



## Transcriptions

### Nehemiah and Development

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**Annotation:** *Daystar University Conference on the Church's Role in Development, Nairobi, Kenya, July 1980.* Ted Ward describes particular events from the first part of the book of Nehemiah to illustrate basic processes in community development.



Our Bible study this morning is in the book of Nehemiah. The first part of Nehemiah, particularly, and we're going to move around and focus a number of particular events and experiences that are described in this book. I'm going to use the somewhat unusual and, as a matter of fact, I think not very safe procedure of reminding you of the frame of reference of our course before we actually engage in the Bible study. In other words, rather than doing things the way we ordinarily do start from the Word of God and then go toward the human problem this morning, I'm going to remind you of some of the human problems we've been dealing with and then look at the Word of God. I think this will have the benefit of giving you more sensitivity, alerting you to seeing some things that you might not otherwise see in these passages of Scripture.

The chart that's on the screen right now you have seen before. It is the three sets of needs of human beings as identified by Lindzey and Aronson.<sup>1</sup> The three sets of needs that begin with the survival and security problems which we call (1) basic needs (2) the social needs, which are

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<sup>1</sup> Chart not available. He is possibly referring to Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (eds). *The Handbook of Social Psychology. Applied Social Psychology* (Vol. 5). Longman Higher Education, 1970

satisfactions—both giving and receiving satisfaction from our relationship with people; and (3) those self-awareness, self-satisfied needs that come third in the sequence: self-esteem, pride in one's work, and the satisfaction that comes to oneself from controlling and managing in one's own circumstances and environment.

Now the point of this list, of course, from Lindzey and Aronson is that in a situation where those first needs are not being met, it is not likely that you will get very far working on the second or third sets of needs. Similarly, where the second set is not being met, you probably will not get very far in working on the third. In other words, for example, working on the matter of human creativity and the sense of worth of persons may not very well be a good starting place with people who feel that there is no satisfaction in life from the experiences with others. And certainly such people who are limited in their security and in their basic needs are not going to be able to do very much with anything else. Now this is to remind you that, as we study human personality and human culture, we see that this is the way God has created a human being. When we study the process of development itself—and this transparency you have not seen and I'm not going to deal with it in great detail because it is a continuation of our lecture on participation and I decided not to get into quite this much detail—but in this transparency we're asking the question, what kind of participation is significant? [Transparency content not available.] And we find, down the left margin of this transparency, that there are five forms of participation usually occurring sequentially in a development process. In other words, as we study effective development processes, we see these five forms of participation going down on the left: Giving, Helping, Teaching, Leading, and Sharing. And, again, these tend to occur in a sequence and each of them, down through until the last one—in other words the first four—has a built-in limitation and has some very distinct hazard.

When we give, for example, our goal is to contribute. Our motivation is compassion. That is it's an emotional not necessarily intellectual motivation, and the danger in it is that it will allow us potentially to discharge pity without any accountability. In other words, the way to read this chart is that that first form of participation has, as its goal, the contributing to someone else. The motive for that is an emotional motive of compassion. The danger in it is that it will allow people to discharge pity without any accountability. And much that we see in relief work falls into this danger. It releases us from a sense of burden, but it quite often does very unaccountable sorts of things. So, for example, when we have shipped 50 tons of foods to a certain region where there is famine, we instantly feel better about it. Never mind if the foods are getting through. Never mind if the foods are adequate and appropriate. Never mind what the secondary effects may be.

So, we usually ask that we move as rapidly as possible beyond the giving function into a second form of participation: true helping. Now helping is different from contributing or giving in that its motive is not simply to contribute, but its motive is to lift. And it is motivated by a concern which has rationality in it. It is a logically oriented process for giving is quite often an emotional process. So we'd say that helping is a second form of participation. But the danger in any process that involves lifting someone else is that it gives us a superior stance. Whoever is doing the lifting is automatically, in his own perception and in the perception of others, standing above and lifting toward. So it is the danger of the superiority itself that we must watch for in reference to the helping form of participation.

