

Nehemiah – Volume 1

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Preface

The title given to this book, ‘Nehemiah – A Servant Leader’ indicates the kind of man Nehemiah was. He comes onto the Biblical scene at a very critical time in Israel’s history as you will read in Chapter 1. The combination of being a leader and a servant becomes evident as you read through the Biblical account. Nehemiah’s godly example was both a stimulus to the people to follow his leadership and his servant approach meant he had the Glory of God and the people’s best interests at heart at all times. What a lovely attitude to cultivate. Indeed, there is in Nehemiah a small reflection of what we find in all its fullness in the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Concerning him we read in Philippians 2 that he, though “...*being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, made himself nothing...he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.*” Our prayer is that the Lord

himself will help you to serve him in your day, as Nehemiah did in his.

I am grateful to Philip Grist for his valuable contribution to the series of *Sound Words* radio programmes on the book of Nehemiah which this book was written to accompany. As with all our *Sound Words* books you will gain the greatest profit from this volume if you have your Bible alongside you as you work through its pages so you can look at the many references it contains, and if you do so prayerfully, seeking God’s help to teach you from his Word.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the Bible Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries who served the Lord amongst the people of Israel who had returned to the land from their exile in Babylon/Persia. In fact Ezra returned in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I in 458 BC (Ezra 7:8) while Nehemiah returned in the king’s twentieth year 445 BC (Nehemiah 2:1). So there was a gap of some 13 years between these two men coming on the scene. Having said that their ministries did overlap as is clear from Nehemiah 8 when Ezra read the Law of God to the people (see also Nehemiah 12:26).

In this opening chapter we are going to consider Nehemiah's background under five headings.

1) Nehemiah's influence

We know from Nehemiah 1:11 that he had risen to the position of being the king's cupbearer, which was a position of great trust and influence. The cupbearer would act as a combination of prime minister and personal counsellor to the king, being also responsible for the king's security from assassination attacks. He would guard the king's sleeping quarters at night, or at least be responsible to ensure the king was secure. Also as cupbearer he would drink from the king's cup first to ensure it was safe for the king to drink and not poisoned! While this was a very risky job for anyone, the person entrusted with it had to be someone of complete integrity and trustworthiness otherwise he might poison the king's drink after he had tasted it.

As the book unfolds Nehemiah becomes the governor of Judah, so clearly he was a man of considerable natural ability and influence, something that was closely linked to his personal godliness and faithfulness to God and his people. Indeed the two words that characterise this dear man of God are 'prayer' and 'work' because he humbly depended on the Lord in everything he did as his prayers display, and he was diligent in his work and not in the least bit lazy. We also need to add that he was obedient,

courageous, an encourager to others in the Lord's work and confident in his God.

He served two terms as governor, the first for 12 years (see Nehemiah 5:14) after which he returned to Persia (see Nehemiah 13:6), then he returned for a second term in office (see Nehemiah 13:7).

2) Nehemiah's family

We know very little about his family background except that his father is named as Hacaliah in Nehemiah 1:1 and that his brother's name was Hanani. This brother had already travelled to Jerusalem and returned to Susa the place of the Persian King's winter palace by the time the book begins (Nehemiah 1:1-2). Most think that Nehemiah was probably born to Jewish parents while they were in exile, but the Scriptures do not give us any information on his birth. It was his brother who brought him the news that although the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt, the city itself was in ruins with much of its walls like rubble and its gates burned. This was going to have major significance for Nehemiah as we shall see.

3) Nehemiah's position in the purposes of God

We must comment on the sovereignty of God which is quite clear in that he arranged to have Nehemiah, who was going to be a crucial figure in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, in the position he was in. God had overruled all

that had happened to this man up to time of the start of this book so that he would be the right man in the right place, for the right reason and at the right time. Nehemiah would have a vital part to play in the protection of the Jews, and therefore a key role in the whole plan of salvation that God accomplished in Christ several centuries later. In the jigsaw of God's big picture of redemption Nehemiah played a crucial role so that the promises first made in Genesis 3:15 as God pronounced his judgement on the devil, that wicked serpent, and elaborated on in more detail to Abraham, for example in Genesis 22:18 would be fulfilled. The enemies of God's people sought many times to eradicate them off the face of the earth, but God's eternal plan that from this people Christ should be born was constantly protected as God preserved his people, often by just a small remnant.

The lesson from this is a very important one to learn. Whatever God decides he will do, no one can prevent him, however weak to human eyes and understanding his cause in the world may appear to be. The Psalmist gives us very helpful instruction about God's absolute sovereignty. We read in Psalm 115:3:

“Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.”

These similar words are found in Psalm 135:6:

“The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.”

Therefore what a comfort this is to the Lord's people, particularly during times of difficulty and opposition to the cause of God in the world. The Lord reigns. He always has and always will. Therefore how blessed to be his child.

4) Nehemiah's name

It is not insignificant to know that the name 'Nehemiah' means 'Yahweh comforts' or 'the Lord consoles his troubled people.' As we shall see as we work through this book, Nehemiah was the instrument in God's hands to bring great consolation from the Lord to the Jews living amongst the rubble of Jerusalem. It has been said that in every generation God equips his faithful people to spearhead his work on earth, and Nehemiah was one such faithful servant of God. He was the ideal worker for the Lord at that particular time.

5) Nehemiah's themes

The Bible commentator Raymond Brown has listed a number of key subjects that Nehemiah brings before us, the first is his doctrine of God. We shall discover throughout this book that not only was God very real to Nehemiah, but his understanding of who God was and what he was like, was thoroughly Scriptural. For Nehemiah, there was no one quite like the Lord, he was the only true and living God. He recognized that God's sovereignty not only governed

the circumstances of his own life, but that of the entire world, even those who refused to acknowledge him. The Lord was also utterly reliable, as he had always been, and consistently just: a solid rock for those who trusted in him. In addition he knew that God was pure and holy and sinless, whereas we are impure and sinful and need his grace to be holy just as he is holy. Nehemiah also rejoiced in the fact that God is compassionate and gracious to a degree we find in no one else. God is also majestic in his power and for him nothing is too hard. God is also wonderfully near to his dear children, and sees all they face and hears all they pray.

These truths about God are exactly what his troubled people needed to know and rely on and be comforted by in the enormous difficulties they were facing in Nehemiah's time. Other themes we will meet are the fact Nehemiah was soaked in Scripture which he loved as the Word of God and which governed his life. As we have mentioned he was also a man of much prayer and a wonderful leader.

May the Lord in his great mercy teach us the important lessons that the book of Nehemiah contains and may we be faithful servants of the Lord just as he was in his generation.

Chapter 2: Nehemiah Is Compelled To Pray - Nehemiah 1:1-11

The book of Nehemiah is very helpful in that it gives us dates at various points which enable us to place the events in their context. After introducing himself as the son of Hacaliah in v1, he tells us the date when this book begins.

“In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa...”

This is the twentieth year of the Persian king Artaxerxes I which is during November/December in 446 BC. (Susa was the winter palace of the king.) The date 446 BC helps us to see the setting of this book. Many years previously the land of Israel had been attacked by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and a considerable number of the people had been carried in exile to Babylon. Eventually, in 586 BC, the city of Jerusalem was laid to ruins and it had remained in that state ever since. The Babylonian kingdom came under Persian control and under the decree of Cyrus the Persian king some of the exiles were allowed to return to the land of Judah. The temple had been rebuilt, although much smaller than Solomon's. An attempt had also been made to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem but this had failed, being stopped by force (see Ezra 4 especially v23). Before getting into the details of the verses before us it is a help to remind ourselves of the final sentence of Nehemiah 1 which tells us that he was cupbearer to the king. In other words he was in a very important and influential position

and was a man who had the king's complete confidence. The providential significance of this will become clear as we proceed.

1) News From Jerusalem - Nehemiah 1:2-4

From time to time, those sent back to Jerusalem would return to the Persian king with reports on the situation. One of these was Nehemiah's brother Hanani (which is possibly a shortened form of Hananiah), and he had returned with some other men to Susa. Nehemiah, because of his evident love for God and his people, enquired of his brother and the others how the people were fairing and exactly what the situation in Jerusalem was like. Nehemiah tells us in verse 2,

"...I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem."

Clearly the cause of God was of great concern to this godly man, and note the order and emphasis he made: the people came before property, the Jewish remnant before the city! Something which those who spoke with Nehemiah also saw (v3):

"They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.'"

It was not the kind of news Nehemiah had expected to receive and it clearly distressed him considerably. The needs of the people were uppermost in his mind. The lack of a city wall would inevitably place the people at great risk from attacks, as well as hinder their economic development leaving them in some deprivation. It has to be said that this news stunned godly Nehemiah and his heart went out to the people living in Judah. His response is recorded in verse 4:

"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

What a lovely response this was, not least because it shows us his complete dependence on God for the situation and his deep concern for his people. In the New Testament Paul urged the believers in the Church at Rome to respond in a similar way in Romans 12:15:

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."

