

DEVOTIONS

PROFILE OF A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE - NEHEMIAH

After seventy years of exile a remnant of God's people returned to possess the land they had been expelled from because of idolatry. There are numerous persons of note among those who returned and worked among the people. We think of Ezra, Jeshua, Zerubbabel. Some leaders held civil office, while others were religious leaders of the people. One man who came later than the large group who returned at first was Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. He came as governor over Jerusalem with his initial purpose being the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Though he came vested with civil authority from the monarch of Persia, even more importantly he was a religious leader of God's people, being himself a devout follower of the one true God. We can well imagine that his high office under the king was due to the king seeing those virtues which the followers of the one true God possessed. Earlier others like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had also been advanced above others because the hand of God was upon them.

TO BE A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE MEANS TO BE A MAN OF PRAYER

TLH#540

"With the Lord begin they task, Jesus will direct it;
For His aid and counsel ask, Jesus will perfect it."

This is a good motto for us. And it was certainly a standard for Nehemiah. On hearing the news of the great trouble and shame in Jerusalem, he "continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." 1:4 For Nehemiah, prayer was a repetitive thing. Not something to be done once in a while, prayer was for him an opening of his heart to God. Let us look at his prayer as recorded in chapter one and readily see that he was a man who knew from whence cometh his help.

"O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments;..."v.5

Our Lord Jesus taught us to include in our prayers words of praise to the Lord. Nehemiah does just this, beginning his prayer by acknowledging with this doxology who his God is.

"let thy ear be attentive, and thy eyes open, to hear the prayer of thy servant which I now pray before thee day and night for the people of Israel thy servants..." v.6

When you pray, who comes first? Do you ask for yourself and then for others? Or do you put them first? You see how Nehemiah does. Well might we say of him, behold how he prays. He is so concerned about the trouble in Jerusalem. He must get this off his chest earlier than anything else.

"...confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against thee. Yea, I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances which thou didst command thy servant Moses..." vv. 6-7 He knows the heart of all trouble and problems in the world -- sin. This just must be confessed by this leader of God's people. And notice, too, that he is not the pharisaic type. He openly speaks to God about how "we" have sinned. He is a man of unclean lips and he lives among a people of unclean lips. Confession is not only good for the soul, it is a necessity in our relationship with God. When we confess our sins, He is just and righteous to forgive us in Christ. Without confession there'd be no application of forgiveness.

Knowing that the Lord is the God of steadfast love, the Redeemer who has taken care of the greatest problem, we can readily go to Him for further aid as Nehemiah does. "O Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name; and give success to thy servant today..."
 "v.11 Nehemiah will be asking the king for permission to return to his father's homeland to lead God's people there in the construction of the walls of the holy city. Since he is going to serve God in leading the people against their adversaries, his is not a prayer of mere personal interest. He prays for success for God's "servants." Mighty indeed are his adversaries. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are bad enough. But Nehemiah in his task is also opposed by the worst, the ancient foe of God and man. To God alone must this leader go for help.

Nehemiah realizes certainly that he is a chosen instrument of God. He sees his responsibility and the need for his duty to be done, and so to God he goes to begin the task. Of such a righteous man his prayers do have great power in their effect. The object of his prayer is the one who has taught us, "Seek and you will find..."

A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE IS A MAN WHO SACRIFICES

TLH#442

As a high official in the court at Susa, Nehemiah had great honor and glory. As we see in chapter two, he was well-received when he came into the presence of the king. As a cupbearer to the king, he had awesome responsibility with which certainly came many gifts and much wealth. As one to whom the king would listen, he exercised great power. Yet, all of this honor, glory, wealth, prestige and power in the palace he willingly gave up. Why? He sacrificed for the sake of his God and His people.