So we want to move beyond that kind of lifting from above and so we usually move to the third form of participation which is teaching. And here the goal is to point the way—not simply to drag someone else to a different position—but to point the way so that another may be able then better to understand and comprehend and direct for himself or herself. The motive is to point the

way; the motivation is the motivation of acceptance. In order to teach, one must be accepting. Do you remember on our very first or second day together, we talked about—and someone of you mentioned—the importance of comprehending and accepting the worth of others and working within that? The danger is the danger of hierarchy and I point this out as a danger that exists in any relationship that is a teaching-type relationship. There's always the danger of hierarchy. We pointed out that our models of education and our models of teaching have infected even the way we relate in the church. And we would have to observe that much of the church, in its didactic teaching function, is a hierarchical thing. The bishops teach the pastors, the pastors teach the people, and the people teach the children and it's so forthright down the line.

Now this does not mean that teaching is wrong or we should avoid it. No. On the contrary, we must engage in it, but we must be very alert to the hazard of highly structured hierarchy in which constantly some people are sitting over others in superiority and in judgment. And if we read the Bible carefully, especially Matthew chapter 23, we understand that our Lord said, that's what happens among people who are unregenerated. Hierarchy and structure is characteristic of the Gentiles, the people who are not God's people. And he says very pointedly in that section and in Matthew 20 that that form of management, that form of leadership is not for you. You are all brothers. And he says it over and over again, you are all brothers and you should accept the Lordship of Christ, not the lordship of one another. And that's a very different kind of thing. So, as Christians, we use teaching but we should be very cautious about the danger in the teaching-type of participation.

So we often move beyond that to a leading or a pastoral form of relationship. Leading, as if to walk with. It's interesting in the Bible that quite often we read the passages of Scripture about the shepherd and we visualize the human shepherd with a stick standing over his sheep moving them about as if they were stupid. That is but one side of the pastoral relationship. That has to do with the relationship of the pastor to the wanderer. But to the biblical image of Christ as good shepherd and given obedient sheep, we see a different kind of relationship altogether. It is relationship of leading through companionship. The shepherd leads by being with the sheep, not by being somewhere else and yelling at them, but by being with them in a form of participation that correctly and biblically is leading, but it is not a leading from the superiority. It is motivated by a physical identification with the ones being led. In other words, it's a oneness with, it is not a thing apart. That form of participation that we call leading, in a Christian perspective, is a walking with that is motivated by a physical identification. Sharing in identity and becoming one with.

The authoritarian problem always lurks. That, even in a leading relationship that is biblically motivated, the tendency, because we are all mortal, is to fall into authoritarianism; into that kind of commanding relationship over those that we are leading. And this requires, especially from leadership people, a daily washing in the forgiveness of the blood of Jesus Christ because it is an infection that recurs and recurs in our behavior toward others. Leaders are prone to fall into authoritarianism and we, every one of us as leadership people, should pray God every morning to spare us, yet another day, from that kind of lordship over the church that is reserved for Jesus Christ himself, and is not ours.

So we move, then, beyond this to a kind of participation we're calling sharing. To become one with, not just identified side-by-side as the shepherd beside his sheep, but becoming at one with. And this is the notion of brotherhood. It is not simply a leader and a follower walking together, but it is a sharing as peers. To become one with has to be motivated by, not just a physical identification

with but a spiritual identification with. If we are maturing spiritually, it is possible for us to see that spiritual identification puts us under the lordship of Christ and, therefore, we are sharing as brothers.

Now these five forms of participation are increasingly mature as you go down the page. One is the least mature, though it is worthy. The second is somewhat more mature, though it is still not fulfilling of all that biblical participation suggests. Now, this part of my devotional talk, this morning, sounds like a continuation of the lecture on participation and, indeed, so it is. And I have tried to point out to you before that in my own philosophy of education and in my own approach to learning, I cannot make a sharp distinction between what I am doing in my devotional experience and what I am doing in any other aspect of my work with people. To me, it all flows together, so you'll pardon me if I'm asking you to follow that along today.

