



Lesson 7 April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Nehemiah: The Captive Cupbearer Rebuilds the Nation

Study Scripture – Nehemiah 2:11-20

Background Scripture – Nehemiah 1:1 – 2:20

### Key Verse:

*Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.*

**Nehemiah 2:17**

### INTRODUCTION

Our Study Lesson looks on someone who you can call a captive in every respect. We are looking at an event which occurred in the reign of a pagan king whose kingdom ruled the world at the time. One of this King's trusted advisers and protectors was one of the captive children of Israel who had risen to this extremely high rank. But he was a captive and his life depended on the whims of this King.

But he was a man of God and he lamented over the state of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. So we know from how he approached this sad situation that he was a captive of God and he fully intended to be led by God and to do what God wanted despite the risks.

Note therefore believers whether they consider themselves to be locked in the secular world OR are in the world but concerned primarily with the kingdom of God are pretty defenceless. One of the most important lessons we can learn from Nehemiah's experience is that we are defenceless. We therefore have to learn the hard lessons so that we can depend on the infilling and the leadership of the Spirit of God at every turn. There can be no missing this point if we want to be regarded in the Kingdom of God.

We therefore remind you that any teaching or attitude that says that people in Old Testament are different from people in the New Testament times is quite foolishness. We are nothing outside of the guidance Of God. There is therefore simply no room for pride or boasting.

Our Lesson today gives us marvellous insight into the meaning of Jesus' teaching':  
*"Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.  
Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves".*

The focus of our Lesson therefore is that we are to be wise in our carrying out our responsibilities.

It is to be carefully noted at this stage that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. But what this writer explains about wisdom is very important. He states:

**“Wisdom is the accumulation of a life’s experience of trusting God, learning the Scriptures, taking risk, dwelling on lessons, being willing to go deep inside and struggle with the Lord regarding what we find there, making the effort to change where the Lord indicates.**

**Wisdom and maturity are very closely related. Become mature makes you wise, able to see things as they really are. What Jesus is saying is that the person who will be called in the critical moment to say the critical thing is very likely the person who has been the best prepared over a lifetime to say that.**

**When you’re called on to speak for the Lord, you will draw on what he has taught you and encouraged you from previous crises.**

**You will know something about human nature with its failing and longings.”**

Our Lesson therefore will show

- The Sovereignty of God, -that God guides all the affairs of men,
- That God works all things in His own time when dealing with His people,
- That He does not solve all the problems of His people at one time,
- That when we pray for help God does act to rebuild His Temple
- Wisdom is required when we are doing the work of God,
- Thorough planning and clear thinking will help us do the work of God,
- God helps us in crisis moments, and when we are taking risks in the work of God we are to pray to God for guidance.

Christians are to be shrewd or wise as serpents, but harmless as doves. Even though doves and sheep are almost always defenceless creatures, and we are called doves and sheep, the Spirit will tell us what to say when we need to say something and will enable us to do what needs to be done when we have to act.

The post-exilic life of the Jews following their release from Babylon at the edict of Cyrus the Persian emperor had a most inauspicious start. The first returning exiles, as well as those that followed later faced major challenges to all their attempts to re-establish their national life in the ‘Land of Promise’. They were relatively few in number, lacked resources and faced sustained hostility from neighbours and those who had moved in following their expulsion from the land. They found that the enemies of God were the political, economic, and military rulers in their land, and they were reduced to victims.

The Temple, the most significant emblem of national life lay in ruins. Jerusalem, the Holy City was in shambles with its walls broken down and the gates burned. The curse section of the covenant with Yahweh (Deut. 28-31) was in full force and Israel, Judah and Jerusalem had come to national disgrace and become a *byword* and *reproach* among the nations. Yahweh’s name by association was sullied by the fortunes of the ‘chosen’ people; albeit their fate was at the hand of Yahweh Himself.



Despite the noble efforts of patriots like Ezra, Zerubbabel, Haggai, Joshua, Zachariah and others, progress to re-establish the nation was slow and torturous and came in fits and starts. The harsh economic, social and security environment were compounded by the poor spiritual condition of the people.

To illustrate the sad situation, when Nehemiah, the main character in our Text came on the scene, he encountered significant antagonism and hostile attitudes to him and his work, though the Persian King had appointed him as the Jewish Governor.

The people had to be motivated in the national endeavour being pursued by Nehemiah and it is critically important for us to see “**HOW** he motivated them. Those left in the land at the time of the exile had intermarried with pagans and established alliances with certain foreign families. Other prophets grappled with this devastating situation.

Many of the returnees that were well-off exploited the poor, the pursuit of personal interests was paramount with all, and spiritual concerns were relegated to a distant second place in their lives. As a result it was hard to sustain any national, nation-building effort. Mere survival was a daily concern but gradually with the passing years and under some godly leadership significant milestones were achieved.

First the altar was rebuilt, the foundations of Temple were laid, sacrifice was again being offered to God, certain feasts were revived, the Temple was finally rebuilt but one glaring and needed restoration still had to be done to further the cause of nationhood.

The walls of Jerusalem remained broken down and in disrepair, with the gates burnt. The city was open to attacks from bandits, marauders, animals, prowlers, human enemies, and anyone who wanted to attack the people.