It was also something godly Job had also done himself, for we read in Job 30:25:

"Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?"

Supremely we see this in the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ so many times throughout his ministry. For example, in Matthew 9:36:

“But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.”

On another important occasion Jesus was brought to tears over the people living in the same Jerusalem that Nehemiah prayed for. We read in Luke 19:41:

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.”

Returning to Nehemiah we must note also that he was so concerned about the Lord’s people that he even went without food so he could have more time to pray for them because we are told he fasted. We have a glimpse of the heart of this gracious servant of God. He had a most loving and concerned response to the people’s suffering, and did not display a hard, cold or indifferent reaction to their needs. Also the honour of the Lord was involved because these were his people. This is all the more significant when we remember that Nehemiah had a secure job in the opulence of the king’s palace, living in a very prosperous society. Material prosperity has often blinded some to the needs of others, not so Nehemiah. This attitude should be something every Christian believer should display and cultivate in their hearts. The apostle

Paul tells us that this is one of the reasons why Christ died on the cross for us:

“And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (2 Corinthians 5:15)

Such living for Christ who died for us includes being greatly concerned for others and being willing to serve them. May the Lord grant us the grace to be like this and to be deeply concerned when we hear of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering, for whatever reason.

Nehemiah was compelled to pray about the whole situation, and he did so not just once, but

‘For some days...’

This was a burden that persisted as he sought the Lord’s help, guidance and intervention. What is evident is that as he prayed about the sad conditions in Jerusalem he became convinced that God wanted him to be involved in the solution. From Nehemiah 2:1 it seems that Nehemiah prayed for several months before coming to the conclusion that the Lord was calling him to intervene in the situation. So he came to realise that he needed to bring this issue before Artaxerxes, the Persian king, so he again is given to prayer, and what he prayed is recorded for us in the following verses.

2) Nehemiah's Prayer - Nehemiah 1:5-11

This is the first of several of Nehemiah's prayers recorded in this book. The words of Paul and James come to mind even though they wrote centuries after Nehemiah's time. Paul urged us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to:

"...pray continually..."

While James taught in James 4:16:

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

The hymn writer James Montgomery has expressed how vital prayer is for the Lord's people:

"Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air..."

Prayer is as essential to our spiritual lives as breathing is to our physical lives, and Nehemiah was a man who lived that out every day of his life. It is evident that he did not consider prayer some burdensome ritual he had to work through, instead, it was vital communion with God which was his delight and privilege. His prayer in Chapter 1 can be helpfully divided into three parts.

a. His awareness of God's greatness v1-7

Nehemiah's whole approach to God in prayer is instructive because it was humble, yet also confident because he knew he could appeal to the Lord for mercy. He came with a sense of the immense privilege that any believer has to be able to approach the Lord. This is how he began Nehemiah 1:5-7:

"Then I said: 'O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.'"

We note that he began with God. This might seem obvious, but so essential because it is his understanding of who the Lord is and what he has done and said he will do, that gives Nehemiah both the right approach and confidence that the Lord could intervene in this very difficult situation. Raymond Brown has written:

"Within moments he is exalting a God who is sovereign, mighty, holy, loving, faithful, vocal, attentive and merciful."

Nehemiah described God as the Lord, God of heaven. The Lord is not like the gods of man's making but the one exalted over all, higher than all, and the sovereign King of the Universe, much greater than any human king, especially Artaxerxes king of Persia. He is the great and awesome God who has power and resources beyond measure and able to deal with any problem that his people may have to face, however difficult such problems may be. He is the covenant keeping God whose love never fails his people who love him and keep his commandments. To know that the Lord is so gracious, and faithful, is of such importance in the light of the needs facing his people.

Nehemiah then pleaded with the Lord to listen to his prayer which he was praying day and night for the Lord's people the Israelites. He did not presume or demand that should God listen to him, but humbly pleaded with the Lord. There was in his heart a lovely balance of understanding that God was infinitely greater than he was, but also wonderfully gracious at the same time. The result of this was that he approached God with true reverence and also godly confidence. How we need to cultivate that same response.

Lesson: A true sense of God's greatness and majesty and holiness will always help us to approach him with due respect and love, and an awareness of his graciousness will strengthen our faith to seek his help.

Nehemiah did not stop there. Being confronted again with the majesty and holiness of God had made him aware that both he and the people of Israel had not lived as they should have. This therefore compelled him to confess the sins of the nation, including his own sins (v6b -7). Here was complete honesty as Nehemiah admitted the guilt of his own life in addition to that of the rest of the people. How blunt and direct he was when in v7 he declared:

“We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed your commandments, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.”

No doubt Nehemiah had in his mind the sad state of affairs among the Israelites that resulted in the exile from the land in the first place under Nebuchadnezzar, as well as their present failure. He included not only sins of commission, but also what they had not done which they should have done (sins of omission). Doing wrong and failing to do what is right are both sins which offend the Lord our God. He did not attempt to hide anything away, and though he was praying most earnestly there was nothing in him or the people that deserved God's merciful intervention. His inclusion of himself and his own sins reminds us that if we are to pray for the Lord to help others in distress, we should not be like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who was proud and self-righteous (see Luke 18:9-14). Such an attitude in us will render our petitions ineffective. Honest genuine confession of sin to God is essential if we are to enjoy his forgiveness. So Nehemiah confessed his sin to

the Lord, and acknowledged his own unworthiness and also that of the people.

This has been the experience of so many of the Lord's people as they have drawn near to God, they were made aware of the enormity of their sin. Two examples will demonstrate this; the first is from Isaiah and the second from Peter. Concerning Isaiah we read in Isaiah 6:5:

“‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’”

Then in Luke 5:8:

“When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’”

And Nehemiah responded in a similar way. Yet, he knew they could not do without God's intervention so he continues in prayer.

b. His awareness of the promise God had given v8-9

Next he did something which we find so often in the prayers recorded for us in the Bible: he reminded the Lord about what he had already promised. We find it for example in Daniel who reading Jeremiah saw that God had said the exile would last for 70 years, so as that time

approached he sought the Lord in prayer to accomplish what he had said. (See Daniel 9:2, his prayer follows in the rest of that chapter). One of the great reasons for knowing the promises of God is that they are intended to guide and direct our prayers. When we are praying in accordance with God's Word, we are praying in accordance with his will, and this is something he delights in. Therefore Nehemiah began by asking God to *‘Remember...’* It was not that God had forgotten his promises, but that Nehemiah wanted to ask the Lord to fulfil his Word. He takes us back to the time of Moses and something God had declared them. Nehemiah 1:8-9:

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’”

The Lord said this several times during the ministry of Moses (see Leviticus 26:27-45, Deuteronomy 30:1-5, 2 Chronicles 6:36-39). The nation had been unfaithful to God and he had intervened to discipline his people which resulted in the exile. If God had fulfilled the scattering of his people, then he is equally able to gather them back again, however far away they had been taken, even to the farthest horizon. So the present difficulties being faced in

Jerusalem were well within the Lord's ability to change and bring the needed relief.

There is a further lesson for us from this. When we are aware of our sinfulness, as Nehemiah had been, the devil would want to use that to paralyse us spiritually. He would suggest that God would never want to listen to our prayers because we are so unworthy, because prayer is something Satan hates. In a hymn about prayer which begins, *'What various hindrances we meet in coming to the mercy seat...'* William Cowper wrote this in another verse:

*"Restraining prayer, we cease to fight:
Prayer makes the Christian's armour bright:
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees."*

Nehemiah helps us so much, because what we need to do is to confess our sins, just as he had done, and to rest in God's mercy seen particularly in his promises and take them to God in prayer. As we are more conscious of our sinfulness we should become more prayerful.

c. His awareness God's relationship with his people in all their need v10-11

It is only now that Nehemiah brings the specific prayer request he had before the Lord. He declared in Nehemiah 1:10-11:

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.' I was cupbearer to the king."

He again reminded the Lord of the special relationship he had with his children. Though they were in distress back in Jerusalem they were still the Lord's people, his servants. In addition, these people were those he had redeemed in such a glorious way. Nehemiah went back to the time of the exodus from Egypt when the Lord rescued them from the bondage and slavery they were in. It was a mighty deliverance, as God overthrew the Egyptians and brought his people out and into the Promised Land. He was simply reminding the Lord that these people were uniquely and specially his own people. God had not dealt with any other nation like he had dealt with Israel. There was this very special bond between the Lord and them, all because of God's grace, and they were still his people. And that same bond exists today between the Lord and his people, the spiritual Israel, the company of Christian believers in the world who love and follow his dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been pointed out that Nehemiah was doing the same thing Moses himself did as he prayed for the Israelites after their sin with the golden calf when he prayed in Deuteronomy 9:29:

“But they are your people, your inheritance that you brought out by your great power and outstretched arm.”

In Nehemiah’s time, as in the days of Moses, the real danger was that the Lord’s people would be exterminated, but the whole plan of salvation for sinners was bound up in their survival. The Lord Jesus Christ was to come from this people so their protection and preservation by God was crucial and their enemies needed to be overcome.

