



# Nehemiah: Motivator for the People

September 27, 2009

***BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:***

***NEHEMIAH 2***

***PRINTED TEXT:***

***NEHEMIAH 2:5, 11–20***

*I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.*

*—Nehemiah 2:18*

## Opening Song

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### Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

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## Opening Prayer

*NEHEMIAH 2:5, 11-20 (NIV)*

**2**<sup>5</sup> and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

<sup>11</sup> I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward 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. <sup>14</sup> Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; <sup>15</sup> so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. <sup>19</sup> 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?" <sup>20</sup> 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."

**INTRODUCTION****A. WHICH TYPE OF VOLUNTEER ARE YOU?**

The military method for getting volunteers is familiar: “I want three volunteers—you, you, and you!” It is more like coercion than volunteerism. Even so, there are benefits to this method of finding volunteers: the needed quota is quickly filled, the projects that are pending are finished in a timely way, and the drafted “volunteers” sometimes discover that they actually enjoy what they have been assigned to do.

A second method is the normal procedure of announcing the nature of what needs to be done and then putting out a call for volunteers to accomplish it. The success of this approach varies greatly. Young ministers may have an idealized concept that if they announce the need for volunteers for church-related tasks then such needs will be filled easily. Reality, however, says that most people have already scheduled their time, or they do not want to be involved. The young minister soon comes to understand that this is not the best way to fill those empty slots of service.

A third approach to finding volunteers is direct and usually produces good results: capable individuals are asked personally to accept a task. One benefit of this approach is that sincere but incapable people who would volunteer under the second approach will not be hurt or offended by having their offers of help declined since they will not be asked in the first place.

Yet another type of volunteerism occurs when a talented individual perceives what needs to be done and then does it without being asked. This type of person can be a blessing. Nehemiah was such a one. He heard of a need, evaluated the circumstances, and decided that he was the best person to accomplish it. The excuses that he could have offered were many. But he sacrificed his comfortable position to do what needed to be done.

**B. LESSON BACKGROUND**

Six books of the Old Testament were written after the Jews returned to their homeland from Babylonian captivity. The six books include three historical books (Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther) and the last three books of the Minor Prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).

Three Persian kings interacted with the Jews after the exile. Cyrus the Great captured Babylon in mid-October of 539 BC. The next year he gave his famous decree that all exiled peoples had permission to return to their native lands (see Ezra 1:2–4). Cyrus was named in a prophecy written in Isaiah 44:28; 45:1 over 160 years before he conquered Babylon and other nations of that region. During his reign, the Jews who returned built the altar of burnt offerings, and they laid the foundation for the temple. Then opposition began by the neighbors of the Jews, and the building programs ceased.

Cambyses succeeded his father, Cyrus. Cambyses in turn was followed by Darius the Great in 522 BC. Two years later Haggai received four messages from God. That prophet exhorted the Jews to resume the work on the temple (Haggai 1:1; 2:1, 10, 20). The people again encountered opposition, but the work was allowed to continue while a search was made to see if the claim of the Jews was true—that Cyrus had authorized them to build. The decree was found, and the temple was completed in early 515 BC (Ezra 5, 6).

Xerxes (also given as Ahasuerus) followed Darius. Xerxes desperately wanted to avenge the defeat of his father by Greek forces at the battle of Marathon in 490 BC. The lengthy banquet recorded in Esther 1 may have been a planning session for the campaign that ended with a Greek victory at the sea battle of Salamis in 479 BC. Xerxes chose Esther as his queen when he returned from battle.

Artaxerxes I came to the throne in 464 BC when his father was assassinated. He permitted Ezra to return in 458 BC with other Jews (Ezra 7, 8). See last week's lesson. About 13 years later, in 445 BC, Nehemiah's brother arrived in Susa and told him of the plight of the Jews back in Jerusalem. The walls were still broken down, and a city without walls had no respect or defense. Nehemiah evaluated the matter, developed a plan of action, and waited for the right opportunity to present it to the king. The last verse of Nehemiah 1 notes that he was the king's cupbearer, a very responsible position of influence. Nehemiah could have used this opportunity to explain why he should stay in Susa in order to use his influence to help those in Judah. But this man of prayer decided that the task was his.