As a true leader of God's people when he came to Jerusalem as governor, he continued to sacrifice for the work of the Lord. Instead of taking advantage of his high office he did not even use some of the privileges granted the governor. "Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brethren ate the food allowance of the governor." 5:14 Other governors had lorded it over the people requiring this and that. This governor set an example for the people in that he fed his household from his own pocket. He sacrificed so as not to burden the people. This was not a little sacrifice. "Moreover there were at my table a hundred and fifty men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations which were about us." 5:17 Nehemiah was required by his office as well as by his generous nature to seat many at table during his twelve years as governor. So as not to burden the people with an even heavier servitude, he fed his guests and household from his own pocket.

As pastors, you will have opportunity to follow Nehemiah's example of not seeking to burden the people. Our congregations and preaching stations are so small that they are not able to pay the preacher what he should have. Like the apostle Paul, you will likely have to support your family and yourself in some 'tentmaking' project, working with your hands for your needs. Paul worked while preaching at Thessalonica and Ephesus as well as likely at other places. "For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God." I Thess. 2:9 Love of God and love for His people moved Nehemiah and Paul to act in this

sacrificial manner. May it move you also.

If we consider the recent history of governors of the states of Nigeria during the last civilian rule, we see very few Nehemiah's. They took advantage of their high office to gain wealth at the expense of the people. Remember how salaries were not paid. Remember how many of those governors were fugitives when the military took over, fugitives with ill-gotten gain. "I also held to the work on this wall, and acquired no land: and all my servants were gathered there for the work" 5:16 Forsaking the temptations that so many have given in to as high office holders, Nehemiah kept at his task faithfully.

As governor he also did not have to have his servants work on the wall. They had their own duties to perform in his household. But he gave of his servants time and efforts for the building of the wall. How many wealthy people today would do this? Is the work of the Lord so important as to sacrifice in various ways as Nehemiah did? We answer, "Yes!" Who after all are we serving in the church, but Jesus who sacrificed all for us? His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death were the sacrifice that gained for us forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil and eternal life.

"I gave my life for thee, my precious blood I shed
That thou might'st ransomed be and quickened from the dead
I gave My life for thee; What hast thou giv'n for Me?
...Oh let thy life be given, Thy years for Me be spent
World's fetters all be riven And joy with suffering blent
I gave myself for thee, give thou thyself to Me."

NEHEMIAH WAS GRANTED WISDOM TO LEAD GOD'S PEOPLE

THL#285

As we read of Nehemiah we rightly surmise that God granted Nehemiah an innate gift of wisdom. His very high position at the court in Susa is testimony to this. To be such a trusted official requires the exercising of wisdom. During his service at court the Lord was training him for even higher service to be wisely carried out. As Moses was trained for leadership at the court of Pharaoh, so Nehemiah was prepared for leadership at the court of Susa.

Coupled with this innate gift of wisdom and the development of it was the knowledge that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Many a man of this world is smart, clever, wise by worldly standards, but where does it lead him? Without the belief in God the worldly-wise end up in the same place as the foolish. Nehemiah trusted in the Lord God and sought to follow Him where he would lead. In Nehemiah's case it meant to Jerusalem.

"And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah; and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house which I shall occupy.' And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me." 2:7-8 The beginning of his wisdom was that in everything he sought to glorify the Lord. For instance here acknowledging that his requests were honored because of 'the good hand of my God.'

Here also we see Nehemiah exercising that innate gift of wisdom which means that you think, prepare and then act. How

many times don't people do something without thinking which they later regret doing? The Lord used the illustration of building a tower as to first thinking and preparing and then acting. Nehemiah is the wall builder who first sits down and counts the cost and plans and prepares.

When he arrived in Jerusalem, he did not rely upon what other men would tell him about the situation. Rather he investigated for himself. With a few trusted men he arose at night and inspected the ruins of the wall. In this way he knew the magnitude of the wall construction task. Some men could easily have told him this or that, perhaps true and perhaps not. He would not be influenced by men who had let the wall remain in ruins this long. For Nehemiah it was a matter of God and me. That was the secret of his success. He would not stand in awe of men. The fear of the Lord was the basis of his wisdom.