A capital city without a perimeter wall was a national disgrace and a source of shame.

Note that the enemies of the people of Israel had not as great opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple as they had with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

The people of the world do not mind if you want to build a church and visit it on a regular basis and stay inside and worship. They worship their own gods too, so they don't care if you worship your God on the inside. But if you begin to develop protective perimeters from which you can safely plan and then walk out to spread the word of God after removing the shame of what happened to you then that will be a problem.

It is important to note the significance that the Scriptures ascribe to Jerusalem.

*The LORD loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. (Psalm 87:2-3).*

*Pray for the peace of **Jerusalem**: they shall prosper that love thee. (Psalm 122:6).*

*Blessed be the LORD out of Zion, which dwelleth at **Jerusalem**. Praise ye the LORD. (Psalm 135:21).*

*For the LORD hath chosen **Zion**; he hath desired it for his habitation. (Psalm 132:13)*



*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge. (Psalm 48:1-3) And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from **Jerusalem**. (Isaiah 2:3)*

God designated Jerusalem 'the City of God', that is, the dwelling place of God and the center of life of the entire world. He chose the city of Jerusalem as His own and there is no more important place on earth in the sight of God. Yes, the altar was important, the Temple was important, but construction of those edifices did not complete the work of restoration. The entire city had been destroyed and burnt, and so in God's plan the walls had to be rebuilt, as they were required to meet the need for security and strength. God would never allow the walls to remain in ruins. So despite all that had been achieved so far, the rebuilding of the city walls remained a necessary, urgent and pressing need. This was God's desire. It could not be thwarted.

Note that starting with the first batch of returnees and on, God raised up godly men to provide the sterling leadership needed to start and accomplish the restoration and rebuilding of the nation.

True to His faithfulness, God again provided a leader to inspire and motivate a dispirited people to take on the formidable task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This was a captive leader in every respect. But elements in his captivity we must note were very important in this plan of God.

## **THE MAN NEHEMIAH**

The man chosen was Nehemiah, a high-ranking civil servant in the regime of Artaxerxes, the Persian king. Medo-Persia was the dominant regional power at the time around 444 – 443 B.C. Though a Jew, born in Exile in Babylon, He had risen through what must have been great difficulty and hostility and against intense competition to high office. But God had a plan for him. He was Cup Bearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. He was thus in an extremely important position as personal attendant and confidant to the King of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. In Persian circles this position was more influential than that of our Prime Minister or President.

This position was critically important for this Dictator whose word was law. Nehemiah tasted the wine before the King drank and tasted his food before the king ate and was thus the man that the King trusted with his life. He was constantly in the presence of the King and in this position was the sounding board, the carrier of the suggestion box, and the person with the ears of the ultimate ruler.



Nehemiah's involvement began when he received distressing news concerning the Jewish community that had returned to Palestine from forced exile in Babylonian. Reliable sources informed him that the community was literally under siege from hostile neighbours and the walls of Jerusalem remained broken down and burned. Nehemiah's patriotic heart was broken at the news as he was overcome with a sense of despair and grief.

The hostility of the neighbouring ethnic groups to Israel was monumental. The famous Psalm 137, which records the longing for Zion uttered by the exiled people in Babylon and their call on God to punish the abominable actions of the people of Edom says as follows:

*"Remember O Lord, against the sons of Edom, The day of Jerusalem, Who said, "Raze it, to its very foundations!"*

Clearly, God would now have to deal with hostility from both pagan neighbours, as well as from people of God who had either corrupted themselves or had resigned themselves to a fate national death. The intermarriage of the people of Israel including the priests under leaders with these people was a clear offense in the sight of God. It prevented an overwhelming danger to the nation which was to produce the great Messiah and Saviour.

## **NEHEMIAH'S PURPOSE**

In the tradition of the saints of God making intercession in times of crisis (Daniel 9; 2 Chronicles 34) Nehemiah prayed for the city, confessing his sins and the sins of his people, praising God, invoking the Covenant and asking God for the favour of King Artaxerxes.

In praying, Nehemiah had a specific purpose in mind. Specific purpose, unshakeable commitment, total dependence of God, and understanding of God's promises directed this great leader to properly motivate his people.

His exemplary faith in God is amply demonstrated in a risky approach to the Monarch, as he sought permission and commission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. Nehemiah must also have been aware of the problems he would face in Jerusalem both from enemies without and within. Remember that Jerusalem was always noted as "the rebellious city" and any direct request to rebuild the walls would pose a great danger to the Persian king. So Nehemiah wisely approached the King with a request to properly take care of the burial place of his fathers, something that would appeal to these pagan kings who like the Egyptians worshipped the dead and would go to great lengths to ensure a proper burial ceremony for their kindred. But in all this Nehemiah was confident that "...the hand of my God which was good upon me..." He was successful in his request to the king, and he headed for Jerusalem, with an armed escort provided by the King.

## **PRELIMINARY LESSONS**

Nehemiah's godly leadership and hands-on approach to deal with this very difficult situation, is often put forward as demonstrating the principles people must follow to overcome difficulties.



