

## Turned Loose to Serve Nehemiah 2

A man drove his car into a ditch. Luckily, a farmer came by with his big strong horse, Buddy. He hitched Buddy up to the car and yelled, "Pull, Nellie, pull!" Buddy didn't move.

Then the farmer hollered, "Pull, Buster, pull!" Buddy didn't respond.

Once more the farmer commanded, "Pull, Coco, pull!" Nothing.

Then the farmer nonchalantly said, "Pull, Buddy, pull!" And the horse easily dragged the car out of the ditch.

The motorist was very curious. He asked the farmer why he called his horse by the wrong name three times.

"Well, Buddy is blind. If he thought he was the only one pulling, he wouldn't even try!"

Nehemiah was faced with the enormous job of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem that had laid in ruins for a century and a half. But, the most massive aspect of the task, perhaps, had little to do with construction or engineering. It had to do with getting the community-at-large in Jerusalem to pull together, seeing that this was a cause worthy of their passion, their sacrifice and their participation.

The news of Jerusalem's disgrace, that she was a city without walls, first reached Nehemiah's ears in the month of Kislev in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes. That was early wintertime, about December. Nehemiah immediately felt the burden to do something about it. He mourned and fasted, but he also prayed. It was already in his heart to go to Jerusalem and to somehow build those walls. But, he already had a job. He was the king's cupbearer, and a good cupbearer was hard to replace. Nehemiah wasn't going anywhere unless it pleased the king to allow him to go.

Last week, we looked at a prayer in which Nehemiah made a single request; that God might grant him favor with his boss. Today's text reveals God's answer to that prayer.

### I. A Divine Appointment (1-9)

#### A. The Critical Moment Was on the Lord's Calendar verses 1-3

<sup>1</sup>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; <sup>2</sup>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, <sup>3</sup>but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! 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?"

About four months had passed. It was now about April. Nehemiah had thus far carried his burden alone. Perhaps, it was a festive occasion as kings tended to be extra generous when they were partying. Perhaps, it was just dinner with the queen. Whatever the precise occasion, it was at a time when Nehemiah just could no longer keep a plastic smile in tact. The outward veneer of an otherwise cheerful servant had broken down, and the king noticed. "Why are you sad?" he asked.

Nehemiah admits that he "was very much afraid." The very fact that the king noticed his sad face was frightening. Great deference was shown toward Persian kings. Ancient art depicts servants entering a king's presence with their hands over their mouths so as not to accidentally breathe on him. In some Persian courts, a servant might be executed for not wearing his happy face.

The fact that Nehemiah's request involved leaving the royal court was also scary. The Persians believed that the king's presence was the "epitome of felicity." In other words, there was no better place to be than to bask in the king's glow. No right-minded person would want to be anywhere else. Then, of course, there was the request itself to rebuild the walls. After all, an early effort to rebuild the walls had been thwarted by an earlier royal edict (Ezra 4).

Nehemiah was afraid, but he seized the moment when God granted it and he blurted out: "May the king live forever! 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?"

### **B. The King's Heart Was in the Lord's Hand verses 4-6**

<sup>4</sup> The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, <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>6</sup> 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.

The king was curious. "What do you want from me?" I doubt that Nehemiah's spontaneous prayer right there in the presence of the king was very long - perhaps, just a little glance upward with a petition that God would move the king's heart to help or at least, move his heart not to kill him where he stood. The nature of the prayer is unknown, but it is worth noting that Nehemiah's story is filled with such spontaneous appeals to God. Nehemiah was very much a man of prayer.

Nehemiah shared his desire to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of the city where his fathers were buried. He would rather be 800 miles away, working on broken walls than residing in royal Susa, serving in the king's court. Nehemiah was taking a risk, but his request pleased the king. Whew!! That was Nehemiah's first major obstacle. The king asked how long Nehemiah would need. He probably only asked for two or three years, which would have included a number of months just for travel. Evidently, the king was so pleased with his performance that he was not recalled to Susa for twelve years.

### **C. Nehemiah's Plan Was in the Lord's Will verses 7-9**

<sup>7</sup>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? <sup>8</sup>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?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. <sup>9</sup>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.

Nehemiah was on a roll. The king was being agreeable, so the cupbearer pulled out his list. (Nehemiah had been doing some planning these last four months.) He asked for official royal credentials so the local rulers would not give him any grief. “And by the way, oh king live forever, if you could tell Asaph to give me all the timber I need from Solomon’s gardens on the south edge of town, that would be really helpful.” We don’t know if Nehemiah asked for a title but the king named him governor, a status that earned him a military escort as well. Was this king a soft-touch? Do not forget, Nehemiah had prayed for this man’s favor.

The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.  
– Proverbs 21:1

## **II. A Divine Affirmation (10-20)**

### **A. An Ominous Task Could Not Discourage Nehemiah verses 11-16**

<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.

In Jerusalem, Nehemiah kept his plans to himself. He took a small party of men out of the city under the cover of darkness to get a sense of what he had gotten himself into. Depending on how one phrase in the verses that follow is translated, Nehemiah exited the city through the Valley Gate, hung a left and did a complete counter-clockwise lap around the city. Or, assuming that there was no wall at all on the north, Jerusalem’s most vulnerable side, he only inspected the damage to the existing parts of the wall. This was the scenario that makes the most sense to me.

Based on the record of the work that would be done, Nehemiah exited the city through the damaged Valley Gate, noting the needed repairs as he circled the southern side of the city. When he got to the eastern wall, the terraces on the western slope of the Mount of Olives dating back to David and Solomon had evidently collapsed, leaving so much rubble that Nehemiah had to dismount and inspect the eastern wall on foot. Then, he turned back to retrieve his horse and reentered through the Valley Gate. Of course, everything on the north would have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Second thoughts would have been understandable, and we are not provided with enough of the narrative to deny that Nehemiah may have had such doubts. But again, certainly by prayer, he reasoned that God had been in all of this too clearly for him to bow to fear now.