Now the point that I want to make here is that it helps us, in reading Nehemiah, to bear in mind the two things that I have given you. First of all, what we can find as we study human beings that basic needs must be dealt with before social needs, and that before self-actualizing needs. Now that's the one theme that I want you to bear in mind. The other theme I want you to bear in mind is the theme of the sequence of developing participation.

Now as we look at the book of Nehemiah, you will be able to see evidences of these sorts of themes. It should not be surprising to us if we are dealing with good social science that is a responsible study of God's human creation—man and human society. And, after all, God gives human beings the insight to understand science, understand nature, understand the clouds, understand the insects, and God gives us the understanding—in fact, part of general revelation and general grace is that God gives all human beings the capacity to understand some aspects of human behavior and human society. So if we are carefully using social science to understand God's creation and then we put those evidences up against the Scripture, we should find a rather interesting match. We would not expect to find great conflict. If we do find conflict, it suggests one of two things: either our science needs to be done more accurately, or our understanding of the Scripture needs to be done more carefully. And sometimes our theological understandings need to be revised just as surely as our understandings of human society and human nature.

But as we study this book of Nehemiah, I think it's very interesting—the match between the experiences and the steps of process in Nehemiah's experience and those things that we have looked at from social science on the screen this morning. In the Bible, I know of no other passage that deals more specifically with a development issue than the book of Nehemiah. You are familiar with the background of the book of Nehemiah. After the people of Israel had been taken captive by the kingdoms to their east, there was left in Israel but a handful of the Jewish stragglers that did not get sucked up by the invading armies; probably people who were hiding in some caves somewhere, and there were a few of them. And then there were a few, apparently, that straggled back out of their captivity and they'd come back to the rather pathetic situation that they found in Judea. The city of Jerusalem, itself, had been destroyed; and, in that era, no city without defenses had any possibility for becoming worthy of the name city.

The issue of the walls of the city was a primary concern. This book of Nehemiah has to do with the re-building of Jerusalem. In a sense, it is a problem of rehabilitation, a problem of bringing back the possibility for development. But the whole story is not only an experience in history, but it is an allegory of the development processes themselves. And as Bible students and as people involved in development, I think we ought to be very alert to what happened in Nehemiah's experience.

Now, first of all, we discover that Nehemiah, “In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men. And I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile and also about Jerusalem” (Neh.1:1-2). It’s very interesting that this story of Nehemiah starts with a human interaction. It doesn’t say, as in Isaiah’s prophecies, that in a certain year the Word of God came to me or some other experience in the temple occurred. It’s a human interaction. Very interesting, isn’t it? Did you ever notice that? Begins with a human interaction and specifically it begins by an interest on the part of Nehemiah. Now Nehemiah had himself in a pretty good situation. He had made himself into a pretty good high servant of the capturing kingdom. And he was in the palace and he had it made. If there was ever a case of a person who didn’t need to be concerned about how things were back there in dusty old Judah, it’s this man. But this man maintains a concern. Because, as we read on and as we discover about his character, he is concerned about God’s people, and he’s concerned about the welfare of those things that are important to God. And I suspect that many of us are in development because of the same motives.

It is not because, in some mystical experience at some dark night, the angel of God took fire from the altar and put it on your mouth and said . . . No, it’s more like Nehemiah’s experience for many of us. Nothing terribly mystical about it; just a burden of concern that is interested in the welfare and condition of God’s Creation. You can generalize that as broadly as you want to. He’s focusing on his own people. There’s nothing wrong with that, especially if your own people are as in Karamoja. There’s nothing wrong with saying, what are the conditions in Karamoja?” What’s it like? Where are we today? What’s happened?

