godly leader
- The source of a godly leader's strength

Personal Qualities of a leader

Nehemiah's leadership flowed from his character. He was a godly leader because he was a man of God. If we are to be involved in leadership in whatever capacity, we must also focus on our character. We have much to learn from Nehemiah, who was a man who exemplified:

1. **Passion** (Ch 12) – Nehemiah was passionate for God's glory and not for his own reputation or comfort. This is clear when the walls were dedicated and he ascribed all glory to God.
2. **Compassion** (1:1-4) – the other great force behind Nehemiah's leadership was love for God's people. Godly leaders must love the people they lead otherwise they will feed themselves on the flock.
3. **Prayerful dependence** (1:4-11) – Nehemiah was, as we have seen, a man of prayer. The godly leader will be a person of prayer and hence of faith in God.
4. **Transparent integrity** (1:6; 2:5; 5:10) – Nehemiah exemplified integrity. He was on the inside exactly what he appeared to be on the outside. He made decisions based on principle not pragmatism.
5. **Kingdom vision** (2:12) – Nehemiah had God-given vision. He was not a man who was content to maintain what the people already had, but who was determined to build God's Kingdom through building Jerusalem's walls.
6. **Servanthood** (5:15-16) – Nehemiah was faithful as a servant, leading by example. He did not lord it over the people but made himself the servant of all for the sake of the Kingdom. Servant leadership is the only Biblical model of leadership (see I Peter 5:3, Matthew 20:25-28).
7. **Disciplined effort** (4:21-23) – Nehemiah was prepared to work hard, but he was not a workaholic. He maintained a healthy balance in life and most importantly did not measure his success by how hard he worked or by comparison with others but by the grace of God that was upon Him. Leaders must be prepared to work hard but must always ensure that they maintain their spiritual life to fuel this labour.
8. **Sacrifice** (5:14-15) – Nehemiah did not seek personal riches or luxury from the work. He left relative comfort in Susa for a challenging job in Jerusalem and when he was there he gave up his own privileges for the sake of others.
9. **Faithful endurance** (Ch 13) – Nehemiah endured to the end. He returned to Jerusalem after a period back in Susa and picked up his work again to bring further much-needed reforms. Godly leaders endure faithfully in the work of the Kingdom.

Challenges of leadership

Nehemiah faced many challenges in his ministry. The godly leader who seeks to build God's Kingdom will always face opposition, this is a universal principle. If Christian leaders are to be effective they must learn how to deal with the challenges they face. We can learn a great deal from Nehemiah's example as he dealt with three kinds of challenges. There are, according to John White, two over-arching principles that we must remember as we consider opposition:

- a) *The source of opposition* – although the opposition may appear to come from people, we must never forget that it is ultimately inspired by Satan. We must remember that there is a spiritual battle between two Kingdoms, and we must fight this battle with spiritual weapons.
- b) *The aim of opposition* – this is always to stop the work of building God's Kingdom. If we remember this, we will also remember that dealing with the problems must never be allowed to distract us from continuing the work. We must keep steadfast and learn to resist Satan but also keep building.

So, then, let us consider the three types of challenge Nehemiah faced:

a) Attacks on the work

These took at least three forms:

- (i) *False accusations* (2:19) – His enemies accused Nehemiah of rebellion. Often godly leaders will find themselves falsely accused of wrong motives. John White writes of this accusation that, "People often accuse others of the same evil they themselves intend". This is very true, and often people suspect God's leaders of being motivated by the same ungodly attitude they themselves harbour.
- (ii) *Mockery and public ridicule* (4:1-3) – This is another common challenge for godly leaders. Nehemiah's enemies attacked the Jews at their point of weakness (they almost certainly already felt feeble before he said it) and cast aspersions on the ability of their work to endure. In reality, the Jews had all the resources they needed to complete the work, both in themselves and in the stones they were using.
- (iii) *Threats* (4:7-12) – When their words failed to impact Nehemiah's work, his enemies took another strategy, beginning to plan an armed attack by a formidable alliance.

Nehemiah's Response:

In reality, words can hurt (whatever our school-yard rhymes may say). Nehemiah paid no heed to the false words of his enemies. He simply left the matter (including his considerable anger about it) with God and carried on the work (4:4-6). Later, when faced with a serious physical threat of attack against the builders, Nehemiah had three options in responding:

- a) Keep building and ignore the threat
- b) Stop the building to defend against the enemies
- c) Reorganise the workers so that work could continue but a defence could also be organised

In a stroke of decisive leadership Nehemiah opted for the third of these responses. If the work had stopped the enemies would have been victorious even if they never attacked. Nehemiah knew that the option of suspending the work was not feasible. If the work stopped the people could lose momentum and the work may never be completed. In addition, the pause in the work could give his enemies more time to get organised and possibly even to appeal to the King to stop the work. On the other hand, if Nehemiah continued the work and ignored the threat he would be exposing the people to potential attack and annihilation. Nehemiah was sensitive to the needs of the people and to the situation and adaptable in being able to change his strategy by having half the people working (even then with swords by their sides) and the other half on guard.

