

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/26/11 Wednesday evening

Series: *“Facing the Past, Moving Ahead for God’s Honor: Nehemiah”*

Current study: Nehemiah 12:1-26 “The Important Role of the Priest”

Priest. What comes to mind when you hear that word? Let me give you a multiple choice question with three options. Here’s the question, “Which one of the following, according to the Bible, is a priest?”

- a) A 12 year old boy with a skateboard under his arm
- b) An infirmed 96 year old woman in a hospital bed
- c) A man with a Bible wearing a clerical robe

The answer? We don’t have enough information, do we? The fact is, all three could be priests. Or, none of them may be priests as defined by the Bible.

So how can you tell? We’ll find out this evening.

All Scripture is God breathed and profitable (2 Tim 3:16). This includes sections of God’s Word that many people seldom consider. I have in mind particularly certain sessions in the Old Testament like the one before us this evening.

We’ve been working our way through Nehemiah for several months now. The book of Nehemiah is a fascinating book.

But why did God preserve the book of Nehemiah? A key question pertains to *intent*. What was the biblical author’s intent for recording this book of 13 chapters?

Some options...

--A manual for team building principles—how to get people to work together on a project

--A book on Leadership qualities—how to identify and be a good leader

Though the book of Nehemiah does give us helpful principles in these areas, I do not believe this was the author’s primary intent. And if all we see in the book are these helpful principles we are shortchanging ourselves of the greatest benefit.

Discuss: What is the main purpose of this book? Who is the main character?

Key: The primary purpose of the book is to teach us about *God* and what is important to God.

Discuss: What do we learn about God from Nehemiah?

A Fresh Look at the Background

- 586 B.C. – God judged His disobedient people.
- 537 B.C. – God returned a remnant of His people to the Promised Land.
- 516 B.C. – The temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem.
- 444 B.C. – The wall was rebuilt in Jerusalem.

The Flow of Nehemiah

- Nehemiah went to King Artaxerxes (chs 1-2).
- Nehemiah led a work team back to Jerusalem (ch 2).
- The people rebuilt the wall (ch 7).
- The Israelites put the Word back at the center of life (chs 8-10).
- They took steps to repopulate Jerusalem (ch 11).

So by the time we come to chapter 12, there's the situation. A remnant is back in the land. The temple is rebuilt. The walls around the city are in place. The city is repopulated. What else is needed?

Something vital is needed. *Priests*. And that's what the text mentions next in chapter 12.

Why did God devote 26 verses to listing another set of names in chapter 12? At first glance, this appears to be just a bunch of meaningless names. It's not. These are not ordinary names. These are the names of priests and Levites.

Why is that significant?

Key Lesson from Nehemiah 12: You don't enter God's presence on *your* terms, but on *His* terms. We'll talk more about this unchanging law a little later, but first let's examine the text.

I. We meet the priests (1-7).

A. The time frame is given (1, 7).

Q: When did these priests serve? Jeshua returned from Babylonian exile in 538 B.C.

B. Twenty-two names are given.

Q: Why 22? See *NIVsb*—There was a rotation of 24 priestly houses that had been established at the time of David.

Note: The Ezra mentioned is probably different from the Ezra who served alongside Nehemiah (who returned some 80 years later).

II. We meet the Levites (8-9).

A. Eight names are given.

B. A brief job description is given.

Q: What did Mattaniah do? What does that teach us about God?

Q: What did the final two men do?

III. We're given information about the families of the priests and Levites (10-26).

A. Here is their genealogy (10-11).

B. Here were the family heads of the priests (12-21).

1. *The time frame is given ("the days of Joiakim," 12; around 500 B.C.).*

So the names to follow were the individuals who served as priestly heads in the temple duties around the year 500 B.C.

2. *Twenty-one priestly families are listed.*

C. Here were the family heads of the Levites (22-26).

1. *The time frame is given (22).*

Q: When was it recorded? In the "reign of Darius the Persian," either 423-404 B.C. (Darius II Nothus) or 336-331 (Darius III Codomannus).

2. *Some job responsibilities are mentioned.*

Q: What did some do according to verse 24? Acc. to verse 25?

So what's the point? Why did God give us Nehemiah 12?

Key Lesson from Nehemiah 12: You don't enter God's presence on *your* terms, but on *His* terms.

How is that truth illustrated in this text? The temple was in place, yes. That's great, for the temple was the House of God. The temple represented the very presence of God. God wanted His people to draw near Him.

But on *His* terms. He did not then, nor does He now, allow people to meander into His presence any old way. We are not permitted to invent ways to approach God. God Himself establishes the way.

In the OT economy, what did God do to make it possible for His people to approach Him? He established the *priesthood*.

What did the priests do? They acted as mediators, as a go-between. The people brought their sacrifices to the priests, and the priests presented them to God.

What happened if someone tried to approach God in a way not prescribed by God? We see a graphic illustration of this in Leviticus 10.

The context: Aaron and his sons were ordained to the ministry as priests in Leviticus 8. It was a big day for this family. They were the family God chose to serve as priests.

But even a priest must come to God on God's terms. Leviticus 10:1-3 shows us what happens when he doesn't. Nadab and Abihu lost their lives.

Was God being harsh? No. He was illustrating a vital truth. We must come to God on *His* terms, not ours. That's precisely what God provided for us in Christ, a way to come to God on *His* terms.

Discuss Implications:

a. What kind of impact should Nehemiah 12 have on us?

b. Nehemiah 12 should make us appreciate the Cross. Why so?

Today, we don't approach God today through the mediation of a human priest. Why not? For two reasons...

1. *We have a Great High Priest in heaven.*

See: Hebrews 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-16; 5:7-10

2. *If we know Christ, we are priests.*

See: 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6

Application: Let's live in light of our priestly position and spend some time approaching the throne of God in prayer.