It was after all this that Nehemiah brought his own personal request to God to graciously hear his petition in v11:

“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants...”

Nehemiah continued to show great humility in the presence of God and the fact that he used the term ‘servants’ in the plural indicates there was a new submission to the Lord in the people’s hearts. As he stated, they:

‘delight in revering your name...’

Therefore we see that reminding God of his choice of his people, of the mighty redemption he had accomplished for them, and their submission to him, then pleading for his help was wonderfully effective. Now in the last sentence of the prayer he asks:

‘Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.’

That is, in the presence of the ungodly king Artaxerxes for whom he was the cupbearer. Nehemiah had come to appreciate God was calling him to go to Jerusalem to help resolve the difficulties, but he was not a free agent because he was in the service of the Persian monarch. But Nehemiah was confident that God could move the heart of Artaxerxes to let him travel to Jerusalem, and provide him with all that was necessary for what lay ahead. Nehemiah had prayed for his suffering brethren from November/December 446BC to March/April 445 BC (compare 1:1 with 2:1). He persisted for four months until the opportunity to speak to the king arrived. That is truly faithful praying, committed praying and persevering praying.

Lessons: This whole passage challenges us to pray with similar determination and faithfulness and compassion for our fellow Christian brothers and sisters, as well as praying for ourselves. It also shows us that we need to have the willingness to serve the Lord in whatever he might ask us to do, especially in helping others in great need. Remember the instruction of Paul to the Galatian believers in Galatians 6:10:

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

Chapter 3: Nehemiah Saw His Prayer Answered - Nehemiah 2:1-10

In opening chapter of Nehemiah we see how this godly servant of the Lord spent considerable time praying to God for the Lord's people in the city of Jerusalem which was lying in ruins. We noted he had started to pray in November/December of the year 446 BC (see Nehemiah 1:1). The opening verse of chapter 2 gives us another date indicating that he had had been praying until March/April the following year. This was between 4 and 5 months of careful, diligent, persistent intercession for the Lord to intervene on behalf of his troubled people. What became crystal clear to Nehemiah over this period of time was that the Lord wanted to use him as part of the answer to his prayers. What is particularly interesting is that there is absolutely no record of him refusing to do this but rather the very opposite, willing and humble obedience. But this was only one part of the answer for there were other things that were also needed if Nehemiah was going to be allowed to fulfil this commission. To start with he would need the permission of the king of Persia, Artaxerxes, to leave his highly valued and trusted position as the king's cup bearer. It would also mean he would have to travel a considerable distance to get to Jerusalem and would need some form of official protection so he could make the journey safely. Then, when he arrived at Jerusalem he would need to obtain the large quantities of building material needed to complete the renovation of the city walls and gates. When we consider that Artaxerxes was an

ungodly king, to actually ask him for an extended leave of absence was an extremely risky business, but there was no alternative. Nehemiah was going to have to approach him, something that took considerable courage, and do so in the right way which needed much wisdom. Therefore it was necessary for the Lord to give him that opportunity and for which he had prayed much (see Nehemiah 1:11). It is how this came about and what its result was that we are going to consider as we look in Nehemiah chapter 2:1-10.

1) The Lord Opened The Door v1-5

There is an important item of background information we need to have before us. Those who served the king were not to allow their personal difficulties and sorrows to interfere with their service before him. They were to look happy regardless of their circumstances. However, as the burden to do something for the people back in Jerusalem grew heavier, Nehemiah could no longer hide his feelings, and as the king looked at him he could see Nehemiah was troubled. It is described in Nehemiah 2:1-2:

“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, ‘Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’ I was very much afraid...”

Note that Nehemiah said he had never been sad in the king's presence prior to this day, reinforcing what we have noted about the conduct expected when with the king. And the king, who clearly valued Nehemiah very much, not only noticed this sadness but came directly to the point and asked Nehemiah why he was like this. Even though king Artaxerxes was not a child of God, he nonetheless seemed to have had at least some measure of discernment and thoughtfulness, at least towards Nehemiah, because he concluded that this sadness was a matter of the heart. Sometimes even the hardest of individuals can display a tender side to their characters. It is obvious that he was concerned that his trusted friend was in distress. But equally we have an indication of the severity of a king's edicts because immediately when he was asked, Nehemiah became afraid. The king could not only refuse to help him but could have quite as easily demanded his execution!

This reference to being afraid reminds us that these ancient servants of God were no different from us in their frailty and weakness. Remember what James wrote in James 5:17 concerning Elijah that he:

“was a man just like us.”

And what is so encouraging is that if the Lord enabled and helped them in their trials and challenges, he is also able to help us in ours. It is also worth reminding ourselves of something similar which Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:27:

“...God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...”

The Lord can use whoever he wants and whatever their circumstances may be, when he calls them to serve him, their fears and anxieties are not too big for him to overcome.

Returning to Nehemiah, even though he was very much afraid he knew he had to answer the king, and as he did so he abided by the customary way of addressing those in high position at that time, as well as telling the king the cause of his sadness. We read in Nehemiah 2:3:

“I said to the king, ‘May the king live for ever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’”

It was a critical time for Nehemiah and the whole future of the work of the Lord depended on the right outcome because the preservation of his people was essential as the Messiah had been promised to come from them. It is quite easy for us to see why he was very afraid, but we must also remember the hearts of kings are in the Lord's hand, even ungodly kings! Proverbs 21:1 makes this abundantly clear:

“The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”

Responding to Nehemiah's reply King Artaxerxes asks another question in Nehemiah 2:4a:

“The king said to me, ‘What is it you want?’”

What an amazing thing for him to say! There was no dismissing the situation as an irrelevance because it was for a tiny part of his empire many miles away from them. There was no strong rebuke for Nehemiah because of his sadness in the king's presence. It was exactly what was needed because the Lord was at work answering prayer. And Nehemiah responded very quickly in two ways in Nehemiah 2:4. First he prayed:

“Then I prayed to the God of heaven...”

Secondly he answered:

“If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so I can rebuild it.”

a. Nehemiah's prayer

The reference to him praying and then immediately answering the king shows us this was what has been called ‘an arrow prayer’ fired to God in heaven. It was something Nehemiah prayed in the quietness of his heart and mind, and was of necessity short because this was a real emergency. We see in Nehemiah the vast difference that

exists between a true child of God and one who is not. Let me explain. I remember my father tell me of an ordeal he had while serving in the navy during a time of war. Among the crew were many men who claimed to be atheists and who made fun of the few who were genuine Christian believers. However, when their ship came under enemy attack and there was the fear of imminent death, these atheists were praying to the God they claimed they did not believe in! But once the danger was passed these men returned to their unbelief and mockery of those who truly loved God, and God was forgotten. Sadly, this is so typical of unbelievers who only use God when they want, almost as an insurance policy, but consistent prayer is something they never engage in. Nehemiah was so different from this. In this book we have already noted that he was a man of much prayer. It was his daily experience to have prolonged times of communion with God. He both loved and depended on God very much, so this emergency prayer was part of a life devoted to seeking God, which shows that he was a genuine child of God. Remember what we read in James 5:16:

“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

Clearly Nehemiah was trusting in the Lord. We also need to note his description of God as ‘*the God of heaven*’ because it is as we grasp this truth that our fears will subside and peace be granted. One Bible commentator, Dr Raymond Brown, has said that Nehemiah's urgent prayer

teaches us a number of things about this vital subject, as follows:

1. The necessity of prayer – we dare not do without it and in Nehemiah’s case the lives of thousands depended on it.
2. The immediacy of prayer – we can pray anywhere and don’t have to go to special places.
3. The naturalness of prayer – how wise and sensible and rational it is to pray.
4. The intimacy of prayer – although God is the God of heaven, he is also close to each believer.
5. The confidence of prayer – he was coming to the One with limitless resources.
6. The effectiveness of prayer – immediately he was given the right words to answer the king.

Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States of America, once said: *“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 all around me seemed insufficient for the day.”*

b. Nehemiah’s request

It is important to note the polite and courteous way Nehemiah spoke to the king *‘If it pleases the king...’* This also shows us his considerable courage and boldness in the presence of Artaxerxes as he asked permission to rebuild Jerusalem. We need to note that when he needed courage

to overcome his fears, the Lord granted it to him and not before.

We need to remember that Jerusalem had suffered two onslaughts. The first was the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Then second, was the opposition to the rebuilding of the city when the first exiles returned there, which we find detailed in Ezra 4:7-23 and something which this same king had sanctioned. So Nehemiah was asking the King to do a u-turn, and therefore this was not something one could take for granted. In his wisdom he appealed to the Persian respect for the dead by referring to the desecrated graves of his fathers, something that would have struck a chord in the king’s heart. Still, everything laid in the balance and the question ‘Would the king allow him to go to Jerusalem?’ was humanly speaking, still uncertain. The king could still refuse Nehemiah’s request. However, we are not looking at this from a human perspective and neither was Nehemiah. This was the Lord’s work, the Jewish remnant (Nehemiah 1:2) were God’s people and Jerusalem was the city where his temple was situated. The Lord was clearly opening the door for Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem.