Now, we find that he has an interest and he gets some data. Very important. He doesn’t just operate on his feelings. He has a concern that motivates his curiosity, but his curiosity asks for data. He does not sit and speculate what it’s like back in Jerusalem; he takes opportunity to ask people who have been there. And that’s what this first verse and second verse is all about. It is a deliberate inquiry on the part of Nehemiah. I would encourage you, in the next few days, to read this whole passage carefully because today I’m going to skip.

It occurs that the basic problem identified in Jerusalem falls in the category of a survival and security need. The walls of the city have been destroyed. And so, as you remember, he asks the king for permission. But notice how he does it. In the 2nd chapter, verses 2 and 3, you find a very interesting thing. The king said to me, “Why does your face look so sad when you’re not ill. This can be nothing but the sadness of the heart. I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, ‘May the king live forever!’” Now notice this beginning of this transaction with power is a recognition on the part of power, the king, that there is an emotional concern in Nehemiah. It does not begin with some great intellectual argument. Nehemiah tries to communicate and I think it’s deliberate. I think he tries to communicate to the king that he has a burden.

Now he could not really expect that king to be as interested in Jerusalem as he, Nehemiah, is. Could he? No. But he plays on the fact that the king is interested in him, Nehemiah. And sometimes we, as developing intermediaries, should go to the authorities that trust us on behalf of others. Think about that. And not just with a logical argument—with a burden of heart that allows the authorities to say, man, you look like you are really torn up about something. What’s the problem? Oh, let me tell you my burden. And then the facts come out. And that’s the way he approaches it. Not a bad model. Not a bad model at all. Very practical. I’ve used it lots of times myself. May the king live forever! And notice he respects the authority here. It’s not God’s authority for Jerusalem, but he says, God can use it to benefit Jerusalem. Notice that. We are sometimes too

concerned about whether the sources we go to are godly sources or secular sources. Nehemiah went to a secular source because that's where the power was and he recognized it honestly. That's where the power is. And he goes and he says, "May the king live forever!" He treats him with respect. Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed with fire? And the king said, "What is it that you want?" Notice that. Not, what can I do for Jerusalem? But, what is it that you want?

A development expert knows how to become an intermediary on behalf of people with need. "Then I prayed to the God of heaven and I answered the king." Notice that. Then I prayed to the God of heaven and I answered the king. That's beautiful. He's got the king asking the question. Then he says, as if stepping aside, now, God, is the time. Help me with the answer to the king. And then the whole thing becomes very closely focused. "I prayed to the God of heaven and answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight'—notice that again he's playing on the personal relationship that he has with the authority—"if it pleases the king." Not, he doesn't lay on him a big trip about God has told me I should tell you. See that? Boy, we make mistakes sometimes when we expect people, who are not godly, to take our burden of God on themselves. Look, you've got to have a human relationship with the authorities. And then you go and say to God, give me the word, and you come to the man and say, I have a need. "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can re-build it." He wants to be sent. Very important. He doesn't say I'm going to go if you support me. He says send me, send me. Make me your contact with that situation. Oh, if we could learn the beauty of that. If we could put ourselves in the middle and become the contact people from, for example, the secular government. That's exactly what's going on here, isn't it? He's becoming the contact for the secular powers. But he's prayed to God about it. He's asked God for the inspiration about the kind of thing he should ask for—how he should answer the king.

And then look at what he says. I'm going to do some skipping. The king asked, "How long will your journey take?" When'll you get back? I need you here, and so forth. And then he says in verse 7: I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah." He asks the secular authorities for those kinds of obediences to the customs that make him responsive and subservient to those who control the situation. He does not say, give me an army so that I can go charging through Trans-Euphrates. He doesn't say, help me sneak around. He says, you have authority to communicate with those authorities. Would you please use your authority to communicate with those authorities so that my way might be made safe? Would that we could understand that that is allowable in God's frame of reference. That we should recognize that, even the powers of this world, are subject to the leading of God if we go through the communicating channels that they respond to. He observes the custom, in other words. He does not violate them.