While Nehemiah is rightly lauded, the providence of God and the fact that God did His work through the instrumentality of Nehemiah must be recognized in this entire episode. We should beware of attempts to isolate principles, as if to say that certain principles when followed determine success. Some praise Nehemiah's problem analysis, situation assessment and forward planning ability and imply that these are essential ingredients in the success of his work. These were undoubtedly important, but they were not the most significant elements in the narrative. The Scriptures record men and women of God who have approached problems facing the people of God in different ways, with varying degrees of success. But the common and indispensable ingredient for success is always the presence of God and His determination, irrespective of the personal abilities of the men and women of God.

If God is not the initiator of solutions, the provider of the means for tackling the problem, the guarantor of the solution and the one with a watchful eye over the affairs of His people, there will never be godly success. If one follows principles, outside dependence on God, there might be success of a sort, but it will not be the success that God wants. Whatever we achieved by way of success will be a temporary matter and would probably lead to greater problems in future that we can imagine.

Let us learn the wise principles God has taught in the Scriptures so clearly demonstrated with Nehemiah and let us do the work of God efficiently, using all the abilities at our disposal. We will not operate successfully without complete dependence on God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is His guidance, wisdom and direction that we must seek and to which we must adhere. We must aim at obtaining wisdom and maturity in our spiritual life so that God will use us in the building of His nation and His kingdom.

The Book of Nehemiah and the Text we study contains a tremendous amount of instructions from God and is rich in life applications. We are encouraged to pay special attention to the principles taught.

Despite their recent history of self-interest, apathy and divisions, the people responded to Nehemiah's appeal based on the outline of his history with dealing with God and committed themselves to rebuilding the city walls. The cooperative effort to rebuild the walls in the face of threats and intimidation reawakened the national spirit, boosted the morale of the community and was in fact a restoration of the people, as much as a restoration of the city walls.

## **THE TEXT.**

### **Chapter 1-2: 1-4.**

The Book of Nehemiah is a personal account of the affairs of the returned Jewish community from about 445 B.C. to 431 B.C., in particular the year 445 B.C.– 444 B.C. A large section of the Book covers the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem which had remained in ruins since 586 B.C. when the Babylonian despot Nebuchadnezzar sacked the city. Nehemiah (his name means the Lord comforts) was a top civil servant in the regime of Artaxerxes the Medo –Persian king who



held political and military sway throughout the region at the time. In fact, Nehemiah was a *Cupbearer* to the King and his position and duties play a very important role in this lesson.

Sometime in late November early December (Chislev) around 445-444 B.C. Nehemiah received some troubling news about the Jews who had returned to Palestine following their release from Babylonian captivity. This was the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign and Nehemiah was stationed in Shusan (Hebrew) the winter capital of the Persian kings. (See Daniel 8:2; Esther 1:2). The main Persian capital at this time was Persepolis.

Nehemiah inquired from a group recently returned from Judah about the welfare of the Jewish community in Palestine. He referred to the Jews as '*escaped*' because they had been forcefully taken to Babylon. Hanani, the only member of the group named appears to have been Nehemiah's blood brother, (7:2). Given his senior position in the government, Nehemiah was likely aware of the political limitations imposed on the returnees. They could rebuild the Temple and private dwellings, but permission was not given to rebuild the city walls of a notably rebellious city. Still it was good to have first-hand knowledge of the situation from his own people.

The news concerning those in Jerusalem was dire. He was told that the people were in great *affliction and reproach*. They were under constant harassment and intimidation and the 'city gates', which should have provided protection and security for the citizens, were in ruins. The people were living in fear with little dignity and the broken-down walls well reflected their sad condition. Nehemiah was deeply distressed at the news. He was likely very uncomfortable living in luxury and security at the court, while his brethren suffered in Judah. Like his great predecessor Moses, he felt compelled to do something to alleviate their sad condition. He was serving the King in Persia, but his heart was in Jerusalem. He reacted to the news with sorrow and wept and *mourned several days*. This meant that he mourned in the conventional way of sitting down on the ground in dust and ashes, so extreme was his sorrow.

Nehemiah's reaction to the bad news was admirable and exemplary. He made it a subject of serious, prolonged fasting and prayer. Some believe he fasted and prayed for four months, since he was informed around November-December and did not approach the king until the month Nisan, our month of April.

Nehemiah began his prayer with praise for God's greatness and His loyal love for His people. He confessed the people had sinned against God and had disobeyed the Mosaic Law. He reminded God of His promise to restore His people to their land if they repented. He also noted that they were the people God had *redeemed* from Egyptian slavery for a special purpose and concluded with a petition that his planned appeal to the king would be favorably received. Much prayer and fasting preceded his approach to the King.

Nehemiah wept and prayed over the ruined city of Jerusalem and pleaded with God to restore and recover the people. Many of us today find ourselves in similar ruin and we need practical help on how to reclaim our ruined lives. We have sinned, lost our way, damaged several areas



of our lives, found ourselves in bondage to wrong attitudes and habits, become vulnerable to attack and hostile forces have wreaked destruction on us.

In that situation we should follow the example of Nehemiah; pray for help and fully expect God to do something about our situation. We know that God answers prayer and so we continue to pray, sometimes for a longer period of time that we think it should take for God to answer.