Application for us:

When our work comes under attack from ungodly people we must respond as Nehemiah did: commit our feelings about it to God and ensure that the work continues. We must not give up in face of opposition.

b) Problems within the community

The second major type of challenge for Nehemiah's leadership was problems within the community:

- (i) *People who thought they were too important to be ordered* (3:5) – some nobles refused to work under supervisors. They are mentioned as a throw away comment. Clearly Nehemiah was not prepared to put his

effort into trying to bring these few proud people along with him (like Ezra in 10:15). He simply records the problem and carries on with his record of the work.

- (ii) *Discouragement and fear* (4:10-14) – unsurprisingly, in face of the extent of opposition against their work the people became discouraged and afraid. Nehemiah’s response was compassionate and swift. He took action to improve security, but he also refreshed the people’s faith by reminding them of the greatness of the God they were serving.
- (iii) *Inequalities within the community* (Ch 5) – as the work was progressing Nehemiah became aware that all was not well in financial terms within the community. The rich were oppressing the poor. Nehemiah dealt decisively, leading all the time by example, in addressing the issue and redressing the inequality. He firmly takes the side of those who are being oppressed and is not afraid of the consequences if those who were oppressing them were offended.

Nehemiah’s Response:

Nehemiah dealt wisely with each of these problems:

- (i) *He ignored the proud* – When people were proud and refused to work under leadership (we could say without accountability) he ignored them and carried on. We must also accept that not everyone will catch the vision for God’s work. If we have been faithful in communicating the vision and encouraging faith by teaching God’s word, if some do not respond we must not allow that to hold the work back. Sometimes we must advance and leave behind those who do not follow.
- (ii) *He encouraged the weak* – When faced with discouragement and fear in the community Nehemiah took practical action and also inspired faith in God. Christian leaders must also help people to remember that the source of their strength is in God, and that if he is for us no one can stand against us.
- (iii) *He confronted the sinful* – Finally, when faced with sin within the community, Nehemiah responds decisively. His anger at sin and injustice is powerful (5:6-7), a reminder to us that anger is not wrong so long as we learn to express it in appropriate ways. Nehemiah reflected on it before acting (v7), which is something we must also be careful to do so that in our anger we do not sin (Ephesians 4:26). Nehemiah’s readiness to stand for truth even when influential people in the community may not like it is striking. He has the moral authority to take this stance because he leads by example. Christian leaders must also learn to lead by example but also to be prepared to challenge those who do wrong, harming the community, even if these people have influence in the community. Too often churches are held back because leaders will not risk challenging people who are wealthy or whose families have been longest in the church. The way in which Nehemiah confronted the issue also carries lessons for us:
 1. Firstly, he went to those who were responsible for doing wrong and made his view clear to them in private (v7a). Because he had reflected on the situation and knew the facts he did not fall into the danger of seeing “both sides” of the situation, but stuck to his conviction. We must ensure that we have heard all the facts, but once truth is clear we must stand for what is right and not allow this to be compromised. We should first speak to the people individually and privately. Sometimes this will be sufficient to solve the problem, but if they are not repentant or if the issue was a highly public one (as in Nehemiah’s case) we must be prepared to progress to the next step.
 2. Secondly, Nehemiah held a large public meeting to deal with the wrong (v7b). There is a place for such meetings in the church if the issue cannot be resolved privately or certain public results of the wrongdoing require a public response.
 3. Thirdly, Nehemiah insisted on a public oath from those who had done wrong (v12). Again, there may be a place for such oaths in the church. There must be a resolve not merely to talk about problems publicly (as sometimes happens in church meetings), but to reach a resolution and to make it clear to all involved what action this will require. Nehemiah made the seriousness of the issue clear, warning the people that God would judge them if they continued (v13). We must not think that sin within the church is any less serious (see Jesus words in Matthew 18:15-20 or Paul’s warnings in I Corinthians 11:27-32 if you are in doubt about this).

c) Personal attacks against him (6:1-14)

