



I inspected the broken walls. (Nehemiah 2:13)

WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

Studies in Nehemiah

Lesson 2

“OUT OF THE IVORY PALACES”

Nehemiah 1 - 2

In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem and made an end of Judah as a sovereign nation. At that time he entered Jerusalem, burned the temple, carried most of the remaining Jews off to Babylon, and knocked the walls down. Consequently the few Jews who remained could not defend themselves (2 Kings 25:1-11). The invading army completely leveled the city and its beautiful temple. For several decades Jerusalem and most of the surrounding territory that had been Judah was virtually uninhabited, although the history of this period is very obscure.

This was accompanied by the exile to Babylonia of large numbers of the Jewish people. Then, in 539 B.C., the new Persian king, Cyrus the Great, conquered the Babylonians, and the Jewish exiles and indeed all the peoples of the Middle East became his subjects. Cyrus decreed that the Hebrew exiles might return and rebuild their temple (2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:2-3). Carrying with them the sacred vessels from Solomon's temple, which had also been in exile, they returned and, by 515 B.C., the new temple (usually called Zerubbabel's temple) was completed.

But out of the some two or three million Jews deported from the land, only 50,000 decided to return to the Promised Land. That is only something like 2 - 5%! Fifteen years after the book of Ezra ended; almost 100 years after the first captives came back to the Promised Land; some 150 years after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls of the city of Jerusalem were still in rubble.

The returned exiles had attempted to rebuild the walls in or shortly after 458 B.C. (some 75 years before Nehemiah), but that project failed because of local opposition (Ezra 4:12, 23). No one thought this obstacle could be overcome, so the walls lay in ruin and the people stayed in trouble.

A city without good walls was in constant danger of attack. Only rural towns in the “boondocks” were without walls. People thought that any city without walls had no treasure to protect.

Then God brings Nehemiah on the scene.

“The first seven chapters of Nehemiah as well as 12:31-13:31 are written in the first person. This, as well as all or part of Neh 11 and the rest of Neh 12, constitutes what is called the Nehemiah Memoirs. As such it offers an extensive look into the life and heart of an outstanding servant of God that is unique to the Old Testament.”

- Mervin Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The man Nehemiah was multitalented. In this book he displays three of his abilities. In the first chapter he appears as the King's cupbearer. Then when he hears the call of God to build the walls of Jerusalem, he becomes Nehemiah the builder. By the end of this book he is seen as Nehemiah the Governor of the city - actually overruling in all the affairs, political, religious, and social.

A chronological chart might look like this:

586 BC Jerusalem destroyed - exiles to Babylon
 539 BC Babylon overthrown by Cyrus of Persia
 538 BC First set of exiles returns to Jerusalem
 536 BC Temple construction begins
 530 BC Temple work halted

522 BC Darius 1 becomes King in Persia
 520 BC Temple construction resumes
 516 BC Temple completed
 458 BC Second set of exiles returns
 445 BC Third set - Nehemiah

I. THE BAD NEWS AND NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE NEHEMIAH 1:1-11**A. The News Concerning Jerusalem Nehemiah 1:1-3****1. A responsible position**

In November/December of 446 B.C. a high government official named Nehemiah accompanied the king of the mighty Persian Empire, Artaxerxes, to the winter capital of Shushan (Susa) where the palace was built high on an acropolis.

2. An agonizing report

Several of his Jewish kinsmen, including his brother, Hanani, had just come from the province of Judah, almost a thousand miles away. When Nehemiah inquired about conditions there, Hanani told him about the defenseless, disgraced survivors who resided near the city of Jerusalem whose walls had never been repaired.

Nehemiah, of course, knew of the re-population which had taken place in previous years under Zerubbabel and Ezra, but he was unaware of the recent difficulty which Hanani and his friends had apparently seen for themselves.