One lesson is that if we pray for help and we expect God to do something, we have to prepare ourselves and be ready for when God's help arrives. It often comes unexpectedly and sometimes we miss His answer. As we look at Nehemiah's story, we can see that he expected God to answer, and he prepared himself for God's answer and was ready when the answer came.

Nehemiah knew the walls of the city needed to be rebuilt, as nation building without security is an extremely difficult venture. (See Iraq and Afghanistan). He was well aware that rebuilding the walls of a city that had a history of rebellion was not in the same class of decision as giving permission to rebuild a Temple.

Allowing the city walls to be repaired and re-erected would allow the Jewish people a level of political independence that could be dangerous and would excite their neighbours. In addition, allowing the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem would be tantamount to politically separating Judea from Samaria. The rebuilding of the walls would create an area ruled by a different Governor, namely, Nehemiah. Naturally, this would be opposed by the existing power structure in Judah-Samaria.

Nehemiah knew that the favor he desired of the king was no small matter. He knew he had no power to change the King's mind, but he also knew:

*The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will,*

(Proverbs 21:1). So he entreated God to give him strength and courage to approach the King, and also to guarantee him success.

Nehemiah undoubtedly had great respect for the king but the expression '*this man*' at the end of his prayer showed the big difference between his reverence for his God and his conception of his master, the Persian king.

One writer informs us on '*cupbearer*':

**This officer, in the ancient Oriental courts, was always a person of rank and importance, fully trusted by the king and from the confidential nature of his duties was and had frequent access to the royal presence and possessed of great influence.**

Note the importance of Nehemiah's position. He knew that God would work but he did know when and so he waited for four months.





Generally we are hasty and impatient people, and we want God to answer our prayers even before we make them. We do not like delays in answers to our prayers. Of course we do not always grant the request of our children, our relatives, our friends, or others but we do not want God to delay when we want something. That's just our selfish nature at work. We must understand that it is not that God is unwilling or unable to answer prayers immediately. God wants us to persevere in prayer and keep on praying until He is ready to answer. Nehemiah knew this and so he prayed and remained deeply troubled over the state of Jerusalem.

## CHAPTER 2

Nehemiah, guided by God, committed himself to this project with a strong sense of God's approval. Now was the time for him to take the tremendous risk of approaching the King with this politically charged request. Note however that Nehemiah had been praying, had learned wisdom from God and had prepared carefully what he was going to say and how he was going to say it.

It was the month of Nisan, that is, April, when Nehemiah finally approached the King. He was further burdened by the knowledge that asking the king to revise his Jerusalem policy might anger the king. Most likely he had delayed any precipitous or hasty action, patiently waiting for God to indicate that this was the right time. (See his specific request for God's help on that day in Nehemiah 1:11).

Nehemiah came before the King to serve him wine, a very dangerous job, for he had to taste the wine before giving it to the King. Many would try to assassinate the King by putting poison in his food or in his wine. In those days whoever was King this opportunity was one of the very few ways to remove the King from office and so the wine taster's job was a dangerous one. The cupbearer was one of the King's main line of personal defence and the King had to believe that he was a man of integrity, trustworthiness and above suspicion.

Nehemiah was under stress, for if the King became suspicious or distrustful of him, he could easily lose his life. He would always be looking for changes in the attitude or look at the servants for any change could indicate something was brewing. Nehemiah had to appear cheerful and confident at all times in the King's presence. Any change in his demeanour would raise suspicions in the King and incur his wrath. Nehemiah makes the point that he had never been sad when appearing before the King (Esther 4:2).

The vigilant King noticed that Nehemiah was sad. Despite his deep feelings of distress, he could have concealed his grief if it had been necessary, though some believe that his sadness showed despite his best efforts to conceal it. Men in his position usually have the ability to mask their feelings. **(the heart knows its own bitterness, and in the midst of laughter is often sad)**. The miserable conditions in Jerusalem gave him cause to be sad and showing his grief would give occasion to the king to enquire into the cause. Likely he hoped to prompt a sympathetic response from the king and thereby have an opening to present his petition. Predictably the king asked why he looked sad, given the fact that he was not sick. The King commented that this must be a 'mind' problem.

This was always going to be a risky approach and an already anxious Nehemiah became more fearful at the king's question and rightly so. The situation was Nehemiah stood before an absolute monarch and any suspicion of a plot, would mean instant death. The King recognized



that there was something unusual and possibly dangerous going on and probed Nehemiah to find out what was on his mind that would dare him to show unhappiness before the King. This was a moment of tremendous danger. Note however that this was also a moment of tremendous opportunity which Nehemiah sensed. The King had not called the guards immediately and as such, this was God's open door.

Nehemiah hurriedly assured the King that he was loyal and then immediately and likely praying silently tactfully told the King that he was sad because the place of his birth and the resting place of his fathers' bones was in ruins.

This was a powerful appeal that would strike a sympathetic chord in the king's heart. In eastern cultures the place where one's ancestors' bones rested, had to be respected and protected at all costs. These ancient Kings were always worried about their own burial, as illustrated by the fantastic amounts of money and labour spent on the pyramids in Egypt. The King would likely be sympathetic to Nehemiah's desire to secure the resting place of his ancestors. The plea very wisely did not involve any question of politics or political advantage for the Jewish nation. Nehemiah did not specifically refer to Jerusalem, for that city had a reputation as troublesome and was always in revolt.