Time and again he had to exercise wisdom in the face of opposition. "Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabod, who was shut up, he said, 'Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple; for they are coming to kill you, at night they are coming to kill you.' But I said, 'Should such a man as I flee? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.'" And I understood, and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me an evil name, in order to taunt me." 6:10-13 Yes, indeed, do not fear men who are only able to kill the body; fear God who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell forever. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Nehemiah saw through the craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Nehemiah knew the Law of God that for him to go into the temple would be sin. He was not of the priestly order. If he were out of cowardice to hide in the temple to save his life, it would discredit his office and ruin his work on the wall and among the people. He was well aware that the enemies were not all of the heathen. Shemaiah, Noadiah the prophetess and other so-called prophets were in the pay of Tobiah, Sanballat and Geshem.

The enemies tried various means to stop the work, but under the wise governor the work went forward. They would falsely accuse him time and again to stop the work, but the work went on. They would invite him out to parley with them and he would see they only meant to ambush him, so he went not.

Let us remember that in our work we should exercise wisdom also. By our hasty and ill-thought out actions we could bring discredit on our work for the Lord. We must see through all the devices of the devil by which he is seeking to stop our carrying on of the work of the Lord. We are building for the kingdom of God. To stop this work because of the enemies of God and His people would be a disaster. We pray as Nehemiah did, "O God, strengthen thou my hands."

A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE LEADS

TLH#410

Good generals are those who have been under fire, who have experienced or are experiencing what the soldiers under their command experience. A leader leads into battle. Soldiers are much more willing to obey commands of an officer who says, 'Forward

men! Let us go forward!' and who goes forward with his men, himself in the lead. This leader is far more preferable over one who says, 'Forward men! I will wait for you here.'

A leader should give direction to those who follow him. "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned." 2:17a Nehemiah had seen for himself the situation. He told the people the problem. He also stated the solution. Build the wall. Direction must be given to people. We are leaders of God's people must point out the sins and weaknesses that beset us. And then we must point out the solution. Trust in the Lord with repentant hearts. Seek to follow God better. We must give our people direction from God's Word. It is God's Word which states the problem and gives the solution.

"Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace." 2:17b A good leader also says 'Let us,' and carries through on his word. When Nehemiah said 'us' he did not mean 'them' or 'you'. He meant 'us'. On any one of the days during which the wall was being built you would find Nehemiah deeply involved in the project. In studying his book we do not find a governor reclining comfortably on a couch in the governor's house. We see a leader out among the workers. We see him giving directions and showing how. We see him intent upon his task.

When we preach to our people, we must not preach one thing and do another. That would discredit our work. Peter says, "Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, nor for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock." I Peter 5:2-4 The shepherd is among the sheep leading them. He encounters what they encounter. He walks with them. He not only says, but means 'Let us.'

The greatest direction which the leader gives is in pointing to the one from whom our help comes and reminding God's people how much and how many times He has already helped His people. 'And I told them of the hand of my God which had been upon me for good, and also of the words which the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good works." 2:18 When we point as Nehemiah did to God and relate His love for us, then the people will by the power of the Spirit rise up and say, 'Let us build.' It is the love of God which compels, constrains, moves us. The leader of God's people knows that this good news of the love of God for us is the power of God for salvation and for a life of following Him. We know and so we speak.

"Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build; but you have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem.'" 2:20 Ah, the courage of Nehemiah! These are Nehemiah's words to Tobiah, Sanballat and Geshem - the enemies of God's people. Nehemiah places his daily trust in God, that He will give success to each day's work. Nehemiah places ultimate trust in God alone, not in the wisdom, wealth, or weapons of God's people. "The God of heaven will make us prosper," is the simple child-like trust that each believer has. The governor leads his people in placing ultimate trust in the God of heaven.

As we teach our people from the catechism 'Thy will be done' and what it means, we teach them to believe that His will is done. No matter how fierce the Tobiah's, Sanballat's and Geshem's may become, His will is done. No matter how the devil may roar and scowl fierce as he will, His will is done. No matter how weak I am, His will is done. Let us be leaders of God's people who lead in placing our child-like faith in the God of heaven who has sent His

only-begotten Son to earth to lead us to heaven.