The difficulty is not specified, but it undoubtedly resulted from the suspension of the work of rebuilding the city as ordered by Artaxerxes about 446 B.C. (see Ezra 4:21-23). The "force of arms" which Ezra records probably caused great affliction.

The survivors were enduring "reproach." The enemies of the work would naturally have been gleeful at the work stoppage, and the Jews would have been the object of their scorn.

B. The Response of Nehemiah Nehemiah 1:4-11**1. A personal response 1:4**

Nehemiah was so overcome with sorrow that "*I sat down and wept and mourned for many days.*" (verse 4). He personally identified with the remnant in the misfortune they had suffered.

His knees would no longer hold him and the tears would not stop. He fasted and prayed.

2. A prayerful response 1:5-11

In response to the news of the Jews' distress Nehemiah interceded in prayer to the Lord for the nation by confessing their sin and calling on God to deliver them through him, giving him favor with the king.

Nehemiah shows his spiritual character by his first response being prayer. Abraham Lincoln once remarked, "*I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of those about me seemed insufficient for the day.*"

Nehemiah's prayer is a model of godly petition.

a. Praise 1:5

The first part of Nehemiah's prayer is reminiscent of the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 7:21 and 10:17. Both see Jehovah as mighty and One to

be feared (See also Daniel 9:4ff.). Nehemiah portrays Jehovah as the One Who keeps His covenant and shows mercy to those who love Him. (cf. John 14:15, 23; 15:10) The greater God becomes, the smaller his problem becomes.

b. Confession 1:6-7

Nehemiah confessed the sin of his people and of himself. He specifies corrupt or wicked dealing and disobedience of the Mosaic Law. He did not just confess generally but got specific: 1:7

1. *"We acted very corruptly against thee"*
2. *"Not kept thy commandments"*
3. *"Not kept thy statutes"*
4. *"Not keep thy ordinances"*

c. Petition 1:8-11

Nehemiah follows the correct pattern for successful prayer in praising God and then confessing his sin so as to eliminate the obstacles to God's hearing and answering (see Psalm 66:18 and Isaiah 59:1-2). Then, he asks God to remember the specific promise of regathering, which had already begun, that these who had returned were His people (verse 10), and that he, Nehemiah, be granted mercy and favor in the sight of Artaxerxes (verse 11). He based his petition on God's promises and on a very present need. Alan Redpath (Victorious Christian Service) says, ***"Much of our praying is just asking God to bless some folks that are ill, and to keep us plugging along. But prayer is not merely prattle: it is warfare."***

3. A persevering and practical response

Nehemiah did not simply pray and leave "everything up to the Lord." God is not a bellhop we ring for service when we do not want to carry the luggage of life. He knew that when God works in the world, He often works through people. He knew that if you pray for something, you had better be ready to be used by God to help answer your own prayer. To pray is to perceive God's working and to be willing to serve Him to help bring about the answer. Nehemiah continued this prayer for four months - From December to April.

A cup bearer was a combination of prime minister and "master of ceremonies" rolled into one office. Kings lived in isolation (intrigue and assassination a threat – Artaxerxes' father was assassinated). They gravitate to wise and trusted men around them. Nehemiah tested food, guarded sleeping quarters, and would be general adviser and confidant of the King.

To be the cupbearer was to have great authority and responsibility. It was a position of great influence. The King, in quiet hours, when he felt free and relaxed, would be able to discuss ideas with Nehemiah so he had to be qualified with great wisdom and political aptitude.

The reason why God turned to Nehemiah was not his position. The reasons why God turned to Nehemiah to be the man for the hour were the characteristics that we see in chapter 1. Nehemiah was a man of burden; he was a man upon whom the burden that weighed heavily on God's heart weighed heavily on him too. He was a man of prayer. He put that burden in his heart into the articulation of the language of heaven, prayer before the throne of grace. He was a man of action - he was not just a man who knew what to do, and knew to pray about what needed to be done, but he was a man willing to get onto his feet and do something about it! Because of those characteristics Nehemiah became the man for the hour.

