

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN NEHEMIAH

THE STORY OF NEHEMIAH – A JOURNEY IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

PART FOUR – SOME FINAL THOUGHTS FOR LEADERS

11. THEY RECOGNISED THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE

11:1-36 Jerusalem was God's city, to be the centre of teaching, worship and meeting God. She represented the expression of God's love as a bride joined to her husband. (Gal.4:21-31; Rev.21:2) As such she needed people. Most settlers had preferred the smaller towns and villages with plenty of fertile land around them. One tenth were to live in Jerusalem, like a tithe to God, representing the whole nation. Casting lots meant letting not chance but God do the choosing. He chose us to be His children but we can say 'no'. (Rom.8:28-30; I Pet.1:1,2) Wonderfully it seems none of those chosen to live in Jerusalem refused. The other nine-tenths of Judah and Benjamin were scattered through villages in their original tribal areas and a few further north. They looked to those in Jerusalem for teaching and example as others today will look to Christians who really mean business with God.

Question for discussion – What does it mean to us today that we are chosen by Christ to be His 'bride', His beloved people?

12. THE SPIRITUAL LEADERS, THE LEVITES

12:1-47 The tribe of Levi had been chosen back in the time of Moses to be responsible for the tabernacle which from Solomon's reign onwards was expanded to become the temple. Their task was to care for the building and all that happened in it which included sacrifice for sin, prayer and teaching the word of God. It was vital therefore that they were faithful in every sense. The first concern Nehemiah had was to be sure that they were genuine Levites so their ancestry had been recorded and was now checked. Some of the Levites had special responsibility for the music and singing which has always been an important part of worship. Others were to look after what had been given to God for His service. Nehemiah divided the singers into two choirs who walked around the top of the new city wall in opposite directions singing in praise and thanksgiving to God. Everyone heard and saw them and could join in. Finally they met up at the temple where sacrifices were offered. Overwhelming joy was the experience of the whole city. The Levites continued their service. The people supported them by their gifts and the Levites in turn supported the high priestly family of Aaron.

Question for discussion – Why is spiritual leadership so important to the life of a community? How can we be faithful 'Levites' today? How will joy again be the result?

13. WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN A LEADER TAKES A VACATION

13:1-31 As they continued to study the word, their society continued to change. (Eph.4:11-16) As the people grew in their knowledge of God's word they became aware of aspects of their lives God wanted to transform. The Moabites and the Ammonites had been forbidden since the time of Moses to enter a place of worship of God because of the lengths to which they had gone to exclude the Israelites from ever entering the Promised Land. (Deut.23:3-6) Yet

an individual Moabite like Ruth could be accepted when she trusted the Lord.(Ruth 1-4) The issue was the gods they sought to bring in with them.

While Nehemiah was back in Babylon reporting to the king, Tobiah the Ammonite, one of the three who had consistently tried to undermine Nehemiah's authority had infiltrated the temple. He had set himself up with an apartment in the room which was intended to store the gifts which would be the Levites' means of support. He had done this by family intermarriage with Eliashib, one of the priests who had been descended from the group who returned from Babylon in the time of Darius.(12:22,23)

The consequence of Tobiah's takeover of the Levites' storeroom was that the Levites had not been financially supported. Consequently they had given up serving and returned to their villages to support themselves. It is very likely that Tobiah had somehow taken over what should have been given to the Levites. Nehemiah's angry response in throwing Tobiah's possessions out of the temple storeroom foreshadowed Jesus' action when He drove the traders and moneychangers out of the temple.(Jn.2:13-17) Getting rid of Tobiah was not enough. Nehemiah appointed reliable people who could be trusted to make sure the gifts for the Levites actually reached them. Driving false teachers out of the church of Jesus Christ will not help unless they are replaced by those who really teach the truth. Tobiah as 'the flesh' illustrates again how our old nature will continue to try to infiltrate our relationship with God.

The second issue which had arisen in Nehemiah's absence was trading on the Sabbath. The purpose of the day of rest from normal work was to follow God's example in creation where He rested on the 7th day to enjoy His work as a whole.(Gen.2:1-3; Exod.20:11) Jesus made it clear in the New Testament that the Sabbath was to be so much more than a day off. It was to be a day for being fed on truth and for feeding the needy.(Matt.12:1-8) It was to be a day for letting God miraculously restore power and purpose to the crippled.(Matt.12:9-14) Trading on that day distracted God's people from His purpose. Nehemiah shut the traders out to their great displeasure.

The final issue Nehemiah had to address was that of Israelites intermarrying with women of other nations and so being led into the worship of their gods. Solomon had been a tragic example of how even the wisest man of his generation could destroy his ministry by ignoring what God had said about marriage only to a believer. A marriage in which two people look together only to God for answers is the only basis for a strong family which in turn is the sole foundation on which a healthy society can stand. Nehemiah was uncompromising in his stand and the leaders accepted his position. Again Sanballat, who reminds us of Satan, was behind this attack on family life. The Devil is still busy today doing exactly the same thing.

Nehemiah demonstrates that he is only human when twice more he hopes that God has noticed his faithfulness!

Question for discussion – What problems are liable to happen in the Christian church when the leaders are absent for a while? How does this chapter illustrate the way to deal with the mistakes others make when we are away for a time?