2) Nehemiah Boldness v6-9

Because Nehemiah had truly sought the face of God over the issue, the Lord graciously gave him a positive answer. We read in Nehemiah 2:6:

“Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.”

Again, this was quite an amazing response from the king and his wife. Who would have thought they would want to further the work of God, because this was what they were doing even though they were almost certainly unaware of it? The sovereignty of God is such a wonderful truth and his hand at work in these events is clearly seen. Let us never forget that though earthly kings sit on their earthly thrones, the Lord God sits enthroned over the whole Universe because he is the Most High God. He is the one who is really in control. We also see that prayer had not made Nehemiah lazy for he is very much at work, seeking to do all he could to further the work of God. Nehemiah obviously told the king how much time he thought he would need, but we do not have those details. We can see from Nehemiah 5:14 that he actually stayed as governor in the land of Judah for twelve years before returning to Artaxerxes to report on the situation, and then went back for a second term in Nehemiah 13:6-7. It is likely that Nehemiah probably told the king that it would have taken a much shorter length of time, but that the king extended his stay by appointing him the governor of Judah.

Having secured the king’s permission Nehemiah was not slow in asking for the further help he knew he would need. There were two matters that he knew he required if this

whole enterprise was going to be successful. First, he needed the king to grant him a safe passage. Travel in the ancient world was often perilous, so Nehemiah placed this need before the king in Nehemiah 2:7:

“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?’”

Probably these letters would also have secured his need of food and water while on this lengthy journey. Second, when he arrived in Jerusalem he would need materials to do the rebuilding work, so he courageously placed this need before the king as well in Nehemiah 2:8:

“And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, 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?”

Again this was quite remarkable because he was in effect asking the king to fund this rebuilding work by providing all that was required. This shows Nehemiah’s wisdom as he understood this work would require considerable resources. His thoroughness is something we will see throughout these studies. Then Nehemiah tells us how the Lord even met these needs in Nehemiah 2:8:

“And because of the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.”

Without hesitation Nehemiah attributed the whole success of this venture to the Lord. He did not even say, ‘Because I prayed so hard that is why I gained this success.’ He acknowledged the entire enterprise was due to the Lord’s gracious goodness to him. What a humble man he was as he walked each day with the Lord. How we need to do so similarly when the Lord is merciful to us, especially when we enjoy some success or blessing in our work. We must be quick to give all the praise to the Lord and not give our proud hearts an excuse to take any of the glory to ourselves. Then Nehemiah adds an interesting detail in Nehemiah 2:9:

“So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.”

His protection was secured at the expense of the Persian empire! God’s sovereign overruling in all these affairs is such an encouragement to those who trust in him, because it is the same Lord who is overruling our lives too. And what an encouragement also not to be anxious and filled with worry as we are so prone to do. When such anxieties come into our lives we need to ask the Lord to help us to fix our eyes on him and to rest in the fact that God is for us and knows every detail of our circumstances. God’s

sovereign care of his people has been wonderfully summed up by Paul in Romans 8:28:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

That verse does not say that all things are good, but that in all things God works for the good of his children. The Lord our God uses even the things we find difficult and painful and troublesome, to work out ultimately for the good of each of his children. Knowing that God is sovereign in all things makes prayer to God such a rich blessing. There is no one greater or better that we can ever come to. And for Nehemiah this was his daily experience as he committed everything to the Lord in prayer.

3) Opposition Begins v10

As we close this particular study of Nehemiah we discover that even though the Lord did open the door for Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem, and moved in the King’s heart so that he helped Nehemiah, that did not mean that this work would go ahead without any further problems. We need to remember that primarily this was a spiritual work, even though it involved much practical labour. Remember that whenever the Lord is at work the enemy of souls seeks to hinder and stop the work going forwards. In Ephesians 6 Paul teaches that we are involved in a spiritual war against the powers of darkness. We have an enemy, the devil, who

would like to tear us apart and who will try any means possible to hinder the work of God. We know that ultimately he is doomed to failure, but that does not stop him doing all he can to oppose the Lord's work, and so often he uses people as his instruments to accomplish this. We discover that as soon as Nehemiah reached Jerusalem he faced opposition from two individuals who would make trouble for him for some time to come. They are identified in Nehemiah 2:10:

“When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.”

Sanballat was probably the governor of Samaria (Nehemiah 4:1-2) and Tobiah probably was the governor of Trans-Jordan, and these two men were not at all happy. They were probably motivated by political reasons feeling their authority was under threat by Nehemiah's presence and the work he came to accomplish. We shall see how this worked out as we proceed further through this book, but reference to this opposition so early on reminds us not to be surprised when we face similar difficulties as we seek to serve the Lord. This should not discourage us, but instead have the opposite effect of encouraging us. The devil will not raise up opposition if the Lord is not at work, so his opposition is an indication the Lord is with us and using us. In the next chapter we will see how Nehemiah proceeded.

Chapter 4: Nehemiah Began The Rebuilding Process - Nehemiah 2:11-20

Jesus once taught a large crowd of people to count the cost of being his disciple. He told them that he was to have first place in their lives over every other person or relationship, and that each one must be prepared to carry his cross and follow him. To help grasp the lesson he presented them with an illustration that they could all easily understand. We read what he said in Luke 14:28:

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?”

The wisdom of such a course of action for a builder is easy to appreciate. In applying this spiritually such an approach is wise not only when an individual considers becoming a disciple of Jesus, but also when we consider doing anything in the Lord's service. In many ways it was like this for Nehemiah. You will recall that after several months of prayer, Nehemiah came to the conclusion that the Lord wanted him to head up the rebuilding work in Jerusalem. We saw in the previous chapter how the Lord wonderfully answered his prayers because the ungodly Persian king Artaxerxes positively encouraged the journey to Jerusalem and gave Nehemiah his help. We now consider Nehemiah 2:11-20. Nehemiah had arrived in Jerusalem after his long journey and it was three days later that the narrative takes up events (v11). These three days

were probably rest days after his long journey because we find that Ezra did a similar thing as Ezra 8:32 states specifically that they rested for that period. It has been estimated the journey from Susa to Jerusalem would have taken several months, therefore the need to be refreshed after such an arduous period was so wise as he needed to be at his best for what lay ahead.

An aside from Nehemiah, it is worth pointing out that there are times when it is legitimate to take a period of rest. You will recall this was something which Jesus saw as necessary for himself and the disciples. We are told in Mark 6:31:

“Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’”

Also in another example after the death of John the Baptist, Jesus again withdrew privately by boat to a solitary place (see Matthew 14:13). Such times help us to recharge our batteries and give more time for prayer. This is not an excuse for laziness, but a wise approach to be ready for further work in the Lord’s service and to seek his help.

1) Nehemiah Surveyed The Situation v11-16

Like the wise builder in the illustration Jesus gave which was mentioned above, Nehemiah recognized he needed to

see the full extent of the situation. This would enable him to work out what needed to be done, what materials would be required, how many people would be involved, and where they were to work for the task to be completed. Without telling anyone why he had come to Jerusalem he discreetly set out to discern what work was required under the cover of darkness. The details are in Nehemiah 2:12:

“I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.”

This would have been done very quietly because although he took several other men with him he was the only one who rode on a donkey or a mule. Again we see his wisdom in the way he went about it. First, it seems he was very aware that there would be opposition to the work and he did not want to give these enemies any hint of what was going to happen. With such knowledge his opponents could have engendered fear amongst the Jews before the work had even began. Second, he needed to assess if the work could be done by those in Jerusalem and the surrounding district, so that when he did tell them why he had come he could encourage them to do what was required. It has to be said that his survey was very thorough as Nehemiah 2:12-15 tells us:

“I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for

Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night I went out through the Valley Gate towards the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on towards the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate."

The things he discovered must have distressed him even more as he saw the state of the devastation that had befallen the city. Gates burnt to cinders and rubble from the walls was everywhere to be found, and in one place it was so bad that it was impossible to get past (v14). This necessitated travelling up the length of the Kidron Valley to see the state of the walls from below. Again we are told that Nehemiah had not informed anyone about his plans (Nehemiah 2:16):

"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 nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work."

The fact that there is a repetition of his discreet approach indicates he had very strong reasons for proceeding in this way. There were adversaries from whom his plans were to be hidden, and a people who would need to be carefully led

to engage in this work, so he needed time to consider everything required.

2) Nehemiah Proposed The Work v16-18

Having worked out all that was going to be required after his survey he called the people of God together. They are described in v16 as:

"the Jews...the priests...nobles..officials...any others who would be doing the work."

No one was left out, all were included. What wisdom he displayed in this simple fact. He wanted all of God's people to be involved in God's work. Their social position was neither to be used to accuse him of favouritism, nor of leaving others out. This was something in which the entire company of the Lord's children were to be included. We shall see this again later, but it is worth noting at this point that this is a lovely illustration of how the New Testament describes the Church of Christ. Using the illustration of the parts of the body we are taught that each member is valuable and has a share in the work of extending the kingdom of God. Romans 12:5 instructs us:

"So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another..."