A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE COURAGE

TLH#416

"...who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouth of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight...Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated--of whom the world was not worthy..." Heb. 11: 33-38 This is from the 'faith' or 'heroes' chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews. It states how courageous God's people have been. How heroically believers have faced down through the years the foe's invenomed ire! 'How' is the question also. The answer is 'through faith.'

Though Nehemiah is not mentioned by name in Hebrews chapter eleven, he is there in spirit as are all the other unnamed saints who had courage through faith. Nehemiah was not killed, though he faced death in the threats of his opponents. He did not have to unsheath the sword, though he was ready and willing to for God. We may say that through the courageous leadership of Nehemiah death in battle did not claim any citizens of Jerusalem during his governorship. Because of the courageous stand of the governor the enemies of God's people cowered, God working through Nehemiah.

Nehemiah's courage was tested times without number. He armed the people confident in the Lord, disregarding the ominous warnings, "From all the places where they live they will come up against us." His response to this? "So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and arose, and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.'" 4:13-14 The strength of the governor's position was not the places in the uncompleted wall where he stationed the people. The strength likewise was not in the swords, spears and bows. THE strength was in the Lord, who fights for them. Greater always is He who fights for us over they who fight for them.

Like brave Abraham of old he arms his servants. "From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail... 4:16 He is not thinking of some way for himself out of the battle. He commits his servants not to the protection of his person, but to the cause of God.

And if we wonder where Nehemiah would be found fighting, we find out. "And each of the builders had his sword girded at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'The word is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.'" 4: 18-20 Nehemiah would be found in the thick of the fighting. The trumpeter would stand beside him ready to give the call to rally to the governor's position that he might lead you

in the fight.

That which gave Nehemiah the courage to arm his people, to disregard the safety of his own life and to risk all was: Our God will fight for us. We, too, today must never forget that our God has fought for us, He won the greatest of all possible victories on Calvary. The victory is ours by faith. Trusting in His sacrificial death as the punishment for our sins we look forward to the great victory celebration in heaven. Now we have like Nehemiah some 'little' battles to be fought. Final success in all these are guaranteed because the Victor stands by us. Let us have the faith-courage of Nehemiah and we will see success as he did.

A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE IS FAIR, JUST AND IMPARTIAL

TLH#412

We know very well that in some places, for instance in Nigeria there is so much which is not fair. Bribes are commonplace. A bribe given means that someone gets special treatment, oftentimes at the expense of someone else. How things go with you depend often more on who you know than on some rule of fairness and justice. Evil escapes punishment and those doing good are quite often afflicted. The police do not have a reputation for honesty. Elections are cancelled in their results because of rigging. On and on the list of injustice, unfairness and partiality could go. How refreshing to study the actions and words of the governor of Judah!

Nehemiah took very seriously his office as that of one sent by God to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. He was God's servant for good. While the building of the wall of Jerusalem is the focal point of the first chapters of Nehemiah, there is much more reported in the full book of thirteen chapters. We see Nehemiah upholding fairness. He lived this. As governor he enforced this. His were not just flowery words to be compromised in practice.

Problems: "Now there arose a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. For there were those who said 'With our sons and our daughters, we are many; let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.' There were also those who said, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.' And there were those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax upon our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children are as their children; yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved; but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.'" 5:1-5 These were problems among God's people. What should he do?

As a pastor you will be called upon to settle disputes between members of the congregation. What should you do? Favor your friend; favor the one who has been better to you; decide the issue as to how you feel; ignore the problem. Obviously, none of these is the solution. Nehemiah reflected on the Word of God and what it taught. He then sought the answer God gives through His Word. That must be our way, also.

"I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words." 5:6 Does injustice make up angry or have we gotten so used to it we have no righteous anger? A righteous anger is being upset that right is not done. Nehemiah was bothered by these words even

more because it was a report of injustice done to God's people by God's people.