### ***I. REQUEST BY NEHEMIAH (NEHEMIAH 2:5)***

As our text opens, it has been four months since Nehemiah heard about the conditions in Judah (Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1). The early verses of this chapter reveal a crisis: Nehemiah has a sad countenance in the presence of the king. This can be interpreted as being unhappy with the king, and it puts a person at risk of being thought of plotting a coup.

The king evidently thinks highly of Nehemiah. After hearing the explanation, he asks what Nehemiah desires (2:4a). Nehemiah offers a "snap prayer" (2:4b) and begins his answer. It is evident that his answer is not off the top of his head. It is well developed. He is also aware that this king had given an order previously that a building program in Jerusalem had to be discontinued (Ezra 4:21). Nehemiah's words must be chosen carefully.

***5. And I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."***

Nehemiah begins with phrases that show his submission to *the king*. He avoids the word *Jerusalem* and simply requests to go to a *city of Judah* where his ancestors *are buried* so that he may make it a city again.

### ***II. RESEARCH BY NEHEMIAH (NEHEMIAH 2:11-16)***

Nehemiah makes his journey to Jerusalem with official papers and a military escort (Nehemiah 2:7-9). The soldiers provide protection, and their presence adds to the credentials and purposes he gives to the regional governors. His having an escort is different from Ezra's refusal to have such (Ezra 8:22). Ezra thought that having soldiers to accompany him would demonstrate a lack of faith. Nehemiah believes it is necessary for the purposes he has in mind.

#### ***A. TIME FOR REFRESHING (V. 11)***

##### ***11. I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days***

*Jerusalem* is almost 900 miles from Babylon. But Nehemiah has been in Susa, where kings spend a few months of the year. That is over 200 miles east of Babylon. Thus Nehemiah's journey is more than 1,000 miles. He uses *three days* after his arrival to become acclimated to the city, to become acquainted with the leaders of Jerusalem, and to refresh himself. Nehemiah 5:14 reveals that he is the governor for 12 years, starting at this time.

#### ***B. TIME FOR RECONNAISSANCE (VV. 12-15)***

***12-15.... 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.***

Nehemiah's leadership traits are exhibited again in that he has a plan for checking

details and making changes from his plan. A full moon almost certainly fills the night sky for this inspection to take place. This enables him to see the difficulties his project may encounter. He can determine how difficulties may be overcome before anyone has a chance to raise an objection. His method is vastly superior to someone's saying, "Men, I think we should repair the walls. What do you think?"

Just one animal (perhaps his horse or a sure-footed donkey) is quieter than several. The *few men* with Nehemiah are probably the personal servants who have accompanied him from Susa. Nehemiah is not ready to tell the local leaders what is in his mind. Riding allows Nehemiah to survey the situation from a perspective that he would not have were he walking.

**13. *By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward 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.***

Nehemiah's nocturnal inspection of *the walls* gives the names of two *gates*. The next chapter refers to other gates, including the two cited here. The precise locations are unknown, but the names themselves help to indicate probable sites. The first gate mentioned probably is located on the western side of the city. The second gate is thought to be on the eastern side of the southern part. Nehemiah's tour confirms that the wooden gates, the weakest part of a city's defenses, will have to be rebuilt.

**14. *Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through;***

The *gate* mentioned here is thought to face the Kidron Valley, on the east side of Jerusalem. The steepness of the slope into the valley is good for defensive purposes. But the accumulated debris combine with the steep slope to make it impossible for Nehemiah to continue riding.

