

THE RESTORING BUILDER

DEVOTIONAL READING: Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 2:11-20; 13:1-22

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 2:11-20

I. Surveying the City

Nehemiah 2:11-16

11 So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.

13 And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.

16 And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

11. The journey from Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire, to Jerusalem was nearly 1,100 miles. A daylight walking pace of two miles per hour for six days per

week (resting on the Sabbath) means a trip of about three months' duration. The *three days* therefore provided some needed rest for Nehemiah after such a long journey. The break also gave him the opportunity to plan his strategy, an approach he would use again before confronting another problem (Nehemiah 5:6-7).

12. Nehemiah was aware that not everyone in the territory was on board with what he was planning (Nehemiah 2:10). Thus an excursion by *night* under cover of darkness was most likely the best way to examine the city and assess what needed to be done. Only a *few men* needed to accompany Nehemiah on such a mission.

Nehemiah was secretive about his intention to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and gates. Disclosing his plans too early could put the entire enterprise in jeopardy. His sense of appropriate timing was a quality that made Nehemiah a capable leader.

13. It appears that Nehemiah did not make a complete circuit of Jerusalem but only of the southern area. At the same time, locating precisely some of the places cited is difficult. *The gate of the valley* appears to have been at the southwestern side of Jerusalem.

The location of *the dragon well* is disputed, though it is often identified with the pool of Siloam on Jerusalem's southern side. *The dung port* may describe the gate

leading to the trash dump in the Hinnom Valley, to the south of Jerusalem.

The scene before Nehemiah was in keeping with what his brother Hanani had described to him (Nehemiah 1:3). It's one thing to hear a report of destruction and quite another to see it firsthand.

14. *The gate of the fountain* was possibly situated in the southeastern wall of Jerusalem. *The king's pool* may have been a part of King Hezekiah's project to bring water into the city (2 Kings 20:20). The rubble at the pool was so excessive that *the beast* Nehemiah was riding could not get through. This detail emphasizes the enormity of the devastation he found in Jerusalem.

15. *The brook* mentioned here is probably the Kidron, a name also attached to the accompanying brook east of Jerusalem. Nehemiah thus retraced his path, going *back to the gate of the valley* where he started.

16. This verse again highlights the secrecy of Nehemiah's journey by night. In these initial planning stages, there was wisdom in gathering information and considering his plans carefully without questioning a large group of people about the strategy needed to address the required repairs. To have done the latter may have resulted in immediate negativity—a “we can't do that” attitude.

II. Summoning the Leaders

Nehemiah 2:17-18

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

18 Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.

17. Nothing is said about the span of time between Nehemiah's excursion and his meeting with the groups named in the previous verse. Most likely he convened them as soon as he could, given that the condition of *the wall left Jerusalem* vulnerable to attack.

There was an important emotional reason to have strong walls in a city, too. The city was an object of derision and mockery (*a reproach*) in its current state. Jerusalem was the holy city, the site of God's temple. It needed to be maintained. Thus Nehemiah described the decrepit state of Jerusalem as something that was not only troubling to the residents of the city but also disdainful to outsiders.

Nehemiah used the first-person plural pronouns *we* and *us*. He identified with those who were concerned about the dismal condition of Jerusalem. The solution as he saw it was of practical value. Rebuilding *the wall* offered protection as well as going a long way toward rehabilitating the feeling that Jerusalem itself was in ruins. Three considerations determined where ancient cities were built: (1) access to water, (2) access to trade routes, and (3) defensibility. A great city needed all three! A city without walls was vulnerable to enemy armies. Nehemiah 13:15-22 reveals a way that the completed walls would help the residents of the city obey God.

18a. Nehemiah was speaking to people who perhaps had become rather skeptical concerning God's plan and purpose for them and for the city. Over the years since the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon, various attempts to rebuild Jerusalem had been thwarted (Ezra 4).

At first Nehemiah's proposal may have sounded like just another plan that would meet with failure and simply add to the people's disillusionment. But when he spoke of *the hand of my God which was good upon me*, he offered reason for new

hope of success. Throughout the Old Testament, the mention of God's hand represents the work that God does in the world.