II. THE REQUEST OF NEHEMIAH NEHEMIAH 2:1-8**A. Permission to Go to Jerusalem Nehemiah 2:1-8**

It was not until April (Nisan), 444 B.C., perhaps when the king and his court had returned to either Persepolis or Ecbatana, that God moved in the circumstances and in the heart of Artaxerxes. God often waits because He is so much wiser than we are. He looks at everything from the eternal point of view. He works all things together for good (Romans 8:28) and never makes any mistakes. This is why we are told to wait patiently for His will and not take things into our own hands.

In his usual manner, Nehemiah the cupbearer came into the king's presence one day, but this time with a long face (verse 1). This in itself was to be expected, considering the deep concern over the situation at Jerusalem, but one was not supposed to be sad in the king's presence. Just to be near him was supposed to be happiness. Nehemiah's fear reminds one of the situation of Esther when she risked her life to come into Ahasuerus' presence.

When asked the reason for his dejection, he told about the plight of his brethren in Judea. It may have been that this was a situation known personally to Artaxerxes, and he now guessed further that his cupbearer had something special on his mind! When he asked, Nehemiah shot up a "flare prayer" asking for wisdom and for the right words to say and the courage to say them (verse 4). The request was made for a leave of absence to go to Jerusalem and assist in the rebuilding. It was an earlier decree by Artaxerxes that had halted the construction. His change of mind here is all the more remarkable (although it must be noted that the king had left himself an opportunity to change his mind Ezra 4:21).

B. The Permission Granted

Throughout this conversation it is evident that Artaxerxes had a high regard for his servant. He was concerned at (and not offended by) Nehemiah's sadness; he gave Nehemiah permission to make a request, and he then granted the request itself. He simply wanted Nehemiah to return when the job was completed. The text records that Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes 12 years after the king had appointed him governor of Judah (5:14; 13:6). Nevertheless he may have also gone back sooner than that (v. 6).

Constable remarks:

One writer calculated the date of Artaxerxes' decree to rebuild Jerusalem as March 5, 444 B.C. "This date marks the beginning of Daniel's Seventy Weeks (Dan. 9:24-27). Sixty-nine of those seventy weeks (173,880 days) were literally fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem, presented Himself at His 'royal entry' as Israel's messiah, on March 30, A.D. 33. The prophecy of Daniel was fulfilled to the very day (cf. Luke 19:40-42). The seventieth week of Daniel, the Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:4-28; Rev. 6-19), will find its fulfillment in the future." - J. Carl Laney, Ezra and Nehemiah, p. 77.

III. THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM NEHEMIAH 2:9-20**A. Nehemiah Traveled to Jerusalem with the King's Escort Stirring Sanballat's and Tobiah's Anger Nehemiah 2:9-10**

Three months have passed in between verses 8 and 9. Nehemiah journeys across the river and comes to the city of Jerusalem, that holy place that was in such degradation. We read in verse 9: "Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army

and horsemen with me.”

He goes on this journey, and he finds the city and the walls that are so broken down. Then in verse 10 we find that the first thing that Nehemiah encountered in the city was opposition. Verse 10: *“When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.”*

If you want to do any work for God you must anticipate opposition in that work. Opposition in the work of God often causes some people to say: *“I wonder if I am in God's will?”* They question it, maybe they even turn their back on God's will - maybe they do not perceive it at the time, but they walk straight out of God's will because they are afraid of confrontations, they are afraid of opposition! The great irony, and I believe it is a dupe of Satan, is that the opposite is the truth. It is when we encounter opposition that (most of the time) we can see it as proof that we are in God's will.