**15.... *so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.***

Nehemiah continues his inspection as he moves along *the wall* to the north. Most scholars think he retraces his route to the first *gate*.

**C. TIME FOR REFRAINING (V. 16)**

**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.***

Five groups of people are mentioned here as being not yet informed by Nehemiah about his real goal. This is more specific than the "anyone" of verse 12. The precise distinctions among these groups are not known.

Ecclesiastes 3:7 states that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent. Nehemiah knows the difference. In his wisdom, he determines when others will be informed. Not everyone is entitled to know everything all the time, in spite of wanting to have his or her curiosity satisfied.

**III. REPORTS BY NEHEMIAH (NEHEMIAH 2:17, 18)**

The time has come, and Nehemiah is ready to make his announcement. His audience probably includes the groups cited in the previous verse.

**A. PRESENT REVIEWED (V. 17A)**

**17a. *Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire.***

Have the people of *Jerusalem* become accustomed to their unpleasant and uncomfortable existence? Things can be in a certain state for so long that people get used to it. They may be unable to envision circumstances being any other way. So Nehemiah needs to cast a vision of a better tomorrow. This starts with a frank assessment of the current situation.

The visual aids are all around. He reviews the troubles, the rubble, and the situation of the *gates*. He has been in Jerusalem only a few days, but he identifies with the people by using the word *we*. He is the governor, but they are in this together.

#### **B. PROPOSAL TO BUILD (VV. 17B, 18A)**

*17b, 18a. "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.*

The residents of *Jerusalem* undoubtedly are curious about the arrival of a new governor with his servants and his military escort. So they assemble because of respect for him and his authority. Perhaps they assume that this will be a routine exhortation to be good citizens, to avoid any incidents that may be reported to the king, and to pay their taxes.

Instead, Nehemiah gives a radical proposal that seems impossible. The city has not had fortified walls for over 140 years! But Nehemiah reinforces his plan by recounting the providential acts that have brought him to them, and he reveals that he has royal approval.

#### **C. PEOPLE'S RESPONSE (V. 18B)**

*18b. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.*

Nehemiah is persuasive! The people combine their inner desires with their emotions, and they encourage one another for the *good work* ahead of them. Their response "Let us rise up and build," as some older translations put it, is one of the classic statements of the Bible. It has been used by many congregations that are entering into building projects.

### **IV. RESISTANCE TO NEHEMIAH (NEHEMIAH 2:19, 20)**

We all know that big projects can bring big resistance. It is unlikely that the

resistance that comes next is a surprise to Nehemiah.

#### **A. REACTIONS OF THE ENEMIES (V. 19)**

*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?"*

*Sanballat* and *Tobiah* are mentioned earlier in verse 10 as being aware that Nehemiah has arrived to promote the general welfare of the Israelites. *Sanballat's* name has been found on a papyrus in Egypt, dated just 37 years later; he is identified as the governor of Samaria (compare Nehemiah 4:1, 2). Samaria is the capital of this immediate area, and fortifying Jerusalem is seen as a political threat. *Tobiah's* area is to the east, across the Jordan River. He is, at least, an *official* of the king of Persia. A person with that name could not prove his Israelite heritage (Ezra 2:59, 60). He and his descendants (the *Tobiads*) are renowned far into the period between the Old and New Testaments. *Geshem* is a powerful Arabian leader to the south (Nehemiah 6:1). His name has also been found in Egypt.

Thus the people of Judah and Jerusalem have enemies on three sides: north (*Sanballat*), east (*Tobiah*), and south (*Geshem*). Later, Nehemiah 4:7 says that the people of Ashdod, which lies to the west, join this confederation. Thus the opposition surrounds Nehemiah and his followers.

The enemy leaders know that using force against Nehemiah can bring the wrath of Artaxerxes. So they resort to a war of words: mockery, threats, and ridicule. Perhaps they hope that Nehemiah will retaliate with force, for that will justify the accusation of rebellion *against the king*.

