

LESSON 2

NEHEMIAH: REBUILDING THE WALLS

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For a long, long time the only thing I knew about Nehemiah was that he was supposed to be the shortest man in the Bible -- through a wretched pun on his name, "knee-high-miah." I am glad to have discovered a great deal more about this man in the intervening years and I trust you have too. He is one of the great characters of the Old Testament, but perhaps not as well-known as some others.

Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the Hebrew Bible, for they are part of the same story. In fact, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all come out of the same general period of Israel's history. They appear in our Bible in reverse order of the chronological order in which they took place. In other words, Esther actually happened when God first began to move in the midst of Israel's captivity to return this nation to the land. That was soon after the halfway mark of the seventy years that Jeremiah had predicted the captivity would last. God raised Esther, a young Jewish maiden, to the throne of Persia as queen. It was her husband, King Ahasuerus of Persia, who is the Artaxerxes of the opening chapters of Nehemiah. This heathen king gave the command for Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to build up the walls of the city. Perhaps that accounts for a very interesting parenthesis that appears in this book in chapter 2, verse 6, when Nehemiah went to the king: "And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him)." That queen, I believe, was Queen Esther, the Jewish maiden who had been raised to this prominent position by the grace of God.

Neither Artaxerxes nor Ahasuerus are the names of this king. That is what is so confusing. These are really titles. Artaxerxes means "the great king" and Ahasuerus means "the venerable father." These were not the king's given names. It may or

may not be helpful to know that this Artaxerxes and Ahasuerus are also Darius the Mede of the book of Daniel. And then, to add to the confusion, Artaxerxes in the book of Nehemiah is not the same Artaxerxes as in the book of Ezra. Now do I have you thoroughly confused?

At any rate, in the history of these people, Esther — as an instrument of God's grace — was sent to the throne of Persia and so moved the heart of her husband, the king, that he allowed Nehemiah, his cupbearer, to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah began the work of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. Some twenty-five years later, Zerubbabel returned with about fifty thousand of the captives from Babylon, as is recorded in the book of Ezra.

God has reversed this order in scripture. Instead of Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra, these books are turned around and we have Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Scripture is never concerned simply with chronology. It is concerned with the teaching of each book. In these three books we have the story of the way out of captivity, back to God. The book of Ezra begins with the building of the temple. The restoration of the house of God is always the first thing in the way back to God. Then comes the building of the walls, as we will see in the book of Nehemiah, filling the need for security and strength. Finally, the book of Esther comes as the revelation of the purpose of all this in the life of any individual. That gives you a quick survey of these three books.

The book of Nehemiah falls into two divisions. The first six chapters cover the reconstruction of the wall, while chapters 7 through 13 deal with the reinstruction of the people. With those two you have the whole book. Now what does a wall symbolize?

One of the most famous landmarks in the world today is the Berlin wall, dividing the city in two. Ordinarily though, a wall symbolizes strength and protection. In ancient cities the only real means of defense were the walls. Sometimes these walls were tremendously thick and high. The walls of the city of Babylon, as recounted in the story of Daniel, were some 380 feet thick and over 100 feet high — massive, tremendous walls. Therefore, the city of Babylon considered itself very safe.

What does it mean, then, to rebuild the walls of your life? Nehemiah is the account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is a symbol of the city of God, God's dwelling place and the center of life for the world. In an individual life, then, the rebuilding of the walls would be a picture of re-establishing the strength of that life. We have all met people whose defenses have crumbled away. They have become human derelicts, drifting up and down the streets of our large cities, absolutely hopeless and helpless. But God in grace frequently reaches down and gets some of those people and brings them out to rebuild the walls. This is the picture of the way the walls of any life, of any local church, of any community, of any nation, can be rebuilt into strength and power and purpose again.

The first step in this process is given in chapter 1, verse 4. It begins with a concern about the ruins. Nehemiah says:

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days; and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4 RSV)

You will never build the walls of your life until you have first become greatly concerned about the ruins. Have you ever taken a good look at the ruins in your own life? Have you ever stopped long enough to assess what you could be under God, and compared that with what you are? Have you looked at the possibilities that God gave you in your life, and seen how far you have deviated from that potential? Like Nehemiah, you have received word, in some form or other, of the desolation and ruin there. When Nehemiah hears this report about Jerusalem, he weeps and prays for days, showing his intense concern. You will never rebuild the walls of your life until you first weep over the ruins.