Returning to Nehemiah, how the work is presented to the people is quite instructive. We discover this in Nehemiah 2:17-18a:

“Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.’ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.”

We see a number of lessons here. He includes himself with them in stating the difficulty they were in: *“You see the trouble we are in...”* He identifies himself with the people and he shared the burden of their circumstances. This is something we have seen in Nehemiah already in his prayer to God in Chapter 1. Then he expressed his solidarity with the whole nation of Israel by referring to *‘the sins we Israelites, including my father’s house...’* He thoroughly involved himself and identified with the rest of the people, such was his caring approach. He shared with them the difficulties, and did not say that the trouble was theirs and nothing to do with him. He was not like the Levite and the priest in Jesus’ parable about the man who had fallen among robbers who left him half dead and who passed the injured man by (see Luke 20:25ff). They did not want to get involved in the wounded man’s difficulties, but that was not the case with Nehemiah for their burden was his burden. He then carefully described what their shared trouble was, *‘Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates burned*

with fire.’ This was something these discouraged people had lived with for a long time and which left them so vulnerable to attack and exploitation by their adversaries. Then, including himself again, he called the people to the rebuilding work, *‘Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.’* He was proposing the correct solution to the issue, but stated from the start that he himself would be involved in the rebuilding work with them because he said, *‘...let us...’* He then gives them an encouraging motive, *‘and we will no longer be in disgrace.’* Again he shares the disgrace with them, and stimulates them to want to see their situation changed. This disgrace is probably a direct reference to the attitude Jerusalem’s condition brought forth from the ungodly surrounding nations and peoples. This was not simply a physical matter, but it had profound spiritual implications because the honour and glory of God was bound up with these people, and others viewed the situation with scorn. But Nehemiah did not wallow in self-pity neither was he overcome by the fact that these conditions prevailed in Jerusalem for around 100 years! Instead, he gave the people something designed to inspire confidence. He referred to his own experience of the Lord’s help thus far, *‘I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.’* He gave them the greatest encouragement possible. The Lord in his great grace and sovereign mercy had wonderfully overruled in Nehemiah’s life and his presence in Jerusalem that day was a wonderful evidence of the Lord’s blessing. Nehemiah, although outlining the enormity of the work to be done, focusses their attention

not so much on the task, rather on the One for whom they would build. However weak and frail they may have considered themselves to be, the Lord was greater, infinitely so. He was more than sufficient to overcome every obstacle, to provide each one with strength and to protect them from any who would attempt to oppose their work. He directed their attention to God himself. So we can see what a wise and helpful man Nehemiah was and what a real source of help for the Lord's people he was too. We might even call him the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament Barnabas who was so-called because he was a Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36).

The people responded in a wonderful way (v18):

“They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work.”

There was real enthusiasm to engage in this service for the Lord and in dependence on him. We need to note also that it was described as ‘...*this good work*...’ The Lord's work is always a good work and the privilege of serving him is something we should always value highly. This is a helpful reminder that believers should never engage in a bad or sinful work. The eager response of the people was a further indication that the Lord's gracious hand was still helping Nehemiah and the rest of the people were going to share in that blessing.

3) Nehemiah Resists Opposition v19-20

Up to now all the people seemed favourable and ready to move forward, but as soon as the work was made known it was opposed. Sanballat and Tobiah, whom we met back in verse 10 and who were disturbed when they heard someone had come to promote the wellbeing of God's people, gave public expression to this opposition. They were joined by a third man named Geshem the Arab. It seems he governed the large area of north-east Egypt and northern Arabia, with its lucrative spice trade and he may well have felt this was all under threat hence his opposition. Their opposition is described in Nehemiah 2:19:

“But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. ‘What is this you are doing? they asked. ‘Are you rebelling against the king?’”

It was a two pronged attack. First, they used scorn and contempt, deriding and making fun of the Jews, clearly designed to undermine their morale. One of the weaknesses of our human nature is that we can so easily be discouraged from a course of action simply by being laughed at and embarrassed by others, and these evil men exploited that. Remember, the devil is a master at trying to demoralize those in the Lord's business, so we need to recognise this when he attacks us. Remember that Jesus also spoke about this kind of attack in Matthew 5:11-12:

*“Blessed are you when **they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.** Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

The tongue can be a vicious weapon at times. Second, they used false accusation by questioning their obedience to King Artaxerxes. We know that years earlier the king did stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem, as we have noted - see Ezra 4:12-16, but that was not the case now. Instead, not only had he consented to the rebuilding work, but had also aided Nehemiah and given him permission to use timber from the king's forest. Nehemiah's reply to all this in verse 20 was very instructive:

“I answered them by saying, ‘The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.’”

He stood his ground resolutely and did not concede the smallest amount to these men. And significantly, he did not say, ‘The king has given us permission’ which would have been correct, but instead that they were relying on ‘The God of heaven...’ In fact, he was assured that the Lord who had called him, and helped him and the people this far would not abandon them but give them success in the work. It was a marvellous expression of his complete trust in and dependence on the Lord, the Most High God,

the God of heaven. Nehemiah remained a man of faith, and his faith was not shaken at all! He had the complete assurance that having been brought this far by the Lord, he was not going to let this enterprise fail. He therefore confidently told these mere men that he and the Jews were the servants of the God of heaven and they would commence the rebuilding work. He was resolute, because God had entrusted this work into his hands and he was not going to back down simply because these men thought otherwise. When times of adversity arise, knowing that God is in a work is a tremendous source of strength as we engage in that work. Further, Nehemiah told these opponents that they would have no share in this work, nor did they have any legal right or claim on the city. This shows the strength of his discretion for had such opponents been given a part in the work they could have caused untold damage. The wisdom of this decision will become clearer as we work through this book. This was God's work for God's people, and this demanded they were separate from the ungodly peoples of the land. These opponents were routed and dismissed so the work could get underway. How important it is not to get diverted from doing the Lord's work. In his commentary on Nehemiah, Stan Evers makes a very helpful application:

“We too, like Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem, are called to build. But we are not erecting a physical building, but the church, ‘the city of God’ (Psalm 46:4; Hebrews 12:22-24). We do not build with bricks and cement, but with the tools of fervent prayer, powerful

preaching and zealous personal witnessing to those who do not know the Saviour. We shall encounter opposition, but the ‘God of heaven’ who gave success to Nehemiah is our God!”

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Chapter 5: Labourers Together With God - Nehemiah 3:1-32

One day the Christians in the ancient city of Corinth received a letter which contained these words, “*We are labourers together with God,*” or “*We are God’s fellow-workers.*” In those words is the whole idea of a group of people working together while relying completely on God for strength and wisdom and guidance to complete the task in hand. This is exactly what we discover in Nehemiah chapter 3. This chapter contains the details of all those who helped in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah’s leadership, and what part they shared in that work. In our previous chapter we saw how Nehemiah had challenged them about the sorry state the city walls and the people eagerly volunteered to commence the work, so Chapter 3 describes what they did. Nehemiah declared to those who were opposed to the Lord’s people doing this work that:

“The God of heaven will give us success.”

So relying on the Lord the people engaged in the work. In this portion of the Bible there are details of their names, sometimes their backgrounds, the part of the city walls or gates or towers they repaired, and how they went about the work. A superficial reading of the chapter might make us wonder why such insignificant details were included by Nehemiah, and indeed some Bible commentators pass over this chapter with little comment. But we must always remember that all of the Bible writers were guided by the Holy Spirit. This means every part of the Bible is important and beneficial, and in fact when we give time to examine these details we discover there are a considerable number of lessons for us to learn. This is an Old Testament example of what the believers in Corinth read in Paul’s letter mentioned above – they were God’s fellow-workers. In our study of Nehemiah 3 we will consider two main areas.

1) Nehemiah’s Wisdom

One of the noticeable things that this chapter illustrates is the wisdom which Nehemiah was endowed with. Having spent several days prior to commencing the work surveying the needs of Jerusalem, he acted with considerable skill in managing the work.

a. Nehemiah knew all those involved in the work

This is seen in the fact that he recorded them by name. In addition, his summary of the work each person did was his

personal commendation of each one. This meant that he valued and appreciated each worker, which in turn must have encouraged them. In many areas of life people are not valued as individuals, they are merely numbers on a data base, which is very impersonal. Nehemiah was different because he knew his workers and valued each one. How important in the work of building the Church of God that every member involved should be valued.

Pastors should know their flock and show a personal interest in each one, just as Jesus did during his ministry. This is not just for those in leadership positions in the Church of Christ, but each believer should genuinely value and appreciate every other believer in the Church and have a genuine interest in their welfare. How important it is to express appreciation to those who have done something in the life of the Church, however insignificant it might seem to be.

b. Those who lived in Jerusalem were appointed to work near their homes

We are told in v10 that Jedaiah made repairs opposite his house, in v23 Benjamin and Hasshib made repairs in front of their house, and Azariah made repairs beside his house. The same applied to some of the priests who made repairs in front of their own homes (v28), and there were others including Meshullam (v30). This had a considerable advantage because it meant these people did not have to spend time commuting to another part of the city. This strategy contained a number of benefits.