As governor he was in a position to do something about the injustices. Would he? It is easier at the outset to just ignore injustice. Why get involved in something that may cause you trouble, after all the injustice is not done to you? This is what the sinful flesh says. The Word of God says that we are to defend the oppressed. We are to uphold truth. Nehemiah acts, "I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, 'You are exacting interest, each from his brother.' And I held a great assembly against them... The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God..." 5:7-9 He rebukes those doing wrong.

The Word of God is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. We even moreso than Nehemiah must use the Word to convict of sin. Only those who know their sins can then by the power of the Spirit repent. Only those who repent have the forgiveness of their sins. It all begins with rebuking sin. If we don't act fairly and justly in declaring something as sinful according to the Word, then repentance can not be.

Nehemiah's sense of justice was an active one. He readily rebukes even to the point of bringing charges publicly. He furthermore sets an example, "Moreover I and my brethren and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us leave off this interest." 5:10 Not one to say to others but not do himself, the governor gives and loans at no interest. The problem is not interest so much as the people could not afford the interest and there was a famine worsening the situation. Fairness required what Nehemiah did.

So often we hesitate to rebuke sin for fear of adverse results. But here see the merciful and God-pleasing results, "Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the hundredth of money, grain, wine and oil which you have been exacting of them." Then they said, 'We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.' ...And all the assembly said 'Amen' and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised." 5:11-13 To this we add our Amen, Praise the Lord!

A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE POSSESSES HUMILITY

TLH#348

One of the worst pitfalls for leaders is pride. Pride goes before a fall and a haughty spirit before destruction. Think of the proud pharaoh of Egypt who would not let God's people leave until fully ten plagues had fallen. Nebuchadnezzar on his palace roof exalted himself in foolish pride and for it became as a beast of the field with his hair as long as eagle's feathers and his nails as bird's claws. The next generation does not always learn. So it was that Belshazzar in a great feast exalted himself and profaned the holy vessels taken from the house of God in Jerusalem. For this desecration brought on by his pride he lost that very night both his kingdom and his life.

We can think of any number of rulers in Africa who are as these ancient kings. Pride is their motivating power. They continue in power not because the people always want them, but because they think themselves indispensable for the nations as

rulers. And we have also seen in Africa and other places how suddenly, like Belshazzar, the mighty are fallen.

Nehemiah, as a civil ruler, is a breath of fresh air. He had great power given him by the absolute ruler of Persia. It did not go to his head, such that he'd say, 'Am I not mighty Nehemiah, great and glorious ruler of Judah, mighty builder of the wall of Jerusalem, noble and grand dispenser of justice.' In studying the book there is no way in this world that we could imagine Nehemiah saying this. He cautiously avoided this pride trap of satan.

"Now some of the heads of the father's houses gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury a thousand darics of gold, fifty basins, five hundred and thirty priests' garments. And some of the heads of fathers' houses gave into the treasury of the work twenty thousand darics of gold...And what the rest of the people gave was twenty thousand darics of gold..." 7:70-72 Nehemiah numbers himself among those who contributed financially to the work. And he does it in a humble way, 'the governor gave.' He is showing from the highest office to the lowest the support for the work. He is not intent on showing how much he gave. In humility he speaks of his contribution in the third person.

"For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.' But now, O God strengthen thou my hands." 6:9 Confronted by bitter and hateful opponents does the governor say, 'I will arm men and lead them out against such wicked men and slay them. I will...I will...' No, in humble dependence he seeks from God the strength to do what is right and lead God's people in the God-glorifying way.

And when finally the work on the mighty wall is finished, What does the governor do? Does he call together the nobles of the land for a feast that they might praise him for his leadership? What do you think? "So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations round about us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" 6:15-16 Nehemiah gives glory to God for the accomplishment of fifty-two days.

So it must also be with us. In a leadership position as pastor we must always realize, as Nehemiah did, that it is God who is in charge. Without His help all our labors are futile. And when we achieve some accomplishment, give credit where credit is due, to God alone belongs the glory.