This is followed by confession. In chapter 1 is Nehemiah's wonderful prayer as he confesses that

the nation has forsaken God, and acknowledges the justice of God's dealing with them. That is followed immediately by commitment. Look at verse 11 of chapter 1. He says:

"O Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name; and give success to thy servant today," (Nehemiah 1:11a RSV)

To do what? You see, this man has a plan forming in his mind, even while he has been in prayer, of how to go about rebuilding the walls. He has something definite he wants to ask. He says:

"...and grant him [Nehemiah] mercy in the sight of this man." (Nehemiah 1:11b RSV)

What man? Well, you have it in the next verse:

Now I was cupbearer to the king. (Nehemiah 1:11c RSV)

So here is a man who, out of his concern, and after the confession of his heart, commits himself to a project. He asks God to begin moving in the king's heart. Now this is always how any return to the grace of God must begin. We get concerned. Then we confess. Then we commit ourselves to action and ask God also to act in our behalf, for invariably in an enterprise like this there are factors over which we have no control, and God must arrange them.

At a men's conference some time ago, a man told how in the early days of his Christian experience someone had encouraged him to pray about the things that happen on his job, in his relationships with his boss and with his fellow employees. He said, "I didn't think praying was the right thing to do at first. But I tried it and I saw that it worked. You know. I thought it was quite an unfair advantage over those poor heathen, but it worked so well that I could see that God had provided prayer for us." Nehemiah is well aware of this — God must move in the areas where Nehemiah cannot, so Nehemiah prays about going to the king. When he appears before the king, the king notes the sadness of Nehemiah's face and asks what he wants. Since this is the very king whose wife is Queen Esther. He already has a great concern and knowledge of the Jews' problems. He is responsive to Nehemiah's plea for permission to return to Jerusalem.

The next necessary step in the program of reconstruction is courage. In verse 9 of chapter 2 we read:

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite... (Nehemiah 2:9-10a RSV)

Do you recognize these names? Whenever you read of Ammonites, Amorites, Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Perizzites, or any of the other "ites," you have a picture of the enemy of God — the flesh. This satanic agency within man inevitably resists the work and the will and the ways of God. Here you have this same enmity; when the enemies of God

...heard this, it displeased them greatly that some one had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. (Nehemiah 2:10b RSV)

Immediately courage is needed. Whenever a man like Nehemiah says, "I will arise and build," Satan always says, "Then I will arise and oppose." Satan makes things difficult when we start turning back to God.

We see, also, the need for caution. When Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem and rides about the city at night he doesn't just start putting bricks on top of one another. He doesn't rush out and get all the people excited to build the walls. If he does, he would fall into the trap of his enemies. The first thing he does is arise at night when no one else knows, ride around the walls of the city, and survey the ruins. He takes note of exactly what needs to be done. He makes an honest survey of the facts. Then he begins to lay his plans. These three principles of reconstruction — a display of concern, confession and commitment, and courage with caution — are basic to rebuilding.

In chapter 3 we learn how he went about this task of reconstruction. If the walls of your life are broken down — if your defenses have crumbled so that the enemy is getting at you on every hand, and you easily fall prey to temptation — I suggest you pay special heed to the process of reconstruction set forth in the book of Nehemiah. We learn, first of all, that the people were willing to work; second, that they became involved and immediately started doing something. Nehemiah, in the wisdom that God gave him, set each of them to work building whatever part of the wall was nearest to each of their own houses so that they were personally involved in the work. The rest of the chapter describes how they went about building. It all centered on the ten gates of

the city of Jerusalem. The people would be assigned a certain portion of the wall defined by the gates that gave access to the city. As you read through this chapter, you will find the names of these gates; the Hebrew names have great significance. I would like to quickly describe these for your own edification, and we can draw the lesson from each at the same time.

First of all is the Sheep Gate. This is the gate through which the sheep were brought into the city to be sacrificed at the altar. The Sheep Gate, of course, signifies the Lamb of God, whose blood was shed on the cross for us, and, therefore, it reveals the principle of the cross. That is always the starting place for strength in your life. You have to recognize the principle of the cross — the fact that God will be moving in your life to utterly cancel out your own ego, your own plans, and your own self-interest. The cross is that instrument in God's program that puts the ego to death. That is where we must begin building for strength.

The account then moves to the Fish Gate. Now what does the name "Fish Gate" suggest to you? Do you remember how the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men"? (Mark 1:17) This suggests the witness of a Christian. Has that gate broken down in your life? Has the wall around the Fish Gate crumbled? If so, this gate for defense, and its wall, need to be rebuilt again, for the Lord Jesus said that every Christian is to be a witness for him. If this wall is broken down, you will find that through this the enemy will enter again and again. If you can never say a word for Christ, if there is never any witness in your life, then this wall is broken and the Fish Gate needs to be built again.