Then he says also, "And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy." Now, he's getting bold at this point. You say, my goodness, why doesn't he quit while he's winning? He's asked for permission to go. Then he's asked for these letters of credential to get him through all the customs. Now he's asking for another letter to a friend of the king over there to give him supplies. Shouldn't he, as a person of God, simply say, my God will provide. Why doesn't he spiritualize it and say, I don't think we need to plan. I don't think we need to be concerned about how much wood we'll need. We don't know. We'll get over there and God will somehow give us some inspiration and some help. Look, this man is thinking

ahead and he's saying to the authority, please arrange with another civil authority to send secular people to help us meet this need. Did you ever see that? Did you ever see that before in this passage? That is very strategic. And when he goes on, he goes on in the strength—not only of the spiritual strength of God—but in the solicited aid and help that he's been able to get from friends of his friends. He puts it all together for God.

Now, let's jump ahead [v. 11]. "I went to Jerusalem and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few others." Now, that's just long enough to rest up from the trip. It's interesting. He goes out at night. I think this is very fascinating. I have not yet told anyone. When he sets out during the night with a few men, he does this on the grounds that he has not yet told people why he's there. And I want you to know that one of the worst things you can do in a development situation is to arrive announcing your plan. Now when he sets out with these few men—I'm not sure who they were. People who've travelled with him or local people, it doesn't say. I wish it did because I'd like to have a little more detail on the kind of groundwork he laid for this inspection trip. "There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on." In other words, he didn't even take any horses, but, "By night we went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had broken down and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire."

Now here, at this point, I'm going to do some high interpretation that goes a little beyond the Scriptures. Why would he go out at night? First of all, it must have been a moonlight night. All right? Can you visualize that? I don't think he was going out in stone gardens. That would have been pretty stupid because it says he went out to inspect. I have to believe that he wanted to take a close look without embarrassing the people that were in the city. I have to believe that he was so compassionately concerned about those people that he did not want to set up an embarrassment. Here he comes—and he must have been dressed fairly well because he was a very high servant of the king in the other land. And he comes back here among his own people and it would have been very easy for the people to say, look at your finery. Look at the condition we're in. Who do you think you are? You remember people reacting that way to some of God's people before? I remember when one of God's people chosen for a job didn't understand the dynamics of that and he got himself in great trouble. Remember that man who showed up and announced that he was going to deliver the people? And they said, "Well, who are you?" What was his name? *Moses*. This man profited from Moses' mistake as I believe he knew the story of Moses. And he says, I'm going to go out here at night. I'm not going to tell them what I'm here for. I'm going to go out and take a look at the situation because I've got to know more about it. He was a data-hungry man. He wanted real hard evidence. He went out and he made the inspection.

Then he comes back again. In verse 16, "the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or the nobles or the officials or any others who would be doing the work." He already knew that they were going to go to work. I think that's a dangerous thing for him. I think he's running a terrible risk there of making that assumption. But, on the other hand, he has this terrible burden from God and he feels that, you know, it's only a matter of time until this thing will get underway. But he's still very cautious about how he approaches it.

"Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in.'" Oh, boy, is that beautiful, is that beautiful. He does not say, I see the trouble you're in. Do you see the difference? How often we show up, especially in relief work, and say, I see your problem. Do I ever see your problem. He

doesn't say that. He says *you* see, you see. Your perception is important. You see the trouble we are in and he identifies with that trouble. Boy, that's clever. That is important.

Then he says, "Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire"—the obvious. They all knew that. They all agreed to that. That's what they were seeing— "come, let us re-build the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace." And then "I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, 'Let us begin re-building.'" Who made the decision? The people.