The King considered Nehemiah's answer a reasonable explanation for his sadness and that there was no danger to his person. He invited Nehemiah to tell him what was on his mind. The question shows that the king was inclined to relieve the situation in Jerusalem. Some look at the note in verse 6 that the Queen Esther was sitting beside the King during this encounter and believe she played an important role to in this entire incident.

Strengthened by four months of fasting and prayer and aware of God's presence, he immediately regained his calm self-possession and seized the opportunity offered by the King's words. But first he prayed one last prayer to Jehovah in heaven, to ensure divine assistance in the request he was about to make to the king. Nehemiah knew that he could not change the heart of the King, and no amount of manipulation would work and so he prayed and left it up to the Lord.

Tactfully, respectfully, he asked the King to reward him for his faithful service, by sending him to Judah, to the city of Jerusalem where his fathers' graves were located, with permission to rebuild the city and repair the ruins. Nehemiah was explicit in his request, but he still deferred to the king's wisdom. The king would know that this skilled administrator who had performed so well before him would equally well do the specific job with which he would be entrusted. God was obviously at work, for the King's heart was accepting of the explanation. The King understood that this kind of project would take some time, and he would have to find a replacement for the trusted Nehemiah.

It appears that beside Artaxerxes was his Queen, which many scholars believe would have been Queen Esther. For those scholars that believed that Esther's reign was before this time it is felt that she could have been there as mother-in-law of the Queen or queen mother. If this were so, her influence would have been directed toward restoring Jerusalem.

The King asked Nehemiah how long the project would last, and Nehemiah gave him a time. It actually took Nehemiah twelve years in all to complete the project and he was gone from the court for that long a time, eventually returning as promised. There is clear indication here that the king valued Nehemiah's service and capability to handle such a big task and that Nehemiah



had done some forward planning to determine the duration of his absence. God answered Nehemiah's prayer and the King agreed to send him to Jerusalem.

Some scholars who study secular history tell us that the province of Syria, just north of Judea had revolted two years before and the King would have thought that it a good idea to have a trusted man like Nehemiah as governor of Judea. Under the wise leadership of Nehemiah, Judea would serve as a buffer between the often antagonistic provinces of Syria and Egypt. Whatever the explanation for the King's ready agreement, it was clear that God had worked all things according to the counsel of His own will and that the King was agreeable to take the risk of having the trusted Nehemiah leave him for several years.

Nehemiah was a careful man and he obviously thought in advance about the difficulties he would likely encounter and the needs that he would have in the rebuilding process. He requested that the King give him Formal Letters of Appointment and Letters of Diplomatic Immunity so that he would have safe passage through the different territories and requisition forms to get material from the King's forests. Nehemiah anticipated trouble, so the King arranged to have a contingent of armed soldiers along to provide security. This detail remained with Nehemiah while he was in Judah. (See Nehemiah 4:23). He went on his journey with his military escort and with the full authority of the Persian court behind him.

We may gather from this that if we are going to rebuild our ruined lives, we need to think seriously about what the rebuilding will require. We must carefully and honestly assess our situation and determine the necessary changes for the fulfilment of God's will in our lives. If we have repented for our past misdeeds, determined to change and improve our lives, we must understand that we have the full authority of the throne of God behind us. Nehemiah was confident that the throne of Persia was behind him but beyond that he was in the favor of God. We should then act with confidence knowing the unlimited power of God is behind us. We should also be aware that when we have repented and made plans to follow the guidance of God, we will often experience trouble. Satan never rests. But know also that God uses difficulties for our maturity.

When Nehemiah reached the occupied lands and the rulers there realized the situation, they were upset and aggrieved that someone had finally come with power and authority to protect the people of Israel. Sanballat the Governor of Samaria under the Persians and his cohort Tobiah were not pleased with Nehemiah's mission. The stage was now set for serious opposition to the work of God.

Let us keep in our mind the fact that Nehemiah the captive cupbearer faced three crises. The first crisis moment was before the King.

The second crisis moment was when he faced a hostile enemies that lived in the land with the letter is from the King that gave them authority to do what he wanted in the area.

Nehemiah's third crisis moment came because of the necessity to provide motivation and encouragement since he had to motivate his own people of Israel who are loyal to God, working as a team with them to rebuild the wall.



### **Verses 11-15.**

*Verse 10.* Nehemiah did not allow the displeased pagan rulers to bother him, but he went to Jerusalem and stayed there for three days. In that three days Nehemiah went to scout the situation. He knew that he could trust no one, even though the Bible mentions that a few men were with him in the night. It is not clear if they knew his full plans, but some men were with him. He seems to have excluded the Jewish rulers. He was aware of the corruption and compromise rife in the community and the fear and despair among the people, so caution was his watchword. Similarly, he was aware of the open opposition that he would face by people such as Sanballat and Tobiah, who though part of the Jewish community were clearly not followers of God.

So anticipating opposition from those inside and those outside, when doing the work of God we must as Nehemiah did face the facts as they are, list them, acknowledge them, don't excuse them and work wisely.