B. Inspection of the Walls: Nehemiah Secretly Inspected the Walls at Night Nehemiah 2:11-16

C. Exhortation & Reaction of the People

When Nehemiah revealed to the people his plan to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem with God's and the king's approval, they agreed to do it. (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

D. Samaritan Reaction

1. The objection

Sanballat and Tobiah objected to the people building the wall as being against the king, but Nehemiah replied that God would give them success (Nehemiah 2:19-20).

The tension between Nehemiah and the surrounding governors needs to be considered. Nehemiah came to Jerusalem as governor. It is not certain whether he is one of a series of Persian-appointed governors, a line reaching back to Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel or, whether there was no final establishment of a governorship in Jerusalem before Nehemiah, Judea being a part of the province of Samaria. Whether Nehemiah is the first Persian-appointed governor of Judea or an *ad hoc* official on a special assignment, the tension which developed between him and Sanballat is most understandable.

2. Sanballat

The designation of Sanballat the Horonite (Nehemiah 2:10, 19) may refer to a native of Horonaim, or of one of the two Beth-horons, the "upper" or the "nether," mentioned in Joshua 16:3,5.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says, *“Sanballat is the Babylonian Sin-uballit, ‘may Sin give him life,’ a name occurring a number of times in the contract tablets from the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, and Darius Hystaspis.”*

As governor of Samaria, Sanballat was joined by three other provincial governors (Tobiah of Ammon, Gasmu of the Qedarite Arabs and perhaps Abd of Dedan) to oppose the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The reason for their opposition is clearly political. While these governors protest their allegiance to the Persian king, it is quite obvious that they are selfishly motivated. Nehemiah, with his enthusiasm and his *“poor”* (!) example of repudiation of the allowance allotted to the governor, was a threat to these surrounding governors.

Sanballat appears to have been a Jew or at least a good Jehovist, giving Yahwistic names to his sons Delaiah and Shelemiah. Further, it is significant that when Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem the second time, he discovers that the son of Joiada the Zadokite high priest and the daughter of Sanballat had been joined in a diplomatic marriage uniting the two great families of Judah and Samaria.

3. Tobiah

Nehemiah's conflict with Tobiah, following his return to Jerusalem, is also pertinent here. Discovering Tobiah entrenched in the temple, sustained by Eliashib the priest, Nehemiah reacted in his own inimitable way and threw Tobiah and his belongings out of the temple. Nehemiah considered this another effort to subvert the restoration of Jerusalem. His Persian authorization gave him control over the affairs of the temple.

Tobiah also may have been a Jew, being the ancestor of the prominent Tobiad family of the Ptolemaic period. The Biblical statements about Tobiah indicate that he was a relative of the high priest and that he was a leader of the Jews, receiving their support and maintaining their loyalty. He is described as "*the Ammonite servant*," a term indicating an official of high standing even though Nehemiah uses it to scorn a political opponent.

The Ammonites attempted repeatedly to occupy the land of Gad but it was only after the conquest of the Israelite Trans-Jordan by Tiglath-Pileser III that they succeeded in dominating the southern part of Gilead. In the time of Jehoiakim the Ammonites tried to enlarge their territory at the expense of Judah. But the citizens of this area remained Judaeans even under the Ammonite occupation in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., though this area was officially in the land of Ammon.

The Tobiads were landowners in this area, being local rulers and enjoying an autonomous state. It would seem then that the tension between Nehemiah and Tobiah was also not so much ethnic or religious but rather political.

4. Gasmu

Gasmu was another local governor who opposed Nehemiah. While the Edomites had encroached on the southern lands of Judah during the exile, they drop from view, following the return, to be replaced by a confederation of Arabian tribes led by Gasmu. He seems to have established control over a wide area of North Arabia, displacing Moab and Edom, even perhaps reaching into Egypt. Thus the Qedarite Arabs led by Gasmu replaced Judah's hated southern neighbors. Nehemiah's confrontation by Gasmu should be seen in this light. It would seem that Gasmu's loyalty to Persia was not always certain. In the later part of the fifth century along with the king of Egypt, he seems to have had plans to take Phoenicia, necessitating Persian intervention.