#### **B. RESPONSE TO THE ENEMIES (V. 20)**

*20. 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.”*

Nehemiah’s response to the three leaders also gives encouragement to the residents of *Jerusalem*. There are three parts to Nehemiah’s reply. They include a strong statement of trust in *the God of heaven*, a mutual affirmation of determination, and a recounting of three ways that the opponents are excluded from any participation in a project ultimately intended to bring honor to God and his people.

This thrilling chapter comes to a close at this point. It has been exciting from its tense beginning in a capital city of Persia, to the secretive nighttime inspection of the walls, to the challenges to a lethargic people, to the forceful response of scorn from enemies who plan to stop Nehemiah.

The next few chapters tell of more opposition and of the remarkable success of organization and leadership. The gates and walls are built in 52 days in the summer of 444 BC (Nehemiah 6:15)—what previous generations could not do in 140 years.

## **CONCLUSION**

A person may read about Nehemiah and be moved to take risks. Some make major purchases without any means of making the payments, for they have “faith” that God will somehow provide at the right time. There are incidents in which the funds did arrive at the last minute, but there are also the failure accounts in which people had to move or surrender what they bought. The failures do not make good illustrations in lessons or sermons!

Nehemiah is an outstanding example of a person who had goals and plans, but he was also realistic. He planned and investigated in order to cause his dreams to become reality. Throughout his book he mentioned times when he prayed to God, for his was a reasoned faith. When the king of Persia granted him the unlikely request, he was on solid ground.

## **RESEARCHING FOR RESTORATION**

The rectangular worship auditorium in a small church building had a platform built in the corner. Thus most of the congregation had to look somewhat sideways to see the pulpit. A new minister persuaded the church to rebuild the platform across the front of the room. One elder objected on the grounds that “It’s *always* been this way,” but the project went forward nevertheless. When the old platform was demolished, that elder marked a code on each piece of lumber being removed, noting where it was in the old platform. He then stored the wood in his barn.

A new minister came on the scene many years later. Using a dubious argument for “the value of historical preservation,” the same elder persuaded the new minister to agree to restoring the platform to its original state. So out of the barn came the original wood! The questionable restoration could not have been accomplished without careful observation of the original platform.

Nehemiah was just as careful in his inspection, but for a much better reason. He wanted to see where the old walls were and what their condition was so they could be restored for a valid reason. In a negative sense, regard for “the way things used to be” can be whimsical at best and harmful at worst. In a positive sense, Nehemiah’s concern for the walls of Jerusalem reflects the

concern we should have for being faithful in rebuilding our broken lives according to Scripture.

### ***ON BEING SECRETIVE***

Some secrets need to be kept. Consider the growing problem of identity theft. A lost wallet may provide a thief with enough information to open bank or credit card accounts with the stolen identity and run up thousands of dollars of bills. Sometimes the theft is done by “dumpster diving”—going through trash to find papers with sensitive personal financial information.

The high-tech approach to identity theft is *phishing*—usually an e-mail that throws out some “bait” in hopes of getting someone to “bite” and reveal financial information. Thus *phishing* is electronic *fishing*. An example is the e-mail purportedly from a wealthy political refugee whose accounts have been frozen by a dastardly government of a third-world country.

The e-mail promises a substantial reward for allowing the deposit of millions of dollars in your bank account. But, of course, you must first reveal your account numbers! Those who do not know when to be secretive about their financial information and when not to will get into trouble.

Nehemiah was secretive because a premature disclosure of his plan could have brought unthinking, knee-jerk opposition from his own people. Needed changes in the church are sometimes prevented because resistance builds as a result of partial information that gets out; when “the grapevine” takes over, watch out! There comes a time when people are to be informed, of course. As the old saying goes, “timing is everything.”

