

A BIT MORE NEHEMIAH

Separating life into distinct categories of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ damages, sometimes irreparably, any attempt to live a whole and satisfying life, a coherent life with meaning and purpose, a life lived to the glory of God. Nevertheless, the practice is widespread. But where did all these people come up with the habit of separating themselves and the world around them into these two camps? It surely wasn’t from the Bible. The Holy Scriptures, from beginning to end, strenuously resist such a temptation.

The damage to life is most obvious when the separation is applied to daily work. It is common for us to refer to the work of pastors, priests and missionaries as ‘sacred’ and that of lawyers, farmers and engineers as ‘secular’. This is wrong. Work by its very nature is holy. The biblical story is dominated by people who have jobs in gardening, shepherding, the military, politics, carpentry, ten making, homemaking, textiles, fishing and many more.

Nehemiah is one of these. He started out as a government worker in the employ of a foreign king. Then, as we are told about in these memoirs, he became a building contractor and project manager, called in to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His co-worker Ezra was a scholar and teacher, working with the Scriptures. Nehemiah worked with stones and mortar.

The stories of the two men are interwoven in a seamless fabric of vocational holiness. Neither job was more or less important or holy than the other. Nehemiah needed Ezra and Ezra needed Nehemiah. God’s people needed the work of them both. We still do.

Summary from ‘The Message’ Bible (Eugene H Peterson)

Nehemiah was remarkable man of God. With great sacrifice he devoted himself to the work of God. He exercised strategy and planning for the people of Israel. He inspired others to work for the cause of God. He used his God-given talents for the service of the Lord and the Lord’s people. He was a man of deep faith, ardent prayer and willing obedience. He is a fitting example for any Christian in combining the essential ingredients of godliness, hard work and prayer for the building up of the church of God.

Nehemiah brings a fitting conclusion to Old Testament history. Everything that appears in the Bible after this book has been collated under poetry or prophesy. With exception of Malachi, who was a contemporary of Nehemiah, all the other books precede Nehemiah in terms of chronology. Throughout three and a half millennia, an amazing number of wonderful prophecies have been given to Israel: God...at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets’ (Hebrews 1:1). The book of Nehemiah closes that Old Testament history. The Lord had determined to leave the nation with a sense of hope and expectancy. Israel, reduced to a remnant composed mainly of the tribe of Judah, is restored to its own land to await the Messiah. Now they are known more as Jews than Israelites.

440 years are to pass in prophetic silence until the coming of the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. The silence will be broken by the messenger heralding the coming of the ‘messenger of the covenant’ (Malachi 3:1). John the Baptist will break the silence by bursting upon the scene of history as ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ (Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:2-3).

Summary from ‘The Old Testament explained and applied’ (Gareth Crossley)