When their attacks on the work fail, Nehemiah’s enemies focused in on the leader himself. This is the third of the challenges Nehemiah faced, and it can often be the hardest for us as Christian leaders. When our work is attacked

we can easily remember that it is God's work, and when there are problems within the community or team we can deal with them according to the principles of God's word. When we come under personal attack, however, it is easy to become discouraged, to feel sorry for ourselves, or to believe that in fact we are useless and ineffective. We need to learn from Nehemiah as he dealt with three kinds of personal attacks:

- a. *A murder plot under the guise of invitation to talk things over (6:1-4)* – Four times Nehemiah's enemies sent the same invitation to him. He was wise and godly enough to know that their intention was in fact to kill him. He could not collaborate with these men because they had different goals. As John White writes, "The call for collaboration can have many motivations. For unity, however desirable in itself, can be a pretext for schemes and power plays, and even a cover for sinister plots". We must learn to be wise about who we collaborate with, but we must also be aware that invitations to "talk the matter over" can sometimes be less than innocent. It will require great wisdom to know when to refuse to go.
- b. *An open letter libelling him (6:5-9)* – Libel and gossip remains a serious issue in churches today. John White writes:
 Tragically, most of the gossip and slander in the Christian world is inaccurate, unnecessary and usually vindictive. All too frequently it arises from pride and contempt for others and is based on ignorant prejudice and misunderstanding.
 Sadly, I fear that White is right, and these things do happen even in churches among people who profess the name of Christ.
- c. *A move to intimidate and discredit him publicly (6:10-13)* – finally the personal attacks reached their pinnacle as Nehemiah's enemies became increasingly desperate. They actually hire a false prophet to prophesy against Nehemiah. These are the depths people can stoop to destroy the work of God, even appealing wrongly to God's word, false prophecies or theology to discredit people. Sadly the same tactics occur today among some people who prefer to spend time criticising others for not doing it the way they expected it should be done rather than carrying on with God's work themselves.

Nehemiah's response:

Nehemiah's response to these personal attacks is challenging and highly relevant for Christian leaders:

1. Firstly, he firmly and briefly denied the false accusations (v8)
2. Secondly, he prayed for strength to cope with the stress and anger these attacks created (v9)
3. Lastly, he trusted God to vindicate him (v14)

Application for us:

Of course, there may be times when it is right to defend ourselves against personal attacks, but often we would do best to respond as Nehemiah did. He did not waste time defending himself, but carried on faithfully with his work and with an attitude of dependence on God. He did have an emotional response, and this is inevitable when we are faced with falsehood and malice, but he knew how to deal with stress – not through giving up but through prayer. Christian leaders will also need to learn to cope with stress, which will certainly be part of their experience.

Leadership Skills

There is an unfortunate tendency among Christians to see a false dichotomy between skills (efficiency and organisation) and spirituality (faith and anointing). Some people tend to over-emphasise planning and human effort and leave God in the background. On the other hand, some people suggest that God's work is spiritual and therefore people should stop trying to improve their skills and focus entirely on prayer. Nehemiah's life, however, teaches us that no conflict exists between these two aspects of godly leadership. Nehemiah, as we have already seen, exemplifies faithful dependence on God, but he is also a great example of someone who used skills effectively to accomplish his God-given vision. God works through the people He calls to do His work. He uses people with their gifts, abilities, personality and experiences. As Paul teaches in I Corinthians 14:40, orderliness is biblical. So, then, what skills do we see in Nehemiah that may be relevant for godly leaders today?

1. Alertness

Nehemiah demonstrated alertness in looking for God-given opportunities to act (in 2:1-10 he seizes the opportunity to speak to the King) and in anticipating challenges that were around the corner (see 7:3-5, 11:1-24). This alertness flowed directly from his prayerful preparation for his work. He spent long periods of time seeking God's direction and focusing on Him and the vision He had given Him. If we compare this approach to our modern committee meetings where long periods of time are spent discussing present problems with comparatively short amounts of time being spent trying to recognise God-given opportunities and anticipate challenges ahead of time. Perhaps this is related to the fact that we so often relegate prayer to a brief time at the end of our meetings. John White suggests that we should pray longer at the outset of the meeting, and in fact adds that if we expect a committee meeting to last for 90 minutes we would be best to spend 45 minutes in prayer at the outset. Alertness is a skill. It is a discipline to be learnt by leaders who believe in a sovereign God.

2. Thoroughness

Upon arriving in Jerusalem (after a three day break) Nehemiah was careful to accurately assess the situation by making a night-time tour of Jerusalem (2:11-15). He took time to establish the situation accurately and first hand. He did not depend on half-truths, rumours or the assessments others made. In leadership there is no substitute for accurately assessing the situation in which we serve. It is vital to know the people we will be working with and understand the challenges that lie ahead of us. Sadly, great damage is sometimes done by Christian leaders who rush into situations on the basis of recognising a need without actually taking time to appreciate the scale and nature of the need first. Even worse, some have caused great harm by acting on the words of one group of people without actually taking care to hear the perspective of others.