*Verse 12 – 15.* Under cover of darkness he explored and assessed the damage to the walls, looked at the extent of the debris, and ascertained the scope of work for his planned restoration. Note his careful and sensible approach. He did not rush out and get the people all excited to rebuild the wall. He secretly surveyed the situation, honestly examined the facts, noting what had to be done and then shaped his plans.

It seems that Nehemiah set out from the west side of the city, and turned left towards the south, continuing counterclockwise around the rubble of the city walls, until coming back to his starting point. Nehemiah wasn't just sightseeing, but carefully surveying the wall and what state it was in. The word "viewed" as used in the Text, comes from a medical term indicating an action of probing a wound to see the extent of the damage. This shows the meticulous efforts with which Nehemiah approached his task. For the first time Nehemiah was able to connect the sorrow felt from the report he received with the actual facts of the situation. One can only imagine how he felt at this time, understanding the implications the ruins had on the people of God.

Nehemiah could have looked at what was right for the moment in Judah. The exile was over, and the temple was built. Sacrifice and worship were returning, and the progress of returning to God was slow but on its way. There was much to be thankful for in Jerusalem, but sometimes as Nehemiah did, we must take a clear look at what is wrong, and what is still left to do to properly and completely move in a direction to serve God.

When we carefully note certain aspects of Nehemiah, we see he was not satisfied with the state of Jerusalem. He wasn't being critical of the leadership and where they currently were. However, he did not wish to stay stagnant, he wanted Jerusalem to continue moving forward, and all his actions led to this eventual action.

As Christians we want to best for our fellow saints and the larger community. God's plan for the world and His children is complete; we just have to get on board and all our goals for



-serving Him and becoming the best children we can be will come to pass. David Guzik a prominent writer and scholar reminds us:

**“When we look at the church, we love the church and are thankful for what God does here. But when we look honestly, we are probably not satisfied with the impact we have made on this community. We cannot say that it is enough or that there should not be far more. We think of the financial support and the outreach and the spread of the Word of God through the church, and yet know that it could be more and that the ministry could go out further and broader....**

**if someone took a tour of your life the same way Nehemiah took a tour of Jerusalem they might notice many broken down portions in the figurative walls of your life. Proverbs 25: 28 says:**

***Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls”.***

**Many lives are like a city with broken walls-- living with a constant sense of fear, poverty, and insecurity. We should not hide our eyes from these broken- down places; God wants to change them and make the first steps of change right away”.**

We are also pointed to something that Nehemiah knew. We should pay attention to this ourselves:

**“Wisdom and experience tells us that we are in warfare against a deadly and strong enemy and we must be cautious and careful. We should not assume that all the “people of God” are on our side, or alternatively on the side of God. There are always “tares” among the “wheat”. It behooves us to “test all the spirits to see whether or not they belong to God” and depend on the leading of the Holy Spirit”.**

Also, here is some more great advice:

**“You will often find it best not to commit your plans to others. If you want to serve God, go and do it, and then let other people find it out afterwards. You have no need to tell what you are going to do, and, I may add, there is no need for you retelling what you have done, for very frequently God withdraws himself when we boast of what is being done”. (Spurgeon).**

**Verse 16.** As the study continues, we can draw upon certain additional important ideals in the work of God, as illustrated by Nehemiah.

1. Good work is likely to be well done when it is first well considered.
2. It is the wisdom of those who are engaged in public business, as much as they may be, to **see with their eyes**, and not to proceed altogether upon the reports and representations of others, and to do this without noise, and if possible unobserved.
3. Those that would build up the church’s walls must first take notice of the ruins of those walls. Those that would know how to amend must enquire what is amiss, what needs reformation and what may serve as it is.

Nehemiah noted that neither the rulers, the Jews, the priests or the nobles knew of his plans and nightly activities, as he had not disclosed his plans. He anticipated opposition and kept things to himself. He wished to prevent any leakage of his plans to the enemy before the work began and planned to quickly finish the work and so deny them the time to mount a successfully appeal to the King of Persia. Also he might have wanted to formulate a plan before the Jews could marshal arguments as to why they could not rebuild the walls. When he did present his ideas, the people responded positively. This is an evidence of Nehemiah's wisdom as a leader.



## WORDS OF HOPE IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION AND A DISCOURAGED PEOPLE

**Verses 17-18.** Only after Nehemiah had personally examined the situation and determined the extent of the problem did he get others involved in the work.

He knew a large work force was needed and so he finally enlisted the co-operation of the community. Note how Nehemiah went about doing things in the right way. Note how the Spirit gave Nehemiah the right things to say to the people at this **right time**, this critical time.

As a great and experienced leader he understood the psychology of a people beaten down, frightened by the many powerful enemies that surrounded them, and frozen into inaction, only caring for their own survival, and not willing to stir up the situation. Remember the people of Israel who had returned from Babylon had now lived in the land for two generations and over this time had not yet begun to rebuild the walls. They had accepted the disgraceful condition of living in a city without walls, with the terrible signs of damage all around them.

Note how he motivated the people into action. He first took a long, honest look at everything, not only at what was pretty. He had kept his counsel to himself and did not wear his heart on his sleeve for everyone to see. He did not avoid looking at the weaknesses.