When Nehemiah came to the Lord in prayer after hearing of the sad condition of Jerusalem, he noted how the Lord had redeemed the covenant people, of whom Nehemiah was a part, with a "strong hand" (Nehemiah 1:10). Nehemiah was able to provide evidence that God's hand was at work on His people's behalf. Previous rebuilding had been stymied by opposition (Ezra 4). But at this time Artaxerxes had given his approval and full support to the work in Jerusalem. Even so, the true king, the King of kings, was the one in ultimate control of His people's welfare.

18b. The people's response must have emboldened Nehemiah. The fact of God's powerful hand leading and blessing does not eliminate the need for human hands to do their part. He prefers to work through people instead of just accomplishing His purposes all on His own.

III. Scorning the Critics Nehemiah 2:19-20

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?

20 Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

19. *Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite* have already been introduced as villains (Nehemiah 2:10). Any worthwhile undertaking for the Lord is bound to encounter opposition of some kind. Consensus is desirable but is not always achieved (Ezra 10:15).

The word *Horonite* may indicate that Sanballat is from Beth Horon, a town about 12 miles from Jerusalem. Though likely part of the northern Israelite tribe of Ephraim, he always opposed Nehemiah's work on behalf of Judah and Jerusalem. *Ammonite* people had long been enemies of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3-4), and *Tobiah* was no exception. He was related by marriage to some of Nehemiah's companions and had many supporters among the Jews (Nehemiah 6:17-19).

Arabians were also a Transjordan people. During the Persian period (539–331 BC), they engaged in much trade and commerce. *Geshem* may have been opposed to any program promoting the welfare of the Jews if he saw it as a threat to his business dealings.

An accusation of rebelling *against the king* had succeeded in halting an earlier rebuilding effort (Ezra 4). But Nehemiah had the full backing of the king. He knew the claims of his critics were baseless.

20a. There is no record of Nehemiah's mentioning King Artaxerxes in his reply to the scoffing of his enemies. Instead, he appealed to a higher court: *the God of heaven*. Nehemiah knew that God was not going to abandon him or the people who had committed themselves to *arise and build*.

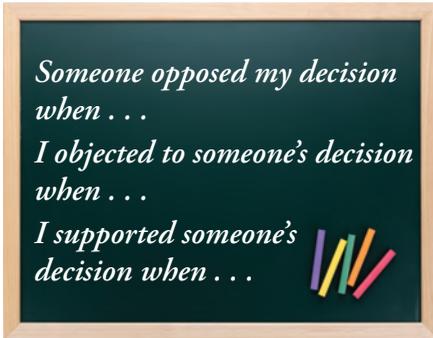
20b. The Hebrew word translated *portion* is used to refer to God's division of the promised land among the tribes of Israel. Any portion Sanballat had had as an Israelite was revoked when God sent the 10 northern tribes into exile for their faithlessness (2 Kings 17:6-23).

Regarding the idea of *memorial*, the opponents did not have the historical ties to the city that Nehemiah and his coworkers did. They had no legal *right* to interfere. Nehemiah boldly drew a clear line that would remain intact despite any continued resistance that his enemies directed his way (Nehemiah 4, 6, etc.).

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

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Into the Lesson



Consider the application of the old saying “timing is everything.” When doing God’s work, what are the reactions people have when they see that work being done.

Into the Word

Read Nehemiah 2:11-20. Imagine you are writing an entry in Nehemiah’s diary after the following events happened. Record the thoughts and feelings that Nehemiah might be experiencing.

Verses 11-12

Verses 13-16

Verses 17-18

Verses 19-20

How do the four verses interact and how are they interdependent?

Into Life

To remind yourself of Nehemiah’s testimony of God’s hand on his life and his leadership (verse 18), do the following:

1. Trace an outline of your hand.
2. Label the fingers with up to four life incidents, one per finger (leave thumb blank), in which you have seen God’s leading.
3. Put a star beside the most significant incident.

Share with someone the most important life crossroads where God’s guidance made the difference. Finally, label the thumb with a situation where you are still seeking God’s guidance.

1. How have your experiences been like Nehemiah’s?
2. How does your review of God’s past guidance encourage you about the guidance you now seek?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Pray for God’s powerful hand to be at work in your life daily.