A LEADER OF GOD'S PEOPLE MUST BE A REFORMER

TLH#267

Nehemiah sought to follow God's Word. Where that Word would lead him, he would go. It showed him that concerning God's house, the servants of the Word, the sabbath and the private lives of God's people there was need for reform. Being a civil ruler, that is governor, some might say that he needn't have gotten involved in these issues. That is false. It was because Nehemiah was a believer in the Lord God that he undertook the governorship. It is impossible to think he would not become involved in religious affairs. He followed the examples before him of men who were both civil and religious rulers. Like Kings Josiah and Hezekiah he instituted reforms.

"...Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was connected with Tobiah, prepared

for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the cereal offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil..." 13:4-5 Evidently this was a very spacious area. Eliashib was in league with the enemy of God's people, Tobiah. Eliashib, the priest did this profane thing while Nehemiah was away at the court of Susa for a time. When Nehemiah returned he did not hesitate in the least at reforming this error. "And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders and they cleansed the chambers; and I brought back thither the vessels of the house of God..." 13:8-9 It is not hard at all, knowing Nehemiah to conceive of him with his own hands throwing out the furniture of Tobiah. He saw an error that had to be corrected and he corrected it.

"I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them; so that the Levites and the singers who did the work, had fled each to his field." 13:10 The temple ministers were not provided for contrary to God's law. The Word of God should be obeyed. The temple sacrifices and services must continue to remind God's people of their God and of the future Messiah and His work. "So I remonstrated with the officials and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?' And I gathered them together and set them in their stations." 13:11 He saw to the bringing in of the tithe and appointed faithful men to distribute it. The services of God's house and His servants must be provided for.

"In those days I saw in Judah men treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on asses; and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day..." 13:15 A casual observer unfamiliar with the Old Testament law might think all this work commendable. But God had commanded for His Old Testament people no work from 6:00pm Friday until 6:00pm on Saturday, the sabbath. During this time they were to rest in God, remembering Him and His work for them. "Then I remonstrated with the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing which you are doing, profaning the sabbath day?' There must be time for God. The problem with people then and now is they put themselves first. Nehemiah was not one to just say something and let it go at that. He saw to it that the gates of Jerusalem were shut on the sabbath, not to be opened until after the sabbath. He set some of his trusted servants there to see that this was enforced; no bribes to the gatekeepers for entrance. When some of the greedy merchants appeared outside the wall, he warned them that when next they appeared on the sabbath, he would lay hands on them. They did not come back.

Nehemiah knew that the Word of God was not just for the house of God, the servants of the temple and the sabbath day. It was also for the personal lives of His people. "In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah...And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women?...'" 13:23-26 The problem was not a mingling of races. The problem with such marriages was that one was a believer and one a pagan. Such was forbidden by God's Word. In a very strenuous manner Nehemiah sought for reform in this personal aspect of the people's lives.

As a reformer, Governor Nehemiah sought to have the people

follow the clear Word of God. If an error had taken root, he with the help of God and the direction from the Word sought to uproot it. He spoke and acted, being no man of empty words. So we must speak and act. To be a leader among God's people in reforming means to be outspoken for the right. Error will not leave of its own accord. We bring the Word of God to bear in our people's lives. The Word says, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you...Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience... Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Col. 3:5,12,15 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds and hearts through faith in Christ Jesus.

In our study of the book of Nehemiah we have beheld a spiritual profile of a leader of God's people, Governor Nehemiah of Judah. We have seen him as a man of prayer, and sacrifice, and wisdom. We have beheld him acting in fairness and with courage. As a leader truly leading God's people, yet he maintained Christian humility. With a reformer's zeal he brought the Word of God to bear into the private lives of God's people.

For us who are and who are to be Lutheran pastors we see in Nehemiah an example of faith to follow. And for our people's sake and to the glory of God let us follow his example. Let us pray, "O Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name; and give success to thy servant..." Let us work in His kingdom with the confidence that, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build..."