3. Discretion

Another feature of leadership demonstrated by Nehemiah in his night-time tour of Jerusalem's walls was discretion. In 2:16 we learn that he had not told any of the officials or other people where he was going. In fact, he took only one horse with him as well (2:12) to avoid drawing attention to his party. Nehemiah knew that he had to communicate the vision God had given him (2:12) to the people of Judah, and that this would be a make or break moment for his leadership. He had the wisdom to know that he had to choose the right moment to speak and the right people to speak to. Godly leaders today must also demonstrate wisdom in knowing who to speak to about what issues and how to do so.

4. Team building

After assessing the situation discreetly, Nehemiah begins to build the people of Judah into a team capable of getting the task done. In 2:16-20, we see three important principles at work:

- a) *How does Nehemiah lead the team?* Nehemiah identifies himself with the people immediately, using the words *we* and *us* (vv17&18). He does not come in as the official from outside to tell the people what they must do. He leads from within. Christian leaders must also remember this principle – that although we may be entrusted with the responsibility of leading we always do so from within the community of faith and that all member of the team are vitally important.
- b) *Who is included in the team?* Nehemiah includes all of the people in the team, including priests, nobles and officials (v16). However, he clearly excludes from it those people who have a different agenda (v20). The team is inclusive, but only of those who have faith in the true God and who are committed to the vision.
- c) *How does he motivate the team?* Nehemiah had come into a situation where morale was understandably low. Judah was weak, poor and surrounded by enemies. It is interesting that Nehemiah does not try to deny the seriousness of the situation. In fact (v17) he is brutally honest in telling them the challenge they will face. However, in addition to telling them the work they must do he also inspires them by sharing the vision God has given. God's gracious hand was upon them, as was the favour of the King (v18).

Nehemiah was an inspiring leader because he was captured by a God-given vision and he saw God's people not as a resource with which to accomplish his goal but as partners in the work. In his book *Excellence in leadership* (IVP), John White writes:

You see, leadership is an interpersonal matter. People do not follow programs, but leaders who inspire them. They act when a vision stirs in them a reckless hope of something greater than themselves, hope of fulfilment they had never before dared to aspire to.

5. Efficient organisation

Having assessed the situation and motivated his team, Nehemiah now shows another skill: efficient in organisation. He moves from vision to strategy in Chapter 3 as we see that the work was divided well. In this strategy the team work together as one but all members have their own specific responsibility. This is a vital principle of team work that there is unity but also individual responsibility. Teams flounder when they do not trust members to carry on with their own specific area of ministry, but they implode when individual members become loose cannons acting in isolation from the team and not under authority. John White comments that, “it is unlikely that work on the Dung Gate (3:14), the Fountain Gate and ‘the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King’s Garden’ (3:15) would be equally appealing”. Godly leaders will face the challenge of helping members of the team to assume responsibility for and to value their particular part of the work. In the church some gifts will be more public than others, but all are vital to the health of the body. We must constantly teach people this truth and believe it ourselves.

6. Adaptability

As the work on the wall progressed problems began to develop as opposition intensified (Chapter 4). In the face of these problems Nehemiah demonstrated another leadership skill: sensitive adaptability. In Christian leadership we must also be sensitive to the situation on the ground and adaptable. It is foolish to carry on full steam ahead with a project if the situation has changed or if workers are exhausted on the verge of burnout. The godly leader will have to assess the situation and prayerfully decide how best to respond so as to deal with the change in circumstances without seeing the work of the Kingdom coming to a halt.

7. Delegation

In 7:2 we see one final leadership skill in Nehemiah. Nehemiah had to return to Susa now that the work in Jerusalem was complete. He had to appoint someone else to lead the people in his absence. In short, he now had to delegate this area of responsibility. How did he choose the person? He looked for godly character: integrity and faith. We see this same principle at play later in his life in 13:13 where Nehemiah chooses people because they are trustworthy. Delegation is a vital skill for Christian leaders too. As John White warns:

the most common failure is to not delegate, either because the leader suffers from a need to cling to power or else because the leader cannot trust others. The result is that needed tasks never get done. People who could have carried them out grow bored and feel useless. If you lead, follow Nehemiah’s example and *delegate*. Don’t do everything yourself.