- i. Time and energy was not wasted by having to go elsewhere to work, rather it increased the efficiency of the work to be done as more time could be given to the tasks in hand.
- ii. It meant they could be easily fed and supported by the family and so to concentrate on the work without the distraction of have to leave the work for these needs to be met.
- iii. It also meant that if enemies attacked near their families, the builders were available to defend their loved ones and their work, and not have to worry about security and safety because they were not near their home – a very practical and necessary provision

c. Nehemiah ensured each part of the city wall was covered

Numerous times throughout the chapter we are told that each worker adjoined his neighbour or was next to him. Indeed, words such as ‘next’ ‘to’ or ‘beyond’ are found throughout the chapter. In v2 the men from Jericho built the section adjoining to the wall repaired by the priests. In v4 Meremoth repaired the next section to where the sons of Hassenaah worked, and next to him Meshullam worked. This continues throughout the chapter, ensuring that the whole of the work around the entire city was covered and no part of the wall was neglected. Clearly, Nehemiah stimulated the whole population to serve the Lord and work hard to accomplish the building of the city walls.

This was all the more remarkable when we consider that there were no wages for doing this work. It was done for the Lord and his honour, it was this which motivated the people to labour so diligently.

What a challenge to us in the Church of Christ today to stimulate every believer to diligent and sacrificial service for Christ. The Lord Jesus saved us so that we may serve him, therefore if any are not doing so, they are failing the Lord who bled and died for them at Calvary. Sadly, new believers are sometimes discouraged from doing tasks in the Church because older and more mature believers (who ought to know better) only criticise them or say they cannot do it as well as they can. Nehemiah was not proud or arrogant like that even though he was the governor. He arranged for all the people to work alongside each other, thus enabling them to learn from and support each other in this great task for the Lord.

We should also add that by deploying people around the entire city perimeter Nehemiah left no part of the work undone or unprotected. He was a very wise servant of the Lord and a man with considerable leadership qualities. It is also worth noting how humble a man he was, because he does not mention himself and the part of the work he engaged in at all. He gave the honour to everyone else. The New Testament puts it like this in Philippians 2:3:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”

2) The Variety Of People Who Worked

No one can read Nehemiah 3 and fail to notice the amazing variety of people who were involved in the reconstruction work. While they were all Jews, and therefore belonged to the people of God, their own backgrounds varied considerably. There were priests (v1, 22 & 28), goldsmiths (v8 & v31-32), perfume makers (v8), a ruler of a half district of Jerusalem (v9 & v12) and rulers from other places (v14-18), Levites (v17), and merchants (v32). There was a wide mix of people, but all of them were eager to engage in this work for the Lord. Undoubtedly some would have possessed some building skills, but those who did not still gave of their best and were willing to learn and to help. How easy it could have been for the priests to have excused themselves saying their work was more important than building, or that it would have made them unclean. Yet these were at the top of the list that Nehemiah made (v1) and the high priest was first of all, as they repaired the Sheep Gate. What a godly example set by these spiritual leaders of the people. They then dedicated the gates in what some think was a ceremony like the laying of the foundation stone of a new building, but in this case, the gates were dedicated to the Lord. Once again we see a direct challenge to those with positions of leadership in the Church today, ie how they should set a good example for all other believers to follow. Thankfully the priests in Jerusalem were good examples and laboured as hard as everyone else.

There were three groups of people we have not mentioned in detail so far and which are worth highlighting.

i. Some women are mentioned

We read in Nehemiah 3:12 of:

*“Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section **with the help of his daughters.**”*

We need to remember that women were rarely mentioned in Near Eastern culture, so whenever the Bible mentions them it indicates something of considerable importance. These young women, perhaps some were just children, were willing to do work that was normally the prerogative of men! Pastor and Bible commentator Stan Evers writes this about these daughters:

“Christian women should be encouraged to do more than make cups of tea at Church anniversaries! Godly ladies played a vital part in the life of the New Testament Church, women who were well known for ‘helping those in trouble’ and who devoted themselves ‘to all kinds of good deeds...Do the Churches to which we belong stimulate the ladies to develop spiritual ministries?’ (See 1 Tim 5:10; Titus 2:3-5; Rom 16:1-1 & 12)

ii. Men from other cities in Israel are mentioned

There were workers from Jericho (v1), Tekoa (v5 & v27), men from Gibeon and Mizpah (v7), the residents of Zanoah (v13), the rulers of Beth Hakkerem and Mizpah (v14-15) and Beth Zur (v16) and Keilah (v17). How delightful that these men were engaged in the rebuilding work even though they did not live in Jerusalem. Each of them had their own responsibilities, yet they gave up pursuing their own legitimate interests. Nothing would keep them away. What a lovely zeal they had for the Lord’s work. Are we genuinely like them, or are we the opposite? That is the challenge they present to us. These two groups, the people of Jerusalem and those from the surrounding towns, indicate that each one played his part. We should also serve the Lord in the same way in our generation, in our Churches. They are a lovely example of the unity that should exist among the people of God, even though we are all different and have different backgrounds. We are one in Christ (see Galatians 3:28), therefore we should demonstrate that in the expression of our unity with the people of God worldwide, and in particular in our own Churches. Remember, this unity was seen in Nehemiah’s day by the people’s willingness to serve.

iii. Nobles of Tekoa are mentioned

Up till now everything had been so positive, but that was not the case with everyone. We read in Nehemiah 3:5:

“The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa – so far so good - but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.”

This group of men would not get their hands dirty and considered this work to be beneath them. Many other residents of Tekoa work really hard and with great dedication repairing two sections of the wall (see v5 & v27). It seems that the reason for such inaction was pride. The phrase

‘did not put their shoulders to the work’

is an expression from the agricultural world describing the stiff-necked ox which refused to be yoked. These men considered it beneath their dignity to engage in lowly tasks such as building. They were stiff-necked. We know of the tragic case of a young man who studied well at Bible College, being taught by godly men who served the Lord well. However, when this young man was appointed as the pastor of a Church he became the most lazy person in it, setting a dreadful example. In his pride he claimed now that he was the pastor everyone else had to serve him! Someone has said that pride is a cruel enemy because it inflates our self-importance and makes holiness impossible. Other rulers and nobles were heavily involved in the rebuilding work, but not these men, they were self-centred and selfish. Down the ages pride has tragically been the cause of so much division amongst the Lord’s people. Whenever we are guilty of pride we show we have

forgotten the humility of the Lord Jesus Christ who stooped to wash his disciple’s feet (John 13), and who stooped even lower by submitting to the death of the cross. Before the cross of Christ there is absolutely no room whatsoever for human pride or arrogance or conceit. How we need to heed and resist the bad example of Tekoa’s nobles and determine to follow the example of the people of that city who were an illustration of the humility of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In spite of these Tekoan nobles, we have to say that the work on Jerusalem’s walls and gates got off to an excellent start. The weeks that lay ahead were by no means going to be easy for them. But we shall see that as they continued to be committed to the Lord and to each other the work progressed until it was completed in record time.

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Chapter 6: Handling Opposition: Nehemiah 4:1-23

After the encouraging start to the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls and gates, the work had not got very far before opposition and hostility to it soon raised its ugly head again. Before looking at the precise details, the fact that this is recorded is quite instructive. It reminds us that any work for the Lord is a spiritual work and opposition will always be a reality for those engaged in it. We see this right at the beginning of time when the devil in the form of a serpent attacked God’s creation by tempting Adam and

Eve to sin (see Genesis 3), and it has been so ever since. The New Testament reminds us that we are in a spiritual battle with the powers of darkness, and it has always been the case for the people of God. This was something Jesus warned his disciples about at the very beginning. Here's a reminder of what Jesus said on more than one occasion. First in John 15:18-21:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.”

Secondly in John 16:33:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

And Paul reminds us similarly in Ephesians 6:10-13:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our

struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

The opposition that believers face has been summarised as three main areas: the world, the flesh and the devil. With these things in mind we turn to Nehemiah chapter 4.

1) Opposition From Without v1-3

The chapter opens with the attack coming from two sources.

a. The opposition of Sanballat v1-2

We have already met Sanballat in Nehemiah 2:10 where we discovered he was very much disturbed over Nehemiah's intervention to help the Israelites. He was the governor of Samaria and was therefore Nehemiah's main political opponent. The weapons he used on this occasion were ridicule and mockery to undermine the work the Lord's people were doing. We read in Nehemiah 4:1-2:

“When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his

associates and the army of Samaria, he said, ‘What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?’”