### **LET’S TALK IT OVER**

**1. What opportunities do people who work in secular professions have to advance God’s kingdom in ways that a full-time minister does not?**

**2. Ezra refused the king’s offer of a military escort while Nehemiah accepted it. How does this compare with situations today where some believers choose to proceed on “faith alone” while others take precautions and prepare for contingencies? Is one of these approaches more “spiritual” than the other? Why, or why not?**

**3. What was a time when you needed to form a plan of action before sharing with others what was on your heart? What negative consequences could there have been of sharing prematurely?**

**4. How can a building campaign be a unifying experience for a congregation?**

**5. What may have been the outcome if Nehemiah had given a more conciliatory response to his opposition? How do we decide if our responses to the enemies of the church should be sharp or conciliatory?**

### LET'S TALK IT OVER

**1. What opportunities do people who work in secular professions have to advance God's kingdom in ways that a full-time minister does not?**

Like Nehemiah, those in secular professions have access to people in positions of political and financial power who might be persuaded to use their resources in favorable ways. Some unbelievers have negative stereotypes of ministers and the church yet will respond favorably to the good character of a Christian coworker.

Knowledge and technical skills gained in a secular profession may enhance Christian ministry in various ways. Think of the computer specialist who helps set up an attractive Web site for the church, the biology teacher who can speak effectively on the flaws of evolution, or the businessperson who helps the congregation find a loan on favorable terms for a building project.

**2. Ezra refused the king's offer of a military escort while Nehemiah accepted it. How does this compare with situations today where some believers choose to proceed on "faith alone" while others take precautions and prepare for contingencies? Is one of these approaches more "spiritual" than the other? Why, or why not?**

There's an old joke about a man trapped on his roof during a flood. He refuses three rescue attempts, each time saying, "God will save me." Finally, he drowns. In Heaven, he asks God why He didn't rescue him. God replies, "I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?"

Facing problems with "prayer alone" or "faith alone" can be deeply spiritual, or it can be a presumptuous desire to see a miracle when God has already placed means for solving the problem within reach. Faith may be shaken if God does not answer in the way we expect. The role of faith may be minimized if we start to feel unduly self-reliant. On the other hand, faith grows as we learn that God is all-sufficient. Faith also grows as we see that in God's foreknowledge He has already provided for our needs in practical ways at times.

**3. What was a time when you needed to form a plan of action before sharing with others what was on your heart? What negative consequences could there have been of sharing prematurely?**

Some of the most difficult conversations are those that involve confronting others about sin or setting some boundaries on the behavior of certain people in our lives. Prayer and forethought are essential because of the potential for an emotional reaction and a rift in the relationship.

Often, churchgoers find it easy to identify areas where ministry can be improved. Suggestions or criticisms are sometimes unwelcome to overworked church leaders. However, suggestions that are paired with a thoughtful proposal of how to solve the problem and a person willing to volunteer to lead the effort can be a great blessing.

**4. How can a building campaign be a unifying experience for a congregation?**

Prayer, visionary leadership, and unity of purpose are some of the essential elements of a successful building project. A building project can be a defining moment in the life of a congregation, so it should be approached in a deeply prayerful way.

The goal should be challenging and require sacrifice, but not to the point that it saddles the congregation with burdensome debt. The people need to see the value of the project and understand it as God's purpose, not simply as a human goal. Overcoming obstacles together and seeing God's faithfulness helps bond the congregation and prepare them for even greater exercises of faith later.

**5. What may have been the outcome if Nehemiah had given a more conciliatory response to his opposition? How do we decide if our responses to the enemies of the church should be sharp or conciliatory?**

Nehemiah's opponents were firmly entrenched in their opposition. A conciliatory approach in this situation may have been interpreted as a sign of uncertainty or weakness (compare Titus 1:13). A softer, "come join us" answer may have served only to let the fox into the chicken house.

***PRAYER***

*Lord, we are thankful for the examples of leadership and trust in the life of Nehemiah. Whether it is ours to lead or to follow, may we do so with a complete trust in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.*