The next gate is the Old Gate. You will find it in verse six. What does this gate symbolize? Well, I suggest that it represents truth. In many Christians' lives this gate is broken down — they are no longer resting upon truth. Truth is always old, and it is upon old things that everything new must rest. Somebody has well said, "Whatever is true is not new, and whatever is new is not true." These are the days when the old truth is being forsaken. Men are rapidly throwing away what the church has stood for. They are saying that we don't need these things anymore. But if we allow this old truth to go, we find that the wall crumbles and the enemies outside gain access to our soul. This gate needs to be built

up again and this wall needs to be repaired so that we rest upon the old principles of the word of God. Truth will never change. It was true when it was uttered. It was also true a hundred thousand years before it was uttered. And it will be true a hundred thousand years from now.

I often think of a story about the fellow who one day went to visit an old musician. He knocked on the musician's door and said, "What's the good word for today?" The old musician didn't say a word. He turned around and went back across the room to where a tuning fork was hanging. He took a hammer and struck the tuning fork so that the note resounded through the room.

Then the musician said, "That, my friend, is 'A' It was 'A' yesterday. It was 'A' five thousand years ago and it will be 'A' five thousand years from now." Then he added, "The tenor across the hall sings off-key. The soprano upstairs is flat on her high notes. And the piano in the next room is out of tune." He struck the tuning fork again and said, "That is 'A' and that, my friend, is the good word for today." That is truth. Truth is always the same. It never changes. We need to rebuild the old gates of truth.

The next gate is the Valley Gate, and you can see immediately what it suggests. It is the place of humility, isn't it? It is the place of lowliness of mind and humbleness of heart. God has said in every page of Scripture that he is against the pride of men. He looks for the lowly, the humble, the contrite, and those who have learned that they are not indispensable. They have learned to have a low opinion of themselves but a high opinion of their God. It is this attitude that he seeks. This Valley Gate often needs to be repaired.

The Fountain Gate is next. That name reminds us instantly of the words of the Lord Jesus to the woman at the well, "The water that I shall give [YOU] will become in [you] a spring of water [a fountain] welling up to eternal life." (John 4:14) It speaks of the Holy Spirit, which is the river of life in us — the flowing of the Spirit of God in our lives, to enable us to obey his will and his word.

This is followed by the Water Gate. Water is always a symbol of the word of God. The interesting thing about this Water Gate (as opposed to the one in our nation's capital) is that it did not need to be repaired. Evidently it was the only part of the wall that was still standing. It mentions the people who

lived by it, but it doesn't mention its needing repair. The word of God never breaks down. It doesn't need to be repaired. It simply needs to be reinhabited.

Then comes the East Gate. The East Gate faced the rising sun, and is the gate of hope. It is the gate of anticipation of what is yet to come when all the trials of life and all the struggles of earth will end and the glorious new sun will rise on the new day of God. This gate needs to be rebuilt in many of us who fall under the pessimistic spirit of this age and are crushed by the hopelessness of our time.

Next is the Horse Gate. The horse in scripture is a symbol of warfare or, in this case, the need to do battle against the forces of darkness. "We are not contending against flesh and blood," the apostle says, "but against the principalities, against the powers...the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12) This is the battle!

The ninth gate is the Muster Gate or, literally, the "examination gate." This was evidently the place where judgment was conducted. We need to sit and take a look at ourselves every now and then — to stop and re-evaluate what we are doing.

That brings us around again in the last part of the chapter to the Sheep Gate, the gate of the cross. The cross must be at the beginning and the end of every life. Now, in this beautiful way, the book of Nehemiah is teaching us what needs to be done to strengthen the walls in our lives.

The next chapters, four through six, cover the persecution that arose from building the city walls. As I have already suggested, when you start to rebuild the strength of your life you will find that a force immediately arouses itself, both within yourself and outside yourself, and that resists God's work in your life with every influence that can be used against you. The persecution revealed here can be summarized in three words — contempt, conspiracy, and cunning. The enemies tried to mock or heap contempt on what God was doing. When they failed, they attempted a conspiracy. They tried to involve the Israelites in a plot that would overthrow this work. When that failed, they tried to call Nehemiah away from his work by a very cunning scheme. But when you come to chapter 6, verse 15, you read this wonderful sentence:

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. (Nehemiah 6:15 RSV)

An amazing record!