As with the other surrounding governors, Nehemiah's confrontation with Gasmu was predicated on political reasons.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

1. Nehemiah is a picture of the Lord Jesus in leaving wealth, prestige, and honor to come to a place of destitution, hard work, mockery, derision, and opposition. The big difference, of course, is that Christ did it all for us and went to the cross in death.

2. When God has a purpose, He can and will use any forces in earth and in the heavens to accomplish His will. Here are just a few examples:

- To free the children of Israel from captivity in Egypt, He used frogs, darkness, snakes, locusts, plagues, first-born death, and several other forces, including the Red Sea.
- To help Joshua conquer the Promised Land, He used angels, hornets, the sun, the moon, hailstones, and several other forces, including the shouts of the children of Israel to fell the walls of Jericho.
- To sustain Elijah during a famine, God sent a raven every day, morning and evening, to bring food to Elijah.
- To help the Hebrews return to Judah and Jerusalem from Babylon, He used three kings, a military coup, and gifts of silver, gold, and livestock from the royal treasuries.
- Nehemiah also tells us that God protected His people from bandits while they were traveling, loaded down with treasures of silver and gold, from Babylon back to Judah - a three-month journey.

It is difficult for us, in our fleshly natures, to imagine the kind of power that can control and direct the actions of hailstones, frogs, snakes, locusts, angels, hornets, ravens, and kings. But when we put our trust in God - and we, in turn, receive the favor of God - we can expect the unexpected: miracles from any direction at any time.

3. The practical lesson here is that we can trust in God to do the impossible with the improbable, at the most unlikely time, using the most inconceivable tools.

4. Ancient walls were necessary for safety and security. Early gates were places of justice, news, story telling, and reports. The walls would allow the people in Jerusalem to cultivate their spiritual lives without any outside interference from other nations with pagan gods. It was a place of safety not only physically, but spiritually.

As believers do we not have walls of spiritual protection and spiritual security that we put around ourselves in the disciplines that we exercise as God's children? Think of a few: baptism is one, the reading of God's word is another, prayer daily before God, witnessing, fellowship, the breaking of bread, the prayer meeting - the many exercises that are encouraged for our spiritual well-being in the New Testament. They are there for our protection and cultivating of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

What "broken-down walls" or "burned-up gates" are there in your life? What needs to be repaired in your personality, your relationship to others, or your walk with the Lord?

Choose to be aware of PROBLEMS; listen to the needs of others; don't just let them go by. Then, take these needs to the Lord in PRAYER, that you will gain God's viewpoint for the repair work to be done. Thirdly, get God's PERMISSION and instructions as to what your specific part is to be in the work, and then make specific PLANS for carrying out your assignment, first at home and then outside with others.

What will you determine with God's help to repair this week? Remember that with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26), because He WILL supply all your needs (Philippians 4:19)! – Robert Stevens, Church Bible Studies, Nehemiah

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

(Taken from Dr. Robert Stevens, Nehemiah Lesson 2, Church Bible Studies)

1. Read Lesson 2.
 - (a) What application to your own life did you learn from the lesson or lecture?

 - (b) What did you decide to “repair” this week? (See Conclusion)

Read Nehemiah chapters 3-5

2. From Nehemiah 3
 - (a) write the names of all the gates.

 - (b) What special notations regarding the work do you find most interesting?
3. In view of other Bible passages you may know, what spiritual significance do you see in the names of the gates?
4. Study Nehemiah 4 and list the various ways in which the enemy tried to stop the building.
5. (a) What evidence do you find in Nehemiah 4:1-15 that God helped the Jews? Give verse(s).

- (b) Can you find several specific defense measures in verses 16-23? Give verse for each.
6. Summarize the problem which is discussed in Nehemiah 5.
7. How did Nehemiah set a good example for his people?
8. Memorize Philippians 4:19.