

## Sermon – 18/01/2009 pm

### Nehemiah Inspects the Walls

Study Text: Nehemiah 2:9-20

King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah everything he wanted and sent him on his way to rebuild the broken down walls of Jerusalem. He gave Nehemiah an armed escort to ensure he got there safely. Did Nehemiah ask for this escort? We are not told but, unlike Ezra, he accepted the offer. Ezra felt ashamed to ask the king for an escort of soldiers and he explains why. His circumstances were different to those of Nehemiah. While it was not right for him to ask for or accept an escort it was right for Nehemiah to do so.

What is right for one believer is not always right for another. We are to obey God's commands of course but there are situations in which we are to follow our conscience. One person considers it okay to eat meat while another says no to meat. Paul accepted such a position and so must we (Romans 14). In some matters God's people will have different views. Paul simply reminds each one that we will have to give an account of ourselves to God for our every word and action.

### Institutions

Nehemiah had prayerfully and carefully obtained letters from the king to give to the governing authorities of the region beyond the River. These governors had authority over Judah and Jerusalem. With the good hand of God upon him he gave these letters to the governors. These letters carrying the king's signature authorized Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city of his fathers as he wished. Without the letters Nehemiah would have had a very difficult time; this becomes evident as the story unfolds.

God's people do not have license to break the laws of the land – apart from special cases when we have to declare that we must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). God has appointed the authorities who make and administer the laws of the land. As difficult and frustrating as it may be in dealing with government officials we are to abide by the law. Nehemiah made sure what he was doing was legal.

The leaders of a Christian school in India wanted to build a new gym. They needed council permission to do so. Local councils are notoriously corrupt as we well know, so the school decided to go ahead without permission. The authorities were soon on site to stop the work. The site lay idle for years.

It was not long before the arrival of Nehemiah became widely known – although he tried to keep secret his mission. The news unsettled *Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite* (2:10). These fellows hated the Jews, but who were they? Sanballat is a Babylonian name. They were not governors at this time as they are referred to separately from the governors in the previous verse. An ancient document written in 407BC, a few years after the time of Nehemiah, refers to Sanballat as the 'governor of Samaria'.

Tobiah means 'the Lord is good'. He was probably a worshipper of Yahweh. He was a good friend of Eliashib the priest (13:4). Tobiah probably became the governor of Transjordan

under the Persians – as the name Ammonite indicates. Though not governors, Sanballat and Tobiah were influential and powerful men. Their politics did not permit the people of God to prosper.

## Inspection

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and like Ezra waited three days before commencing his work (2:11, Ezra 8:32). We are not told what he did in these three days so assume it was time to recover from the journey and settle into his house. What is remarkable is that after only three days he began his work.

On the fourth night Nehemiah set out to inspect the walls of the city. Why at night? He did not want to attract undue attention. He had not told anyone what God had called him to do. He took just a few men with him as he set out on a donkey or mule to inspect the walls around the southern part of the city. Presumably it was a moonlight night.

Jerusalem at this time ran along a ridge between the Kidron Valley to the east and the Tyropoeon Valley to the west. To the south was the Hinnom Valley. The refuse or dung gate led to this valley where garbage was dumped. Nehemiah left through the Valley Gate heading south around the city. When he started up the other side he could not get through on his donkey so went along the last section on foot.

Nehemiah had seen what he wanted to see. He was able to determine the dimensions of the project. He did not want to start work without such details. What shame it would bring to start the work and not be able to complete it. A half built wall would be no help at all.

Jesus spoke of following him in similar terms. He said that a builder first sits down to count the cost lest after laying the foundation he cannot finish – *and all who see it begin to mock* (Luke 14:28-29). We see all around the sad truth of what Jesus said. We see men and women who started out following Jesus but have fallen away. We see those who were once regular in worship now rarely in the Lord's house. Jesus saw many fall away from following him. Are you committed to finishing the race with Jesus?

Nehemiah knew he must complete the task. It is the same in ministry. It is very difficult to find committed people for ministry. They may start out well but the work soon fizzles out. Other things take priority, or discouragement sets in. Nehemiah was doing his work unto the Lord – and so must we. We must not be distracted or become discouraged.

## Implementation

Nehemiah wasted no time in implementing his plans. In many ways the task was impossible. He did not have bags of money to pay workers. He was not able to do it all himself. He needed the cooperation of the people of God. After inspection he called the Jews together, including the priests, nobles and officials (2:16). He did not just gather his family. He did not just choose a few close friends. He called all the people together to share with them the vision the Lord had laid upon his heart.

*You see the trouble we are in with the city walls broken down* (2:17). Nehemiah identified with the people. He was one of them. He shared the disgrace and shame of living in such a

broken down city. He urged them to get together and rebuild the wall. *Come let us build the wall of Jerusalem (2:17).*

The people thought it was impossible but Nehemiah urged them rise up and do the impossible. He did so proclaiming that God was with them. He shared how God had already answered his prayer and brought him back to Jerusalem with the blessing of King Artaxerxes.

‘Nothing is impossible for God’ is the enduring message of Scripture. Abraham’s wife Sarah learnt it; Zechariah learnt it as did Mary the mother of Jesus. All these lessons related to the birth of a child but the truth extends to every part of God’s creation. All things are possible for God. Paul said *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).* He was speaking about suffering. This is the position from which Nehemiah was speaking. God’s people were suffering.

Nehemiah did not forget what the Lord had already done for him in answer to prayer. If God was with him, who could be against him. Nehemiah was a man of God and also a man of action. He called the people of God to join him in rebuilding the walls and they said ‘Yes!’ ‘Let us rise and build’ they said (2:18). How happy Nehemiah must have been hearing those words. How happy any church leader is when the people say ‘Yes! we will join you in serving the Lord’. ‘How can we help, what can we do to serve the Lord’.

## Opposition

While the walls of Jerusalem were broken down there was no opposition. Many churches face no opposition because the world sees nothing to oppose. An agent rang me one day asking if we wanted to sell the church. He thought it was not being used. Does this city know there are people of God worshipping in it?

Sanballat and Tobiah are now joined by a fellow called *Geshem the Arab (2:19)*. He must have been from the region of Arabia – maybe a friend of Tobiah the Ammonite. News of Nehemiah’s plan and his call to the Jews reached these local politicians. There may well have been leaks from the ranks of the Jews. Nehemiah’s decision to inspect the walls at night was well founded.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem wasted no time in getting together to try and stop the project. They could not do so legally because of the King’s letters but they still used this as a threat – *will you rebel against the king? (2:19)*. in the goodness of God they did not write to the king as their predecessors had done (Ezra 4). They relied upon ridicule, threats and subterfuge.

Nehemiah was ready for opposition. He did not engage in long arguments but boldly stated *the God of heaven will prosper us (2:20)*. It was a statement of faith in the Lord his God. As Nehemiah stepped out in faith to serve the Lord the Lord blessed him and his faith was further strengthened. That is what growing in faith involves. You must exercise faith to if it is to grow.

William Carey, one of the first missionaries to India, famously said ‘expect great things from God, attempt great things for God’. Was he thinking of Nehemiah when he said this? Do you believe what he said? Are you exercising you faith. How are you serving the Lord?

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