This situation did not affect his vision, and his faith, for he had committed everything to God.

He looked at the cost of rebuilding the wall, the time, the effort, and what was required of the leadership in Jerusalem.

Then in verse 17 he tells us he spoke to the leadership. He knew he could not do the job required by himself but needed their co-operation. The leaders were essential to accomplishing the task. He was depending on God to give him the right words.

Note that he did not represent himself as the great saviour from Babylon who had the confidence of the King of Persia himself. He did not start by saying he had soldiers from the King, letters of authority from the King, and lumber and the needed materials from the King of Babylon.

He started by identifying with them.

He first pointed to the obvious situation of desolation and waste, which the leaders could not deny seeing. He put himself in as one of them referring to *“the distress we are in”*. He owned the problem along with them, and so

1. He did not criticize them or
2. Blame them for their inaction and the pervading sense of despair.
3. Then he called them to action, offering them a partnership
4. Then he appealed to their sense of pride, their self-respect, their condition of shame and the necessity to remove their national disgrace.



Note that the emphasis was not primarily on the bricks and lumber and the garbage around Jerusalem. It was an appeal to the mind. If the mind was not in alignment with the plan of God, nothing spiritually acceptable to God will be done.

Putting the bricks and lumber and clearing the garbage would be the end result of them putting their mind in the right place.

Bringing the words at the end of the verse into its fullest meaning when Nehemiah says ***let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.*** I do not think he means only to outside nations, but clearly does not wish Jerusalem to be a reproach to God.

They might have remembered that the great king David had faced the same type of problem when Goliath challenged Israel, and he was outraged at the disgrace on Israel and was determined to act despite the apparent odds against success. He knew fully well that God did not like His nation to be disgraced by pagans. And so David acted. He then put the final piece into place. He told them the full story of how he fasted and prayed and how God led the way and 'opened' the heart of the King. God removed the political concerns of the King and this was proof that God was with them.

This therefore was really God's project not Nehemiah's project. They were really partnering with God, working with Him. This was a high calling. One writer advises:

***"If something has God's fingerprint on it, people will want to support it: if it has only man's fingerprint on it, they will rightly hesitate."***

Note that Nehemiah was speaking to people of God, not persons who wanted to follow the leading of self and the leading of Satan. These people realized God was on their side and they would overcome all obstacles.

Nehemiah stated then that the King of Persia had given him full authority and provided all the needed resources. If the king of Persia could hear the voice of God and partner with him, the leaders and people of Jerusalem could do no less than to partner with him in this great cause so dear to the hearts of all of them.

This was all they needed to hear. The argument was compelling, and the people reacted in unison:

*"Let us arise and build".*

So they strengthened each other and began to work together, now fully aware that God was with them and once they cooperated with each other success was guaranteed.



Notice what Nehemiah did not do to motivate the people. He did not do what the evil-minded people of the world do to achieve power and reach their goals.

1. He did not beg.
2. He did not make deals.
3. He did not get into high sounding arguments to manipulate the leaders.
4. He did not tell them lies but was straight up with them.
5. He did not offer rewards, incentives, or as one writer put it” **vacations out at the Sea of Galilee for the ones who got the job done.”**
6. As one writer sums it up: **“There was no external motivation- manipulation, guilt, pressure, carnal rewards which can work for a while, but are never a part of God’s vision for getting things done”.**

Note carefully that these people of God, with minds now directed by the Spirit did not

1. Deny the need for the walls because they had lived without the walls for a hundred years.
2. Did not see the project as too much work.
3. Were willing to pay the price and were not willing to leave the work up to Nehemiah alone.
4. Did not see the opposition that they knew would certainly come as too strong.

God rewarded Nehemiah’s vision, and his prayer, and God moved the hearts of the leaders and people of Israel. The work began.

**Verse 19.** Of course the Devil would not let them alone. The enemies came to mock and accuse them of plotting rebellion against the King of Persia.

The enemy came in two forms. Spiritual opposition to the work God wanted to be done came right on schedule.

Two men are first mentioned. The first man **“Sanballat”** was connected by marriage to the priestly families. (Nehemiah 13:28) There is some indications that he was Governor of Samaria. Note that the priests had corrupted themselves by intermarriage.

The other person mentioned is **“Tobiah”** clearly a Jew for he was a man with a Jewish name. The name was prominent in priestly families. The name meant **“Yahweh is good”**, but that did not stop him from opposing the work of God.

Actually it is felt by some scholars that both these men were Jews, brethren to the people of Jerusalem and Nehemiah. But they were betrayers. Opposition from brothers must have been difficult for Nehemiah and the leaders of Jerusalem and Israel. Remember that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places. Satan uses people to oppose the work of God.

But these were clearly spiritual enemies. The pattern continues, and the Apostle Paul even warned the Ephesian elders to expect opposition from inside their group.





Then we read that the leader among the Arabs, named “**Geshem**” an outsider associated with the renegade Jews, joined in the attack.