### **B. Potential People Problems Could Not Dissuade Nehemiah verses 17, 18**

<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.

The sergeant was furious that none of his squad had shown for morning formations. Just as he was about to report them all AWOL, one soldier finally ran up, panting heavily.

“Sir, I can explain. I had a date last night and it ran a little late. I missed the last bus, so I hailed a cab but it broke down. I found a farm, bought a horse but it dropped dead and I had to run the last then miles.”

The sergeant was skeptical, but before he said anything, eight more ran up. Each offered the same excuse: “Sir! I had a date last night and it ran a little late. I missed the last bus, so I hailed a cab but it broke down. I found a farm, bought a horse but it dropped dead and I had to run the last then miles.”

Fuming, the sergeant was ready to drop the hammer on all of them when one more soldier ran up, saying, “Sir! I had a date last night and it ran a little late. I missed the last bus, so I hailed a cab but ...”

“Let me guess,” the sergeant interrupted, “it broke down.”

“No, sir! There were so many dead horses in the road; it took forever to get around them.”

When Nehemiah finally did share his plans with the priests and officials, he had reason to suspect all sorts of excuses for why the people had never taken the initiative to build the walls.

Egos could have gotten in the way. Nehemiah was new on the scene. He didn’t want to “pull rank” as a Persian-appointed governor. He was their countryman. They were all in the same fix.

There could have been resistance to the scope of the task. It was formidable. Someone may have protested, “Do you know what a big job you’re talking about?” Of course, Nehemiah’s little nocturnal jaunt around the city would have given him the insight to answer, “Why yes, yes I do.”

Nehemiah could have faced apathy. After all, the walls had been down for a century and a half. Sometimes, people live with spiritual barrenness for so long that they think that is all God has in store for them. Still, until the walls were complete, Jerusalem could not be a safe or mighty city.

But, Nehemiah faced no such resistance. It was the people who said, “Let’s get building!” Perhaps, Nehemiah was an inspiring and eloquent orator. Perhaps, he was a supreme motivator. Perhaps, he was a great vision-caster. It seems to me, however, that once he shared his burden and how God had moved to this point, that the people saw the project as their burden too. They knew that they were all in it together, and that the project was in the best interest of all of them.

That happens when God is at work, not to accomplish human goals, but to awaken human hearts to His work. A cause is not conceived by the leader and “sold” to everyone else. God places the burden in multiple people and brings them together, and they agree, “This is what we need to do.” Last week, we spoke of spiritual walls that the church must always be determined to protect. The ancient church ... “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Is that a cause we can all own; to strengthen ourselves in the areas of knowing God’s Word, prayer, fellowship as well as the remembrance of what Jesus has done for us?

### **C. Sinister Enemies Could Not Deter Nehemiah verses 10; 19, 20**

<sup>10</sup>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 ...

<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.”

Sanballat was from Samaria, to the north of Jerusalem. Tobiah was from Ammon to the east of the Jordan. Like Nehemiah himself, they may have been appointed as Persian-backed governors in their respective countries. Geshem may have been a local sheikh. All of these men were united in their opposition to Nehemiah out of their historical animosity towards the Jews as well as their desire to have a foothold in Jerusalem. This would be the first of a number of times that they would try to intimidate Nehemiah from following God's call. They assumed that he might be rebelling against the empire by rebuilding the city walls and hinted that they might tattle to the king.

It seems odd that Nehemiah does not simply flash his authorization letters from Artaxerxes to these three guys. He had the prudence to recognize that these men were enemies of God's cause. If the present tactic didn't work, they would just resort to others. Not only was Nehemiah not intimidated, he was barely distracted. He told them bluntly, "We are God's people. This is God's work. You cannot stop it."

Does God still give His people this kind of encouragement? Does not the church still come under attack from within and without? Satan is the prince of this world, and the church will always be at odds with the world. Satan has no claim to the church, but he does delight when God's people respond to times of trial by flying apart rather than by pulling together. But, I am encouraged by Jesus' words when He responded to Peter's good confession that He was the Christ. Jesus wasn't just talking about the power of men giving Him the right label. He was talking about a community of believers who would live under His lordship as the anointed King from God.

"... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. - Matthew 16:18

## **An Observation about Empowering Leadership**

In chapter 3, the work simply begins. We don't read about blueprints, contracts or committees, and not just because Nehemiah thought they were boring. There wasn't time. This massive repair was completed in fifty-two days. There was a plan, but not a cumbersome one. It called for massive participation. The same freedom that Artaxerxes extended to Nehemiah, he in turn extended to the people. Unskilled laborers did unskilled work, skilled laborers did skilled work and the others worked on parts of the wall that were right in front of their homes. A simple plan suffices when everyone embraces the same cause.

Was Nehemiah a leadership guru? I don't know. It seems to me that the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem was not a notion conceived by Nehemiah that he cleverly had to sell. They all saw the need, and they were all turned loose to build according to their abilities. The people of Jerusalem were not tools for capturing Nehemiah's vision. They were truly in this thing together.

It is the goal of the Pastoral Team to remove every obstacle to people serving God according to their gifts short of falling into a condition of isolationism and unaccountability. That said, when I speak of building up the health of our church by building up the spiritual walls that keep us safe – when I speak of strengthening the pillars of teaching God's Word, fellowship, remembering together the sacrifice of Jesus and prayer – I speak of a good work that should not require a pitchman. These are the things that make us safe as believers and that make us strong together.

2500 years ago, an ancient people stood up to such a challenge: "Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work" (verse 18). That would be an appropriate response today as well.