In the latter part of the book, chapters 7 through 13, is the story of reinstruction. This is the way to retain strength once it is rebuilt. In chapter 8 we have the great calling together of the people by Ezra the priest that is recorded also in the book of Ezra. Notice the steps here. It began with the reading of the law, chapter 8, verses 5 and 6:

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people [this is the way to preach] for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. (Nehemiah 8:5-6 RSV)

And verse 8:

And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8 RSV)

This is nothing more or less than expository preaching. This was the first means of retaining the strength represented by the walls.

After this, the people celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles, when Israel dwelt in booths made of tree boughs to remind them that they were simply strangers and pilgrims on earth. Next was the remembrance of the lessons of the past. In chapter 9 you have Ezra's tremendous prayer, when he recounted what God had done in the life of this people. It is always good to stop and remember what God has taught you in the past. That is always a sure way to preserve the strength that God gives you. Following this prayer, the people signed a covenant and agreed that they would do what the law demanded. They covenanted; they resolved that they would take the step of obedience. I can tell you out of my own experience as well that you will never be able to retain the strength that God gives you until you are ready to be obedient to what he says. You must obey him whenever you hear and know what he wants.

In the eleventh chapter is the recognition of gifts among the people. There are the Levites, the gate keepers, the singers, and various others who ministered in the temple. Similarly, in the New Testament we are told to discover the gifts that the Spirit has given us and to put them to work.

"Rekindle the gift of God that is within you," Paul wrote to Timothy. (2 Timothy 1:6) If you want to retain your strength, start using what God has given you.

Then, in chapter 12. in the dedication of the walls, the people gathered and marched around them with instruments, singing and shouting, playing and rejoicing, and crying out with great joy. There is nothing that will add more to your strength in the Lord than to express the joy of the Lord in your life.

The book closes with the matter of resistance to evil. Your strength will be maintained if you will take the attitude that Nehemiah took for God. He was ready to say "No!" to the forces that would destroy what God was doing in his life. Look what he had to do. In chapter 13, verse 7, having gone back to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem, he says:

I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah [this man was first mentioned in the beginning of the book as an enemy of the Jews], preparing for him [the enemy of God] a chamber in the courts of the house of God. (Nehemiah 13:7b RSV)

He had allowed Tobiah to move right into the temple! What did Nehemiah do? He said:

I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. (Nehemiah 13:8 RSV)

He went in and threw Tobiah's furniture out into the street. And that isn't all. He found that the priests had been cheated, so he restored the money that belonged to them. Then he discovered that throughout the city the people were violating the Sabbath. They were bringing in merchandise and selling it in the streets. In verse 19 he says:

When it began to be dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the sabbath. (Nehemiah 13:19a RSV)

He kept them all out of the city. Then he discovered that some of them were waiting outside the doors all night, hoping that someone would come out and do a little business. So what did he do?

I warned them and said to them, "Why do you lodge before the wall? If you do so again I will lay hands on you." (Nehemiah 13:21a)

Then he discovered yet another problem. The people were still intermarrying with the forbidden races around them. Nehemiah became violent. In verse 25 he says:

I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair [What a man!]; and I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves." (Nehemiah 13:25 RSV)

But that still isn't all. He found that one of the fellows who was his foremost enemy, who had done more than any other to oppose the building of the wall, was Sanballat the Horonite. In verse 28 we read:

And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; [So what did he do with him?] therefore I chased him from me. (Nehemiah 13:28 RSV)

Now perhaps you feel that Nehemiah was too severe. But here, you see, is a man who has learned that there can be no compromise with evil. He has learned one of the greatest lessons that the Spirit of God can ever teach anyone: to say no when it needs to be said.

It was on this very note that the Lord Jesus began his ministry in Jerusalem. As he came into the temple and found it filled with the money changers,

who were defiling the house of prayer, he made a whip of cords and drove them out of the temple. There is nothing gentle about that! Here is a man who is thoroughly angry, with sparks flying from his eyes, and yet he is perfectly justified in what he does because he is resolutely saying no to that which defiles the temple of God. Those who have made a mark for God throughout the history of the church have been those who have learned to say no and have said it at the right time. You read the story of the Covenanters, of Martin Luther, of John and Charles Wesley, of all those who have moved against evil in the world, and they were always men or women who had learned to say no. They stood against anything that defiles the temple of God.

Now these are the ways by which strength is maintained in our lives also. As we come to the close of this book we see that the walls of Jerusalem stand once again and God's testimony is re-established in this city.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this look into your Word, into the truth that affects our own lives. We pray that we, also, may learn as Nehemiah did to be disciplined, courageous, confident in you, and willing to say no, willing to be absolutely ruthless against the forces that would undermine and sap the vitality of our lives in you. In Christ's name, Amen.