This approach is not new, of course. One of the devil’s chief weapons is to make the Lord’s people a laughing stock. In our world where the emphasis is on being one of the crowd, often believers find they are the target of similar ridicule and abuse from unbelievers. Such attacks are aimed at isolating and discouraging the Lord’s people so that they stop serving the Lord because of the embarrassment caused by their opponents. But we need to note how this opposition arose. Sanballat was an influential figure with considerable political power in the society of his day. This hostility to the Lord’s people and their work began in his heart because we read that he became angry and incensed. He was guilty on the inside because of the aggressive emotions he felt. We need to remember what Jesus said about the human heart. He was in debate with the Pharisees and a crowd of people about what makes a person unclean. He said first in Mark 7:15:

“Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’.”

Then Jesus clarified what he specifically meant and this clarification covers a vast area of sinful conduct. We read in Mark 7:20-23:

“He went on: ‘What comes out of a man is what makes him “unclean”. For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean”.’”

Applying this to Sanballat, we see that his heart was full of malice and folly. He was guilty of hatred against not only the Lord’s people and his work, but against the Lord himself. How we need to seek the Lord’s help so that we do not follow a similar path. Probably, the main reason for Sanballat’s response was that Jerusalem lay at the centre of a major trade route linking Egypt to the Tigris-Euphrates river area. A secure Jerusalem would naturally attract trade, and Samaria, where Sanballat ruled, would lose out economically. So from within his heart comes this tirade of abuse, mockery and scathing sarcasm which he expressed publicly. In the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria he made the Lord’s people his target.

His first attack was designed to make the Jews utterly discouraged and thus he hoped would compel them to stop the work. His reference to the Jews being feeble and his questioning the possibility of them ever finishing the work, or of sacrificing to the Lord again (probably a reference to

the sacrifices of thanksgiving when the work was completed), or of being able to overcome the tremendous damage the walls and gates had suffered, was the expression of the evil that existed in his own heart. He was saying the work was too great for them to complete. It is easy to see what he was trying to do by boasting in this arrogant way. But so often when such opposition arises, those who are guilty of it, fail to see the unseen hand of the Lord and they totally underestimate his power and grace.

b. The opposition of Tobiah v3

As with Sanballat, we have already met Tobiah in Nehemiah 2:10. He shared Sanballat's contempt for the work of the Lord. He was an Ammonite official and may well have been a worshipper of God because his name means 'The Lord is good' makes his opposition even worse for he should have known better. But he joins in the ridicule in v3:

“Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, ‘What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!’”

In his arrogant pride he claimed that even if the rebuilding work continued it would be so frail that a fox walking on it could topple anything they may have rebuilt! The wall would be useless because the builders were pathetic and amateur in their attempts. Again there is a sly innuendo that the Lord's people were useless and their efforts futile.

Today that same approach is sometimes taken by opponents of the gospel of Christ in order to discourage the Lord's people in their work of building the Church through the preaching of the gospel. They say to preach about Christ is futile and useless and they consider it foolish, just as Paul described in 1 Corinthians 1:23:

“...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..”

The whole purpose behind such attacks is to stop the Lord's people in their service for God. This same approach is often made to unbelievers when they begin to show an interest in following Jesus, their friends will mock and ridicule them to prevent them becoming the Lord's children.

The work of rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem had begun with great eagerness and unity by the Lord's people, and it was immediately opposed. This raises the question, what could they do about it? Should they listen to these opponents and give up the work? As far as Nehemiah was concerned this was not an option, so he applied himself to the best remedy.

2) Prayer from Within v4-6

a. Nehemiah's prayer v4-5

We have already discovered that Nehemiah was a man of prayer. In Nehemiah 1 we saw him praying for months about Jerusalem and the sad state it was in. Then in Nehemiah 2 he prayed when he had to ask King Artaxerxes to release him to travel to Jerusalem from Persia. He was a man who committed the whole of his life to the Lord, and it was on the Lord that he depended rather than on his own strength and abilities. Prayer was almost instinctive to Nehemiah, whereas there are those who only ever pray in an emergency, then forget to seek the Lord when the emergency is over. This is exactly what he did at this point in time. The opposition was strong and hostile and needed to be dealt with, the best person of all to do this was the Lord. He could overcome these enemies and utterly frustrate their evil plans. His prayer is recorded for us in Nehemiah 4:4-5:

“Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.”

With great confidence Nehemiah laid the whole situation before the Lord. It has been suggested that this prayer was public, made before his fellow labourers because it begins

with the words ‘*Hear us...*’. Instead of engaging in pointless and time consuming discussions with his opponents he directs himself and the people to the Lord. We see that his prayer was based on the wonderful covenant relationship that existed between God and the people of Israel because he addressed the Lord as ‘*...our God...*’ Stan Evers writes:

“Surely God would come to the relief of his own people who were despised?”

In the Scriptures, we are told again and again that the Lord feels the heartaches and distresses of his people. Referring to the struggles Israel endured in the wilderness Isaiah 63:9 makes this point:

“In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

When Saul of Tarsus was stopped by the Lord Jesus Christ when he was on his way to persecute Christian believers in Damascus, he made a similar point in Acts 9:4:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

So close is the bond between Christ and his children that to persecute them is to persecute him. There is this wonderful unbreakable union between the Lord and his people, and

Nehemiah knew that and therefore he prayed to the Lord about the opposition they were experiencing. Nehemiah was careful not to take things into his own hands but sought the Lord to intervene and overcome their wicked intentions. He was able to pray in this way because this was a direct attack on the Lord. He prayed for the Lord to mete out justice on these enemies. His words have troubled many over the centuries, as have the ‘imprecatory’ Psalms in which David calls down God’s judgement on certain individuals – Psalm 109 is reckoned to be the strongest of these. While such prayers are difficult for us to read they are none the less recorded in Scripture and those who prayed in this way were not rebuked by God for their approach. There are also numerous examples in the New Testament of the apostles calling down God’s justice on the enemies of the Lord and his people. For example:

- i. The judgement on Ananias and Sapphira who lied to God (Acts 5:1-11).
- ii. The condemnation and subsequent blindness on Elymas the sorcerer in Acts 13:10-11.
- iii. The response of Paul to Alexander the metal worker who had caused him much harm - Paul declared the Lord would repay for his sinfulness (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

These relatively rare and unusual prayers are found in both parts of the Bible. As Jesus taught us to forgive our enemies and to pray for them, these present us with a dilemma. How do we reconcile this?

- i. As we have just said we need to underline that these are relatively rare in Scripture, they are not everyday occurrences.
- ii. To be able to pray like this demands that a person must be very spiritual in order to understand the mind of God and not pray out of revenge.
- iii. This shows that Nehemiah was concerned more than anything else, not for revenge, but for the glory and honour of God whereas Sanballat and Tobiah had provoked the Lord to anger.

These two men had ridiculed a venture which God himself had inspired and planned. They had openly challenged the wrath of God by despising him so openly. There is a place for righteous indignation as Jesus showed when he cleansed the temple. In praying as he did, Nehemiah showed how spiritual he was, because he so closely identified with the Lord and his work.

b. The impact of Nehemiah’s prayer v6

When we ask what the immediate effect was, we discover something very encouraging in v6:

“So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.”

The people continued to build – it was as simple as that! Nehemiah had committed their way to the Lord, and they were not diverted from their task one bit. In fact they worked so hard that the wall all around the city had reached half its height. The people had truly worked with all their heart. How encouraging to read this. Nehemiah did not let the mockery of their opponents cause them to give up their God-given task one single bit. They courageously carried on building. What an example these believers present us with! How committed they really were to the Lord, and their labours demonstrated this. How easy it is for us to be guilty of half-heartedness, and to use the smallest difficulty to bring us to a standstill in serving the Lord. May he help us to serve him with all our hearts.

3) More Opposition From Without v7-8

Having had their mockery and ridicule swept aside you might have thought that Sanballat and Tobiah would have given up, but not at all. They were joined by the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men from Ashdod. We read in Nehemiah 4:7-8:

“But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.”

Like a relentless tiger hunting its prey, these evil men pursued a means to stop the work. The enemy of souls is just like this. Remember how he attacked Jesus by tempting him for 40 days and nights in the wilderness at the start of his public ministry. It was his attempt to get him to walk away from the path of obedience to his Father which would end with his crucifixion outside Jerusalem. He failed miserably as Jesus stood firm and resolute. Luke’s comment at the end of this particular period of temptation is significant. We read in Luke 4:13:

“When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.”

It does not say that he left off tempting Jesus for ever, as you might expect, but only until he found another opportune time – he is relentless. If that is what happened to the Lord Jesus Christ, we ought not be surprised if it happens to us. This is exactly what happened to Nehemiah and the people of God. Their opponent’s anger which caused the initial abuse now came to boiling point. They were ‘*very angry.*’ No doubt the fact that their previous taunts had been ignored had injured their pride, so they kicked out against the progress on the walls with even more malice. They were incensed that the work was going well and that the many gaps in the wall were being closed, so with increased numbers they plotted to fight against Jerusalem. The Hebrew which is translated as ‘*the gaps were being closed*’ (v7) is literally ‘a bandage was applied’ to the walls, it’s a picturesque way of saying how much

care the builders took with their work. Verbal abuse against the people was exchanged for violence in order to stop the work. From the list of opponents given it may well have been that they intended to surround Jerusalem. This was because Sanballat was from the north, Tobiah and the Ammonites were from the east, the Arabs were to the south and the men from Ashdod in the west. A sizeable number of men must have been involved in this evil venture. Again we learn that to serve the Lord can at times be very costly and will bring opposition in one form or another. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12:

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,”

Knowing this is so helpful because it enables us to prayerfully prepare for it, it also means that persecution will not take us by surprise. This does not make it any easier, but its presence is an indication that we really are the Lord’s and turns it into an encouragement to our assurance of salvation. We also need to remember that those who experience such opposition are assured that the Lord will bless them (see Matthew 5:10-12).