Godly leaders must learn to delegate and to train up leaders who can share their responsibility and carry on the work after they have gone (whether to leadership in a different location or to glory). In choosing who to delegate to they must look for the same three qualities Nehemiah did:

- a) *Integrity* – they should be people of consistent godly character who are not prepared to compromise obedience to God’s calling under pressure.
- b) *Faith* – they should be people who demonstrate faith in God.
- c) *Trustworthy* – they must be dependable and faithful to carry on the work.

The source of Nehemiah’s strength

Finally, let us focus on the source of Nehemiah’s strength to carry out the work. This is probably the most important lesson for us to learn if we are to be involved in leadership or indeed any form of Christian ministry. Too often as we serve the Lord we become so taken up with accomplishing tasks, getting the work done, that we lose sight of why we do it. We become “human doings” instead of human beings and we find ourselves running on empty. Attacks and opposition only make the situation worse, and if we are not careful we will soon find ourselves heading for burn out. How did Nehemiah find strength to keep going?

I believe the answer is summed up in a simple phrase that came from his lips. In Chapter 8, when the Law was read to the people by Ezra there was a profound emotional response (v9). The people began to weep, but Ezra and Nehemiah could see that, although spontaneous and genuine, this was not appropriate to the occasion. Their attitude is striking in

view of the way modern preachers and praise leaders try so hard to create an emotional response, which then often ends up being contrived rather than genuine, and then, when it happens revel in it and keep encouraging it. Emotion is good, and an emotional response is something to thank God for, but only if it comes from a response to God's revealed truth, and the leader's role is to ensure that this response is appropriate and leads on to a change in the will and lifestyle of the people. We must be careful not to try to do the work of the Spirit for Him or to create unhelpful expectations or manipulate the emotional state of people.

Faced with this situation, Nehemiah told the people to prepare for a feast, and then simply added:

“Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10)

This may appear at first reading to be a throw-away remark, but I believe it to be a profoundly succinct summary of an attitude that Nehemiah had learned and practiced over the preceding years of serving God. Nehemiah knew the grace of God (2:18) and the joy that the discovery of grace brings. It was this that inspired him. He was no workaholic and no legalist. He did not measure himself by comparison with others, and he knew how to cope with the seemingly endless workload that confronts every servant of God. He knew the peace of being in the quiet place of prayer with God and simply rejoicing in Him, and this gave him strength to keep going. His focus was not on the challenges he face, or even on the work he had been entrusted with, but on the God whose grace had transformed His life and whose glory and Kingdom captivated His imagination and will.

Do you know the joy of the Lord in your service for Him? Are you running on empty? Then pull aside from your busyness and be with the Lord. Be refreshed in His grace and in the joy it brings and then begin to apply the lessons in leadership we have learned from Nehemiah. Reassess your work and ask what it is that God has really called you to do. God never wants you to be doing more than you are physically and emotionally capable of. If you find yourself overburdened it is not His fault! Perhaps you are trying to do some ministry God never called you or gifted you to do. Perhaps you need to adjust your strategy or delegate to others. Perhaps God is calling you to a different ministry location. Take time to be with Him and may your ministry be Spirit-led as you keep in step with Him. When a leader's work outstrips the blood supply of his spiritual life he result will be pain, ineffectiveness and stunted growth. Don't allow that to happen to you. May you know the joy of the Lord as your strength as you serve Him!

Summary: five steps in leading

We can summarise what we have learnt about leadership in five words:

- **Passion** – the leader must begin with a passion that comes from prayerful dependence on God. If there is no passion then there will be no power to keep the work going.
- **Vision** – a leader must have a vision for God's Kingdom and a clear sense of what work God has called him or her to do. Where there is no vision the ministry will fall into the default “maintenance mode”. The irony of this is that if we simply try to keep things going it will inevitably lead to decline.
- **Strategy** – with the vision in mind the leader must form a strategy to reach the goal. This must be flexible, but also clear. Where there is passion and vision but no strategy the work will be uncoordinated and less effective. People will get frustrated because they know where they need to go but have no idea how to get there. Leaders must spend time figuring out an appropriate strategy based on a careful assessment of the situation and the resources available to them.
- **Discipline** – once the vision and strategy are in place, the leader will need to be disciplined to keep the work going. However, godly leaders are not only disciplined in keeping working, but also in keeping their passion and vision fresh through a vibrant spiritual life.
- **Risk taking** – once the vision is clear and the strategy is in place and the hard work has been done the leader will be able to consider taking risks. Nehemiah was prepared to take the risk of alienating some very influential people because of the way they were treating other members of the community. Risk is not something to be praised in itself, but it is often necessary if God's Kingdom is to move forward. It must never be done without the back up of the preceding steps in the chain.