Note the technique these enemies of God used. They used scorn to make the builders of the wall feel stupid and foolish, thinking that their project was a foolish one and that only fools would do such a thing. One writer warns us:

**“Many are turned away from God’s will because they experience or fear scorn. Men who are not afraid of death have been manipulated because they do not want to be laughed at. It seems that sooner or later, God will allow every Christian to be tested at this point; as to whom they regard more, man or God.**

**We must never be more concerned about what people may say about us than what God requires of us.”**

Note also the ignorance displayed by these men. They accused Nehemiah and the Jews of rebelling against the King of Persia. In doing so they were pointing to the King as the highest authority in the land, downgrading the higher authority of God.

In addition, they pretended that they were not aware that the King had given permission for the work. They, like many of the enemies of God do not know what they are talking about.

The enemies of the God in the church as well as those outside the church do not really know or appreciate the level of their ignorance and the real fate that awaits them on the Day of Judgment.

**Verse 20.** But, knowing full well that God had put the King of Persia on their side, they responded confidently that the God of Heaven would prosper them and so they would *arise and build*.

These men of God were not sidetracked. They had confidence in God and therefore knew they would succeed. They were accordingly bold in their response to the enemies of God.

The people of God knew who they were and what God had sent them to do so as servants of God, they would *arise and build*.

Note that the opposition first mocked and ridiculed them, and then slandered them with charges of disloyalty to the King. When the mocking didn’t work then the enemy started to threaten.

The response of the Jews was appropriate. That is the way we should react to opposition. When we face opposition, we must view it as something God allows in order to strengthen us. We do not have to be frightened or intimidated. We must demonstrate our faith in God as they did, for we know that the God of Heaven will certainly prosper us. They declared as we must declare that those who do not believe in God or who themselves are not under the control of God, have no right to the place of God.



Nehemiah did not hesitate to speak the truth about these enemies of God. They might have been born as Israelites, and might even have citizenship in Jerusalem, but their heart and behaviour showed they have no right or belonging in the city of God. They did not belong to God but belonged to Satan.

## CONCLUSION

**Nehemiah was a nation builder.** We are here to work with God to build His nation, His kingdom. That is your task. You should never forget it.

We too must not be afraid to warn those inside as well as those outside the body of Christ that there are spiritual enemies of God and therefore, they have no right to be with God for they do not belong to Him.

It is most important to warn men not to deceive themselves.

It is most important to note that “rebuilding the walls” required good leadership and a good level of cooperation from all interested parties. Good leadership cannot do the work alone and others must be involved.

Often the work of God is neglected or not recognized, not from lack of willing hands but the lack of someone to lead. They all saw the wall broken down and in disrepair, yet none proposed the repair until Nehemiah made his proposal for restoration, then they were all in agreement. Wise, honest leadership under-girded by prayer is necessary to advance the work of God.

To rebuild the ‘walls’ leadership must motivate the people, stress faith in God and point out God’s approval that He wants His people to ‘repair and rebuild’. They must be reminded that God is in control of all circumstances and that is so even before they want to act, He is already putting things in place so that they will succeed. Clearly good strong leadership has a critical role to play in the work of God.

The way and the steps of recovery from ruin are now clear. It applies in the life of the nation and in our individual lives. There must be a willingness on our part to move away from compromise.

First, there must be a deep concern over the situation when people are obviously estranged from God. Grave concern will inevitably lead to deep sorrow and prayer. When we pray and fast patiently and not faint, God will respond and will provide the opportunity to change. When that is done, we must look at our situation honestly and begin to take the steps outlined in the commandments of God.

Wise planning begins with prayer. With confidence in God we can then concentrate on rebuilding the ‘walls’. God has promised to give success to all those in His Covenant. Opposition should only strengthen us. The victory has already been won and God’s will is



guaranteed. The work of God requires concern for others, concerned about the ruins and desolation among the people of God, courage and caution.

Note that Nehemiah was trustworthy and honest with the King even in the face of danger. He was not the kind of man asking for personal fortune or power. He wanted to do the work of God and he wanted to help his people. He was willing to go, and he was willing to wait on God to send him at the right time. He accepted his personal responsibility. He was willing to exercise his gifts at the right time.

One writer believes that we should never look at this lesson without applying what the Spirit is teaching us about ourselves. He states:

**“All through our lives He will make us the right person for the critical time to say what will suit His purposes. So here are some important questions to ask:**

**What is God doing right now?**

**What struggle are you going through now?**

**What study of the Bible should you be making now?**

**Are you learning how God thinks?**

**What lesson can you learn from the things that are going wrong?**

**Should you be learning something about when to speak and when not to speak?**

**Have you been in settings of counsel and personal renewal in which you figured out why you struggle the way you do, what it is about your interior life that makes you prone to certain problems; and have you let God minister to you there?**

**Could you explain to someone else someday what you’ve been through, how your suffering has led to something good, so you can comfort them with all the comfort that you’ve received?**

**If so, you will know what to say because the Lord has taught you lessons throughout a lifetime. The Spirit is doing the teaching and giving you the words for the moment. He gets the credit.”**

So let us learn from Nehemiah that God is guiding, teaching and keeping us in fellowship with Him. He is always moulding us and strengthening us in ways that we are not aware of.

Nehemiah was clearly a man devoted to prayer. Like Nehemiah we must begin and be sustained in the work of God by prayer.

