

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 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few others. 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.

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

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 of the fact that not everyone in the territory was on board with what he was planning to do (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 others* 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 Valley Gate* appears to have been at the southwestern side of Jerusalem.

The location of *the Jackal Well* is disputed, though it is often identified with the Pool of Siloam on Jerusalem's southern side. *The Dung Gate* 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 Fountain Gate* 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 to improve its odds of survival in a prolonged siege (2 Kings 20:20). The rubble at the pool was so excessive that the *mount* Nehemiah was riding could not *get through*. This detail emphasizes the enormity of the devastation he found in Jerusalem.

15. *The valley* 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 Valley Gate* 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 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.” ¹⁸ **I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.**

They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began 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 *disgrace*) in its current state. Jerusalem was the holy city, the site of God's temple. It needed to be maintained in a way appropriate to this distinction. 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 gracious hand of my God on 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 his "mighty 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 and lifted his spirits. 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, 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?"

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."

19. *Sanballat the Horonite* and *Tobiah the Ammonite official* 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. *The 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 *start rebuilding*.

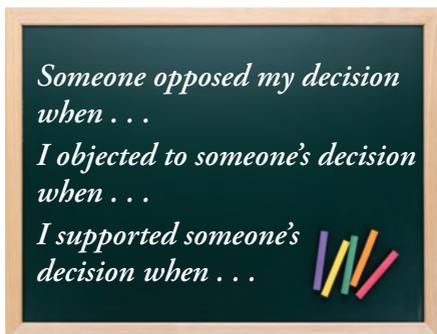
20b. The Hebrew word translated *share* is used to refer to God's division of the promised land among the tribes of Israel. Any portion Sanballat had had as an Israelite was revoked when God sent the 10 northern tribes into exile for their faithlessness (2 Kings 17:6-23).

Regarding the idea of *historic right*, the opponents did not have the historical ties to the city that Nehemiah and his coworkers did. They had no legal *claim* to interfere with what Nehemiah was doing. With the king's support, 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.