4) More Prayer From Within v9

Once again Nehemiah’s and the people’s response is very significant. In the Lord’s goodness, they were clearly made aware of their opponents plans and they did two things.

i. They prayed – v9a

“But we prayed to our God...”

Their immediate recourse was to seek the Lord’s help so they prayed to him about the danger they were in. There was this delightful dependence on the Lord which is a quality that is found in all those who seek to walk humbly with him. Though they were relatively few in number and therefore vulnerable, they knew that the Lord could both protect and equip them to carry on with the work he had given them to do and that he would guide them.

ii. They appointed guards – v9b

“...and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.”

This is a lovely combination of faith and works. They believed God would help them, and that stimulated them to extra effort. Stan Evers writes:

“Prayer without work is presumption, and work without prayer is self confidence.”

This is a very important balance as we need to depend on God otherwise the work will not be accomplished, we must work with all our hearts. In the New Testament it is put like this in James 2:26:

“...faith without deeds is dead.”

Someone has said that a person is saved by faith in Christ alone, but saving faith in Christ is never alone because it is always accompanied by works. Our works are the fruit of true faith. This is what was displayed here as they appointed those to keep watch so that any attempts by enemies to attack the city would be seen and defensive action could then be taken. Every believer today needs to apply this lesson to their own hearts because we should be constantly watchful and vigilant to prevent us from falling into temptation and grieving the Lord.

5) Demoralisation Comes From Within v10-12

Up to this point the opposition has been from without, and suitable action was taken to counteract it, but the Lord's people were not a perfect people by any means. So far, they had responded well, but some discouragements adversely affected some of them. This came in two ways. First, the enormity of the task brought discouragement to some. We discover in v10:

“Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, ‘The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.’”

This is such an easy way of thinking to fall into. After years of decay, the rubble that needed to be cleared away would have been considerable and would undoubtedly have needed much hard labour. Verse 10 pictures the labourers being ready to drop with exhaustion from having

to carry so many heavy loads of rubble. Sometimes so much rubbish needed to be cleared before any obvious advance could be made, and it was this which made some feel it was all too much.

Second, fear of their opponents brought discouragement to some in v11-12:

“Also our enemies said, ‘Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.’ Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, ‘Wherever you turn, they will attack us.’”

Their enemies propaganda concerning their threats was not idle, they were deadly serious because they were intent on murdering the workers. This struck great fear into the hearts of some, and it did not go away. Those who lived nearest to where the enemies were, felt this particularly keenly, and to them it seemed there was no way of escape. They told Nehemiah so ten times over, such was their fear. These were not supermen, but ordinary individuals. They were just like the disciples of Jesus, and just like us! One day when the disciples were crossing the lake in a boat, Jesus was asleep on a cushion, a great storm arose and terrified these men. We find the details in Luke 8:22-24:

“One day Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Let’s go over to the other side of the lake.’ So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came

down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Master, Master, we’re going to drown!’”

It was as if these disciples had forgotten all they had seen the Lord accomplish. Were they not completely safe because the Lord was in the boat with them? The Lord’s response was so helpful - Luke 8:24-25:

“He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. ‘Where is your faith?’ he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, ‘Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.’”

That gentle rebuke, “*Where is your faith?*” said it all. It was the same with the people of Judah at this crucial stage of the rebuilding work. It was as if they had forgotten that nothing is too hard for the Lord. The relentless attitude of their opponents just wore some of them down, even though they had previously prayed to God. Pessimism had crept in where once faith had triumphed. Likewise, we can so easily be filled with panic by the danger that surrounds us and be overcome by depression due to weariness from our exertions in the Lord’s work, but we must not give up and lose all we have gained. It is always easier to begin a work for the Lord than it is to continue it, especially when difficulties present themselves. We need to remember that

these Old Testament narratives were written to instruct us today as we are taught in Romans 15:4:

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

6) Strategy To Overcome v13-23

The remaining verses of Nehemiah 4 once again reveal the faith and leadership skills of Nehemiah. He did not ignore those who voiced their fears nor did he dismiss their comments as foolish. Their enemies’ intentions were very real and serious. Instead, he acted to deal with the situation. We need to remember that he knew what it was to be afraid himself. Back in the palace of Artaxerxes fear came upon him when the king questioned him in Nehemiah 2:2:

*“...so the king asked me, ‘Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’ **I was very much afraid...**”*

He also knew that fear is overcome by reflecting on God’s greatness, glory and majesty and sufficiency of. So he addressed the way the people were feeling with considerable sympathy and loving concern. First, he dealt with the understandable fears of many of the people by going to the most exposed parts of the wall and ensuring that at those points the people were well armed in v13:

“Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows.”

This meant that they were ready for any attack at these points. Then Nehemiah, having looked over the work spoke to all the people words of tremendous encouragement demonstrating the vibrancy of his own trust in the Lord in v14:

“After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, ‘Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.’”

He directed his needy people not to his organizing abilities or their own skills, but to the Lord. He uttered words similar to so many others at critical times in Israel’s history. He told them not to be afraid of their enemies but to be full of the fear of the Lord their God. By urging them to ‘remember’ the Lord, he showed that he understood that these dear people had momentarily taken their gaze off the Lord and were beginning to sink under the weight of the work and of the opposition to it. This was a bit like Peter when he walked on the water to Jesus, then when he looked at the wind and its effects he began to sink. Nehemiah carefully described the Lord to them as the one who is both great and awesome. These two qualities were just what these demoralized people needed to revive their confidence

in God. After all he was the creator of the universe, and as their Lord, he was bound to them by his own covenant. At so many times in the past he had come to their aid and demonstrated his awesome greatness. Perhaps the most notable example from the Old Testament of this was the Exodus when God brought them out of Egypt. What powerful enemies he overcame for them in the form of Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, and what a rescue he accomplished. He was still the same God centuries later in Nehemiah’s day, as he is still the same today. Nehemiah did not instruct them to treat God as some benevolent benefactor who simply pours out blessings regardless. No – we need to respond accordingly! Because God is great the people were urged to fight for one another. It is faith and works again, working in perfect harmony. Belief in the greatness and power and majesty of God was never designed to produce laziness and presumption in us, but to stir us up to serve him with all our might. When news of this course of action that had reached their enemies the effect was immediate v15:

“When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.”

It was not that the threat disappeared, nor that their hostility diminished, but that their whole plan had been frustrated by God, and so the people could return to the work. Nehemiah wisely acted to pre-empt any future possible attacks. He did not expect his opponents to lie

down quietly, so he took appropriate precautions in v16-18:

“From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.”

This gave protection to the people as they worked, even though it reduced the number who were able to do the building, instead the work did not stop but progressed. It is easy to picture those carrying loads with one hand and their sword with the other. They could at least still work while being ready for any attack. Nehemiah then set up an early warning system using trumpets. Because the people were widely spaced around the city wall whenever an attack was expected they would blow the trumpet and those from elsewhere on the wall could quickly gather to support them. Again Nehemiah concluded his instructions by pointing the people to the Lord thus giving them confidence in v19-20:

“Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, ‘The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the

wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!’”

We need to remember that what was at stake here ultimately was God’s great plan of salvation. He had promised that a Saviour would one day come into the world, be born into the Jewish nation in the land of Israel. God’s great plan was at stake and his enemies could not be allowed to succeed. Nehemiah’s closing words are not unlike Paul’s words from Romans 8:31:

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

The people of God in ancient times and in the present day are in the same privileged position of knowing that the eternal God is our refuge and a very present help in times of trouble. It was with such glorious words ringing in their ears that the whole company continued in the rebuilding work with great diligence.

Raymond Brown has written: *“The leader knew that his people must work hard but, in the last analysis, the success would not depend on their sustained exertion but on God’s assured strength.”*

We read in Nehemiah 4:21-23:

“So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, ‘Have every

man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so that they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day.’ Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.”

These words indicate the remarkable commitment of the Lord’s people to the Lord and his work. They took wise precautions at night time by everyone staying inside the city and with a change of guard to cover 24 hours each day. It appears that many of the workers were deprived even of sleep, but none of them grumbled or complained but diligently laboured for the Lord. They worked very long hours, not even Nehemiah took time off to change his clothes! What sacrificial service Nehemiah and these people gave to the Lord. Here were a people who deeply loved God and who were whole-heartedly committed to his work in the world. And that is the kind of people the Lord looks for today.

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