Now I don't know how long it took for that conversation. The way the Bible tells us passages like this quite often are so short that you have to believe that it was either a miracle that God moved in and changed their whole orientation. Because, after all, they had been facing this situation for a long time and hadn't done anything. What would immediately change that? Did they respect this great leader? I'm not sure. You don't instantly respect great leaders. What had they done? They had sat and talked with a newcomer who shared their problem, asked them to talk about it, made a suggestion, and sat back and waited for them to decide. Now I don't know how long the gap may have been within those two verses there. It may have been instantaneous. The Bible doesn't tell us. But there's a possibility that they had to think about it, talk about it, reason it out, and they came to a conclusion.

Well, I'm not going to tell you about the ones that were negative on this situation. I want to get on with the strategy of the positives. There was a reaction but the answer to the reaction that Nehemiah gave in verse 20 was, "The God of heaven will give us success." We do not need to look to our own resources; God will give us success. Now, at this point, he becomes spiritual about a matter that, back when he was getting supplies ready, he was not willing to trust simply to some kind of miraculous providence. He got the supplies, he got into the situation, now he's got the people organized, and now he says, "God will give us success." You've got to be careful at what point you enter in this notion of God will do it. If you do it prematurely, you may have the thing so spiritualized that there's no substance in it.

I have so much fun with this book that I could take the rest of today and look point by point by point at the very exciting things that this man does as he moves on in development. Now I'm going to do some skipping again because you just want to see some highlights in these first several chapters. In the next chapter, you find an almost dull set of readings. "Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and re-built the Sheep Gate." Now you say, good grief, what are we going to read here? Sounds like a genealogy; one of those dull sections of the Bible that doesn't have any spiritual meat in it. Don't be sure, even when you read the genealogies. There're some very interesting spiritual truths if you reason them out and look at them closely. Find out who is related to whom and what that meant in terms of God's great movement.

Does it say anything to you that this list—and it is a long list—look at it. It says so and so did this; so and so did that. They went this far in the gate. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section and Zakkur, the son of Imri, built the next one, and so forth and so on and so forth and so on. What a dull chapter. Listen, start right off with the first verse. Does it tell you anything very exciting when it says Eliashib the high priest, and his fellow priests went to work? *Participation*. Not just participation. The whole chapter says that and that's beautiful. Can you imagine the high priests and all the other priests going to work? There's a miracle. It says, "The high priest and his fellow priests went to work and re-built the Sheep Gate." Not even the most prominent gate. Very beautiful. Not just participation. But he says, look, we even had the biggies; we even had the biggies.

Now the men of Jericho were outsiders living down in Jericho before the destruction of the kingdom. And they were probably residents of Jerusalem now, but they still were called the Jericho people. Right? And they're mentioned next, even those people that weren't part of the original structure, Jerusalem. And it wasn't benefiting their city. Jericho had also been destroyed—wasn't benefiting their city—but they were the next ones mentioned. And you can just go down through here and you can find how many different people, including craftsmen that you'd ordinarily think would stand back and say, well, we can't do work like that. We'll let you do it and then we'll do nice things for you later. They all pitched in.

Now it doesn't tell us how this was organized, but it speaks of a tremendous amount of organization. And I think, in the grace of God, the cleverness of Nehemiah disappears right about this point. You just don't get any emphasis on the cleverness of Nehemiah. And people who study this book and preach about it exalting Nehemiah, I think are an embarrassment to Nehemiah. Because all the way through this thing, the book of Nehemiah puts the emphasis not on Nehemiah, but on whom? The people, the people. Consistent through this book. Tremendous participatory book.

Now did our man, Nehemiah, start out with basic needs? Yes. He dealt with the security and survival issue that was the big problem in Jerusalem at that time. But, interestingly, when we get down into the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter at this point something else emerges. "Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, 'We and our sons are numerous; and in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.'" Does that sound familiar? They've got a famine problem. Others were saying, "We're mortgaging our fields and our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." A landownership problem. That sound familiar? You read that chapter 5 you will discover what is clearly one of the first cases of land reform in the name of development. I ask you to look particularly at the 9<sup>th</sup> verse and following. "What you're doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also leading the people and money and grain. But let's stop charging interest." In other words, let's get away from this business of giving people money only if they will give us lots of money back. "Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and oil." By the way, excessive interest rate was one percent. And Nehemiah says, it's too much. Here it is in the Word of God. *Where is that?* Where is that? 5:11, 5:11. I want you to share with me something of the excitement of seeing how this man, with a burden, arranged for physical needs to be met, arranged for lumber, arranged for all the needs that would be required, except the labor, and then worked with the people to restore the city walls. Then went to work on the problem of human relationships, the social needs. And interestingly, long after this, we find over in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, the first mention of evangelism.

Now, granted, these were people of God that simply needed restoration. But he does not arrive on that situation with an evangelistic appeal to restoration because they've got some needs that are so basic that they can't see those needs. They can't see the spiritual needs for the physical needs. And take it however you will, this book which is the most clear-cut in the whole Word of God on the physical development needs, starts off with the dealing with security needs, moves to food needs, then moves to human organization, and social needs. And, then, in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, Ezra is brought into the scene—the priest. "So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak until noon as he faced the square before the Water

Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the book of the Law.” They were ready. God was doing a restoration work in Israel. And where you find they read from the book in verse 8, read from the book making it clear, giving them meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. A biblical teaching approach. “Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them” (v. 12).

Here is celebration of the deliverance of the redemptive processes of God. And, interestingly, the big repentance moment doesn’t occur until the next chapter. They’ve got it all backwards. They were celebrating God’s redemption and then it dawns on them in chapter 9: “On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads” after the celebration. Those of Israelite descent separate themselves from the foreigners, and so forth, and they ask God’s forgiveness. And you see the forgiveness and the repentance as part of a great spiritual growth experience, not a salvation experience. God has interesting ways to do things and they don’t always conform to the models that we have brought from our own limited experience. May we go to the Word of God and expand our experiences so that we have a bigger understanding of the way that God can work. This is a beautiful book, Nehemiah. Study it carefully and don’t skip over some of those things that seem to be meaningless and pointless like those lists. Take a good look. There are some hidden messages that’ll just jump right up, like little flowers in the desert, and say, look at this, God is great. Let’s pray together.

Our Father, we pray that you will give us that sort of feeling of concern for your people that will allow us to go to the authorities and share our burdens and concern. And to build upon the friendships and the contacts that you give us, even in the secular world, so that we can bring resources to bear upon the needs of people. Father, help us to be zealous in the matters specifically of looking after our own, our families, people of our own clans, people of our own as Christians. Help us to be zealous about them, Father, because we know it was appropriate for Nehemiah to say, “My people suffered.” And help us, Father, to take those resources that are available and bring them into the focus on the problem that will allow great things to be done in the guidance of your Holy Spirit. Father, we thank you for this man who, in the telling of this story, allows himself to become almost a side character. Not the big important leader, but simply the facilitator who lets people participate and take the credit. May it be true of us, Father, as it was of Nehemiah, that we attack problems and meet needs with a burden and a concern that does not seek our own glorification. May it be true, Father, of us, that in a sensitive awareness of your timing, we can bring the priests of God and the Word of God before people so that they might see and understand more fully what it is that God is doing and that together we might celebrate the redemptive process that motivates development. May it be true of us, Father, that we are not after a technological advancement. That we’re not simply after building beautiful walls and beautiful gates in order that people can say well, these now are more developed. But may we be functional and may we be realistic; may we meet needs that are real. And in doing so, Father, may we be strengthened. May we work in such a way that your people will be strengthened, so when it is all done, people can stand before you in repentance and in the glory of your plans by which we are being redeemed, being made fulfilled, being made whole people, becoming developed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.